

# Atheism FAQ for the Newly Deconverted

RationalWiki

First off, ***don't panic!*** It'll be okay.

If you found this article, you very well might have recently lost faith in your god or particular religious teaching. Some people have been raised to think that life without religion is utterly unthinkable, so a loss of faith can be difficult and trying, especially when deeply ingrained in our thoughts. Indeed, someone suffering a “crisis of faith” may wonder if there’s something wrong with him/her or even think that his/her life was wasted is now devoid of meaning.

This document’s mission is to help you find your way out of this darkness and confusion and into a place where you can be happy making reality-based, open-minded decisions on your own. It is by no means comprehensive, as no single document ever can be, but instead hopes to answer your most pressing questions.

Whether you are recently de-converted, on the brink of losing your religion, or a long-time non-believer, these questions and answers aim to give an overview of life without religion. You have entered the world of atheism, science, and rationality; here we’ll tell you what’s important to us, where we get our morality, and how we face the peer pressure to return to the church. And remember, choosing religion because you feel you have no other option is no choice at all.

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## So what do I believe now?

The truth is that you're pretty much free to believe whatever you want. That said, there are many concepts and ideas that have been put forward by atheists and freethinkers alike for centuries, and you may find that you — having either lost a faith, or having it shaken — agree with them. You're still free to disagree with them, of course, and find your own way.

The originator of this FAQ is what is sometimes known as a “weak atheist”, someone who does not *actively deny* the existence of gods but lives as if there are none. Other contributors from RationalWiki take different opinions; some are neopagans, some are Christians, many are agnostic or more overtly atheist.

“Atheism” is nothing more than the mere negation of the belief in the existence of any gods. Put that way it is a very limited statement itself. However, for most atheists, this position is merely the starting point to establish alternative, non-religious theories about ethics and social life. There are various secular (i.e., “no god/religion”) philosophies around; the most common are humanism and naturalism, but there are lots of others. Most of them are pretty similar however. What we all have in common on this wiki is that we're aspiring **rationalists**. This is the principle that belief systems, philosophies and worldviews (particularly those that inform your behaviour towards others) should reflect what can be observed and tested, not what someone or something tells you to accept as true without evidence. That means everything — *everything* — is fair game for scrutiny, *including* this fundamental tenet of rationalism itself. If you renounced your faith and became an atheist out of a lack of evidence for god's existence, then you have already implicitly accepted some of the tenets of rationalism. If you'd like to find out more about it, keep on reading, explore this wiki, the internet, books, or even try to form some original thoughts and share them with others.

Admittedly, you've already been bait-and-switched here. This isn't really a document about atheism itself; there's really quite little to explain there and this is not a bad thing. Essentially, knee-jerk atheism is no better than unexamined religious faith as it can be, as often as not, a purely emotional response to an adverse religious experience. Also, atheism by itself only means that you don't believe in a god. It doesn't say anything more, and you'll find that despite the rationalist image put forward by some atheists, other atheists can believe in a lot of woo, or be as clueless as your average wingnut about society. These people might be rare in religious-dominated societies like some parts of the US, where becoming an atheist usually means you have questioned your peers' faith and dropped out of religion as an informed decision, but travel to secular countries in Europe and you'll meet them.

This document is designed to put curious readers on a somewhat better footing; namely a rationalist one in which you feel comfortable asking the questions that everyone always told you that you weren't supposed to ask. You've heard

the phrase “curiosity killed the cat”? Well, actually curiosity is a great thing, and it’s part and parcel of practically every great discovery in the history of humanity. Be curious. Do outside research, then research the research. Don’t ignore inconvenient data. Strive to find the truth about everything.

If anything, the “thing to believe in” pushed by this article would be a form of curiosity-led rationalism. But don’t take our word for it; do your research. We don’t want you to just listen to us; you’d be missing the point of what we’re saying if you do.

### **Is this atheism or agnosticism?**

Whether someone is an “atheist” or an “agnostic” is a bone of contention for many — and arguments over the internet erupt frequently over it. Neil deGrasse Tyson, for example, prefers no label at all but will take “agnostic” if pushed — whereas Richard Dawkins is less compromising about his position on the subject, describing himself as “6.9 out of 7” on his Kinsey-style atheism scale. So, opinions differ on what one should label oneself: you don’t believe in God, therefore you’re an atheist; you’re not 100% sure, therefore you’re an agnostic. “Agnostic atheist” is most often used as a compromise that acknowledges a lack of belief (which is what atheism refers to) but that you don’t take it as a 100% certain faith position (which is mostly what agnosticism is used to refer to).

From a rationalist position, it cannot be overstated that these are just labels. The chances are that your own beliefs and ideas are as nuanced and as subtly defined as anyone else’s—and two people calling themselves “atheist” may differ from each other more than either would with someone else calling themselves “agnostic”. The trouble starts when people begin to infer facts from these labels, and so they come with downsides. If you call yourself “agnostic” you might easily be accused of having some form of faux open mindedness and that you wouldn’t call yourself agnostic about an invisible purple dragon that sits on your shoulder all day. Yet if you call yourself an “atheist”, you might stand accused of taking a faith position, and rejecting the existence of God(s) based on no substantial evidence—and that sort of accusation can come from theists and skeptics alike.

In the end, though, what you choose to call it isn’t particularly important. Go with “agnostic atheist” to get the best of both worlds if that’s how you feel, or even choose some other label; the important part when it comes to treating God with rationality is the following:

1. To treat all concepts of god equally (i.e., be as “atheist” or “agnostic” about YHWH as you are about Allah, and Vishnu, and Xenu, and Thor, and so on).
2. To understand what would change your mind about the veracity of a belief system and stick to it (it’s unlikely, but you never know when there’ll be a booming voice from the sky).

3. To ensure that the evidence in no.2 is not a straw man of the belief in question.

It might also be important to note here that the term agnostic has a rather different meaning in academic philosophy circles. There, it refers to the belief that one cannot know anything about God due to Its transcendental nature, therefore this agnostic is making a bold epistemological concern (one to do with knowledge) while simultaneously being an atheist in that necessarily one cannot possess belief in the existence of something which one also believes nothing can be known about. Referring to oneself as an “agnostic atheist” would solve this problem of potential mis-identification.

### Is atheism a religion?

Most of the claims that “atheism is a religion” originate from a fallacious argument (combining elements of the *tu quoque* and the *non sequitur*) made by promoters of religion. According to this argument, atheists’ criticisms of religion (particularly those of the New Atheists) are invalid because atheists are *also* religious; adhering to a different sort of religion often termed a secular religion. There are two ways of responding to this argument. One proposes that the answer is a resounding “no”, while the other says that even if it was “yes”, it wouldn’t matter at all as the question is just an issue of semantics and clever word-play.

