Unbelief (Religious Skepticism, Atheism, Humanism, Naturalism, Secularism, Rationalism, Irreligion, Agnosticism, and Related Perspectives)

A Historical Bibliography

Compiled by J. Gordon Melton ~ San Diego ~ San Diego State University ~ 2011

This bibliography presents primary and secondary sources in the history of unbelief in Western Europe and the United States, from the Enlightenment to the present. It is a living document which will grow and develop as more sources are located.

If you see errors, or notice that important items are missing, please notify the author, Dr. J. Gordon Melton at jgordon@linkline.com.

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Introduction

This bibliography is focused on the English-language literature generated by and representative of the history of Unbelief in the Western World from the sixteenth century to the present. While there is a longer tradition of non-theistic belief reaching back to the ancient Mediterranean Basin, especially ancient Greece, such belief was largely nonexistent in the Middle Ages and had to struggle to reassert itself. As James Turner noted in his study of Unbelief [in God] in America, until the sixteenth century questioning the belief in God was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any length of time. Disbelief in God emerged somewhat tentatively in the seventeenth century and could be found among the elites of the intellectual world through the eighteenth century. Through the nineteenth century, the situation changed significantly and the first atheists, even a few atheist groups, emerged in public. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was, as Turner put it, “a fully available option.” As the twenty-first century begins, Unbelief (operating under a number of names) has become a dominant option for thinking about the world in several countries and a prominent if still a minority option throughout the Western world. Its core spokespersons are enthusiastic about its future and believe that (1) atheism to be the coming majority way of comprehending the universe and (2) that belief in God will drop by the wayside as a basis for organizing human society.

The steps by which the Western World has reached such a situation—in which large numbers of people can celebrate Unbelief, work for its coming, and fervently believe in its future—now stands as one of the great stories in intellectual history. That story begins in the sixteenth century where, in the context of the Protestant Reformation, a spectrum of more radical reformers appeared, including a small number who began to challenge core items constituting what had been orthodox Christian faith since the fourth century C.E. Most notable among the radical reformers was one Michael Servetus (1511-1553), who wrote a book on the Christian doctrine of the Triune god, which he found without biblical support. He compared the Triune God with the three-headed hound of Hell. He also joined the Anabaptists in their subversive attack upon the then existing institutional church by challenging the practice of infant baptism. For his effort, he would be arrested, tried, and executed.

Servetus’ challenge to the state church—both its theology and practice—would find its life in the circle of inquirers that formed around the Italian Faustus Socinus (aka Fausto Paolo Sozzini, 1534-1604), a small groups of Eastern European believers known as the Polish Brethren, and the original Unitarian church in Transylvania. Together, these variant strains of non-Trinitarian Christianity became known as the Socinian movement, and from Eastern Europe, Socinian
thought would spread to Western Europe and find a home in England among both left-wing Puritans (the Baptists) and within the Church of England where the attempt to unite Protestants and Catholics through the Prayer Book, left space for dissenting theological speculation among those who found both perspectives lacking.

Meanwhile, as Unitarianism penetrated church life in England, a new form of dissent emerged in Germany. Rosicrucianism, the first form of post-Reformation Esotericism to gain a following, would provide a very different challenge to the dominance of Christianity, but would, if more indirectly, challenge the doctrine of the Trinity. It did not so much directly challenge the doctrine, as ignore the Trinity in its affirmation of a single transcendent and somewhat distant deity. Early circles of discourse for the discussion of the new Esotericism would give way in the eighteenth century to the speculative Masons and its Great Architect of the Universe.

Freemasonry and Unitarianism provided the main currents upon which the next major challenge to the pervasive Trinitarian theology of both Catholic and Protestant churches—Deism. Deism would draw out the implication of the esoteric model of the deity—utterly transcendent and distant from creation—especially as such a deity related to prayer, miracles and providential care. One could perceive an important difference between the Deists and their Unitarian predecessors. That difference would make them the first upon whom their critics would impose the label “atheist.” Deist thought seem to lead to something that could be imagined as synonymous with belief in no God at all. Such a belief could also lead to radical displacements in society such as the French and American revolutions and their radical introduction of secularism into their running of the government.

Deism would also be a major product of the Enlightenment and its privileging of reason as the overarching principle for observing the universe, organizing society, and maintaining a personal life. The Enlightenment built upon the Protestant attack on the Catholic miracle theology and the privileging of proximate causation over remote causation, and culminate in the religion of Reason briefly advocated following the French Revolution. The Enlightenment thinkers would, of course, provide long-term inspiration to the rationalist strain in Unbelief.

Deists struggled with the issue of organizing a religion that affirmed a transcendent unresponsive god. Some advocated a religion whose remaining function centered upon the perpetuation of a moral society in which sermons would be replaced by lectures on ethics and moral behavior. Deism would become a temporary transitional movement that would be superseded by, on the one hand, an international Unitarian movement, and on the other a full-blown atheist (Freethought) movement.

Deism did, of course, find a more permanent home in Freemasonry whose affirmation of the Great Architect of the Universe is purely deistic, and continue as the dominant perspective within masonry to this day. In 1877, the French branch of Masonry separated from England and began admitting atheists and the leading French Masonic organization remains officially atheistic to the present. It has, at the same time influenced a variety of European lodges to adopt its position.
During the nineteenth century, at least in North America, emerging atheism seems to have been built around subscription lists to Freethought publications and circles of discourse they nurtured. Freethinkers, like the popular orator Robert Ingersoll, could sell numerous books and pamphlets (transcripts of lectures), but they headed no organizations to facilitate the further integration of his ideas in the society. Many Freethinkers found a home in various Esoteric groups whose attacks on specific beliefs like hell and the rigidity of personal Christian ethics resonated with many Freethinkers (who perpetuated deistic and agnostic views).

However, through the nineteenth century, especially after the formal organization of the American Unitarian Association a whole spectrum of organizations would appear to the left of the Unitarians including the Universalists, the Free Religionists and groups accepting such names as Freethinkers, Secularists and Liberals. Britain’s National Secular Society (founded 1866) appears to be the oldest organization promoting Unbelief still in existence, and rightfully has a prominent place in the history of Unbelief. From it, modern organized Unbelief can be said to arise, and through it secular perspectives spread throughout the United Kingdom and to former British colonies such as India and Hong Kong.

One cannot, of course, write the history of Unbelief without reference to Karl Marx, his close associates like Frederick Engels, and the formation of the Communist movement. The whole Socialist movement (including Marxist Communism) became wedded to Unbelief and anticlericalism (though Marx’s opinion of religion was far more complex than the catch phrase about “opium of the people” implied). A significant portion of the current community of Unbelief consists of Marxists, or increasingly, post-Marxists.

In the last half of the twentieth century, Unbelief made giant strides. In those countries of North America and Europe, where Marxism never became a majority perspective, a revived community of Unbelief emerged around a set of issues that found resonance in the larger society—separation of church and state, the denunciation of pseudoscience, the articulation of a secular moral perspective, and the promotion of human rights. At the same time, the contemporary community of Unbelief rejected its longstanding alignment with the Esoteric community, with whom it had shared a mutual challenge to Christian orthodoxy.

The contemporary Unbelief community finds its unity in a mutually agreed upon atheism—a simple observation that having observed the universe (through various scientific lens) and thought about reality (in post-Enlightenment modes), no basis remains for affirming the existence of a deity. At the same time, the community is divided on a number of important issues. Is Unbelief simply a perspective to be affirmed, or a cause to be organized, promoted, and perpetuated? Is a non-theistic religion (such as religious humanism) viable, or is all religion to be opposed? Should atheists align with older non-theistic belief systems such as Confucianism, Jainism and Theravada Buddhism? Where does secular non-theistic beliefs fit within a pluralistic religious world? Does Unbelief constitute a position protected by law in the same manner as religious perspectives? How far should government go in protecting religions? What is the meaning of (implications of) separation of church and state for atheists and for others?

**Looking Backward**
At one level, the contemporary community of Unbelief is difficult to grasp. It is not religion, but at the same time is a community largely defined by its stance toward not so much religion in general but the Western Christian manifestation of religion. It is not religion, but fills the role religion has primarily supplied for most individuals in the West for the last two millennia. It is a very diverse movement as once having abandoned Christianity and Judaism, a wide variety of perspectives remain and differences within the community can frequently be as intense as those between unbelievers and believers. The intensity of differences within the Unbelief community has been on full display through the twentieth century as Marxist thought emerged, rose to prominence and then abruptly fell as the century ended. Religion began to expand rapidly in China following the Cultural Revolution and in Russia and Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Apart from the short-term gains and losses for unbelief in the last decades, the long-term view shows a monumental rise of the community of Unbelief from nonexistence at the beginning of the sixteenth century to a perspective held by hundreds of millions. One can see as step-by-step growth of a community first created by those who wished to establish a form of Christianity that challenged key items upon which Christian orthodoxy had organized its thought and practice. Both the new Protestant community and the Catholicism that emerged from the First Vatican Council saw a spectrum of dissent and paid relatively little attention to the Socinian/Unitarian strains (except to end its short-lived period of influence in Poland). Unitarians, like Mennonites and Baptists, hid in the spaces between the competing larger churches and slowly spread from country to country and gained adherents.

In the seventeenth century, Deism would emerge as a new movement among intellectuals, nominally members of the larger churches, who presented their thought as part of the spectrum of the intellectual endeavor of the elite. Finding their main support among individual readers of their pamphlets and books, the Deist writers rarely sought to mobilize a following by organizing a society or club that sought to perpetuate a Deistic perspective. They were content to bring discomfort to those who would settle; into a weakly thought-out theology or rest on an ill-defined tradition of church life. Most chose their battlefield for attacking the religious consensus with extreme care, quite respectful of the power of a church wedded to the state power that had shown its ability to suppress theological dissidents. Essential to the history of the rise of unbelief was the changing punishment for the crime of blasphemy—death to imprisonment, to civil penalties, to its decriminalization altogether.

