



Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion

SYSTEMATIC ATHEOLOGY

ATHEISM'S REASONING WITH THEOLOGY

John R. Shook

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Systematic Atheology

Atheology is the intellectual effort to understand atheism, defend the reasonableness of unbelief, and support nonbelievers in their encounters with religion. This book presents a historical overview of the development of atheology from ancient thought to the present day. It offers in-depth examinations of four distinctive schools of atheological thought: rationalist atheology, scientific atheology, moral atheology, and civil atheology. John R. Shook shows how a familiarity with atheology's complex histories, forms, and strategies illuminates the contentious features of today's atheist and secularist movements, which are just as capable of contesting each other as opposing religion. The result is a book that provides a disciplined and philosophically rigorous examination of atheism's intellectual strategies for reasoning with theology. *Systematic Atheology* is an important contribution to the philosophy of religion, religious studies, secular studies, and the sociology and psychology of nonreligion.

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15 Philosophical Approaches to Demonology

Edited by Benjamin W. McCraw and Robert Arp

16 Eighteenth-Century Dissent and Cambridge Platonism

Reconceiving the Philosophy of Religion

Louise Hickman

17 Systematic Atheology

Atheism's Reasoning with Theology

John R. Shook

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First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-07998-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-11412-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>A Prefatory Address to the Reader</i>	vii
1 The Overture	1
2 Atheists and Atheism	9
3 Atheology and Theology	33
4 Methods and Modes of Atheology	49
5 Atheology's Ancient Heritage	67
6 European Atheologies	97
7 Rationalist Atheology	135
8 Scientific Atheology	161
9 Moral Atheology	187
10 Civil Atheology	223
11 Complete Atheology	251
<i>Bibliography</i>	255
<i>Index</i>	305



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A Prefatory Address to the Reader

This volume of atheology has atheism's side of the story to tell. Some excuse for this partiality must be offered to the reader, since published accounts of atheism are not scarce. Innumerable books written by theists depict atheism in stark terms, letting theism's advantages shine for the faithful like sunlight through fogs of doubt. As for books by atheists, besides the many aggrieved rejections of religion, worshipful hagiographies recount the lives of emboldened atheists to illustrate reason's predestined ascendancy over religion. This book serves as an academic alternative to theology's dim view of the faithless, and a systematic alternative to secularism's bright view of progress. For two further reasons, important to both factions, atheism deserves a full and fair presentation: atheism molded theism's development in the past, and atheism will help shape what theism may become in the future.

Atheology can also sharpen atheism's focus here in the present. Atheology is concerned with gods and whether any god is real enough to make a difference to anything else. Although atheism cannot agree that convictions about gods are right, atheism sees how god-beliefs exist, and how faiths make a difference to people holding them. Religion's defenders strenuously argue that faithful belief in god should exist, as if that is the same as arguing that god exists. This confusion is understandable. For a religion, maintaining belief is the primary goal, in order to ensure its own existence for generation after generation, so it may practically overlook the difference between upholding belief and upholding god. Reasoning with theists about the reality of god, and not just about beliefs of people, is atheism's main goal. Atheists can forget that goal as quickly as theists. It is not unreasonable to offer alternatives to religious faith, but atheism cannot be only about disparaging what others have affirmed for themselves. As theologians understand best, the psychological field of conviction is where religion naturally enjoys most every advantage. Atheists charging this way and that, first defining faith as the absence of reason and then trying to reason against faith, seem more lost in shadow (a shadow left by god?) than any of their elusive targets.

Those who stay focused on arguments against god find their difficulties doubled—before winning on the well-lit field of reason, an opponent must be found there. Fortunately for the atheist, a real god would have reasons

to exist, not staking its reality on faith alone. Thinking that god should be real is the prerogative of the religious, of course, and they can give reasons why, even if nothing almighty descends for a dialogue. Not even tenacious faith can avoid the contest of reasons. Agreeing with atheism that there is no reason to think that god is real, and advising that faith alone should light the pious path, are intriguing prescriptions for religiosity, but those perspectives cannot evade reasoning. Whatever might be said to the religious to keep up their faith and reassure them that faith is sensible, amount to recommended ideas that function like reasons. “Why faith?” is the essential question, and affirming answers still amount to reasons, reasons open to both positive consideration and negative criticism. Any religion might say that faith is beyond reason or even wisdom, but no religion tells followers that answering the call of faith is not the sensible response.

Atheists well know that the question directed at them, “Why not have faith?” is an opening for a litany of reasons from the faithful. The commonest accusation against the atheist is that an atheist is a fool since there is no good reason to deny god, and therefore an atheist either does not know about god (atheism due to ignorance), does not want to acknowledge god (atheism due to depravity), or does not possess one’s senses (atheism due to madness). That accusation presumes that good reasons to affirm god are already known, which is an assumption that atheism obviously does not make. The very possibility that atheism may be wrong, a possibility so important for the religious, already presupposes that good enough reasons for god are available, even if belief in god should be entirely a matter of faith. The purest of faiths is still answerable to reasoning about what is helpful and sensible, and true faith is capable of answering to reason. The power of faith would not render it mute, just as the power of reason would not rest in silence. Their voices are the melodies in counterpoint for Chapter 1, *The Overture*.

Two points about terminology are necessary. First, this book uses the word ‘god’ in lower case for a generic deity when no specific religion’s god is presumed, and only uses capital-letter ‘God’ when the context requires a reference to an author’s Christian God. Second, this book does not assume that ‘god’ or ‘God’ would only be an existing being, just an entity among many, somehow comparable in being to the rest of the world’s objects or the entire world. Atheism expressly denies that god has existence or being, in agreement with theologies protesting that mere existence cannot be ascribed to a genuine god. Of course, atheism also claims that ‘god’ is not about anything real at all—atheism disagrees with any opinion taking a god to be more than just a human notion. Theologies claiming that god does not exist, has no being, and entirely lacks reality are theologies seeking pure mystery and religious godlessness, and their convergence with atheology is discussed in the third chapter. The phrase “god does not exist” is too familiar to readers to drop entirely, so a theologically discriminating reader can substitute

“god is not real” or “god lacks reality” in order to avoid wrongly accusing atheology that it might mistake god for an existing being.

Acknowledgments are made for earlier versions of some chapters: “Philosophy of Religion and Two Types of Atheology,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76 (2015): 1–19; “Rationalist Atheology,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (2015): 329–348; and “Scientific Atheology,” *Science, Religion and Culture* 1 (2014): 32–48.



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1 The Overture

An atheist is uninterested in any god, but the gods should not be dismayed. Most gods could hear little acclamation from the planet, if there really are any gods to listen. Mass extinctions of deities have happened episodically ever since religion's emergence. Some have survived. Many people on earth still claim an acquaintance with at least one god. They know which god they feel acquainted with, so they would rather be called "knowers" and not just "believers." A person naturally believes in what one thinks is known. The reverse is not true, since knowledge is not so easy to acquire as belief, as everyone also knows. Those claiming an acquaintance with a god can understand the difference, and that is why they conjoin their belief with conviction, rather than the humility that befits mere opinion. Unacquainted with any gods, atheists at least humbly know how they are not that kind of knower. And that complete lack of familiarity also restrains an atheist from supposing that others do know a god or two. No atheist could know that someone else knows god, since atheists are in no position to confirm that acquaintance. Knowers would tell atheists, "You can't say that I'm unacquainted with god!" All an atheist could reply is, "I can't say that you are." That's the reply to make to avoid self-contradiction, and contradicting oneself is something no one should accept.