If “clear” could be considered a color, “abstinence” could be considered a sex position, “bald” could be considered a hair style, and “apathetic” could be considered a stance on an issue, then maybe “atheism” could be considered a religion. That’s not the way reality works, however.

In support of the resounding “no” is the very structure of the word “atheist” itself. It is in opposition to the claim that is one common feature of religion. The prefix “a-” is a Greek term, that simply means “without”, or “not”, while the suffix “-theism” is the belief in god, gods, a higher power, or something of the like. Therefore, “atheism” literally means “without belief in god”. Since religion is a collection of individuals in a system or group who believe in a deity or relate life to a higher power, a group of people who did not believe this would be the antithesis of religion. Indeed, if “no religion” *was* a religion then we’d be in a very bizarre situation where “no religion” wouldn’t be allowed. As comedian Bill Maher described it “Atheism is a religion like abstinence is a sex position”.

Even if we assume some atheists can be *religious*, giving all atheists the “religious” label is troublesome due to the existence of *implicit atheism*. An implicit atheist is a person who is not consciously aware of his/her non-belief, as opposed to an *explicit* atheist who is aware that they don’t believe (and in many respects this is a more meaningful distinction than the “weak”/“strong” distinction). This is because atheism (“a” meaning “not” and “theism” meaning “believing in god(s)”) is a response to theism and is framed in the context of existing religions.

Without theism being explicitly defined, atheism cannot be explicitly defined. Given this, anyone — or indeed, anything — unaware of religion is atheistic, but only *implicitly*. According to this definition, of course, even orange peels are atheists — and this is endemic of many problems with having to work with definitions.

Broadening the meaning of religion to include non-religious atheists, implicit atheists, or even more ardent and vocal ones would utterly destroy the ability of the word “religion” to mean what those religionists want it to mean. If you were to consider “religious” as being anyone who was passionate about an idea, consider how many people would be “religious” and how many new “religions” would form overnight: fans of TV shows, sports teams, political parties, concert goers. All of these people and “religions” would, by this definition, be granted equal footing and equal claim to the “religion” label as Islam or Christianity. Switching to a more narrow and precise definition — one that resembles the actual use of the word “religion”, and one that can actually communicate a better idea of what a “religion” really is — it is completely invalid to lump even the so-called New Atheism with religion.

Atheists, or those in the process of losing faith, wondering if atheism is a religion, need not lose too much sleep over the subject. It is ultimately a question of semantics and linguistic philosophy. A better question would be to ask what properties a belief system has that makes it acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong, something to be encouraged or something to be scorned, and so on. Atheism, in and of itself, makes no requirement for an atheist to be ardent, devout, conscientious or faithful about being an atheist. So even lumping it in as a “religion” means that it doesn’t share many properties with the likes of Christianity and Islam, or their fundamentalist offshoots, as atheism doesn’t demand faith or devout fidelity to a dogmatic code.

A question you’ll see probably a little too often: **“Which God do you not believe in?”** The answer, of course, is all of them. Even the ones you’ve never heard of.

### **If atheism is a *lack* of belief, why all the fuss?**

Some people find it distasteful that atheists should be organised, actively try to disprove God, write books on the subject or generally try and communicate their lack of belief at all. These things make atheists seem as bad as the religions they protest. And people are free to hold this opinion. However, there are some good reasons that atheists should speak out.

Firstly, atheism only makes sense when religion is dominant. As discussed above “a-theism” only works when “theism” is defined. So that religion is a dominant and influential force in the world — though not by the margins some apologists like to think — atheism becomes a more important and meaningful term than we’ve implied above. Atheism is essentially a non-normative behaviour in most

places on Earth; even the question “what religion are you?”, which appears everywhere from forms to casual conversation, is loaded to imply that you have a religion rather than none. Belief in belief is also common, and a meme that almost states you *must* have a religion. While the burden of proof will always lie with the Believer, all of these factors mean that atheists can, and often do, feel the need to justify themselves. Others look into it as a question of why the majority seem to believe something that they don’t: wondering if they are wrong, if there’s something they’ve missed, and so on. Communication and discussion becomes integral to understanding this: **it’s okay to not believe**.

Due to the fact that atheism is such a fringe belief in places, the US "Bible Belt" for instance, atheists are one of the most denigrated and persecuted minorities. People have been driven from their homes and places of work for their lack of belief, essentially being the “them” in the prevalent “us vs. them” mentality. In countries run by fundamentalist Islamic governments, atheism and apostasy are punishable not with a cold shoulder and a blank look, but death. One may as well turn the question around and ask *these* people what all the fuss is about. The activism and community forms a vital part of protecting and helping this minority of people who are victimised.

The extremes of victimisation are fortunately quite rare, confined to theocratic Islamic states mostly, but the social stigma and pressure from family for people to believe is not. There are countless individuals who are probably not happy with their religious beliefs, don’t get the “feeling” of God that their friends do or simply just don’t believe it at all. Yet, these people will be actively afraid of voicing their concerns, both for fear of the stigma of atheism and the instilled belief that it is *they* who are the problem, not the belief system. This has been a defence mechanism for religious belief systems for centuries, so atheists are there to let people break away from this shameless blackmail and psychological torture; there is nothing wrong with you, **it’s okay to not believe**.

In an ideal world, people would be free to leave their religion as easily as they can join one as they figure out what to believe and not to believe. However, the world is not ideal, and people find it difficult to leave a religion, mainstream as well as cult-like sects. Activism, communication and “fuss” is what is there to remedy this situation.

### **What’s the deal with this “Atheism+” thing?**

Basically, if you don’t believe in God, you’re willing to question all (and we do mean *all*) your prejudices, and you think doing right by your fellow human beings is a good and necessary thing no matter what the reason, you’re an Atheist+. There’s a message board and a community, but at the end of the day that’s all you really need to know.

**What about science? You rationalists hold it up as the be-all, end-all of human knowledge, but how can that be when it's always changing?**

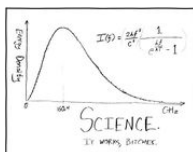


Figure 1: “Science, which is based on observation and reason. Science will win because it works” - Stephen Hawking  
 “Science. It works, bitches!” - Randall Munroe.

Asimov’s essay *The Relativity of Wrong* addresses this objection pretty eloquently, and is worth reading.