Prior to 1800, Unbelief would appear primarily as Unitarianism or Deism. Through the nineteenth century a whole spectrum of belief would appear under a variety of names, each suggesting a slightly different emphasis—Freethought, secularism, rationalism, agnosticism, liberalism, Marxism, skepticism—all words suggesting what few would actually accept as a label—atheism. Only in the twentieth century, would atheism become a widespread and popular self-designation.

Early in the twentieth century, two prominent strains of atheist thought would emerge in prominence. The first continued the Freethought-rationalist-secularist strain of the nineteenth century as represented, for example, in the Secular Union in Europe and the Liberal League in the United States. The second strain was represented in the Marxist movement and the associated
socialist political program, which took diverse forms from country to country. Outside North America and Western Europe, Marxism became the cutting edge of atheist thought and carried it to power in such diverse places as Albania, China and Ethiopia. It remains a significant element in atheist thought in the Western world, though noticeably on the decline.

The two main atheist strains would be joined by a new strain of non-theistic thought in the first half of the twentieth century. Ferment on the leftwing of Judaism and then of Unitarianism would lead to the emergence of a new non-theistic theology with intellectual centers in New England and Chicago. The new Humanists dispensed with theism, but retained a central focus in creating a new ethics-centered religion. The “Humanist” movement began with Felix Adler and the Ethical Culture community in New York City, and later blossom among Unitarian leaders in the Midwest.

In the last half of the twentieth century in North America, the community of Unbelief would recoil from both the post-World War II religious revival that would bring millions into church membership, pushing it upwards by almost 20 percentage points, and an accompanying national attack upon “godless Communism” that aligned with American foreign policy during the cold War. The first sign of an atheist pushback from what appeared as a widespread cultural attack, came from an unexpected source, an aggressive, even abrasive female, a single mother opposed to mandatory “Christian” prayer conducted in the classes in the public school to which she sent her son.

In 1960, Madalyn Murray O’Hair (1919-1995) filed a law suit challenging the practice of having short devotional services (usually including prayer and Bible reading) as part of the exercises beginning the school day in most public schools across the United States. The suit became the focus of a crusade fought out on the public stage as a movement to rid the public schools of prayer. Conservative religious leaders saw in O’Hair an appropriate target upon whom to vent their rage. The issue made O’Hair a celebrity, especially after the Supreme Court essentially accepted her position in its 1963 ruling in a like case—Abington School District v. Schempp—in 1963. Shortly thereafter, she moved to Austin, Texas, and founded American Atheists, which became the largest atheist organization in the country. Even as atheists gathered around and found new life in their new identity, O’Hair’s abrasive style of leadership led many to leave her, and American Atheists became the catalyst for numerous additional atheist groups to form, most notably the Freedom from Religion Foundation.

Then in the 1970s, a set of issues in the American Humanist Association, including a debate over the religious nature of humanism, led to a split by one of the movement’s prominent intellectual and organizational leaders, philosopher Paul Kurtz. Kurtz founded the Council for Secular Humanism, which became the parent of a set of organizations that together mobilized one of the largest segments of the Unbelief community. Not unimportant in that endeavor was the growth of Prometheus Press, also headed by Kurtz, into the most prominent publisher of Unbelief literature in the world. Additionally, the Council was responsible for initiating a new movement battling pseudoscience.

While the Unbelief community was experiencing a new stage in its organizational growth, a new movement appeared within the Jewish and Christian community. Spurred largely by discussions
of the extent of the Jewish Holocaust, a new debate over the problem of evil was punctuated by a set of religious scholars announcing the death of God. Though a relatively short-lived movement, the affront caused by a group of Christian and Jewish theologians identifying themselves as atheists (for whatever reason) created a significant controversy at least within liberal Christian circles over how far the secularization of Christianity could proceed.

The Unbelief community entered the twenty-first century on an optimistic note. In a mere half century, it had taken significant steps forward, even as the Marxist world underwent notable setbacks. It had brought forth a set of large stable organizations, found some international voice heralded by the formation of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and appeared to be gaining measurable support in the general population, even in North America. That growth, however, was not enough for some atheist spokespersons, and by the middle of the first decade of the new century, a cadre of atheists had emerged with a new aggressive stance marked by a heightened level of shrillness and willingness to distance themselves from any form of religion. While energizing some elements of the Unbelief community, it yet remains to be seen whether the new movement will prove effective catalysts in growing the Unbelief community.

A Note on Labels

The label “Unbelief” is a term that has gained acceptance in the last generation as a comprehensive term to designate a wide variety of self-chosen labels to describe the various forms of non-theistic perspectives that have emerged in the west over the last few centuries. Some, like atheism, were originally derisive labels placed on people more or less appropriately by religious (primarily Christian) polemicists. Like unbelief, it is a negative term that defines a position over against a believing majority in the social environment. In the process of attempting to communicate a positive stand-alone position, which incidentally makes no room for the supernatural affirmations of the majority, a variety of different names have been appropriated—Freethought (as opposed to free thought), rationalism, naturalism, secularism, skepticism, and humanism. Each of these terms also has other popular uses and may at times not communicate clearly. Naturalism means something very different in the world of literature or even biology and environmental studies. Skepticism has come to refer not just to religious skepticism, but to the battles against pseudoscience, which involves many, possibly a majority, who are not otherwise unbelievers. Humanism means something very different in the sixteenth century than it implies in the English-speaking world of the twenty-first century.

Modern Unbelief also does not arise in a historical vacuum, but struggles to make a place for itself out of the challenge to the orthodox Christian hegemony of the sixteenth century. That challenge began as questions were raised against the Christian doctrine of the Triune God, God’s providence over the world, the existence of miracles, the possibility of prayer, and the integrity and authenticity of the biblical text. That criticisms initially produced forms of belief that competed with Christian orthodoxy, and atheism initially arose among people who had moved to a non-Trinitarian system of belief and/or one that accommodated a God who had only limited contact with the world. Over the centuries, a form of non-Trinitarian Christianity has continued to exist and at times thrive, and it has periodically been the environment, which has nurtured new non-theistic perspectives, most notably twentieth-century humanism.
Throughout this bibliography, we will use Unbelief in this larger meaning and the terms Freethought, rationalism, naturalism, secularism, skepticism, and humanism as terms denoting the various forms of non-theistic thinking, as opposed to their other uses.

This Bibliography

This bibliography looks at the literature that has been produced by and about the Unbelief community through the last 500 years. Even though Unbelief remains a minority tradition in Western culture, it has been a literary tradition and produced a sizable body of material. In addition a large number of observers have commented upon it. Given the large amount of material available, this bibliography had to be highly selective. It is initially limited by language—it focuses on the English-language material. Even within that limitation, it makes no pretense of being exhaustive; rather, for each subtopic considered, it attempts to produce a selective list of material representative of the best items available.

Second, this bibliography has been developed and arranged in such a way as to manifest the growth and development of the Unbelief community over the last five centuries. The appearance, evolution, and spread of Unbelief have not been without controversy. In fact, it has often appeared that the literature commenting on the movement from a critical polemic position is far larger than the body of material produced by the movement itself. It is, to some extent, impossible to understand the growth of Unbelief without reference to the on-going debates, and the claims and counter-claims made by opposing authors. Indeed, there is a modern tradition of staged debates between believers and unbelievers on the central topics raised by atheists over the existence of God and the viability of religion. This bibliography is, however, primarily concerned neither with the truth claims of the Unbelief community nor the counter claims of theists.

Rather, this bibliography is narrowly focused upon the historical development of a tradition of skepticism and Unbelief in God and the parallel appeal to reason as an alternative way of organizing one’s intellectual life and social community throughout the Western world. It attempts to define the major currents of the developing movement in those countries that have taken the leadership in its emergence. It also attempts to identify the major spokespersons of the tradition and present the most important primary and secondary sources on each. We successively deal with the origins of the movement in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe and then with its Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment development on France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia, before moving to its evolution in North America. Given the emphasis on English-language literature, the sections on the United States and the United Kingdom are proportionately larger.

A final section of the bibliography explores the contemporary scene, with a listing on some recent movements and on the literature that is currently generating significant interest. This section also includes a sub-chapter with a selection of sociological literature reflecting on the present state of Unbelief. The size of the Unbelief community, and possibility of its becoming the majority community in different places is both a major topic of concern and very much a contested issue among Unbelievers. Its self-image is tied to its hope of moving from its present minority status to one in which the majority accept the truth claims its presents. Recent
sociological literature has built a growing body of material examining this issue from a variety of starting points.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the development of Unbelief has been tied to some extent with the battle to place the findings of science in the forefront while simultaneously pushing aside of both (1) pre-scientific views of the world and (2) false views of the world built on flawed science, i.e., pseudoscience. Two closely related efforts, one focused on creationist views of the world and the idea of biological evolution of the human species, and the other opposing a variety of paranormal claims based on reputed empirical observations have developed in the last decades of the twentieth century and are explored in a final section of the bibliography.

Interaction

In the end, it was decided to publish this bibliography on the Internet. Such a placement allows it to remain a living document always open to growth by addition of titles, development of topics covered, and correction of errors. The author invited the input of any readers with suggestions for its improvement. Suggestions may be sent to jgordon@linkline.com.