If the gods impressing their admirers so greatly were regarded as part of the wide world, wild and rare yet approachable by the bold and the brave, disinterest in gods would be viewed quite differently. Common sense says that no one can get acquainted with everything, so we each must take our turns to go out and explore what we can. Only the most miserly of minds would refuse to lend some credit to another's sincere story about what was surprisingly seen with one's own eyes. Yet that same common sense also excuses skepticism towards the tale that stretches belief too far. That skepticism becomes all the more reasonable if the tale is about something other-worldly and inaccessible, and especially if other tales disagree. Those knowers of gods know this all too well: their refusal to believe the tales about gods strange to them was religion's original skepticism. While atheists cannot credit any of those tales with knowledge, all those knowers have no right to complain, since they won't call each other knowers, either. By

2 *The Overture*

courtesy they may call each other “believers,” well aware that their religions describe gods differently. Each believer thinks that most other believers do not know god. Atheism agrees with every believer about that, observing how no believer knows anything about any god.

No believer wants an atheist to agree with wrong believers, of course. “Why are those other believers wrong?” the atheist asks. Believers have plenty to say about why those other believers are wrong about god. Those would-be knowers assume that some sort of deity is real, so they think that one believer must be wrong if another believer is right, and each believer expects to be more right. Assuming a godly reality lets them think that one can be right to make others wrong. However, people telling each other that they are mistaken about something does not make that thing real. And an atheist saying that would-be knowers are mistaken cannot mean that a god is real. An atheist does not assume any godly reality and does not see how to rightly think about any god, so atheists won’t declare which believers are right and which are wrong. Atheism is not the judgment that believers are all wrong about god—yet atheism does suspect that no one is really acquainted with any god.

Atheists are not rival knowers about gods, so believers should not be so dismayed by atheist doubts. Most believers hear little affirmation from the world’s religions, if there are any religions listening to each other. Many believers instead hear denials that they are true believers from followers of different religions. An atheist is unable to credit their belief either, but believers should not complain, since they will not surrender belief no matter how many disagree. Atheists concur that numbers cannot add up to knowledge. Believers forget that rule about knowledge when they suggest that atheists are wrong for being outnumbered. What is believed is more significant than how many believe it. When believers cannot accept each other’s ideas about gods, atheism sees how little confidence could be placed in any of them.

Atheism draws a hasty conclusion here, believers protest. Atheism must have some idea of god before saying that believers have little idea of god—how else could atheists see how believers are all so mistaken? Believers think that only someone with more knowledge can show them where they are wrong. But atheism does not say that believers worship the wrong god. Atheism finds that no one knows about gods, including atheists. Believers display their ignorance about gods without anyone’s help with the truth. Believers do not feel ignorant, all the same, and they surely won’t confess ignorance to other believers or any atheist. Each believer’s idea of god seems more valid than those of other religions and those of unbelievers too. Whatever god atheists want to reject is not really like my god, each believer thinks. Can an atheist talk about not knowing about gods while telling believers they have wrong ideas about god? But atheism does not say that atheists are denying the right god. Atheism finds that anyone thinking that they are acquainted with a god does not actually know. Believers can imagine whatever god they like—a fine idea may not be about anything real.

Accusing atheism of trying to know something about god, or knowing nothing of the believer's god, cannot get a believer better acquainted with an actual god. Believers should refocus on whether their preferred idea of god has as much validity as they imagine, since they think that other gods have less reason to exist. Atheism notes the abundant reasons against this or that god, heard from all those believers, so atheism sees no way for any god to have enough reason to exist. Believers in one god are not impressed by how many believers affirm another god, or how fine other gods seem to their followers. Atheism is not impressed by religious believers, either. As for all those gods, every one lacks enough reason to exist, if believers in other gods are taken seriously. Atheism cannot ignore so many reasons, so it finds no god with sufficient reason to be real.

Since atheism shares common ground and consensus with what believers think about each other, and what they think about each other's gods, why do believers view atheism so negatively? Collectively, all believers think that atheism is quite right about almost all of the gods. Still, believers condemn atheists, not so much for ignoring the right god (like so many other believers already do), but mostly for telling them that they are wrong. That's taking things personally. It is nothing personal for atheism and its reasoning against the gods. That reasoning is sharpened now, but most of it was first fashioned by believers, wielding reasons against each other's gods. Believers of one religion won't accept the next religion's revelations, or miracles, or prophets, or creation tales, and on and on. To this day, there are far more believers than atheists standing up to say why this or that god is unreal.

Above that noisy clamor, the gods seem undisturbed. They are seemingly so immune to criticism that they feel little need to show themselves to believers. That's no great inconvenience for believers, who praise the hiddenness and mystery of god in private, and then denounce the blindness of atheism in public. But atheism was first to see clearly how mystery completely obscures all gods. Atheism denies gods, not mystery. Atheism is the only viewpoint on divinity that maintains consistency about mystery. Each believer is inconsistent by saying, "My god is mysterious indeed, but you must hear about what this god does . . ." As for atheism, (1) the divine and mystery are so indistinguishable that no one encounters a god, (2) no one really knows about gods, and (3) there are few or no objective reasons to think any gods are real. Let "knowers" of a god defend their alleged knowledge—atheist critiques deflate those claims. However, many religious followers earn the label of "believer" by agreeing with atheism on all three counts, while remaining religious about mystery for reasons of their own. Atheism would have little quarrel with believers except for the way that believers have a proclivity for berating any atheist daring to think they are mistaken.

Atheism is not wrong about the way that believers must have their personal reasons for their religiosity. That is how so much religiosity is easily explained. Once again, atheism needs little originality, as the psychological causes sufficient to make people religious were long ago discovered and

4 *The Overture*

refined by religions. Although explaining the existence of believers is not atheism's responsibility, atheism can perceive how believers are attracted to religions crafted to attract them, without any actual gods involved. When a believer finds some notion of a god to be satisfying, and finds the company of like-minded believers pleasant too, that is a good enough explanation for believers as far as atheism can see. Everything that each believer thinks about their preferred god must truly be a fine reason for devout belief. Are not the right signs obvious? "The history of our religion is so old." "The healings of our man-god are so miraculous." "The prophecies of our religion are so accurate." "The copies of our scriptures are so numerous." "The leaders of our religion are so holy." "The temples of our religion are so magnificent." "The rulers of our religion are so victorious." None of these signs are good reasons to accept any god, not because atheism says so, but because religions do not take them to be decisive reasons. No religion would agree that the religion able to point to the oldest dateable fragment of scripture, or the most miraculous healing, is the religion worshipping the true god. There is no religion telling its followers, "When you find some other religion with more true prophecies than ours, switch to that faith." Plenty of religions can claim an ancient heritage, recount astounding prophecies, point to holy men and women, and so on. Convincing signs of a god are only compelling to believers already convinced.

Atheism never denied that believers have their attractive reasons for affirming this god or that god, as preference may dictate. That ideal match between one's view of god and one's individual needs shows how gods are fashioned for believers. One's god, and one's faith in that god, should seem reasonable—who would worship an unworthy deity? Atheism explains religiosity as believers do, pointing out how each believer's god is mysterious except for its appealing features and deeds, so that signs of each religion's god seem evident enough to its followers. Why then do religions view atheism so negatively? Each religion explains the existence of rival religions by pointing out their regrettably tempting views on divinity, and atheism accepts that method for explaining all religions. Collectively, all religions have to admit that atheism is right about most believers. Each religion, of course, would deny that subjective reasons entirely explain its own followers. Leaving the credibility of a religion to individual preference abandons that religion's fate to shifting social trends and new religious ideas. Only the right reasons, reasons rightly credible to any right-thinking individual, are essential to our religion, as each religion tells its story. On that story, other religions about different gods offer few right reasons, or nothing but wrong reasons, leaving their followers in the dark about the real god. Those godly reasons that rightly convince true believers have their personal appeal, but those godly reasons distinguish true religion. The high fidelity from a religion's followers is their harmonious affirmation of a god fulfilling all the right reasons to be real.