A lot of people misunderstand the idea of scientific change, as if what we learn tomorrow will outright contradict what we think we know today. The media are to blame for a great deal of this, especially given their habit of hyping half-baked results and attention-seeking reports from groups such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who often use shock tactics to get across a message that may be overstated or simply wrong. (Even Al Gore, who won a Nobel Prize and an Academy Award for his attempts to raise awareness of global warming, was once a victim of scientific charlatans, supporting psychic research and the like during his term as Senator from Tennessee. He’s gotten better.)

In reality, scientific change is better described in an old saying most famously stated by Isaac Newton: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Any truly earth-shaking scientific discovery (as well as all of the more mundane ones) is what it is not only because it explains something unexpected, but also because it explains why the previous theory explained everything, but not the new observations. Thus it was that Einstein’s theory of relativity supplanted Newton’s classical mechanics in physics — Einstein’s relativity explained why Newtonian mechanics broke down when trying to observe objects traveling near the speed of light, and in turn quantum mechanics explained why Einstein’s physics did not apply in the obvious manner on very small scales.

Science is also self-correcting, and scientists are brutal on each other’s ideas. Take the case of Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, formerly of the University of Utah, who claimed they could fuse hydrogen in a palladium electrode at room temperature — this was the infamous “cold fusion” debacle. It was refuted almost immediately by physicists and chemists who realized that Pons and Fleischmann were claiming the impossible. Importantly, they also tried to reproduce their experiments and didn’t get the same results. A core of “true believers” still think there’s something to it, but they are considered cranks



because the science just did not work. Scientists still look into low-temperature fusion devices as a possible solution to future energy crises, but they have long since abandoned Pons and Fleischmann's electrochemical approach, preferring to focus on what's known as "locally hot" fusion, where the fusion reactions take place at a high temperature on a very small scale, only negligibly raising the ambient temperature in the experiment. Should some out-of-the box researcher show, through reproducible experiments, that cold fusion occurs, then science would accept it as a real phenomenon. This is just one of countless examples where science has changed for the better.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" saith the skeptic, and scientists seek to oblige. If the evidence is there, papers are published, perhaps a Nobel Prize is awarded. If the evidence is not there, the claim is trashed, left only to crackpots and historians to fight over.

Reality doesn't change; mankind's knowledge of reality does.

### **Well, how did things come to be? What was before the Big Bang? If God didn't create the universe, how did it happen?**

Apart from "there is no *before*" as time did not exist, the only answer is "we don't know." Is that so terrible? We're trying to work it out though, which is better than accepting the unsupported claims of ancient writers. For those who want to know more and to hear what leading cosmologists and physicists have to say on the topic please follow the references linked for the most current theories from Stephen Hawking<sup>1</sup> and Lawrence Krauss<sup>2</sup>.

### **You haven't mentioned evolution.**

True, we haven't. Atheism and evolution are separate entities, although both are complementary in the way that they tend to apply methodological naturalism to the world. Atheism goes one step further and applies philosophical naturalism to the world as well. Fortunately, if you are curious about the subject the TalkOrigins.org FAQ archive can answer virtually all your questions and then some far better than we can or need to in this document.

### **Can free will exist without gods?**

Free will is something of a mental abstraction. Others would re-conceptualize questions involving free will, and ask: "how could free will exist in the presence of an all-knowing God?". Indeed, the question can be more generally asked: "does free will exist at all?"

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFjwXe-pXvM>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ImvlS8PLIo>

It is very difficult to devise a test for free will from the inside, since from the inside it is impossible to tell free will from *post-facto* rationalisation. We cannot physically run *100% identical* situations and see if someone can exercise their will to take a different path. The human mind can be described in terms similar to those of computers, and can be called a “state machine”, which has particular properties. As a state machine becomes larger, it becomes *exponentially* harder to predict what state the machine is in now, and what state it will be in at some time  $t$  in the future. It is entirely possible that the human mind is simply a very large state machine, and some physical evidence may suggest this is the case. If all human actions are the result of a chain of causality, that chain is so complex as to be almost completely unknowable. To determine an individual’s future behavior with precision, one would have to know and understand every aspect of that person’s brain and hormone system, as well as the state of any matter or energy which might interact with the person in the future. To simulate reality with this degree of accuracy seems impossible — indeed you probably would have to create an entire simulated reality to figure it out. Thus, the illusion of free will and the unpredictability of humans, as individuals, is simply generated by a great many inputs from various external stimuli, and the internal chemical balance of each person’s body — and this interaction, while deterministic, is *too complex to predict* and free will is what it appears to be.

Since it seems likely that we will never be able to prove or disprove that free will exists, a rationalist could alter the question further to reflect this reality: “does the existence or otherwise of free will have any bearing on your life?” It would seem like a harmless assumption to believe that we have free will, and to then try and choose the best possible action in any given situation. Or, you could believe that your tendency to try to find the best possible action in any given situation has been set up by your biochemistry, in interaction with past events, and simply go with it. Of course, you still have the problem of knowing what the definition of ‘best’ is, but that’s another discussion. Most people make the assumption that free will is real and ignore the paradox it forms with an apparently predictable universe — as we have said, it is a mostly harmless assumption.

### **Shouldn’t all those theologians who have spent time in college and seminaries know what they’re talking about better than I?**

Once you start to consider that there are no gods and therefore no divine influence, claims of expertise in theology and religion look a little shaky. Indeed, you can then wonder if there can be *any* relevant “expertise” on the question of god’s existence that can *only* be attained by studying theology. You need to ask yourself why a priest or academic should be better placed to tell you that God exists than a gardener, a police officer, an English teacher or *anyone else*. For that matter, why should we place confidence in the expert opinions of *Christian* theology, and not on experts and theologians from other religions? The basic

assumption of theism, that God *does* exist, hasn't been backed up with solid and universally convincing evidence — so arguing the finer points of the nature of God is quite pointless.

Theologians, and especially priests, are obviously not independent experts on the question of god's existence; their status as experts is dependent on the public acceptance of their tenets and doctrines. If the wider public tended towards explicit skepticism of God's existence, apologists would quickly find themselves without a job. They have a very strong vested interest in defending religion regardless of whether or not its fundamental premise is actually true. When dealing with apologists, one should keep Upton Sinclair's famous quip in mind: "It's difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."