The production of bibliographies such as this one is very much affected by the most recent developments in publishing. Several print-on-demand publishers including but not limited to Nabu, Kessinger, and BiblioLife have moved to reprint an extensive number of out-of-copyright books, including many in the Unbelief tradition. Of particular importance to this particular bibliographical work is the EighteenthCenturyCollectionsOnline or ECCO Project from Gale Research/Cengage Learning, the large reference book house in suburban Detroit. The ECCO Project is preparing digital texts of works written and published between 1700 and 1800 in England and its colonies, including the British editions of the English translations of many German and French Enlightenment treatises. As this project got off the ground, Gale partnered with BiblioLife to produce publish-on-demand editions of a large number of eighteenth century texts. Those using this bibliography, after locating items, which they might like to consult, will likely find that relatively inexpensive print and/or digital forms of the item will be available for purchase or through inter-library loan.

In addition, some less formal efforts have succeeded in publishing a large number of relevant texts of unbelief on-line. Most notable are the many items available at The Secular Web’s Library at http://www.infidels.org/library/ and the positive Atheism site at http://www.positiveatheism.org/. Surfing the web also reveals many additional items on different sites. Increasingly, the items listed below, especially as they move out of copyright, will become available online, and an online search is the first place to look for any particular item cited below.

January 2011
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General Sources

As the world of Unbelief has emerged and developed, a number of attempts have been made to survey the field both in narrative histories and through the production of much needed reference works. This section includes reference book (encyclopedia, biographical dictionaries, etc.), general surveys of the history of Unbelief, and general surveys of the world of Unbelief and the issues around which it operates.

This author got to know atheist scholar Gordon Stein in the early 1980s in Chicago and developed a relationship based upon our mutual interests in creating archives and compiling reference works in two overlapping fields. This author later continued to work with him on developing atheist sources when we both lived in Southern California. Stein eventually deposited most of the atheist, Freethought, and related material at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He then deposited many of the duplicate items he had collected at the Davidson Library at the University of California—Santa Barbara, where this author had deposited the Unitarian, Freethought, and atheist materials he had collected. These two universities continue to hold the largest archives in North America on the subject of this bibliography known to this author.

Supplementing the general sources listed below are some important on-line resources, the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography (http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/) immediately coming to mind. This ongoing project is under the general direction of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society and under the editorial control of J. D. Bowers, Peter Hughes, Dan McKanan, Jim Nugent, and Kathleen Parker.

The atheist community is served by “The Online Atheist Dictionary,” posted at http://atheistdictionary.com/ and the Secular Web (http://www.infidels.org/). The latter site includes reprints of many classic atheist texts. The online edition of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy edited by Edward N. Zalta (http://plato.stanford.edu/) includes numerous detailed entries on the many thinkers who have led the way in the emergence of contemporary atheism.

The items cited below include those books designed in some way to cover broadly the world of Unbelief and includes encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, anthologies, histories, introductory texts to the world of Unbelief, and of course, bibliographies. Overwhelmingly, the items have been written by people who are themselves unbelievers, but a few worthy studies by religious believers have been included. Of course, in many cases the personal beliefs of the author are not known, and ideally should, in the end, be irrelevant to the production of their studies.

Sources


Jennifer Michael Hecht (Author)

- Visit Amazon's Jennifer Michael Hecht Page
- See search results for this author


2000.


European Beginnings

The Sixteenth-Century Challenges to Trinitarianism

The emergence of atheism in the West did not occur suddenly, but began as an attack upon the almost universal presence of Christianity as the state supported religious establishment and the pervasiveness of laws concerning dissent from the assumed truth of the Roman Catholic Church. That dissent began with the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Pope and began to create space in which similar challenges could be made. The relative success of that challenge as aided by the distraction provided by the movement of Turkish troops through Hungary along the Danube River to the gates of Austria.

Of the various challenges, that begun by a few voices dissenting from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity would prove most crucial. Defined in the early centuries of the post-Constantinian Church, the Trinity had become a distinguishing point of orthodox Christianity and a key element in the doctrine of salvation. To remove the Trinity meant revising the understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the operation of Divine grace. While Protestantism challenged church organization, the non-Trinitarians challenged the intellectual structures through which Christianity operated.

The opponents of the trinity also offered their challenged in the name of reason. Most assuredly, Luther claimed reason as an allay in his defense at the Diet of Worms but the anti-Trinitarians used reason as the hammer to batter a doctrine they found unbelievable. Again, from the perspective of subsequent changes, that approach would prove definitive. Protestantism would carry the day, at least in northern and western Europe, in the sixteenth century, but the modest gains of the non-Trinitarians and the miniscule structures they established in Eastern Europe, would survive and take advantage in the new freedoms which appeared as the Medieval consensus cracked apart.

Sources


Michael Servetus

Early doubts about the Trinity developed for Spanish physician Michael Servetus (1511-1542) from observances that the doctrine was an obstacle to the conversion of Jews and Muslims. Upon reading the Bible, he was startled by its lack of any mention of the Trinity. In 1531, he published his conclusions in a small volume, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (or *On the Errors of the Trinity*). It appears he hoped to win over the leaders of the protestant Reformation to his cause. Following the publication of his second volume, *Dialogorum de Trinitate* (or *Dialogues on the Trinity*), in 1532, he found himself being hunted by both Catholics and Protestants. He hid for several years in Paris under a pseudonym, and eventually settled in Vienne, France where he quietly practiced medicine, and worked on what would become his most substantive theological treatise, *Christianismi Restitutio* (or *The Restoration of Christianity*), published in 1553.

His sending Reformer John Calvin a copy led to his downfall. He was arrested at Vienne, escaped to Geneva, was arrested again, tried and convicted, and executed by fire at the stake. English editions of Servetus’ writings are found in: *The Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity*, translated by Earl Morse Wilbur (1932); *Michael Servetus, A Translation of His Geographical, Medical, and Astrological Writings*, translated by Charles Donald O'Malley (1953); and *The Restoration of Christianity*, translated by Christopher Hoffman and Marian Hillar (2007).

The list below is limited to English-language sources. A much larger body of work exists in Spanish and other European languages. I appreciate Marian Hillar looking over the list and making suggestions for its improvement.

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


Socinianism and the Polish Brethren

Narrowly speaking, the term *Socinianism* refers to the non-Trinitarian approach to Christianity developed and perpetuated in the sixteenth century by Laelius Socinus (1526-1562) and his nephew Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), both natives of Sienna, Italy. They were the leading lights of a secret society formed among Roman Catholics in the mid-sixteenth century in the diocese of
Venice. Members of the group initially assembled to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity, and then acted to promote a non-Trinitarian form of the faith. Laelius was the first to publish his non-Trinitarian views, which included the idea of two separate creations by God. The Italian society would be disbanded, and its members forced to leave Venice. They fled to Poland.

After Laelius’ death in 1562, Faustus eventually associated with the Polish Brethren, a dissenting minority of non-Trinitarians from the Calvinist Reformed tradition that had established themselves in Rakow, Poland, in the 1560s. He led many to adopt the peculiar expression of non-Trinitarian view originally espoused by Laelius and influenced the text of the “Racovian Catechism” published in 1605. It was non-Trinitarian and also rejected the notion of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ prior to his birth as a baby in Palestine.

The Polish Brethren existed until the middle of the seventeenth century when their community was suppressed and scattered. Some fled to England and became one source of contemporary Unitarianism in the English-speaking world. The term “Socinianism,” used in reference to the Polish Brethren, emerged in England in the seventeenth century as the publications from Rakow were circulated among the British dissenting churches.

For additional sources see the bibliographies by Sand and Wilbur cited below.

**Sources**


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The Unitarian Tradition

The modern Unitarian tradition traces its existence to the various groups that challenged the idea of the Trinitarian deity espoused by both Roman Catholics and Protestants as essential to traditional orthodox faith. The primary community was located in Transylvania (then a part of Hungary, but since the end of World War I a part of Romania). A non-Trinitarian form of Christianity emerged at several locations in Eastern Europe as Protestantism spread eastward from Germany and Switzerland. In 1566, Ferenc David (1510-1579), leader in the Reformed Church began to preach non-Trinitarian views and developed a large following. It found a number of converts not only among the German-speaking Saxon communities, but also among the Hungarian Székely people.

The Unitarian movement was given early recognition and hence some degree of protection by the Edict of Torda, issued by the Transylvanian Diet and Prince John II Sigismund (1540-1571) in 1568. After John’s death, the edict was withdrawn and both Catholics and Protestants turned on the Unitarians. David was arrested and died in prison.

Unitarian ideas emerged among various dissenting denominations in the British Isles beginning in the seventeenth century. Their progress was hindered in that it was against the law to openly deny the Trinity. That law remained on the books, though openly disobeyed in places, until the passing of the Unitarian Relief Act in 1813. While Unitarian views had spread among the Baptists and Presbyterians, it was not until 1774 that Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808) formed a separate Unitarian Church. Among the early people associated with that church was the pioneering scientist Joseph Priestly (1733-1804), who would migrate to the American colonies, as much for his political as his religious views.

Unitarians and Universalists emerged across Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and efforts begun in the 1920s to unite them and to protect them from persecution.

In spite of the hostile environment, the church survived through the centuries, including the suppressive Marxist regime following World War II, and in the twentieth century was rediscovered by the American and British Unitarians. In 1995, it became a charter member of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.

Sources


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**Ferenc (Francis) David (c. 1510-1579)**

Ferenc Dávid (usually called in English Francis David,) was a leading voice of non-Trinitarian Christianity of Eastern Europe during the first generation of the Reformation. A Catholic priest, he moved to the Lutheran Church and then the Reformed church, before emerging as a non-Trinitarian. He is recognized as the founder of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania. He began his questioning of the Trinity with doubts about the propriety of talk about the personhood of the Holy Spirit and ended up questioning a variety of Christina ideas about the divinity of Jesus and the possibility of miracles. He died in prison.

David wrote a large number of works, most in Latin or Hungarian, and most remain to be translated into English.

**Sources**


Wilbur, Earl Morse *A bibliography of the pioneers of the Socinian-Unitarian movement in modern Christianity in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Holland*. Rome, Edizioni di stroia e letteratura, 1950.