A religion depicting the conviction of its followers as mere belief for no good reason, or as faith in what must be unreasonable, is a religion relying

on a false façade to distract unbelievers. Atheists do get distracted by that façade, aiming their dismay at any religiosity faithful enough to be beyond reason. Public defenders of religion then have a convenient way to throw doubts at atheism, pointing out how it is atheists who are unreasonable for oddly expecting reasons to have any bearing on faith. As for a religion's message to its own followers, no false front gets in the way of the good news that unquestionable facts declare the glory of god. Godly reasons are always available to answer any follower's questions about the scriptures and the signs, while unreasonable people flee from true faith. Questioning is not a sin, but rejecting the right answers must be. That is why religion distinguishes between two kinds of unbelievers: the reasonable doubters who need a closer acquaintance with religious answers, and the unreasonable deniers who willfully reject the right answers. Doctrinal religions can each say, "Let atheism dismiss the believers of wrong religions just as we do, by pointing out misguided personal reasons and mistaken godly reasons, but atheism must stop at the sight of our truly godly reasons." But what exactly does atheism see here?

Atheism first observes how mystery gets pushed to the background by religion so that god's evident reasonableness is foremost for believers. Atheism secondly observes how each religion tries to conveniently pair an eminently reasonable god with its godly reasons for being real. And atheism next observes how doctrinal religions still struggle with keeping popular godly belief aligned with refined godly doctrine, while wrangling over doctrinal issues from time to time. Those signs so convincing to the faithful can point them in too many directions. The religion proud of its ancient scriptures has to choose among interpretations to discrepant narratives. The religion proud of its inspired prophets has to rank their prophecies according to divine urgency. The religion proud of its age-old rituals has to compel conformity with standard forms. Religions as practiced are far more about human decisions than divine directives, but the latest ecclesiastical consensus is presented as eternal doctrine to each generation of followers.

If god is supposed to be so mysterious, or god is supposedly so evident, why would a religion suffer from any doctrinal difficulties, or have to worry about rival religions? Devotees of doctrine are free to reassert god's mysteries, dissolving religion into mysticism beyond mythic rivalries and religious boundaries—out where atheism can welcome some quiet company. To the doctrinal devotees pronouncing how their religion's godly doctrines are so reasonable, atheism must ask why the doctrines of rival religions are less than reasonable, since those religions also match their godly reasons to their reasonable deity.

Atheism has heard the doctrinal religions explaining why their godly reasons are more reasonable than the reasons invoked by other religions. These religions cannot regard all religions' godly reasons as quite reasonable, since the point of comparing godly reasons is not to worship so many gods, and atheism won't disagree about that. With the stark contrasts among all

6 *The Overture*

doctrinal religions arranged for general view, atheism at last observes how every doctrine is challengeable on many sides as unreasonable. Atheism therefore sensibly agrees with the collective verdict of doctrinal religions that no godly reason appears to be sufficiently reasonable. If there is a heavenly god, there is no earthly reason how any religious believer could know that. But atheism will be sternly warned by any doctrinal religion that no skepticism will be heard from unbelievers so blind as to not see how its own real god really fits such reasonable doctrines. With that warning, the doctrinal religions can voice their agreement—that atheism is the viewpoint lacking vision—and believers are accordingly told that unbelievers have nothing but poor personal reasons for stubbornly shutting their eyes. That story is comfortingly familiar to believers to account for the persistence of other religions, and no religion bothers to make up a new story when tradition works. Nonbelievers have to defend themselves against accusations of degeneracy, perversity, and irrationality, forcing atheism to tell a counter-narrative about all the normalcies to living a nonreligious life.

The devotees of refined doctrine who admit their own discomfort with that basis to atheism's skepticism—too many godly reasons from so many religions—turn their thoughts in a different direction. Godly reasons satisfying common expectations from ready believers do ensure that believers are reasonable by a religion's standards. Yet those standards are underappreciated by other religions' believers and by unbelievers, who should not be labeled as degenerate, perverse, or irrational. A religion's devotees may therefore ask how their godly reasons can gain broader reasonableness. Additional grounds in support of godly reasons are either higher godly reasons, or they are not basically about gods. Appealing to higher godly reasons, chosen for their plausibility to some other religions, only lends temporary advantage. A religion saying, "Mightiness in war shows how our god is truly caring for his people," will make sense to other religions expecting their gods to defend their peoples, and the religion of an expanding empire will accumulate converts. That higher godly reason proves to be a double-edge sword, however, carving up that religion when the empire eventually falls. A religion saying, "Exemplifying pure love is a worthy god's quality, so our loving god is truly real," will make sense to other religions attributing love to their gods, and the religion embodying divine love can attract converts. That higher godly reason proves to be a unifying quality indeed, when another religion prioritizes it and engulfs the first religion. No final advantage would be held by that religion appealing to the vaguest qualities ('supreme', 'absolute', 'infinite', 'pure spirit', 'perfection', and the like) since the world's believers could not be expected to think about such concepts in the same way, even if they happened to mouth the same words. Devotees of refined doctrine picking out persuasive higher godly reasons and regulating their meanings—these devotees are sometimes called "theologians"—enjoy permanent employment in that role. Atheism has no role to play in all these godly engagements, seeing no good reason to submit to

a vast religion or a vague religion, an aloofness shared by believers of small and specific religions.

Nonreligious grounds present doctrinal religions with greater opportunities and deeper threats. They are opportunities, because other believers and nonbelievers can accept them for their own merits, yet they are threats as well, since nonreligious grounds can seem anti-religious for their independence. Independent grounds are by definition available to all religions, and atheism as well. The logical rules allowing atheism's skepticism—disagreement makes nothing real, numbers are not knowledge, do not believe contradictory views, and refrain from belief while equal reasons are opposed—are classifiable as independent grounds. Grounds appropriated as already religious, and grounds intrinsically opposed to religion, lack the needed independence to reasonably support doctrine or deny doctrine. Many mundane matters about the world and life are candidates for service as independent grounds, but they are not equally useful. Grounds agreeable to most people could serve well—their clear support for this or that godly reason lends some independent reasonableness. Religions able to connect several broadly independent grounds with important godly reasons can stand out in the religious crowd.

However, independent grounds may also fail to connect. Disconnections and discrepancies between broadly independent grounds and core godly reasons will not go unnoticed for long. Non-doctrinal religions tend to regard most aspects of life as religious in one way or another, so few disconnections could trouble them, but they cannot distinguish themselves, either. As for doctrinal religions looking for independent support, theologians can watch for discordant disconnections without any assistance from atheism, although atheism's own devotees—let them be labeled as "atheologians"—take note of those disconnections as well. Doctrinal religions cannot come to an agreement that one religion among them best connects broadly independent grounds to its core godly reasons. Atheism arrives at that same assessment. Atheologians cannot see much solidity to attempted connections by any religions, detecting more artifice than substance at best and sharp discrepancies at worst.