When theologians demand that critics of religion first immerse themselves in apologetics before addressing any arguments, they are employing a special tactic known as the Courtier's Reply. This can either be to quash dissent, or stave off embarrassment, by deflecting attention away from their shaky and uncertain foundations and towards the supposed sophistication and detail of deeper theological arguments. Atheists and agnostics will tend to agree that discussions about the *nature* of God are moot until the *existence* of God is established. There's even ignosticism, which posits that even God's *existence* is moot until you get around to actually defining "God" properly. The importance of the fact that religious apologists were often indoctrinated with outlandish beliefs from childhood simply cannot be overstated. Because of this, their views tend towards just assuming God exists and working from there — what is known as presuppositionalism.

In all areas of rationalism and skepticism (not just in terms of atheism) it is important to never just accept what you are told as outright truth. If something you've been told does not make sense to you, but the person telling you is insisting that you rely on what they're saying, it's your responsibility to educate yourself on the subject — to examine the company behind a stock, to understand the laws of thermodynamics and mass/energy conservation, to understand a new invention, or to understand the cultural context and authorship of a Bible verse. Ask questions, as anyone who is relying on fact should be able to answer them (even if they utter an honest "I don't know"!) while those who push woo and falsehoods will misdirect you and try to get you to be quiet. This is called due diligence in business, and it's your best protection against scams and liars, including those who hide behind a Ph.D.

If all this seems daunting and incredulous, consider this: a degree in Bible studies is pretty much equivalent to a degree in Literature, except the diploma-holder will have studied significantly fewer books.

## What about the Bible?

Ah. The source of all good things according to Judaism and Christianity, yet a source of endless vexation to nonbelievers. But not for the reason you'd think—while many preachers would have you think the Bible's truths are self-evident and all-sufficient, most non-believers believe they are anything but.



Figure 2: The Bible regularly comes under fire for its content. Incest, rape, and mass murder make regular appearances in the Old Testament.

Bible studies (that would be church-based study, not historical scholarship which is often quite thoroughly researched) very often dance around or outright avoid the context of the creation of the Bible. The fact is that the Bible, as important as it is to Western literature and thought, was begun in an area that was almost a backwater—Iron Age Judaea, whose single most significant factor in its time was the fact that it happened to be located near major trade routes (and on the military invasion route) between Assyria and Egypt. (For proper perspective, the original territory of Judaea began somewhere a little north of modern Jerusalem and extended along the Dead Sea into the northern reaches of the Negev Desert; while modern Israel extends all the way to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, ancient Judaea had another Hebrew-speaking nation, Edom, occupying that area to the south (although both Solomon and Amaziah managed to conquer it). In other words, a country that, on a good day, covered less than a third of modern Israel and the West Bank.) Judaea was a tiny, mostly agrarian, temple-state based in Jerusalem that for much of its existence was overshadowed by the nominally coreligious but far more cosmopolitan state of Israel to the north, and it didn't manage to come into its own until Israel was crushed by Assyria after making a number of hostile (and rather dubious) political alliances. (The question of whether there was ever a united kingdom of Israel containing all twelve tribes of Israelites is, at best, murky. It's clear that both kingdoms shared much common tradition, but there is little evidence of much activity at Jerusalem at the time of the early Davidian dynasty, if you use Finkelstein's chronology.<sup>3</sup>)

Seeing an opportunity for development, the priestly caste of Judaea combined

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<sup>3</sup>Finkelstein's pottery chronology, which lowers archaeological dates by 50-80 years compared to the variation of the Albrightian chronology used today, therefore, making what is Solomonic, Omride and what is Omride, 8th century, is mostly based on the fact that, in order to make the traditional pottery chronology work, Philistine pottery has to be introduced in 1177 BCE, but, such pottery is only introduced at non-coastal sites, such as Lachish, in the 1130s BCE. The Finkelsteinian chronology, by way of third Philistine invasion, pushes the first appearance of this pottery on the Canaanite coast into the 1130s BCE. The main reasons for it not being accepted by a majority of scholars are 1. There is no evidence for a third Philistine invasion, 2. This chronology squeezes the Hazor strata, 3. The traditional chronology is Biblically supported, 4. Would you buy pottery from a nation which may potentially take over you until such a nation has stopped its expansionist phase and settled down?.

the related but divergent religious stories of Israel and Judaea into a common tradition, and any previously believed gods into the single personage of YHWH, the God now worshipped, in various variations, by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions, ruthlessly suppressing other traditional Semitic faith elements in favor of those that promoted Judahite—Jewish—identity. From the original documents of the faith—believed to have developed into the modern Book of Deuteronomy—came an immense anthology of literature relating the history and faith of the Jewish people and their struggles to retain an identity of their own in the face of cultural encroachments of regional powers. Middle East researchers have found a great many elements common to many other Semitic peoples in the area—many of the details of Noah’s Flood date back to the Sumerian (i.e. pre-Semitic) Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, and the Book of Job is known to be an elaboration on an ancient pan-Semitic folktale. This is the Jewish Bible.



Figure 3: Jesus’s acts and sermons are a slight improvement on the Old Testament content, but their value as a verifiable historical account is questionable.

As for the New Testament, its history covers a scant 70 years, from the birth of Jesus (itself a somewhat wobbly date, generally believed to have been somewhere between 8 and 4 BC based on current calendar understanding) to the ministry of Paul of Tarsus, who is the only Biblical writer outside some of the prophets whose name we know, and who wrote only about half of the material attributed to him in the New Testament. The Gospels — the most direct and contemporaneous biographical material of Jesus known — were compiled second and third-hand from other sources, now lost, of unknown provenance, and were picked out of a much greater number of books by a Catholic bishop named Eusebius around 250 years later. At least one Gospel of unquestioned early provenance, the Gospel of Thomas, was lost entirely until the 20th century and never made it into any known New Testament canon. And the Book of Revelation, so beloved of modern evangelicals, had its canonicity questioned by theologians even as late as Martin Luther.

How much of these stories is actually true is anyone’s guess, though a great amount of archaeology has been devoted to investigating and/or proving it.

What we do know is that the idea of Biblical inerrancy simply isn't possible or sensible — even the parts of it that can be verified by historical evidence often contain anachronisms or obvious literary license, and that a great many parts of the Bible simply do not translate into anything comprehensible to modern ears or thinking. Despite what your preachers tell you, contradictions abound in the Bible; many are inconsequential in nature (the infamous “molten sea” of Solomon's Temple, built with an impossible  $\pi=3$  ratio, is really only an issue for strict inerrantists who assert the Bible's “absolute” scientific truth), but many more—such as the wildly inconsistent genealogies of Jesus or the poorly-reconciled double creation story at the beginning of Genesis — would be fatal in a peer-reviewed historic paper.

There is quite a lot of material written on the subject of Biblical history, and the few sources mentioned below in the bibliography don't even scratch the surface of what has been written on the subject. One thing's for sure — it's highly unlikely you'll get answers in your old church. Read. Read a lot. It's good for you.