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The Enlightenment and the Emergence of Deism in Modern Europe

The Enlightenment, beginning in the seventeenth century and reaching its zenith in the eighteenth century, is marked by the rise of the scientific method in observing the world and the demand of scientists that they be allowed to observe the world using their rational talents and reach conclusions without reference to any prior conclusions dictated by revelation, which in this case meant conclusions drawn from the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

The religious/philosophical aspect of the Enlightenment was centered upon the Deist controversy. Deism was a theological position, primarily articulated by academics and other intellectuals who were nominally members of the established church of their country of residence (as opposed to being members of a dissenting religious group such as the Unitarians) but who advocated a theology that stripped Christianity of essential affirmations. So serious and central were the Christian doctrines altered that critics were justified in branding the Deists as holding another religion, though a number of critics went further and began to label them atheists, the deity of the Deists being so distant and irrelevant as to be practically nonexistent.

Deists affirmed one God, but denied any Trinitarian understanding. That denial also necessarily included a denial of any divinity to Jesus Christ. They also denied the occurrence of miracles (God’s breaking the laws which established the regularities of the natural world in response to an individual need or request), the efficacy of intercessory prayer, the value of devotional activity, and the idea of God’s providence (caring oversight of the world). God’s distance from the world s/he created also meant that revelation did not occur and hence the Bible had no authority. The articulation of these positions appeared gradually as did the working out of the implications.

The Deist position would appear in rudimentary form in the writings of Edward Herbert, Baron of Cherbury (1583-1648), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) and be developed in the writings of Anthony Collins (1676-1729), John Toland (1670-1722), Matthew Tindal (1657-1733), Thomas Chubb (1679-1747), and Peter Annet (1693-1769). By the 1720s, the thrust of the Enlightenment thought would be found in France where Deistic themes had been pioneered by Protestant thinker Pierre Bayle (1674-1706) and . The Enlightenment and all its aspects would then be articulated in all its aspects by the likes of the Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), Marquis de Montesquieu (1688-1755), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Voltaire. In Great Britain, The Enlightenment would be carried forth by Adam Smith (1723-1790), David Hume (1711-1766), and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Toward the end of the century, it would influence a generation of revolutionaries in America, including the likes of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, and Elihu Palmer.

The German phase of the Enlightenment is usually dated from the mid-seventeenth century, its first major figure being Gottfried Wilhem Von Leibnez, (1646–1716). German Deists included most notably Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Johann Christian Edelmann (1698–1767), and Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), and the deist movement reached its zenith in the careers of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Deism was also influential of the founding of Reform Judaism, most notably in the thought of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)
In the early nineteenth century, Deism would largely decline and be superseded by Unitarianism and atheistic Freethought (such as appeared among Percy Brysshe Shelley and the other romantic poets).

Sources


The Presbyterian minister John Leland wrote the first historical survey of the movement.


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France

French Enlightenment

While the theological challenge of Deism appears to have developed and matured in England, the full range of Enlightenment thought reached its zenith in mid- and late-eighteenth century France, where Voltaire became its leading exponent and the salons of Paris its primary points of dissemination. As the Enlightenment has been explored by the last generation of scholars, it has been shown to have drawn on antecedents that reach back into the sixteenth century, the have successfully penetrated all areas of society while simultaneously provoking intense resistance and major pockets of non-acceptance, and to have laid the foundations for the progress of the next two centuries while forcing its opponents to adjust their thinking in substantial ways.

This bibliography is primarily concerned with the manner that the Enlightenment encouraged and nurtured alternative theologies that rejected major parts of the Christian (and Jewish) tradition, especially those evolved into a form of what is usually termed Deism, and then went on to lay the foundation for a full-blown atheistic perspective. The jump to atheism had occurred already in the sixteenth century, but was first presented in a manuscript written by Jean Meslier (1664-1729) which was discovered and published only after his demise.

The Enlightenment can be seen as that period from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century in which intellectual life was marked by a cadre of scholars who questioned the received tradition of Western Christianity, offered reason as the base from which they offered their questions, and held up the hope of science as providing the insights leading to a new way of reordering life.

It is often forgotten that the Enlightenment thinkers formed the cutting edge minority of the intellectual community. The academy was throughout the period always in the hands of a more traditionally oriented majority who frequently and often angrily rejected the basic themes of Enlightenment thought, especially its theological conclusions. Only in the twentieth century would the control of the university systems of the West begin the shift to the control of the children of the Enlightenment and Christian theologies start their reconstruction into post-Enlightenment modes of presentation.

The French phase of the Enlightenment may be traced to the career of philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes professed an orthodox Roman Catholic faith through his life, but his philosophical writings appeared to suggest a Deistic perspective that had little use for God beyond the creation of the world and demanded observation of the world without pre-set teleological assumptions. Critics on occasion accused him of being a closet deist, if not in fact an atheist.

The French phase of the Enlightenment is best known and largely defined by the new ideas and perspectives that were floating around the salons and intellectual circles of Paris in the mid-eighteenth century and found expression in the Encyclopedia compiled by Denis Diderot (1713-
1784), the first volume of which appeared in 1751. Included among the contributors were Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), the Marquis de Montesquieu (1688-1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Voltaire (1694-1778). Eventually 17 volumes of articles would appear between 1751 and 1765 (with additional volumes of illustrations appearing afterwards). The work would present both the new perspective advocated by the Enlightenment leadership and the initial scientific findings in which they placed their faith.

Religiously, the encyclopedia claimed philosophy’s independence from (French Catholic) theology, and claimed reason as its autonomous domain. Without attacking the church directly, it subversively denied the church the privilege of speaking with authority in scientific matters and equally denied the state authority in the intellectual and artistic realms. The opinions expressed in the Encyclopedia would then provide the rationale for the French Revolution, the event usually used also to mark the end of the Enlightenment.

Sources


Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)

Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) was a French Protestant and philosopher who pioneered working with the separation of the realms of faith and reason, an idea that would become a bulwark of the Enlightenment. He is also remembered for his writing the proto-encyclopedic work, the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* which began to appear in 1695. He lived most of his adult life in Holland.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**
Jean Meslier (1664-1729)

Jean Meslier lived and died as a Roman Catholic priest. It was discovered after his death that he had become a closet atheist and had penned a book promoting atheism and denouncing religion as he knew it. His lengthy manuscript circulated informally, but was soon condensed and published, including one edition prepared by Voltaire.

He appears to have been the first person to write an entire book-length volume in support of atheism. An English translation has recently appeared.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach was a prominent eighteenth-century philosopher who emerged as a significant voice of the French Enlightenment. Born a German, he later attained French citizenship. His family was wealthy and with his lavish inheritance he was able to attend college, to fund one of the more important Parisian salons, and provide support for less fortunate leaders of the Enlightenment.

Baron d’Holbach wrote voluminously, including articles for Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, though the majority of his writings were largely unheralded until the next century. Most had been published anonymously or under a pseudonym and were printed outside of France. Voltaire denounced his writings as atheistic. His 1770 book, *The System of Nature* (*Le Système de la nature*), published under the pseudonym Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud (actually the name of a former secretary of the French Academy of Science), suggested the non-existence of any deity.

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Voltaire (Francois-Marie d'Arouet) (1694-1778)

The most famous of the Enlightenment philosophers, Voltaire was born François-Marie Arouet. He grew up in Paris and decided to make his living by writing. He first attained some fame from a play he wrote while sitting in prison falsely accused of having written an anonymous satirical poem. The name by which he became known is an anagram of his own name.
As his fame grew, he became known for his wit, but attained some importance for his advocating a broadening of civil rights for individuals, and defending those arrested for their religious opinions. He wrote a number of plays, many pamphlets arguing his often controversial opinions (such as *Candide*), and articles for Diderot’s Encyclopedia. He defended many, but possibly most notably Jean-François Lefèvre de la Barre (1745-1766), a young man accused of vandalizing a crucifix and eventually executed. When his body was burned, a copy of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Writings* was also consumed in the flames.

Voltaire is usually described as a Deist with a tendency toward pantheism. He knew of atheism, but distanced himself from association with it, especially in the case of Jean Melsier. Voltaire wrote many books, pamphlets, articles, and dramas. He owned a large library, which has remained intact in the National Library of Russia at St. Petersburg. The Voltaire Foundation at the University of Oxford focuses the study of Voltaire and the French Enlightenment and publishes scholarly edition of the works of Voltaire and other French Enlightenment figures. It has issued a multi-volume edition of Voltaire’s Works in English.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**
Jacques-André Naigeon (1738-1810)

Jacques-André Naigeon, a Parisian associate of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, emerged in the last half of the eighteenth century as a leader among the people who gathered at Baron d'Holbach’s salon. He assisted d'Holbach with the publishing of his works in Amsterdam and worked with Denis Diderot as an editor on the Encyclopedia. Naigeon authored only one work, *Le militaire philosophe ou, Difficultés sur la religion proposées au Pére Malebranche* (London and Amsterdam, 1768), which included a final chapter written by d'Holbach. Most of Naigeon’s work has yet to be translated into English.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

The atheist philosopher Denis Diderot is primarily remembered today as a major contributor and the senior editor of the *Encyclopédie* (*Encyclopedia*), upon which he spent more than two decades of his life in the mid-seventeenth century. In his hands, the *Encyclopedia* became an expansive multi-volume compendium of the emerging scientific work, left-wing political commentary, and the most radical of contemporary religious perspectives. His writings included some of the first comments on Asian religion in the West.

During his lifetime, Diderot moved from French Catholicism to Deism to atheism, the later view originally stated in his 1749 *Lettre sur les aveugles* (*An Essay on Blindness*). Written at a time when public statements of minority religious opinions could have one arrested, the work led to his speeding a period in the Vincennes prison.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources
Marquis de Montesquieu (1689-1755)

On of the major political thinkers of the French Enlightenment, Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu is identified with the idea of separation of church and state (or religion and government), which with the French and American Revolutions began to spread through the Western world (though still far from universal acceptance globally). From a well-to-do background, he was further privileged by marrying into a wealthy Protestant family in Southern France.