To distract attention away from discrepancies with independent grounds, theologians argue that atheism gains no support from those grounds. Such arguments backfire upon theology. For example, if atheism thinks that nature's order explains what happens in the world, theologians are ready to credit a supreme organizer for such perfect order. When atheism replies that there is not enough regular order to credit a god, other theologians are ready to label any gaps in that natural order as divine interventions. No matter what nature does, theology demands the right to "explain" nature with a god, while denying that nature lends plausibility to atheism, which asks for nothing more than nature as it is. Another example is the way that theology complains that atheism's admission that unknowable reality lies beyond known nature leaves atheism as less than intelligible. Yet theology cannot let

8 *The Overture*

nature be fundamental, so it postulates a mysteriously supernatural ground behind all nature known and unknown, which is supposed to make religion more intelligible. Atheology can only observe that theology would be wiser to focus on its own capacity to gain reasonable support from independent grounds.

Despite that atheological advice, theology is tempted to condemn the ground under atheism, as if atheism were a rival religion to be cursed. Although doctrinal religions cannot converge on the best way to support godly reasons with independent grounds, they can share a suspicion that atheism guards independent grounds too zealously. If religion is vulnerable to a disconnection between its godly reasons and an independent ground, its theologians could respond to this threat by treating that ground as atheistically anti-religious, thus denying its independence and dismissing its relevance. For example, if a religion's theologians say that logical rules—about disagreement, contradiction and opposition, for example—are anti-religious, in order to exempt that religion from scrutiny on those grounds, then atheism might lose a crucial basis for doubting this religion. This sort of tactic does not make a religion more reasonable, however.

First, atheism cannot see why the simplest rules of rationality (or other mundane matters) have to be essentially anti-religious. Second, an allegedly “anti-religious” ground according to one religion would remain an independent ground for other religions that thereby gain an argumentative advantage. Third, there is no earthly ground condemned by most religions as “anti-religious,” so the religions pointing at anti-religious grounds are evidently projecting their own doctrinal weaknesses. Fourth, many independent grounds are widely accepted around the world by believers and unbelievers alike as good common sense, so any religion condemning some of those grounds will be widely viewed as less reasonable, not more. These four considerations have not prevented some theologians from pursuing the tactic of condemning neutral grounds, but it is a dead-end. The doctrinal religion that retreats into doctrinal solitude, telling its believers to close their ears and their minds to an “anti-religious” world, deprives its godly reasons of independent reasonableness. By contrast, the doctrinal religion that gradually adapts its doctrines to suit widely-accepted independent grounds will open minds that once were closed. Atheologists could not refuse their help with that reasonable development. Theologians who feel that religions need less certainty have more company than they might think.

2 Atheists and Atheism

Atheology is the exploration and justification of atheism. Like any ‘-logy’ it defines its central terms to clearly state and explain its positions. This chapter clarifies the meanings of ‘atheist’ and ‘atheism’; Chapter 3 outlines the intimate relationships between atheology and theology; and Chapter 4 sketches primary ways that atheology justifies atheism. Atheology clarifies atheist unbelief about gods, analyzes and criticizes theological views defending convictions about gods, and assembles arguments defending atheism’s judgment that it is unreasonable for anyone to think that a god is real. Systematic atheology, of which this book is an exemplar, organizes the philosophically sophisticated challenges to theism, and concludes that attending to gods has nothing to do with being a reasonable and well-informed person, a moral member of society, and a responsible citizen. Four main methods of philosophical atheology, outlined in the fourth chapter and discussed separately in later chapters, focus on establishing the reasonableness of atheism through appeals to logical reason, current science, sound morality, and good civics. These atheological methods can operate independently, but they can be conducted in concert for a comprehensive atheology, as this volume illustrates in a systematic way, which in turn permits the construction of a complete atheology, discussed in the final chapter.

Nonreligious people take little notice of atheology, even if they might give some thought to atheism. Religious people need not be theological adepts, either. There is far more to religiosity than theology or even theism, and much more to secularity than atheology or atheism. Questioning which god(s) are real, or doubting whether any gods are real, can attract plenty of attention in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, the gods are not everything. Contrasting religiosity with secularity, and discerning their innumerable entanglements here on earth, is a vaster undertaking for multi-faceted inquiries across shifting social conditions and intertwined cultural features. Atheism is not the same as secularity or secularism. However, atheological positions support secularism’s stands on restraining the power of religion in society and politics, and protecting the right to dissent from religion.¹

Atheology endorses unbelief, and notes how hundreds of millions of people around the world are disconnected from religion and disinterested in gods. The field of secular studies is the broader interdisciplinary area of research into the psychological, social, cultural, and political phenomena associated with nonbelief, secularity, secularization, and disengagement from religion.² Secular studies include the effort to track the kinds and numbers of atheists, and the demographics of nonreligious people more generally, and it sometimes offers demographic predictions about the future number of atheists.³ Religious scholars and theologians have a more venerable, but less objective, tradition of investigating kinds and causes of unbelief.⁴ Where secularity is growing, atheology is put to more use, but atheology is not dependent on the plausibility of theories about secularization.⁵ Attention to atheology also rises when outspoken atheists gain public attention, such as the movement called New Atheism,⁶ and nonreligious people are inspired to tell their stories about leaving religion and living secular lives.⁷ Atheology can appeal to naturalistic explanations for religiosity, so it attends to scientific accounts of religious experience and religion's origins and development.⁸

Atheism and Theism

The view among religion scholars that atheism's meaning is determined by the meaning of theism is often stated *ex cathedra* as self-evident and unchallengeable. What is atheism except contra-theism? Mere semantics can conceal false assumptions. It is not the case that whatever atheism is now, or what atheism was during a past era, must only be the denial of whatever theism is, or has been. That assumption is falsifiable, and in fact it is historically false.

What has counted as theism, and what god is supposed to be, has gradually changed in the West, and especially within Christianity. Thinking that such changes were self-caused, that theism developed from its own inner entelechy without external stimulus, is theological dogma. The historical reality is that intellectual conceptions, re-formulations, and creative speculations about god across the centuries and millennia were often provoked by contextual factors of dissent and disbelief. The theism of one era typically developed in response to standing resistance from a previous era. Each successive version of theism was indebted to earlier versions of atheism as well as earlier forms of theism. Plato's supernaturalism dealt with Presocratic skepticism targeted at traditional gods of mythic poetry. Several Church theologians relied on philosophical debates about godly matters almost as much as they depended on their scripture. The rise of natural theology during 1650–80 was a response to the emergence of soulless materialism, and then the moralistic atheism of the mid-1700s was directed largely against natural theology. Many more illustrations of this theism-atheism co-dependency are recounted in this book's chapters.

Theism does not shape atheism like an object casts its shadow. Presuming that the atheism of any era consists of whatever theologians find darkly heretical is poor historiography. Philosophy has a deeper sense of history. Atheism will object to whatever god(s) that theism happens to affirm, but theism has affirmed doctrines designed for responding to atheist objections. Contemporary atheism is far from just the denial of today's theologically approved deities, because its atheological position embodies millennia of thoughtful dissents from every sort of god. Theism today is far from the affirmation of what god must always have been, because its theological god incorporates that extended process of reasoning with atheism.

Due to their parallel roles with explicating unbelief and belief, atheology and theology tend to track and match each other's positions as decades and centuries pass. Those positionings and counter-positionings across so much time have often settled into mutual patterns of provocation and response, developing into an ever-evolving dance and symbiotic dependency. Structural parallels between atheology and theology should be expected, and they are signs of common functions. Both theology and atheology rely on intellectual explications, for enriching their respective religious and secular bases, and those explications are thoroughly indebted to the expressions of opposed views.

Theology and atheology are complicated, but being an atheist has always been straightforward. Gods come and go, but the core definition to an atheist has not changed since the days of the ancient Greeks. Atheists do not think that there are any gods. And, if it is necessary to add, they do not think that they are being unreasonable about that dissent. (By contrast, someone feeling unreasonable for not believing is not an atheist and cannot be associated with atheism.) Atheism, as befits an 'ism', upholds a position: anyone's convictions affirming a god are less than reasonable, so people should live a godless life instead.