### **What about other Scriptures? The Qur'an? The Book of Mormon? The Vedas?**

These books have their own histories, some as colorful as the Bible itself. In Western cultures, histories of some of these books may be hard to come by, but with a fair amount of diligence and a critical eye, quality literature exists on the histories of all of these books as it does for the Bible. You might even be able to use that information to improve this FAQ.

### **Does one need a higher power to have morality?**

Morality is one of the more complex issues in human behavior. Our morality governs how we act and treat each other so understanding and justifying the ideas behind our morals undoubtedly plays a huge part in philosophy. Some people, based on the fact that morality is complex, attribute it to higher powers, namely (their religion's) God. Think about this for a moment: if someone says that all that is preventing them from stealing, lying, raping, and killing to reach whatever ends they want is the dictates of God (or their fear of Hell), can that person really be trusted? To be held to a view of morality only by an external force, implies that should that force be taken away, the individual would resort to immorality almost immediately. Rationalist or atheistic views of morality are defined otherwise, and often look to the history of humanity in not only deciding what is moral, but why we would think that. This removes any external factors, and allows us to make our own informed decisions, with an end result that is just as ethical as those who attribute their actions to God alone.

Humanity (and its ancestors, and many other species besides) has long found it advantageous to live in communities governed by an ethic of reciprocity, best summed up in the many formulations of the Golden Rule (“do unto others as you would have them do to you”, although this position is not without its critics). This moral code appears in some form in virtually all of the world’s religious texts, but also in virtually every secular philosophy, and has been central to human society throughout history. This is not, as some people claim, because we obey God’s moral guidance, but because it is basic common sense to treat others as we expect to be treated, that is, with courtesy, dignity and kindness rather than loathing, spite and murder. In fact, religion and morality were separate in many cultures whose gods were tricksters or simply unconcerned with the ethical behavior of mere humans.<sup>4</sup>

Despite what the works of Ayn Rand might tell you, selfishness is often counterproductive and altruism often helps society. Aiding the weak and sick, who might never get to contribute to a less social society, helps improve the lot of society at large. Many religions and nationalisms work against this, dividing society into “in-groups” and “out-groups”, and frowning on helping those who are not part of the favored in-group. While the right form of competition is necessary in business and scientific research to foster new ideas and provide an incentive for product improvement, it is not always a useful thing in society, and is sometimes outright deadly, such as with war. The types of people who believe it is our duty to help to make society better generally fall under the label humanist. If they are non-religious, they’re secular humanists—those infamous nasty words preachers love to spit out as if they’re a term of abuse. Nobody’s perfect, and everybody has prejudices, but it does seem as if most people, absent a reason to hate The Other, are humanists at heart.

Remember: morality is not acting under the promise or threat of rewards and punishment, but acting because one thinks it to be the right thing to do regardless of the consequences to oneself.

**If everyone were atheist, wouldn’t people just do whatever they wanted, no matter who was harmed?**

No. That would happen only if people stopped caring about or respecting other people, not just because they stop believing in God. As noted above, it is perfectly possible to act in a moral manner without interference from supernatural beings and it is arguably *more noble* to do so without their interference.

Regardless of religious beliefs, there are two main things that prevent most people from willfully harming their fellow humans. One is the gift of empathy — “how would I feel if somebody did that to me?” This is a natural qualm which humanity developed a long time ago, probably as soon as we had evolved the consciousness to understand pleasure, pain and our abilities to inflict them on

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<sup>4</sup>“Religion Functions to Sustain the Moral Order”: Starkly Wrong, Genealogy of Religion

other people. It's at the root of the Golden Rule, and, for most people, empathy and respect for other members of society prevents them from wanting to engage in destructive behaviour.

Despite being naturally greedy, stupid, etc., humans also naturally have some innate sense of empathy. Research in biology, neuroscience, and psychology supports this idea. The study of the evolution of morality is demonstrating that empathic behavior is not unique to humans and that the "law of the jungle" doesn't always mean dog-eat-dog.<sup>56</sup>

The second thing which prevents us from harmful behaviour is our knowledge or prediction of the consequences. This does not have to involve visualisations of Hell, since there are plenty of consequences here on Earth for antisocial behaviour. Depending on the level of the transgression, we may suffer embarrassment, the disappointment of those around us, punishment, possible attacks on us, setbacks in our life or career, etc. With these possible consequences in mind, we do not commit that crime, no matter how much we want to, or if we do, we suffer those consequences.

Of course there are different levels of selfishness, and it isn't always harmful to do whatever we want. A lot of the time it can be harmless fun to indulge ourselves moderately in small ways. Religions often instill a sense of guilt about these small acts of selfishness, which is unnecessary since they usually harm nobody else. Some other acts of selfishness might be more silly. We might want to stay at home instead of going to work, but we don't because we know that's a good way to lose our livelihood. This is a case of predicting the consequences of a transgression, as is also the case with preventing more destructive acts of selfishness, such as a person who considers committing a crime but does not want to go to jail.

But would those consequences still be there if everybody was an atheist? Of course. Theists sometimes claim that we only have laws because of their God's commandments, but in fact the basic laws—prohibitions of murder, rape, violence, theft, etc.—have actually been common in some form to virtually all societies, regardless of religious beliefs. This is because they are founded on the principles of empathy (treating others as we wish to be treated) and aim to maintain a stable and peaceful society, something that every government, and every member of society, has an interest in upholding, no matter what they may believe or not believe about invisible forces or life after death.

### **What's the meaning of life, without gods or an afterlife?**

The **meaning of life** has been pondered over for thousands of years, and may well be *the* question central to all philosophy. It's difficult to convey the answer in a few short paragraphs; indeed there may be no one answer. So this, at least,

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<sup>5</sup>Myth: Atheistic Evolution Cannot Account for the Human Conscience, about.com

<sup>6</sup>A Natural History of Peace, Robert Sapolsky, *Foreign Affairs*



is a very brief guide to a rationalist interpretation of the question and its various answers.