Intellectually, Montesquieu is credited with observations that would lead to the founding of anthropology as a separate discipline—in his attempts to classify and understand the different types of human systems of governance. He placed an emphasis on the understanding of the environment as a conditioning force in human society. This emphasis on the outward conditions, including a country’s religion, that affect political life is aligned with his Deism, which posited a creator who then is absent from the world that has been left to run very much on its own.

Montesquieu had fairly positive views of religion which he saw as being the primary force available to check the power of despotic governments. At the same time, as he developed his ideas of separating government from religion he came to advocate tolerating religious differences in those lands with substantial minority faiths, and the inappropriateness of using government powers to enforce the rules and laws of any given religious community. Montesquieu’s ideas would take very different forms in the United States (where the basic concern was keeping the government out of religion) and France (where the basic concern was keeping religion out of government).

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a leading writer of the French Enlightenment, was born in Geneva of Protestant parents. He left Geneva at an early age and converted to Catholicism, eventually returning to Protestantism in order to regain his lost Genevan citizenship. Of a musical background, he first became known for his 1750 Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, in which he argued that the arts and sciences had led to the moral degeneration of humankind. Rousseau asserted that humans were basically good by nature (an idea quite opposed to the dominant Protestant understanding that humans were depraved and corrupted by sin). He would develop this perspective in the Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men (1755). Meanwhile, he had become a close associate of Diderot and was working with him on the Encyclopedia. He would later break with Diderot over his belief in the spiritual origin of the human soul.

Rousseau often reflected on religion, toward which he had a positive, if heretical, view. His book Emile: or, On Education, for example, included a defense of religious belief. Its main character was a priest who held to a Unitarian (non-Trinitarian) theology and advocated the worth of all religions, not just Christianity. The book would be burned by both Catholics and Protestants. He subsequently had to leave Paris to escape arrest, and took refuge in the Swiss canton of Neuchâtel, and then in England. He returned to Paris in 1770, but had to promise to publish no more. Except for a fragment of his Confessions, his most famous work, publication of the remainder of his literary output would appear only after his death.

Rousseau fell out with both the Roman Catholics and Protestants on one hand and his Enlightenment colleagues on the other. He concluded that religion was necessary, but disagreed
with the idea of original sin. He also believed that God was present in his creation and was the source of humankind’s natural goodness. He also did not understand why church authorities viewed saw his “heretical” views as a more sinister threat than the atheistic perspectives of other Enlightenment spokespersons. He attempted a somewhat futile effort to defend his position in an open letter to the Archbishop of Paris that included an additional argument, largely unappreciated in his century, that freedom to discuss diverse religious matters is in the end a more religious viewpoint than the attempt to impose belief by force.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


France and Unbelief in the Nineteenth Century

The Deist and atheist thought of the Enlightenment coupled with the political discussions carried on in the salons of Paris bore fruit in the French Revolution. In the wake of the end of the monarchy, the new governing power briefly declared its allegiance to what was termed the “Cult of Reason,” (the term “cult” having a very different use than what it was put to in recent decades). Leaning advocates of the new approach to religion were the journalist Jacques Hébert, and the politician Anacharsis Cloots. The Cult of Reason lasted only a matter of months and was superseded by a “Cult of the Supreme Being, which took a more Deist approach to religion. The earlier anti-clerical thrust that emerged with the Revolution remained, however, and the new leadership led a de-Christinization campaign, suppressing both Catholic and Protestant churches. In some cases, church buildings were confiscated and turned into temples to the Goddess of Reason. Violence associated with the campaign, including the desecration of many churches and sacred sites and the destruction of many sacred artifacts and pieces of religious art, created a long-lasting hostility between the communities of believers and unbelievers.

The brief Post-revolutionary anti-theism period, now remembered as the first historical incident of a state proclaiming its allegiance to an atheist philosophy, seeded both the skeptical philosophies of the post-Hegelians in Germany and the Marxist attempts to take control of France in the nineteenth century. First, however, Napoleon (r.1799-1814) worked out a new agreement with the churches (and the Jewish community) that allowed them to exist in a state of
relative freedom, without fear of further suppressive activity by the government. Napoleon also agreed not to allow any public expression of atheism.

The nineteenth century would be marked by the shifting of forces as successive governments came to power and the partisans favoring atheism or religion gained the upper hand. During the brief rule of the Paris Commune, for example, plans were in place to separate the churches from politics, assume state ownership of all church property, and banish any religious instruction from the public schools. The Commune was ended by conservative forces opposed to atheism, which they considered an anti-French tradition. The divisions of over religion in the country eventually led to the 1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and State which focused on three major assumptions: the state’s neutrality in matters of religion, the church’s right to freely live the religious life, and the existence of some public powers over religious institutions.

The 1905 law works in accord with the principle of laïcité, stated as "The Republic neither recognizes, nor salaries, nor subsidizes any religion." While Catholicism remanded the faith of most citizens, the state did not recognize it or any other religions as having official status. It also placed the church into a voluntary support system, with no public money being made available for the upkeep of churches or the salaries of clergy. This approach remains in effect in France to the present.

Meanwhile, as the status of religion was undergoing its ups and down, France became home to various advocates of atheism, with Marxism (treated elsewhere in this bibliography) gaining a significant following. Possibly no more important atheist thinker appeared than August Comte (1798-1857) who amid his broad philosophical endeavor proposed a “Religion of Positivism.” Amid the many who would profess atheism, Comte emerged as the major writer/theorist, certainly the most prominent internationally.

Sources


August Comte (1798-1857) and the Religion of Positivism

French philosopher August Comte was a pioneer thinker and founder of the science sociology and the advocate of a philosophical school call positivism. He also most notably proposed the adoption of what he termed the Religion of Humanity.

After completing his education in southern France, Comte moved to Paris where he became the secretary to Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a utopian socialist theorist, who developed a theology out of a search for the essential core of Christianity which he found in Christian ethics, especially its attention to the poor. Both Saint Simon’s socialism and reductionist theology would greatly influence Comte. Comte also developed a friendship with John Stuart Mill.

By 1830, Comte had begun to develop his own philosophy and began to publish it in a series of short writings released through the decade. These set the stage for his important text, *A General View of Positivism* (1848, English ed., 1865). The work of social science was to build on natural science and move toward a reordering of society on a scientific basis.

Positive philosophy, for Comte, evolved into the Religion of Humanity which would function to meet the continuing needs that religion had fulfilled in the past. This idea was not as well received as his earlier work, but did receive a hearing in the various Freethought organizations that began to arise in the last half of the twentieth century. Many of his followers accepted the idea of a “Religion of Humanity,” but did not like Conte’s particular vision of what such a religion would consist.
For a more complete bibliography of Comte, mostly in French, see

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


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France and Unbelief in the Twentieth Century

Through the ups and downs of the nineteenth century, Unbelief grew steadily. It would find expression in literature as well as the more formal philosophical writings, and become entrenched in the Socialist Party. A peculiar form of Freemasonry would arise in France that abandoned the Deist idea of God as the “Great Architect of the Universe” in favor of an avowed atheism.


Sources


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Reflections of a Roman Catholic theologian/bishop.


French Existentialism

Existentialism was a Twentieth century philosophical movement that can be seen as a reaction to nineteenth century European idealistic themes including the search for the essence of things. It
began with an assertion of existence as a primary category, whose reality preceded essence. The movement is generally traced to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), with the Danish philosopher-theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) seen as an important nineteenth century precursor.

Devotees of existentialist approaches included a number of leading Protestant theologians including such as Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and Karl Barth (1886-1968), but the term is most attached to a set of French thinkers, most notably Jean-Paul Sartre, who explored new categories for understanding the nature of authentic existence. The existential quest began with a search for the nature of authentic existence and through art and literature explored what seemed like fruitful areas of human life for revealing insights—the absurd, evil, and even death—while at the same time seeing human freedom as a major clue element of authentic existence. Among those who gathered around Sartre in the mid-twentieth century, these explorations were done in what proved a largely atheistic context.

Labeling became a concern as the existentialist “movement” blossomed in the year after World War II. Novelist Albert Camus specifically repudiated it, though commentators saw him intimately linked to Sartre. Some saw the movement as more a cultural expression of literary efforts to break out of philosophical straight jackets imposed by both science and philosophy. In any case, the movement enjoyed a hey day in the 1960s and while fading as a popular culture phenomenon, remains as an important intellectual current in Western thought.

Atheist existentialism is primarily tied to three figures—Albert Camus, the German writer Franz Kafka, and Jean-Paul Sartre. These three and their close associates produced a vast set of literature and provoked an even larger set of writings that has attempted to respond and understand their existentialist thought. The list below merely hits a few high points.

Sources


Albert Camus (1913 -1960)

Albert Camus was an Algerian-born French novelist who gained notoriety following the appearance of *The Stranger* in 1949. He went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, his novels having spoken deeply to a generation dealing with the devastation of Europe during World War II. He then died at a relatively young age in a still controversial automobile accident in 1960.

*Primary Sources*


*Secondary Sources*


Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

A German novelist born into a secularized Jewish family in Prague, Kafka was given a classical German education. He worked at several mundane occupations to provide sustenance while pursuing his writing. He published little during his life, and all his important worked only appeared posthumously. After World War II, the sense of hopelessness and the absurd that fill the attention of Kafka’s readers led to his identification with the existentialism of Camus and Sartre. Kafka died from the effects of tuberculosis.