Godlessness and atheism are not modernist notions. Sporadic questioning of the gods can be heard in preserved writings and religious literature all the way back to early civilizations.⁹ Doubts do not amount to atheism, however. Where can atheology be found? Historians confess difficulties with identifying nonreligious philosophical systems. They have difficulty even identifying atheist philosophers. "Not before Nietzsche," says one; "None before Marx," says another. Those who cannot remember much history might at least recall Friedrich Nietzsche's atheist pronouncement that "God is dead." Nietzsche announced this provocation in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science, 1882), but his book credited Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) as the first openly atheist philosopher in Germany. Although European existentialists had a proclivity for approaching atheology, Jean-Paul Sartre perceived little prior to his own existentialism: "it seemed to me that a great atheist, truly atheist philosophy was something philosophy lacked" (de Beauvoir 1984, 436). Yet Sartre's own communist sympathies should have brought at least one exemplar to his mind: communist Karl

Marx (1818–83). No atheistic philosophy existed before Marx’s generation, declares James Mackey (2000, 26). Yet Marx himself knew well the revolutionary atheism of *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity, 1841) by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72). Did the 1830s or 1840s witness the birth of authentic atheism?

Philosophy has a longer memory than most academic histories. What about English feminist Frances Wright? Her 1829 public lectures across America delivered resounding atheist, feminist, and socialist stances against religion and its faults, shocking both sides of the Atlantic and provoking prompt theological responses. Minister and Oxford classicist Benjamin Godwin took notice, but his *Lectures on the Atheistic Controversy* (1834) selected a different target for refutation in the name of Christianity. Godwin chose the notorious atheist Mirabaud, whose treatise *Systeme de la nature* (1770) represented atheism in the eyes of theologians long before they heard of Marx. This Mirabaud was the pseudonym of Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach (1723–89), a philosopher espousing materialism, whose audacious atheism astonished Europe before David Hume’s skeptical work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), was posthumously published. Hume would not openly defend atheism, although he did confirm its logical basis, the impossibility of knowing that god exists. But Hume was acutely aware of a bolder philosophy: the materialism and anti-theism of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Another philosophical authority of that era, Bishop George Berkeley, identified Hobbes as an unmistakable atheist in his book *Alciphron* (1732).

Cambridge philosopher Ralph Cudworth agreed about Hobbes’s atheism, but his treatise *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) opposed the atheist philosophers of ancient Greece, especially the atomist Epicurus (third century BCE). Theophilus Spizelius’s *De atheismi radice* (1666) had already deplored Epicurean atheism, pairing it with Machiavelli’s political atheism as the most pernicious heresies. The idea that gods were invented for civic ends did not originate with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), as he well knew, having studied Epicurus and Greek philosophy for himself. Epicurus and his devoted Roman poet Lucretius (first century BCE) appear on almost every list of atheists assembled by Medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment theologians. Before Epicurus, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (fourth century BCE) designed philosophical systems that included a place for a god knowable to philosophy but not traditional religion. They regarded popular religion as ignorant myth, well aware that earlier Greek philosophers such as Protagoras (fifth century BCE) had already raised strong doubts about all gods. Those early philosophers could also look back further in time to the dawn of philosophy, where cosmologies such as the one framed by Anaximander (sixth century BCE) gave no place for gods to do anything and left no reason to be religious.

Although this book focuses on atheology and atheism as they developed in Western thought, skeptical stances towards deities and philosophical

statements of atheism can be found in the ancient world from Egypt and Persia to India and China. Eastern atheology, when it is systematically explored, will prove to be just as sophisticated and multi-faceted as Western atheology. Doubts about the gods are voiced in the earliest Hindu Vedic literature, the *Rg Veda*. Early Buddhism and Jainism took no interest in a supreme deity, and some schools of Confucian thought had little practical use for gods, heavens, or immortality. In Muslim and Hindu regions, minority traditions of freethought and secularity are not unknown to this day.¹⁰

The Atheist in the Ancient World

Words for ‘atheist’ and ‘atheism’ are far older than the Renaissance, or even European civilization, and Enlightenment thinkers did not have to invent their meanings. The singular word ‘atheist’ has its linguistic heritage in ancient Greek. The Greek word was ἄθεος—a-theos—meaning without god, or godless. This term *atheos* did double duty, signifying one’s separation from the gods, and one’s breach from religion. As a rupture or violation, *atheos* was never a good thing, and this unfortunate condition was connected, in the Greek way of thinking, with another dangerous character flaw of being proudly arrogant, which the Greeks called *hubris*. The word *atheos* pre-dates both Greek philosophy and Greek theology (their intellectual origins are recounted in Chapter 4), by appearing with the dawning of literary achievement from the Greeks. It is used by two of the greatest Greek writers of the fifth century BCE: Aeschylus the dramatist and Pindar the poet.

The term *atheos* is in the oldest theatrical drama to survive from ancient Greece: the tragic play of Aeschylus (c.525–c.456 BCE) titled *The Persians*, performed in 472 BCE. It is used in its adjective genitive plural form as κἀθέων, modifying the Greek word φρονημάτων (*phronematon*), and appearing together as κἀθέων φρονημάτων—*katheon phronematon*, meaning godless thoughts, or ungodly intents. The Loeb Classical Library and subsequent translations of *The Persians* translate *katheon* as ‘impious’ when it is used by the ghost of King Darius to explain why he doubts that the remnants of his son’s defeated Persian army will return home from Greece.

μίμνουσι δ' ἔνθα πεδίον Ἀσωπὸς ῥοαῖς
 ἄρδει, φίλον πιάσμα Βοιωτῶν χθονί:
 οὐ σφιν κακῶν ὕψιστ' ἐπαμμένει παθεῖν,
 ὕβρεως ἄποινα κἀθέων φρονημάτων:
 οἱ γῆν μολόντες Ἑλλάδ' οὐ θεῶν βρέτη
 ἠδοῦντο συλᾶν οὐδὲ πιμπρᾶναι νεώς:
 βωμοὶ δ' αἰστοὶ, δαιμόνων θ' ἰδρύματα
 πρόρριζα φύρδην ἐξάνεστραπται βάρθρων.

They are now lingering where the plain is watered by the stream of Asopus
 which nourishes Boeotia’s fields.

Here they will meet their crowning disaster in requital for their

14 *Atheists and Atheism*

presumptuous pride and impious thoughts.

For, on reaching the land of Hellas, restrained by no religious awe,
they ravaged the images of the gods and set fire to their temples.

Altars have been destroyed, statues of the gods have been
thrown from their bases in utter ruin and confusion.¹¹

Soldiers in an Iron Age army would not show much reverence towards an enemy's gods, but the spiteful destruction of local holy sites was then, and remains to this day, a barbaric assault on civilization itself.

Darius's lines were not calling those soldiers atheists, of course. Disdain for foreign gods is not the same as dismissing all gods. But atheists are brought up earlier in this drama, as the Messenger relates one of the many deadly hazards encountered by the retreating army. The lines that Aeschylus gives to the Messenger say that some soldiers were unbelievers, at least until death seemed near. Are there any atheists in foxholes? Nor for Aeschylus:

νυκτι δ' ἐν ταύτῃ θεὸς
χειμῶν' ἄωρον ὤρσε, πῆγγυσιν δὲ πᾶν
ῥέεθρον ἀγνοῦ Στρυμόνος. θεοῦς δέ τις
τὸ πρὶν νομίζων οὐδαμοῦ τότ' ἠύχετο
λιταῖσι, γαῖαν οὐρανόν τε προσκυνῶν.¹²

Two modern translations yield the same story about these unbelievers:

It was that night some god
blew down winter out of season and
froze holy Strymōn bank to bank. Then any man
who'd once thought gods were nothing
sought them out, praying, begging as he lay face down before Earth and Sky.