Rationalism tells us that, in all probability, what awaits us after death is pretty much what we experienced before birth: a total lack of any awareness. No one alive today was aware during the 16th Century, just as no one alive today will be aware in the 31st Century (ignoring any such conjecture of “immortality” being so close that the first immortal has already been born). This is a pretty scary thought for most people, as most people tend to quite like being alive and aware, and well, death *sucks*. If you are going to die, it helps focus the mind on what we want to achieve in the now. If one assumes that your current awareness is all that you will experience and that it is far from permanent, it makes it more special, and makes every second something to be relished and cherished. This allows a great flexibility and potential for people to discover their own meanings for why they’re here, or even ignore the question entirely, treating it as irrelevant or just the wrong question to ask. An afterlife, on the other hand, actively diminishes the value we put on life as we see it now (since attention is focused on following a religion’s instructions for how to reach the positive afterlife and avoid the negative one), despite how comforting it is to believe that consciousness can transcend the temporary nature of life.

Existentialists believe that life has the meaning you bring to it. One of the great liberties of being an atheist is being able to decide what it is that is important for you to get out of life, rather than have it thrust upon you by the weight of history and tradition. Some people see success as being the best person they can be within the bounds society sets out for them, while others will choose to find success outside those bounds. Other philosophies find an inherent meaning in a life that is filled with good works. Of course, what exactly constitutes a “good work” differs with each philosophy, but most agree fundamentally that living a good life is doing the best you can with what you have. Some things are seen as inherently more meaningful than others, and what is meaningful is not left up to personal discretion but typically that which will make the world a better place in the present and for future generations.

If living on in some semblance after death is important to you, you have some practical options. Children are the most direct way of ensuring some continuance of both your physical attributes and your thought processes. Just make sure that the little brats behave themselves! Becoming an organ donor could enable many other people have their lives extended or improved as a direct result of your actions. Achieving a novel feat or creating some new invention or idea is a great way to ensure something of yourself survives after death and benefits the future. Of course, performing acts of great evil will likely result in your being remembered in future generations, but acts of evil generally conflict with the principles of fulfilling one’s responsibilities as a person and making the world a better place.

If you can, in old age, look back on your life and identify but a few regrets, then you’ve probably lived life the best you can. Alternatively, you may come to the

conclusion — or at least suspect — that life has no meaning, that its meaning is beyond human knowledge, or that whatever meaning it does have is not very important. Any of these are plausible possibilities.

### Gambling? Drinking? Drugs?



Figure 4: Remember informed consent: Before giving **consent** to drinking this absinthe, be **informed** that you will feel like shit in the morning.

Now that’s an interesting question. Essentially, the answer is to a) know your limits and b) stop when the disposable cash and/or fun runs out, whichever comes first.

It’s certainly true that addictive behaviors ruin lives, and trying to suppress them is a big cause of people falling into the faith trap to begin with. The answer, as always, is education. One of your authors had a teacher in high school who didn’t gamble because she always went gaga over radio call-in contests, and was afraid that if it involved actual money, she’d be dragged into a vicious cycle. Some may laugh at that, but it’s a perfectly sensible opinion.

When it comes right down to it, though, there’s a big difference between enjoyment and addiction—a person at a wine or beer tasting is not likely to be someone who hides in the basement drinking Smirnoff 100 straight from the bottle, a college professor indulging in the occasional joint is a far cry from an ODing gutter punk with a syringe in her arm and a panicking buddy trying to decide whether to call an EMT, and Ken Uston organizing a card-counting team at a casino would have had almost nothing in common with a hard-luck case buying scratch tickets at a convenience store. But neither is there a sharp line between the two—addictive vices must always be approached with knowledge

and self-awareness, and a realization that harm reduction must never take a backseat to pleasure. If you can't handle it, don't get involved.

One must also take into account local laws, and the risk of consequences, for engaging in actions that are prohibited. Females committing adultery in certain countries may be stoned. Drug trafficking in Singapore may be punishable by death. Being a Christian in Afghanistan, while maybe not technically illegal, risks torture and death by organized groups such as the Taliban. Of course, there is a basis for knowingly going against laws and customs because you feel it is a moral duty; this is called civil disobedience. However, some acts are plainly irrational, such as smoking weed in front of a police officer if you don't expect or want to be arrested.

A smart rationalist does not condemn indulgence, but irresponsibility. Go with that understanding.

### Or abortion, or euthanasia?



Figure 5: Terry Pratchett, on being diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease became a vocal right-to-die spokesperson and was openly an atheist. On religious objections to euthanasia: "The problem with the God argument is that it works only if you believe in God, which I do not."

Atheism, as it is, doesn't say much about this subject. Well, as atheism is a statement of *lack* of belief, it precisely says *nothing* about the subjects. So anyone who has lost faith in a religion is free to choose whether they like these options or not based on their own ideas — perhaps you had a gut instinct to be pro-choice but were stopped by beliefs? We don't mean to presume, but do feel free to follow what you think, rather than what others are telling you to think. Despite the smears by the Religious Right, atheists, rationalists and humanists value life as much as *any* other person, and it is up to them to choose what they would do in that situation and not to force that view on to others. Really only a very few people deserve to be smeared with the label "pro-death". The issue could be summed up in the phrase "safe, legal and rare", which acknowledges

that abortion is far from an ideal resolution, but when it *is* needed, it shouldn't be done in a back alley using a bottle of bleach and a coat hanger.

That said, the trend is that rationalists and humanists consider both abortion and euthanasia to be a matter of a person's own right to determine what happens to their own bodies, and that these subjects are highly personal matters at that. That's truly what pro-choice means—you may not necessarily support it for your own self, but it's important that the option still be there and you do not infringe upon other people's right to decide for themselves also. While empathy is possible to a degree, no one can fully appreciate the dilemmas of being in a complex situation like having an abortion or ending their own life *until they're in that situation themselves*.

Further secular ideas regarding the subject can be found in Don Marquis' widely cited 1989 paper, *Why Abortion is Immoral*,<sup>7</sup> which puts forward the "deprivation argument" and in Judith Jarvis Thompson's *A Defense of Abortion*<sup>8</sup> which features the famous thought-experiment of being hooked up to a famous violinist against your will. The bottom line, however, is to—as much as you can allow yourself—not infringe on the rights of others, and decide on your own should you be in this position. One of the joys of atheism is that you don't have to listen to a church deciding morality for you; there is a large amount of explicitly secular literature on controversial subjects that one can read and be exposed to. Or alternatively, you can just go with your gut.

### **What about, you know, sex?**

It should go without saying that we, the FAQ writers, generally feel that what (and who) you do in your bed<sup>9</sup> is your business. The important things are informed consent and safety, and since that's quite a bit more general than the simple question of, you know, sex, we'll talk about those first, then get back to the good stuff.