Kafka research is focused at the Oxford Kafka Research Center in England.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Deist Beginnings, Flowering, and Beyond

The British Isles were home to several stages of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. England broke with the Church in Rome but otherwise remained Catholic in faith and practice until Henry VIII (r.1509-1547) passed from the scene. It tried Protestantism and Catholicism for brief periods under Edward IV (r.1547-1553) and Mary I (r.1553-1558), and finally settled on the Anglican compromise under Elizabeth I (r.1558-1603). Meanwhile, a Calvinist reformation carried the day in Scotland and Presbyterianism came to the fore. England would briefly try Presbyterianism in the seventeenth century during the Commonwealth (1649-1660), but Anglicanism again became the faith of the Church of England with the Restoration.

Non-Trinitarianism emerged quietly in the more radical of the Puritan sectarian groups in the seventeenth century, but its progress was inhibited by laws banning Unitarianism that were in place until the early nineteenth century. Meanwhile, unbelief in the essential doctrines of Christianity, in some cases implied and then positively advocated, began to appear in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, Deism provoked a public controversy among the literate elite. The pioneering Deists texts, which beginning with the writings of John Toland (1670-1722) became bolder and bolder in their dissent from the religious consensus, provoked a veritable flood of responses by Christian authors from the popular to the academic.

Deism was largely an intellectual challenge posed by individuals who were nominally Anglicans, and carried out as a war of ideas, a primary concern being it’s reaching out to a public that was increasingly liberal. Throughout the seventeenth century, individuals would be arrested and tried for publishing views considered a rejection of Christian belief. Deism was seen as a more serious concern once it was tied to the events of the French Revolution, and the religion of reason associated with the Reign of Terror (1793–1794).

Deism had little impact among the masses as a movement as it did not assume a social dimension by founding organizations that perpetuated its ideas. Discussions were carried out in clubs and societies that featured debates as a form of entertainment. Organization of groups that advocated various aspects of unbelief would be left to the Unitarians. Their initial chapels began to challenge the laws in the later seventeenth century.

In the nineteenth century, the Unitarian movement would finally attain legal status, and Deism would give way to full-blown atheism/Freethought.

Sources


Important collection of essays related to Deism.


Early Anti-Deist Writings

Clarke, Samuel. A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God. London: James Knapton, 1705.


Edward Herbert, Baron of Cherbury (1583-1648)

Seventeenth-century British intellectual Edward Herbert, Baron Herbert of Cherbury, was an early proponent of Deism which grew out of a desire to build the search for truth solidly upon the foundation of reason. This thesis was presented most forcefully in his 1624 publication *De Veritate (On Truth)* initially published in Paris. Herbert affirmed a belief in God, but rejected the idea of revealed religion. His approach would lead to the philosophical search for what we can know about God and the universe apart from revelation, a discipline usually termed “natural theology.” His writings would be common reading by the seventeenth-century Deists in both Europe and America.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


Charles Blount (1654-1693)

Charles Blount, a British Deist, who began publishing a set of skeptical writings in England beginning in 1673. He was unheralded in his lifetime, as all his writings appeared anonymously. His views were intertwined with emerging anti-Tory politics in the still infant Whig Party, founded in 1678.

His first book on religion, Anima mundi, was an almost comical survey of Pagan beliefs on the afterlife that in the end made fun of the idea of immortality. He followed with Great Diana of the Ephesians and The Two First Books of Philostratus concerning the Life of Apollonius Tyaneus, which included direct attacks on Christianity and its beliefs throughout in the footnotes. His final book, published the year of his death, The Oracles of Reason, included essays that challenged the possibility of Divine revelation and miracles. It also suggested that other worlds with life on them existed.

Blount lived a quiet life of relative ease in Staffordshire. He died following a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Several years after his death, his writings and a biographical sketch were published in a collected edition by Charles Gildon, who had edited The Oracles of Reason.

Primary Sources


-----, The Miscellaneous Works of Charles Blount. Containing I. The Oracles of Reason. II. Anima Mundi... III. Great is Diana of the Ephesians... IV. An Appeal from the Country to the City for the Preservation of his Majesties Person, Liberty, and Property.... V. A just Vindication of Learning, and of the Liberty of the Press.... VI. A Supposed Dialogue betwixt the late King James and King William ....To which is prefix'd the Life of the Author, and an Account and Vindication of his Death. With the Contents of the Whole Volumes. Ed. by Charls Gildon. London, 1695.


-----, The Two First Books of Philostratus concerning the Life of Apollonius Tyaneus. 1680.

-----, Thomas Sydenham, and John Dryden. A summary account of the Deists religion: in a letter to that excellent physician, the late Dr. Thomas Sydenham. To which are annex’d, some curious remarks on the immortality of the soul, and an essay by the celebrated poet, John Dryden, Esq; to prove that natural religion is alone necessary to salvation, in opposition to all divine revelation. 1745.

Secondary Sources


**Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)**

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes was born in Malmesbury, Wiltshire, England, the son of an Anglican clergyman. After his graduation from Magdalen Hall, Oxford in 1608, he was employed by a well-to-do family as a tutor and remained in the employ of the family most of his life. He thus had access to a relatively large library and the intellectual world of contemporary philosophers and scientists. His primary contribution was to political thought, but his writings ranged over broad areas of knowledge. He emerged as a materialist and a nominalist (abstract terms merely pointed to the common attributes of particulars).

Religiously Hobbes has been seen by very differently by recent commentators, some viewing him as an orthodox Christian, other as an atheist, with various shades in between. Hobbes opened himself to various interpretations by excluding most religious questions from what he saw as his primary field of inquiry—philosophy.

Relative to the basic question concerning god’s existence, Hobbes often talked and wrote as if God existed and in one text, the *Elements of Law*, he includes a cosmological argument for the God’s existence. He follows with a discussion reflecting some early Christian theologians that nothing can be know of God apart from His existence due to our finite state. In spite of Hobbes’ many references to God, some, such as Douglas Jesseph, claim that his ambiguous references really hid an underlying atheism.

While Hobbes is somewhat cryptic about his understanding of God (often contradictory and at time citing opinions that may or may not be his), he is less ambiguous about his criticisms of many widely held religious opinions. He is most clearly downgrading of claims of dreams/visions in which contact with God is claimed and miracles stories.

**Primary Sources**

Note: Oxford University Press is currently issuing what is becoming the standard edition of Hobbes’ works as the Clarendon Edition, which is slated to be completed with some 23 volumes. As of 2010 about half of the proposed volumes have appeared. In the meantime, the Molesworth edition (which has been reprinted in modern inexpensive copies) remains the most complete.


**Secondary Sources**


Matthew Tindal (1657-1733)

Matthew Tindal was one of the leading Deist writers of the early eighteenth century, his major work *Christianity as Old and Creation* becoming a favorite target of traditional Christian authors for a generation. Born the son of a Church of England minister, Tindal attended Lincoln College, Oxford and was later named a fellow of All Souls College. The student of a high church professor, he joined the Roman Catholic Church, but remained there only a brief time. Tindal’s early writing out of his legal training had a role in liberalizing the laws on the freedom of the press.

Tindal’s first significantly controversial book, the first part of *The Rights of the Christian Church associated against the Romish and all other priests who claim an independent power over it* was published anonymously in 1706. He argued for the state’s right over misbehaving Christians. Church authorities roundly condemned it, and it was publicly burned.

It was *Christianity as Old as the Creation; or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730), however, that made Tindal’s reputation and set him on a pedestal as the leading Deist thinker in England. Drawing on the new approaches to human understanding articulated by
Locke, Tindal argued that true religion must be both eternal and universal, and at the same time simple and perfect. Religion consists of nothing but the simple and universal duties towards God and man, that is, morality. His approach to religion suggested that particular revelations were to be disregarded and that worship was to be replaced with moral uprightness. Christianity should deliver humanity from the superstitions that caused them to deviate from true religion. The book would be translated into German and become the fountainhead of British Deist though in the German states.

The writings of Matthew Tindal have been included in the massive Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) project by Gale Research Company and are also available in relatively inexpensive reprint editions.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


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Thomas Chubb (1679-1747)

Thomas Chubb was unusual among the contributors to the growth of deism as he was not formally trained in any standard academic disciplines, rather he was a common man who worked as a glove maker and tallow chandler. Nevertheless, he authored more than 50 brief works on religious subjects, beginning with a non-Trinitarian assertion of the unity of God in 1715. In his Discourse concerning Reason, his most famous work, he argued against the changes in Jesus’ religion that begins with the Apostles and has grown into the institutionalized church and its theology. He proposes a stripped down religion very similar to that proposed by John Toland.

The leading theologian in the American colonies in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards critiqued Chubb in his notable text, *Freedom of the Will*.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Fleming, Caleb. *Various Answers etc. to Thomas Chubb*. 1738.


John Toland (1670-1722)

John Toland, an Irishman, became one of the most well-known of the eighteenth-century Deists. Born in Ardagh, Ireland, he later attended the universities at Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leiden and Oxford. Shortly after completing his studies in Oxford, he published his first and still most notable book, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). He attacked the idea of revelation in the Bible. As a good deist, he argues that the truth of religion could be discerned by reason from nature. All knowledge attributed to revelation was, in fact, discovered by reason, it was not a message from the divine. A grand jury attacked him in London, and his fellow Irishmen (already upset by his renouncing his childhood Catholicism) burnt his book in public.

Toland settled in London and wrote numerous books, most of an anti-clerical nature. He would be the first person labeled a freethinker, a derisive term at the time. He is also the first person to use the term “pantheist,” and some believe that the secretive Pantheist society described in one of his books actually existed. In any case, today’s pantheists look to Toland as the fountainhead of their belief.

He also became involved in the *Treatise of the Three Impostors* hoax. The treatise was a book rumored to existed (but never actually seen by anyone) in which Christianity, Judaism and Islam were branded as three great political frauds. Originally, Pope Gregory IX (r.1227-1241) claimed had been written by Frederick II and was cited as a reason for Frederick’s excommunication. At one point, Toland claimed to have a copy of the manuscript which he passed on to a French colleague, who published a French edition.