There in the night a god
roused winter out of season, and
froze solid the stream of holy Strymon:
all who had believed the gods were naught
now sang their prayers, making obeisance both to Earth and Sky.¹³

Whatever one may think about atheists actually praying for their lives, a real encounter with unbelievers in fifth century Greece was no myth to Aeschylus.

Sporadic appearances of the adjectival word 'atheon' appear in other works of Greek literature from the fifth century BCE. For example, Aeschylus's "Eumenides" (performed in 458 BCE) depicts a trial of Orestes accusing him of impiety with the words ἄθεον (line 151) and δυσσεβείας (line 533, cognate of ἀσεβέω, meaning irreverence, ungodliness). Aeschylus's contemporary Pindar (c.522–c.443 BCE) used the term ἄθεον in one of his odes, Pythian 4 for Arcesilas of Cyrene (462 BCE), to describe impious or ungodly weapons (line 162). A play of Sophocles, "Trachiniai" (c.445–430

BCE, line 1036), uses the word to describe an impious mother. During the fifth century BCE, an author could be understood by audiences as referring to unbelieving people taking no notice of gods, and also to impious people who are willfully sacrilegious. No single word was available in Greek for just unbelief as distinguished from impiety, which is an understandable linguistic situation. An author would have to use a phrase such as “believes there are no gods” as a descriptive term instead of ‘impious’ in order to specifically refer to unbelievers.

Some Presocratic philosophers expressed their doubts that any gods exist and they derided popular religion, yet none of them resorted to using the terms *atheon* or *atheos* to describe themselves or others, at least in their surviving works. The ascription of impiety was a serious matter. Plato brought the topic of atheism as well as impiety to the forefront with his account of the trial of Socrates in the *Apology* (c.390 BCE). One of the accusers, Meletus, admits that Socrates is suspected of not just impiety towards the gods of his homeland, but also that Socrates is entirely godless, *παράπαν ἄθεος*, by not recognizing any gods at all (26c). Plato’s dialogue *Laws* (c.350 BCE) demands strict intolerance towards people who do not believe that any gods exist. Such people are collectively labeled as *ἄθεοι* in Book 10, and Plato precisely defines atheists (and not just the impious) as those who wholeheartedly disbelieve all gods and think that all things are empty of gods (*Laws* 908b-c). Readers of these Platonic passages in the ancient world, such as Cicero and Plutarch, understood that clear definition of an atheist.

The Atheist in the Renaissance World

The ability to read Greek was reviving in Europe’s centers of learning after 1400, growing along with the wider distribution of manuscript copies of Plato’s dialogues and other major Greek writers. As a result, the dual significance of *ἄθεος* was increasingly appreciated.

Ficino’s *Platonis Opera Omnia* in 1484 did not use the transliteration *atheos* for his Latin translation, avoiding a transfer into Latin of that ambiguity in Greek between impiety or unbelief. He used familiar Latin words for impiety where impiety is meant in the Greek original, and he used descriptive phrases for atheism, showing how he knew the difference between them, just as Plato did. This was common knowledge among Plato’s translators. Compare three widely-consulted translations of Plato’s *Apology*, at 26c and 26e where Socrates elicits unequivocal accusations of complete unbelief, translated by Ficino, Serre, and Fowler:

Apology, at 26c:

(Meletus) Ταῦτα λέγω, ὡς τὸ παράπαν οὐ νομίζεις θεούς. (Loeb Library edition)

16 *Atheists and Atheism*

(Meletus) Affero equídem te omníno negare deos. (26c, Ficino translation, Florence edition of 1484)

(Meletus) Hoc dico te existimare, nullos esse deos. (26c, Jean de Serre translation, Stephanus edition of 1578)

Meletus: That is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all. (26c, Fowler translation, Loeb Library edition of 1914)

Apology, at 26e:

(Socrates) ὃ πρὸς Διός, οὐτώσί σοι δοκῶ; οὐδένα νομίζω θεὸν εἶναι; (Meletus) οὐ μέντοι μὰ Δία οὐδ' ὅπωστιοῦν. (26e, Loeb Library edition)

(Socrates) Sed per deum o Melíte, putas ne reuera nullum me deum existimare? (Meletus) Nullū per Ioué. (26e, Ficino translation, Florence edition of 1484)

Socrates: Verūm per Iouem, dic mihi Melite, arbitrarísne me existimare nullum esse Deum? Meletus: Arbitror, nec ullo quidé omnino modo. (26e, Jean de Serre translation, Stephanus edition of 1578)

Socrates: But for heaven's sake, do you think this of me, that I do not believe there is any god? Meletus: No, by Zeus, you don't, not in the least. (26e, Fowler translation, Loeb Library edition of 1914)

The descriptive phrasings such as “nullos esse deos” are not evasive circumlocutions. They are not due to a translator's unfamiliarity with the concept of complete unbelief, or a translator's abhorrence of atheism or the word ‘atheist’, or a translator's confusion about what ἄθεος or *atheos* might mean, or a translator's worry that readers would not understand the idea of an atheist. Quite the opposite: translators were able to accurately convey who an atheist really is. The Stephanus edition even supplied a marginal note about Plato's use of ἄθεος for the reader's edification.¹⁴ Historians supposing that the early Renaissance period had no access to an unequivocal meaning to ‘atheist’ forget about Plato.¹⁵

The Bible was less illuminating by comparison. The only use of ἄθεοι in the Bible occurs in Ephesians, and this letter's author (like the author of Colossians, to which Ephesians is closely related) was evidently acquainted with Greek philosophy and Plato's term. Ephesians 2:12 is referring to people as godless prior to their Christian conversion, so it is not narrowly referring to only nonreligious people. The Latin Vulgate translation for ἄθεοι uses the phrase *sine deo in hoc mundo*, “without God in the world,” to indicate infidel non-Christians, following Augustine's use of that phrase in his commentaries on the Bible. Erasmus's edition of the New Testament in Greek and Latin (1519) uses the phrasing *deoque carentes in mundo* (without a god in the world). Perhaps Erasmus thought to cover both nonbelievers in any god as well as believers in other gods besides God with that phrasing. Erasmus was acquainted with the concept of atheism from the early years of his academic career. Besides reading Plato on the topic of atheism, he could

note Plutarch's definition of atheism. He absorbed Plutarch's *Moralia* and assisted with its 1509 publication, and subsequently translated some of its essays and apophthegmata into Latin. Erasmus also admired Cicero, so he was able to peruse what Cicero could convey about atheism.¹⁶

Erasmus's learning was vast for his time, but he was hardly the only scholar to meet with the idea of atheism. Even if a European intellectual living during the late 1400s or early 1500s did not encounter Plato, it would have been difficult to avoid an acquaintance with Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, Aelianus, or Plutarch. These ancient authors wrote works that included representations and definitions of authentic atheism, and not just impiety or heresy.