### **What is informed consent?**

Well, you've heard preachers and politicians complaining that if you allow gay sex, then you'll allow incest, and polygamy, and man-on-dog man-on-turtle<sup>1011</sup>, yada yada. This is an example of a slippery slope argument (which we'll discuss later), and is invalid for one simple reason: sex is a very private and personal thing to most people, and a key point in nontheistic morality is this informed

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<sup>7</sup>Wikipedia's summary of The deprivation argument according to Don Marquis

<sup>8</sup>Wikipedia's summary of A Defense of Abortion

<sup>9</sup>Or on your kitchen table, in your car, on the living room floor... etc.

<sup>10</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Cornyn#Civil\\_rights\\_and\\_law\\_enforcement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cornyn#Civil_rights_and_law_enforcement)

<sup>11</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg7YN-yCr4A&feature=player\\_detailpage#t=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg7YN-yCr4A&feature=player_detailpage#t=180s)

consent thing. It relates to the matter of due diligence discussed above, and it is essentially this:

*In order to take an action, the actor(s) are responsible for making sure that both themselves and others involved know why they're there, approve of their involvement, and understand what effect the action will have on themselves and anyone else involved.*

In the simplest sense, this is a matter of harm reduction—you don't want to be intruding on others with activities they want no part of, nor do you want others injured or otherwise damaged because you were unable or unwilling to let them be outside of the situation. But that isn't quite the whole story.

If you've ever done or witnessed any evangelism efforts, you probably noticed that many people don't really like being approached cold by a stranger attempting to change their most fundamental mindsets. Whether distributing tracts or selling a product, most evangelists tend to ignore that people have their own sense of personal space, and do not particularly appreciate strangers encroaching on that space. Such approaches are perceived as intrusive, not because of unwillingness to hear a message or due to demonic influence, but because they're confrontational and set off people's fear mechanisms: "What is this person doing? What do they want from me?" They are being subjected to a sales pitch they have no interest in and have not consented to receiving. IF the cause is clear and the person is interested, they may change their mind and stop, but the fundamental reason any evangelization effort is difficult is because it violates informed consent.

So, fundamentally, in almost any activity involving several people, it's necessary for all involved to be fully informed about what they're doing and why they're doing it. If that isn't the case, very often someone will quickly and painfully learn the cost of their ignorance, whether it be losing money to a scam or losing quality of life to an STD or an unplanned pregnancy. (Or, in extreme cases, a Darwin Award.) The lesson: when someone is trying to tell you something important, listen, and when someone seems to be failing to tell you something important, research and verify.

### **So yeah, about sex.**

That's pretty simple. Educate yourself thoroughly on both biology and technique (you'll find some good sources in the bibliography below, and here), don't spread STDs, don't try to tie down a player<sup>12</sup>, don't try to play someone looking for commitment, don't use power to manipulate others for your own gratification, stay away from anyone and anything that can't or won't give informed consent, always listen and communicate, always be honest with your partners, and always have a safe word. (More will be covered in the aforementioned books; meantime, assume no means no until told otherwise.)

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<sup>12</sup>Unless they're into that kind of "tying down".

That said, enjoy yourself in whatever way you're drawn to, be honest with your partner(s) about your intentions, and don't apologize for it. Just try not to leave any broken hearts (this takes practice, sadly) or burning genitals in your wake (this one is easy: play safe! Rationality does not stop at the bedroom door). Likewise, remember that moderation is usually the best path in all things—people whose whole lives are based around one thing (be it sex, or gambling, or making money, or anything else) tend to be rather shallow and one-dimensional, and they often end up rather unhappy.

### **But I miss the social setting at church**

The Unitarian Universalist Church accepts practically everybody, including the faithless. If you feel that a church community offers you the best framework for you to be yourself, they or some group like them is probably your best bet.

You may also want to look for a Cultural Ethical Society in your area. This is an international movement that considers the study of ethics and moral behavior very important but not derived from belief in a deity.

Check to see if there's a Sunday Assembly congregation near you. This is a growing international movement centered around the idea of secular, godless community that is devoted to celebrating life and making an impact in our world, all without any creed or religious beliefs. Their motto is "live better, help often, wonder more."

Otherwise, there's nothing wrong with Sunday brunch with friends. Just make sure you tip well—church crowds are, according to many waitstaff, notoriously cheap. (Try to make sure you go somewhere with the opportunity for waffles. You're always better off with the waffle option available.)

If you are inclined to drink beers, consider checking out if there is a Skeptics in the Pub in your area.

### **What do I do with my tithe money?**

For those who come from religions or parts of the world not familiar with the concept, a "tithe" is when a religion requires its followers to give them money (traditionally 10% of their income). Most people who regularly attend a church or temple make some level of regular contribution for its work, though the term "tithe" is now seldom used except in denominations which still expect churchgoers to donate 10% of their earnings.

Well, it's your money and you can do what you like with it. You may find your finances easier to manage without the financial burden of religious participation, and may find you can afford a better lifestyle, travel more or take up a new hobby. Donating to charity is a good way to put some of your money to good

use, and to replace the charitable function of tithing. Remember to do your research and give to causes that you believe in and reputable charities that will use their funds constructively rather than sinking them in overheads.

## Okay, anything else I need to know?

The most important thing: no matter what anyone tells you, you're your own person. You may not be accountable to God, but you still have to answer to yourself and your society; that said, however, you're also in command of who you are, what you do, who you associate with. Explore, travel if you can, always learn, and never be afraid to laugh at your mistakes and madnnesses. Be flexible about everything but inflexibility; tolerate anything but intolerance. Get a library card. Watch a horror movie. Buy some porn. Do volunteer work—soup kitchen, community television, the Peace Corps. Befriend someone your family just wouldn't get.

*“To thine own self be true.”*<sup>13</sup>

And remember what we said about the waffles.

## Bibliography and other reading

### On skepticism

- Brown, Derren, *Tricks of the Mind*. While also delving into numerous tricks of mental agility, Brown sets his book against the background of his own conversion from evangelical Christianity to atheism. Thus he delves into irrational thought and why people can be tricked easily. You can also learn some impressive card and memory tricks.
- Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, W. W. Norton, 1999, 978-0393317558. One of the most powerful anthropological arguments against racism and related prejudices that there is, Diamond's thesis is that the only thing that separates us from less developed cultures is our ancestors' access to resources, and that perceived differences in intelligence don't matter at all. Despite a touch of “noble savage” drivel, this is otherwise an excellent book.
- Gardner, Martin. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, New York, Dover Publications, 1957, ISBN 0486203948. Considered one of the first and most influential works on skeptical thinking in the Anglophone literature, *Fads and Fallacies* surveys much of the pseudoscience of the mid-20th century, some of which still appears in modern times, all of which is valuable for learning how to spot fraud and delusion.