Historian David Berman has argued for the most radical reading of Toland as an atheist. Berman argues that Toland understood and knowingly wrote as one who had concluded that a God stripped of his most important characteristics is no God at all. Ultimately, Deism must lead to atheism.

**Primary Sources**


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------. The Theological and Philological Works of the Late Mr. John Toland: Being a System of Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity. London: W. Mears, 1732.

Secondary Sources


Anthony Collins (1676-1729)

Anthony Collins was a English free-thinker, deist and materialist, a contemporary of John Toland, Samuel Bold, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Woolston, and William Wollaston, and the
aging John Locke. The son of a lawyer, he later attended King’s College, Cambridge and became a lawyer. He developed a broad network among contemporary thinkers and conducted a lengthy controversy through correspondence with the philosopher Samuel Clarke, a friend of Isaac Newton.

Much of Collins’ work, including his correspondence with Clarke, was related to issues of the nature of the soul and the free will-determinism question. Collins was determinist. Relative to the existence of god, contemporary scholars differ on Collins. James O’ Higgins sees him as a Deist, while David Berman argues that he is in fact an atheist. While clearly rejecting revelation, Collins can be read as either supporting natural religion or rejecting religion and God altogether.

**Primary Sources**


Secondary Sources


Peter Annet (1693-1769)

Deist philosopher and writer Peter Annet was a schoolteacher dismissed from his post for his impious opinions toward Christianity and the bible and general hostility to the clergy. He initially gained some prominence as a deist writer at the end of the 1730s with his pamphlet, *Judging for Ourselves, or Freethinking the Great Duty of Religion* (1739), the catalyst for his loosing his teaching job. He also attacked the idea of miracles and the arguments for Christianity based on the credibility of the early Christian witness to the biblical events. He was among the first to put forth the notion that Jesus did not die on the cross, i.e., he was merely unconscious, and was revived in the tomb.

Annet’s writings have been included in the massive ECCO project by Gale Research, and his prominent works are now also available in inexpensive on-demand paperback reprints.

*Primary Sources*


*Secondary Sources*


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David Hume (1711-1776)
One of the most outstanding of modern philosophers, David Hume was the author of four of the most influential books of the seventeenth century, books still read today—*A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), the *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* (1748), concerning the *Principles of Morals* (1751), *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779)—the last published posthumously. Born in Edinburgh, Hume was recognized as a precocious youth. He received little formal education, however, and, being largely self-educated, never held an academic post. He moved away from the Presbyterianism of his youth and even in his first book adopted a critical approach to Christianity (though he cut a chapter on miracles from the text in order to get it published without significant controversy).

Hume is best known for his empiricist views, based in his observation that the stuff in our minds about which we think and deliberate originates in either sense perceptions or from our ruminations about those perceptions. From sense perceptions we are able to build simple ideas which can then be combined into complex ideas. His position led him to attack *a priori* notions about the assumed connection between cause and effect, and from that position to a negative assessment of the many reports of miracles.

Hume eventually arrived at a reductionist view of religion, which he believed originated in the postulating of supernatural forces to account for phenomena otherwise unexplainable by people in the ancient past. Religion was originally polytheistic and relatively tolerant of variant views. It eventually became monotheistic and Hume believed monotheism was inherently intolerant. He thought that humans could eventually dispose of religion. His last book, the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, includes a strong destructive critique of the argument for God from design, which had emerged as the most popular argument for God’s existence in Christian circles.*

Hume was accepted as a fellow atheist by Freethinkers in the generations since his Dialogues, though some still attempt to place him in the Deist camp. He never declared himself an atheist, but his arguments certainly allow such an opinion of him to be justified.


Hume’s major writings are readily available in a spectrum of reprint editions, and online through Project Gutenberg and other sites. The listing below of secondary sources centers on the questions of God and religious belief.
Primary Sources


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**Unitarianism in Great Britain**

Anti-Trinitarian views appeared in England in the middle of the sixteenth century and throughout the Elizabethan Era, executions of individuals for holding such views sporadically occurred. The number of anti-Trinitarians began to grow in the seventeenth century with the arrival of Socinians from Eastern Europe. Anti-Trinitarian views would grow during the years that the Commonwealth set aside the Anglican establishment (1649-1660).

John Biddle (1615-1662), a school teacher in Gloucester, who spent the 1640s in and out of prison for his views, published a tract *Twelve Arguments Drawn Out of Scripture* (1647) that argued that the Christian Scriptures did not support the doctrine of the Trinity. His time in prison eventually took a toll on his health, and he died while in jail in 1662.

A non-Trinitarian religious movement began to take shape in the 1660s and become more public after the Act of Toleration (1689) extended new rights to dissenting groups. The Act, however, covered only those groups that did not deny Christian essentials, and most individuals who held a Unitarian belief remained within the Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches. Unitarianism thus existed as a theological option within groups that were officially Trinitarian in their doctrine. An early attempt to gather a Unitarian congregation was made by Thomas Emlyn (1663–1741) in London in 1705.

In 1773, Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808) left the Anglican Church, and established the Essex Street Chapel, with the assistance two clergy colleagues Joseph Priestley and Richard Price (1723-1791). With the aid of a few highly placed sympathizers, the chapel remained open until the Doctrine of the Trinity Act 1813, took away legal penalties for denying the Trinity. The
British and Foreign Unitarian Association was formed in 1825. The Unitarians still faced considerable negative public opinion that only dissipated in the last half of the century.

Unitarians differed from Deists in that they were attempting to develop a non-Trinitarian Christian theology, whereas for deists, the critique of religion in general and Christianity in particular was at the forefront of their agenda. In the wake of their critique, Desist took the logical next step to atheism.

Unitarianism’s disagreements with Trinitarian Christianity indirectly helped prepare the way for the emergence of atheism, though as atheism emerged, its proponents would attack the Unitarians as a means of distinguishing their non-theistic position from the more conservative Unitarian dissent. In the twentieth century. Through the twentieth century, Unitarianism would nurture religious dissent and thus without prior intent provide a context in which a number of people would move toward a non-theistic perspective.

Sources


Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)

Joseph Priestley an eighteenth-century British scientist recognized for his discovery of several elements in their gaseous state, including oxygen, and prolific writer, was also known as a dissenting Protestant minister who held Unitarian views. A broadly learned scholar, he contributed studies in a variety of fields—history, education, grammar, etc. In 1767, he settled in Leeds as the pastor of the Mill Hill Chapel, a Calvinist congregation. While there he published the three-volume treatise, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772–74), in which his Unitarian views became plainly stated. He also argued that one should only accept those revealed
religious truths that could be aligned with one's experience of the natural world. He argued for his more primitive and simple view of Christianity over against what he saw as layers of accumulations represented by contemporary orthodoxy.

Over the years, Priestley defended dissenting churches and their right to exist. When in 1774, his friend Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808) founded the Unitarian movement in England, Priestley defended him, attended his church, and on occasion preached for him. Priestley support of the American and then the French Revolution capped a quarter century of controversy, and he eventually found it convenient to move to the United States, where he participated in the founding of Unitarianism in North America.

Interestingly, the first avowedly atheistic book published in Great Britain was an anonymous text, now generally attributed to a Dr. Matthew Turner, entitled an Answer to Dr. Priestley's letters to a philosophical unbeliever (London, 1782).

For more extensive coverage of material on Priestley, see R. E. Crook’s A Bibliography of Joseph Priestley (London: Library Association, 1966).

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Unbelief in England—the Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth-century England proved to be one of the more creative places in the Western world and was certainly the time/place in which the Unbelief community moved from being a few voices crying in the wilderness to become a visible minority community that was actively engaged in changing society especially in relation to religious diversity, concern for blasphemy, the role of women, and free speech laws. The first purely atheistic book published in Great Britain was the anonymously issued Answer to Dr. Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever (London, 1782). But just a generation later, the nineteenth century would be launched
with a spectrum of prominent people who expressing their atheist views in print, none more prominent that poet Percy Brysshe Shelley. Largely inspired by French thinking, atheism, forms of socialism, much based in communalism, and ideas for social reconstruction that challenged assumptions of the religious tradition emerged in relative abundance.

The century of struggle to open space for atheists perspectives in England is punctuated by a variety of notable events including the legalizing of Unitarianism (1813); notable trials for blasphemy (Richard Carlile, 1818; Edward Moxon, 1841; Charles Southwell, 1841; George Jacob Holyoake, 1842; G. W. Foote, 1883); the founding of the Leicester Secular Society, the world’s oldest (1851); the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* (1859); the definition of agnosticism by T. F. Huxley (1860s); the founding of the Secular Society (1866); and the launch of *The Freethinker* by G. W. Foote (1881).

It was also the case that atheism would not have the prominence in British academia that it had, for example, in Germany, and that most atheist thinkers, beginning with the likes of John Stuart Mill, would push the cause forward with a implicit atheism, avoiding more direct challenges to theistic positions. Most notably non-theistic assumptions would hover in the background as major advances were put forward in the biological and geological sciences whose findings set many against Christian assumptions concerning the age of the earth and the manner of Divine creation.

The century would culminate in the careers of Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) and Annie Besant (1847-1933). Bradlaugh would emerge as the head of the Freethought movement and Besant one of its most able orators. After a notable career as an atheist, Besant would at the end of the 1880s convert to Theosophy, and have an equally outstanding life as its leader internationally. Besant’s conversion, often viewed as an embarrassing fact by some contemporary atheists, is primarily further illustration of the nineteenth century convergence of the Freethought and Esoteric communities, both of who opposed Christian hegemony in society and decried what they saw as the naïve supernaturalism in church life. Bradlaugh was, for example, himself a Freemason. Esoteric believers were generally theists, but posited a deity was quite similar to that of the Deists (and in France would be dispensed with by the Freemasons).