Cicero uses *atheos* in *De natura deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) to identify "Diagoras the Atheist" and Theodorus as deniers of god, and adds that Protagoras of Abdera doubted that it could be known whether gods exist or not. *De natura deorum*, which was consulted by several early Christian theologians including Augustine, also features the verdict against Epicureanism that it does not accept the existence of gods. *On the Nature of the Gods* resurfaced in the late 1400s and several Latin editions were available by the 1520s, providing expansive insights into the materialism of Epicureanism and the quasi-panteism of Stoicism for Renaissance minds already familiarized with Thomism. Additional information about atomism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism could be read in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers* (first printing in 1533), which outlines materialistic and skeptical stances towards gods. This book also mentions the Cyrenaic philosopher Theodorus, "known as the atheist." Two early Church Fathers who accessed Cicero repeated those accusations of atheism. Arnobius of Sicca's *Adversus Gentes* (Against the Pagans, c.303 CE) surfaced in a Latin edition in 1542. Dozens of editions and printings followed over the next century. In the fifth book of his treatise, Arnobius uses *atheum* while explaining what atheism is:

. . . atheum, irreligiosum, sacrilegum, qui Deos esse omnino aut negent, aut dubitent: aut qui eos homines fuisse contendunt, & potestatis alicuius, & meriti causa Deorum in numerum relatos . . .

. . . atheists, impious, sacrilegious, who either deny that there are any gods at all, or doubt their existence, or assert that they were men, and have been numbered among the gods for the sake of some power and good desert . . .¹⁷

Lactantius, Arnobius's student, also challenged philosophical atheism and used the term *atheos*. His work *De ira Dei* (On the Anger of God, 313 CE) repeats the attribution of atheism to Diagoras and Theodorus, and conducts a lengthy prosecution of Epicurus for denying the existence of true gods, objecting that Epicurean gods are too isolated and aloof to be authentic deities.

If one's interests at that time leaned more towards natural history or intellectual history than philosophy and theology, Aelianus and Plutarch were more digestible. The accessibility of *Varia Historia* by Aelianus (c.175–c.235 CE) expanded with the Rome edition of 1545. It yields diverting and dubious tales interspersed with plain-spoken observations on the world. On the topic of religion, he found enough religion in “barbarians,” as he called them, since “none of them have fallen into any atheism [ἄθεότητα], or question whether there are Gods or not, and whether they take care of us or not.”¹⁸

Writing in Greek, Plutarch (c.46–120 CE) used the words ἄθεος and ἄθεότης with the same meanings as Plato in his essay *Peri deisidaimonias* (On Superstition, one of the *Moralia* essays), which could be read in Europe after its first Greek printing in 1509. Plutarch says that superstitious people wish there were no gods, but as for atheists, Οὐκ οἶεται θεοὺς εἶναι ὁ ἄθεος—“The atheist thinks there are no gods” (at 170f, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt 1926, Loeb Library edition, p. 491). Plutarch's essay on superstition was treated differently because it was translated into Latin later than almost all of his other essays. Plutarch's *Lives* were usually published separately from his other surviving essays (or *opuscula*, around 60 total), which were collectively called the *Moralia*, or moral essays. During the Renaissance, typical editions of the *Moralia* in Latin, French, English, and other vernacular languages only published selected essays. Not until the 1570s could Latin readers access all of the *Moralia*, including *De Superstitione*. Although Erasmus treasured Plutarch and read *Peri deisidaimonias*, he did not attempt a translation of it. The collection of essays in the Latin edition titled *Opuscula (quæ quidem extant) omni, undequaque collecta* (Basel 1530) did not include the superstition essay.

John Cheke's translation of Plutarch's essay in 1540 into Latin as *De Superstitione*, a manuscript presented to England's King Henry VIII, was never published. Cheke was appointed that same year as the first regius chair of Greek at Oxford University, where the manuscript was deposited. One of Cheke's colleagues at Oxford was Thomas Harding, the regius chair of Hebrew. Harding appears to have been the first to use ‘atheism’ in print in England. His tract *A Confutation of a booke intituled An apologie of the Church of England* (1565) laments “such confusion of opinions and infinite varietie of doctrines, as breedeth in the people a mere paganisme, heathenish loosnes, and a very Epicurian atheism.”¹⁹

A Latin translation of most of the *Moralia* was published (Cologne 1542 and Paris 1544) as *Ethica, seu Moralia Opuscula*, but this volume did not include *De Superstitione*. Thomas Kirchmaier (Thoma Naogeorgo) published a Latin translation of *De Superstitione* in his volume titled *Plutarchi Chaeronensis summi Philosophi, Libelli septem* (Basel 1556). This translation was included in a volume of the Stephanus edition, *Plutarchi Chaeronensis, Opuscula varia: quæ magna ex parte sunt philosophica* (Geneva 1572) edited by Henri Etienne (Henricus Stephanus). Another translation

appeared in 1573: Hermann Crusier (Cruserio/Cruserius) translated *De Superstitione* for inclusion in *Plutarchi Chaeronei Ethica, sive Moralia Opera, quae extant, omnia* (Basel 1573), published by Thomas Guarini.²⁰ For comparison, the passage in which Plutarch speaks of ἀθεότης is followed by its Latin and modern English translations.

ἡ μὲν ἀθεότης κρίσις οὔσα φαύλη τοῦ μηδὲν εἶναι μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον εἰς ἀπάθειάν τινα δοκεῖ τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ τοῦ θείου περιφέρειν, καὶ τέλος ἐστὶν αὐτῇ τοῦ μὴ νομίζειν θεοῦς τὸ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι

(165c, Loeb Library edition)

Divinitatis quidem abnegatio, cum iudicium fit vitiosum quòd nulla res fit beata & incorruptibilis, nempe Deus, in indolentiam quandā videtur deducere: eiusq; finis est, quū nō existimet Deū esse, ut etiam non timeat.

(Naogeorgo 1556, p. 57)

Igitur etiam ex iis, de quibus sermo est, impietas, quae nihil beatum esse & incorruptum prave iudicat, in quondam indolentiam videtur non credendo numen esse impellere, estque finis ei non putandi esse deum, eum non timere.

(Cruser 1573, p. 314)

To come now to our subject: atheism, which is a sorry judgement that there is nothing blessed or incorruptible, seems, by disbelief in the Divinity, to lead finally to a kind of utter indifference, and the end which it achieves in not believing in the existence of gods is not to fear them.

(Frank Cole Babbitt 1926, Loeb Library edition, p. 457)²¹

Latin phrases such as *divinitatis quidem abnegatio*, a denial of divinity, convey the idea of atheism so that no transliteration or neologism of a single word is necessary. The transliteration of ἀθεότης is *atheotes*, which translators avoided. However, the appearance of ἄθεος as a singular noun, or ἄθεοι as the plural noun, which also occurs in Plutarch's writings, was eventually transliterated. Neither Naogeorgo nor Crusier resorted to transliteration, instead using *divinitatis quidē negator* and *impium* in their translations of *De Superstitione* for those denying divinity, or the ungodly. The translation by Wilhelm Holtzman (Guilermo Xylander) of Plutarch's *De communibus noticiis adversus Stoicos*, "Against the Stoics," in another volume of the 1572 Stephanus edition transliterated ἄθεοι as *atheī* where three philosophers are called atheists. Crusier's 1573 translation of "Against the Stoics" also used *atheī* in that passage.