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<sup>13</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

- Pierce, Charles. *Idiot America*. New York: Doubleday, 2009, ISBN 978-0767926140. Takes the blend of analysis and mockery that Gardner created and applies it to the right wing of US politics. Despite somewhat of a lack of focus on the lunacies of the far left (especially animal rights activists), Pierce forcefully proves his point that the US is the best country in the world to be a crank.
- Randi, James. *Flim-Flam* and *The Truth about Uri Geller*, several publishers. Randi's slowed down in his old age, but he's the living avatar of the fact that it isn't enough to know what you *think* is going on; you have to peek behind the curtains as well.
- Sagan, Carl, *The Demon-Haunted World*. The last great work of the astronomer-turned-scientist-to-the-people, this book summarizes the most important parts of Sagan's career as a skeptical writer, from his early splash as a challenger to the wild-eyed speculations of Immanuel Velikovsky to his late career as an examiner of all things woo.
- Shermer, Michael, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, New York, WH Freeman and Co, 1997. An in-depth exploration of subjects such as creationism and Holocaust denial, including the thought processes and motivations that believers follow.
- Von Däniken, Erich, *Chariots of the Gods?*. What is this doing here? It's an example of what to look for in bad science writing. *Chariots* is a classic of the crank genre, an example of how a little knowledge and an agenda can lead someone to write complete garbage that people still take seriously. Don't miss the constant arguments from incredulity and von Däniken's nagging undercurrent of racism, not to mention his propensity for making up "facts" and jumping to conclusions based on visual artifacts and textual quirks, or his "interview" with German-American rocket scientist Werner von Braun (an example of how cranks often use chance encounters with famous experts to claim endorsements).

## On faith

- Atran, Scott. *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2002. ISBN 0195149300. Makes the case for belief in the supernatural as a by-product of evolved pattern and agency detection in the human mind and explores the social and cultural aspects of religion drawing on research in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and evolutionary biology.
- Baggini, Julian. *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2003. ISBN 0192804243. What it says on the tin.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0618680004. A book of rational explanations as to why the hypothesis of God existing is ridiculously unlikely to be true, and why religion as it is usually practiced is actively socially dangerous. It is a useful "beginners guide to atheistic arguments" and has helped many people with



deconversion, such as former Pentecostal Derren Brown.

- Henderson, Bobby. *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, New York: Villard/Random House, 2006, ISBN 0812976568. Written to mock Intelligent Design theory, the *GotFSM* is a velvet fist of a satire, mocking the hyperseriousness and intellectual bankruptcy of fundamentalist faith. While not particularly original (the Invisible Pink Unicorn, may her hooves never be shod, and the Reformed Church of the Star Goat preceded the Flying Spaghetti Monster, though perhaps not with quite the same level of detail), the *GotFSM* should be required reading for anyone questioning the limits placed on them by their faith.
- Mackie, J.L. *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford University Press, 1983. ISBN 019824682X. A thorough philosophical debunking of the major theistic arguments.
- Shermer, Michael. *How We Believe*, 2ed. New York: WH Freeman and Co, 2000. A must-read on the psychology of faith by a former believer who is now a leader in the rationalist movement.
- Various, *The Bible*. It is often said that the fastest way to atheism is through reading the Bible. But importantly, it should be remembered that “atheism” only makes sense in the context of religions being the dominant normative belief. Thus, read and understand what people are believing in and where they get their information from. Besides, these books are a key part of language and literature just as much as Shakespeare or Tolkien, and so certainly should never be forgotten or consigned to a book burning.
- Various, *The Atheist’s Guide to Christmas*. This collection of 42 essays from authors as wide as Richard Dawkins and Simon Le Bon examines atheism in an amusing and thought-provoking light. Also, the proceeds go to charity so it’s all good fun for a good cause.

### On the Bible

- Finkelstein, Israel and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 2001, ISBN 0684869136. A somewhat radical but well-defended reinterpretation of Old Testament archaeology by an Israeli and an American archaeologist.
- Mack, Burton, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, New York, HarperCollins, 1995, ISBN 0060655186. An extensive survey of the documentary evidence behind the creation and collation of the New Testament by one of the leading authorities on its sources.

### On sex

- Cox, Tracey, *Hot Sex*, New York/Sydney, Bantam Books, 1998, ISBN 055338032X. Australian sexologist Cox discusses the basics of sex and relationships, bringing equal attention to the ecstasy and agony without

judgementalism. She also has a sequel, *More Hot Sex*, which expands on the first book and, among other things, includes information on same-sex experiences for straight people.

- Editors of Nerve.com, *Sex Advice From...*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2006, ISBN 0811850021. Nerve.com's column of interviews with ordinary people in various walks of life about their sex lives. Very good for understanding that either everyone's a freak, or no one is.
- Joannides, Paul, *The Guide to Getting It On*. Equal parts titillation and information, this phone book-sized tome presents virtually everything you'd ever want to know about sex in as frank and approachable manner as possible—and we do mean everything. Health, technique, anatomy, normalcy, masturbation, heterosexual, homosexual, group sex, BDSM, it's all covered. Along with a good book on the body, this might even be a good thing to give a teenager entering high school as an antidote to inept abstinence-only sex education.

### On brunch

- Jamison, Cheryl A. and Bill, *A Real American Breakfast*, New York, Wm. Morrow, 2002, ISBN 0060188243. Even if you're not American, there are some truly awesome recipes in this book. (If you do live outside the US, you'll also want the rec.food.cooking FAQ from the Usenet newsgroup—there's a lot of gotchas with even the simplest foreign recipes, and the rfc FAQ will alert you to many of the biggest ones.)

### More about freethought

- One great place for information is The Secular Web.
- You can discuss freethought at the Freethought and Rationalism Discussion Board.
- If you are newly deconverted or believers are giving you trouble you can discuss this at Secular Lifestyle.
- The Freedom From Religion Foundation
- If you had a particularly rough time with fundamentalism, check out the community at Walk Away from Fundamentalism.
- If you are sometimes nostalgic for the days when you thought life was simple because you had profound religious convictions, try subjecting them to rigorous analysis by professional philosophers here: Do-It-Yourself Deity and here: Battleground God. You may find that your formerly cherished beliefs were logically inconsistent, implausible, and impossible for any sensible person to accept. This will cheer you up greatly.

## Resources

- “De-Conversion” - a site for recovering believers
- “Debunking Christianity” - debunking Evangelical Christianity
- “ExChristianDotNet” - encouraging ex-Christians
- instruction manual for life, TheraminTrees and QualiaSoup