καὶ ἴσως ἐντύχοι τις ἂν ἔθνεσι βαρβάροις καὶ ἀγρίοις θεὸν μὴ νοοῦσι, θεὸν δὲ νοῶν μὴ νοῶν δ' ἄφθαρτον μὴδ' ἀίδιον, ἄνθρωπος; οὐδὲ εἰς γέγονεν. οἱ γοῦν

ἄθεοι προσαγορευθέντες οὗτοι, Θεόδοροι καὶ Διαγόροι καὶ Ἴππωνες, οὐκ ἐτόλμησαν εἰπεῖν τὸ θεῖον ὅτι φθαρτὸν ἔστιν

(1075a, Loeb Library edition)

Ac fieri fanè potest, ut incidat aliquis in homines barbaros & feros, qui Deum esse nullum putent: deum esse qui existimet, sed eundem non fecurum interitus, nō aeternum, inventus est ne unus quidem homo. Certè qui athei appellantur quòd negarent esse deos Theodorus, Diagoras, Hippo: non ausi sunt dicere deum esse interitui obnoxium, sed non crediderunt aliquid esse ab interitu immune

(Holtzman 1572, p. 820)

Reperias fortassis gentes barbaras & feras, quae nihil de diis sentiant. Sed qui deum concipiat animo esse, nec simul sentiat immortalem & aeternum esse, nullus unquam mortalium exitit. Siquidem qui athei, id est, impii fuerunt dicti, Theodori hi, Diagorae, & Hippones, non induxerunt in animum esse caducum numen

(Cruser 1573, p. 487)

One might perhaps chance upon barbaric and savage tribes that have no conception of god, but not a single man has there been who having a conception of god did not conceive him to be indestructible and everlasting. At any rate, those who have been called atheists, Theodorus and Diagoras and Hippo and their like, did not venture to say of divinity that it is subject to destruction but did not believe that there is anything indestructible, preserving the preconception of god while not admitting the existence of what is indestructible.

(Harold Cherniss, Loeb Library edition, p. 783)²²

The translators of Plutarch's essay against the Stoics relayed his thoughts about atheism, which were controversial opinions during the Renaissance: (a) belief in god may not be universal for all peoples, and (b) there have been authentic atheists among philosophers.

That transliteration of *atheî* for ἄθεοι was no novelty. As early as 1513, *atheî* was used in the Paris edition of Baptista Mantuanus's poems, in the marginal commentary by Sebastian Murrho, Sebastian Brant, and Josse Badius upon Mantuanus's "De morte Federici Spagnoli." Meditating on his brother's death, the poet ponders whether questioning fate is questioning god. The commentary points out how atheists deny that any god reigns, while Epicureans deny that the gods care about mortality.²³

After the examples of Cruser and Holtzman, vernacular translations of Plutarch's "Against the Stoics" began to use *l'atheiste* and atheism. Amyot's French translation *Oeuvres morales et mêlées* (1572) was the best vernacular translation and reached the broadest audience of readers. England's foremost translator at the turn of the seventeenth century, Philomon Holland,

produced the first published translation into English of the *Moralia* as *The Philosophie, commonly called, the Morals written by the learned Philosopher Plutarch* (1603). The passage in “On Superstition” where Plutarch defines ἀθεότης is followed by its French and English translations for comparison:

ἡ μὲν ἀθεότης κρίσις οὔσα φαύλη τοῦ μηδὲν εἶναι μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον εἰς ἀπάθειάν τινα δοκεῖ τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ τοῦ θείου περιφέρειν, καὶ τέλος ἐστὶν αὐτῇ τοῦ μὴ νομίζειν θεοῦς τὸ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι

(165c, Loeb Library edition)

. . . suffi pour venir à celles dont à présent il est question, l'impieté de l'atheiste est un faulx & mauvais jugement qui luy fait croire qu'il n'y a point de nature souverainement heureuse & incorruptible, & le conduit par ceste mesereance, à n'en sentir point aussi de passion.

(Amyot, p. 120)

But now to come unto those which at this present are in question: Impiety or Atheisme, being a false persuasion and lewd believe, that there is no sovereigne Nature most happy and incorruptible, seemeth by incredulity of a God-head to bring miscreants to a certaine stupidity, bereaving them of all sense and feeling, considering that the end of this mis-believe that there is no God, is to be void altogether of feare.

(Holland)²⁴

To summarize this excursion into Renaissance translations, it is evident that Plato, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, and Plutarch conveyed clear ideas about atheists and atheism into the Renaissance world. Those authors, together with Aristotle, Horace, Seneca, Ovid, and Livy, were essential to the ancient world's dramatic influence on the pliable Renaissance mind. By the late 1500s, educated Europeans could read about people who do not believe in any god and worldviews with no place for gods.²⁵

With the growth of scholarship comes an industry of glossaries and dictionaries. Niccolò Perotti's *Cornucopia linguae latinae* (1489) did not include *atheos* or *atheismus*, nor did editions of Johannes Reuchlin's *Vocabularius brevilocus* (1490s), but Calepino's dictionary did. Ambrogio Calepino (Calipinus) compiled his larger Latin dictionary with the title of *Cornucopiae*, which became among the most reprinted reference works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with later enlarged editions known as the *Dictionarium*. The first edition of 1502 defined *atheos*: *qui negat deū esse*. The denial of god's existence remained the core to the *Dictionarium* definition. By 1579, its definition was *Impius, qui negat Deum, qui est sine Deo* (impious, who denies God, who is without God). That definition appears in further printings including the 1609 edition. For comparison, the *Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot Knyght* (first edition 1538,

in the ‘Additions’ section) has “Atheos, he that doth not believe that god is.” The *Thomae Thomasi Dictionarium* (3rd edition, 1592) published at Cambridge has “Athēos, A miscreant, an Infidell, one which believeth no God: godless.” During the mid-1600s, the definition of the *Calepinus Dictionarium* is shortened to *Impius qui negat Deum esse*. By 1681 the longer definition returned: *Impius, qui negat Deum esse, qui est sine Deo*. The 1708 *Dictionarium* had more nuance: *sine Deo, impius, qui nullum credit esse Deum* (without God, impious, who does not believe God exists). The dictionary was later published with the title, *Calepinus Septem linguarum*; its 1726 edition refined the definition for *Atheos* and added a second entry for *Atheus*, & *Atheos*, supplemented with citations for these terms.

Atheos, *ateo*, qui nullos esse Deos credit. Cic. I. *de nat. deor.* c.23, & *Arnob.* lib. 3 & 5.

Atheus, & Atheos, qui sine Deo, & religione est, *Ateista*; quails fuit Diagoras Melius, qui Atheus cognominatus est, Cic. lib. I. *de nat. deor.* c.23. Diagoras, atheos qui dictus est. *Arnob* l. 5. p. 173. Quemquam ex his atheum, irreligiosum, sacrilegum.

These entries cite Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*, Book 1, where Diagoras and Theodorus are labeled as atheists who deny god, and they cite Arnobius’s *Against the Pagans* which says that the atheist denies or doubts that there are any gods.

The *Lexicon philosophicum graecum* (1615) by Rudolphus Goclenius the Elder (Rudolf Göckel) offered explanations in Latin terms for hundreds of important concepts from Greek philosophy, natural history, and science. It included an entry for *atheos*, which says that an *atheos* is someone openly renouncing God, or someone who privately rejects God or divine providence. This entry then says that *atheos* also applies to those who, like Epicureans, fear neither God nor divine judgment. Finally, this entry points out that although Socrates was *atheos* by denying gods, affirming only one God cannot be *atheos*.²⁶

In the wake of translations into Latin came more translations into European languages. Vernacular words in Italian, French, Spanish, German, and English for *atheos* (or *atheus*) and *atheismus* (or *atheismus*) came into use during the 1500s, and those terms consistently referred to not believing in god. There is no question that the accurate meaning of atheism was displayed on the pages of important and accessible books in front of Renaissance intellectuals across Europe. Whether any atheists covertly counted among those intellectuals is another question entirely. Knowing what atheism is cannot be equated with sympathetically understanding atheism. The opprobrium attached to *atheos* made it psychologically daunting as well as socially dangerous. Nevertheless, the word itself was not left unintelligible, even if Renaissance thinkers were typically mystified by the idea of a reasonably intelligent atheist.