Besant was but one of the prominent females involved in Freethought and its associated issues relative to the status and role of women. Note is made of Harriet Martineau (1802–1876); Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1707-1851), Jane and Mary Carlile, George Eliot [pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans] (1819-1880); and Lady Monson (1803-1891). An additional number of women with Deist and Unitarian beliefs were prominent in many of the Victorian era social movements.

An early Unitarian group, the Philadelphians, founded in 1793, would through the last half of the century move toward atheism. Since 1824, it had operated out of a chapel at South Place, Finsbury, London, and assumed the name South Place Religious Society. In 1888, while under the leadership of Stanton Coit (1857-1944), an American who brought the Ethical Culture movement to England, it became the South Place Ethical Society. Coit also founded several other Ethical Cultures centers in the greater London area. All of these centers except the South Place group came together as the Union of Ethical Societies in 1896.
In the middle of the century, George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), encouraged the foundation of a number of secular societies, the one at Leicester being the oldest still in existence. The emergence of these groups led to the formation of a National Secular Society by Charles Bradlaugh in 1866. The National Secular Society would later be joined by the Rational Press Association in 1899.

Sources


Percy Shelley (1792-1822) and the Romantics

In the transition from Deism to atheism in the nineteenth century, the romantic poets play an important role, none more so that Shelley who, like his friend Lord Byron was a Freethinker, only much more assertively so. The publication of his brief work, “The Necessity of Atheism,” in 1811 caused his expulsion from Oxford, though he escapes a trial for blasphemy. His father’s attempted intervention, and Shelley’s further refusal to recant his view, led to a break within the family. Subsequent visits to William Godwin’s bookshop in London led to his acquaintance with and eventual marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft (the author of both A Vindication of the Rights of Women and Frankenstein).

Shortly before Shelley’s untimely death at the age of 30, he joined with his poet colleagues Leigh Hunt and Lord Byron in the creation of a journal that was to be called The Liberal, in which their controversial writings on a variety of subjects including religion could be published.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources
William Godwin (1756-1836)

Political theorist William Godwin was raised in the home of a Presbyterian minister. He maintained the strict Calvinist theology through his early life but then evolved progressively from deism, agnosticism, atheism and then returned to a form of deism which he termed a "vague theism." He had already developed an interest in political issues when the French Revolution began. He generally supported the revolution thought upset about what he saw as irrational parts of it, and participated in an effort to publish Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man.* He
followed with a new analysis of society and how it should be governed which appeared in 1893 as *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*

In 1791 he met Mary Wollstonecraft whom he eventually married. She died giving birth to their daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who later married Percy Bysshe Shelley. Godwin went on to become popular novelist and for many years ran a bookstore which became a popular meeting place for those holding radical political and religious views. He is remembered fondly by people holding anarchist views, as well as by feminists who consider him a man ahead of his time. His last works were some essays on Christianity, which he attacked for offering hope of a false afterlife.

*Primary Sources*


*Secondary Sources*


John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

John Stuart Mill has been considered by many as being the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century. His far-reaching works on political theory, human rights, and moral behavior provide substantial evidence of such an opinion. He wrote less on religion, but much of his writing on other subjects led his contemporaries to assume his status as an unbeliever, especially the utilitarian moral philosophy for which he is most fondly remembered.

Mill was raised apart from any religious training during his childhood and youth. He then wrote little publically about religion out of fear it would distract from the public acceptance of his other writings. His essays on religion were published posthumously, and revealed his favoring a utilitarian approach to religion. Religion had a certain social utility because of its ability to inculcate a widely accepted moral code. At the same time he had concluded that belief in God
and the supernatural was no longer useful and might have actually become detrimental. In his last essay on “Theism,” he left a slim opening for the possibility that God existed, but, in the end, surrounded that possibility with so many observations about any evidence of his handiwork and to negate any hope for God’s having a role in human life.

**Primary Sources**

Mill’s major writings are currently in print in a variety of editions, and the text of most are available online.


**Secondary Sources**


**Richard Carlile (1790-1843)**

Atheist publisher Richard Carlile began his adult life as a tinsmith in London. He became politically active and began to publish and distribute the writings of people who called for the reform of Parliament, including Thomas Paine, initially as a way of supplementing his income. In 1817 he formed a small publishing house, and a month later published a book parodying the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer whose author had been arrested. He was himself briefly arrested for his publishing the work. He also purchased the journal *Sherwin’s Political Register*, which supported political reform and found support from sympathetic voices such as Percy Shelley and Lord Byron.

Carlile was arrested for blasphemy (and several related charges), in part for publishing Paine’s *Age of Reason*. In 1819 he was found guilty and sentenced to three years in jail. While there, he
completed his transition to atheism and in 1821 he published his Address to Men of Science. That same year, his wife Jane and her sister Mary were also arrested and sentenced to prison sentences. More than 150 people associated with him were also arrested in a general suppression of his work.

Once able he resumed his publishing and championed a variety of causes including the equality and liberation [sexual and otherwise] of women.

Toward the end of the decade, now free from prison, Carlile became associated with one Rev. Robert Taylor who opened a center called the Rotunda that became a gathering place for both political reformers and politicians. Taylor published a satirical publication *The Devil’s Pulpit*, the issues of which reprinted sermons he had delivered attacking church.

Carlile was arrested again for his political radicalism. This last imprisonment bankrupted him and he was unable to resume his publications. He died a decade later in poverty and obscurity.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) and Austin Holyoake (1827-1874)

George Jacob Holyoake was a British unbeliever who coined the term "secularism," which became a popular alternative self-designation for atheists in Victorian England. He became associated with journalist Charles Southwell (1814-1860) with whom he shared an interest in Robert Owen’s utopianism. Southwell founded an atheist journal, The Oracle of Reason, and when he was arrested, Holyoake picked up the editor’s role.

Holyoake lectured widely and wrote a number of shorter works published as pamphlets. Following a lecture in 1842 in Cheltenham, he was arrested and convicted of blasphemy. As it turned out, this conviction was the last in England for blasphemy (though not the last trial).
The *Oracle* ceased publication at the end of 1843, and Holyoake subsequently founded a new periodical, *The Movement*, which took a less extreme position and centered more on the promotion of communalism. It would later be superseded by the *Reasoner*.

George Jacob’s brother Austin was also active in the Freethought movement and for a period worked with Charles Bradlaugh, who founded the National Secular Society.


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### The Agnostic Tradition

The term “agnosticism” was coined by Professor Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) in the 1860s. It has come to be used to denote on a personal level a position of indecision relative to the existence of god and on a social level as an assertion of the impossibility of reaching a conclusion. Many atheists have seen it as a way of assuming an atheist position while trying to avoid the social stigma that can come from making the final leap to full-blown atheism. For Huxley, agnosticism appeared to be a utilitarian position that provided a useful perspective to carry on discussions and debates on a variety of issues, but especially evolution and scientific methodology. He notably offered as a definition of agnosticism in an oft-quoted essay on the subject:

Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle . . . Positively the principle may be expressed as in matters of intellect, do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.

He elaborated on this point by suggesting that one erred in professing certainty of the objective truth of a proposition apart from providing evidence that logically justifies such a level that of certainty. From this beginning, agnostics and the idea of agnosticism have become an essential element of the tradition of Unbelief. Such notables as Robert G. Ingersoll and H. K. Mencken described themselves as agnostics.

### Sources


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Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) and the National Secular Society

Political activist Charles Bradlaugh was the most outstanding of the late-nineteenth century Freethinkers. Born in London, he was raised as an Anglican. He left the church as a teenager and was thrown out of the family home. He lived for a time with Elizabeth Sharples Carlile, the widow of Richard Carlile, and soon came to know George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the term secularism. He was but 17 when he authored his first publication representing his new Freethought position, *A Few Words on the Christian Creed*.

After a stint in the army, Bradlaugh settled in London in 1853 and began to write under the pseudonym "Iconoclast." He became president of the London Secular Society in 1858 and two-year later editor of the *National Reformer*. In 1866 he co-founded the National Secular Society, which would soon become the leading Freethought organization in England. He also came to know Annie Besant, the former wife of an Anglican minister with whom he worked closely for many years. Together they opposed blasphemy laws and worked for freedom of speech on birth control issues. The pair was tried for obscenity in 1877. Though convicted, they escaped imprisonment.

In 1880, Bradlaugh was elected a Member of Parliament for Northampton, his election setting off an eight-year period of debates and actions challenging the religious nature of the oath for taking office. A new Oaths Act was finally passed which responded to Bradlaugh’s challenge.
He is today memorialized by celebrations on his birthday, a statue in Northampton, and Bradlaugh Hall at the University of Northampton.

A prolific writer, Bradlaugh wrote numerous pamphlets and articles. These have been the subject of many anthologies and collected works. Also, many of his writings are now available online, especially at [http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles Bradlaugh/](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles Bradlaugh/).

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**Secondary Works**


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Gilmour, James, ed. *Charles Bradlaugh: Champion of Liberty*. London: C. A. Watts, 1933. 346 pp. (A collection of works by Bradlaugh with a variety of appreciations written for the centennial of his birth.)


McCann, James, and Charles Bradlaugh. *Secularism: unphilosophical, immoral, and anti-social: verbatim report of a three nights’ debate between the Rev. Dr. McCann and Charles Bradlaugh,*


Tribe was the president of the National Secular Society and editor of *The Freethinker*.


Annie Besant

Annie Besant, one of the most controversial figures in the history of Freethought, was the wife of an Anglican clergyman, who lost her faith and became an atheist. Following her separation from her husband, she became associated with Charles Bradlaugh, and with her oratorical skills, became one of the most popular public advocates of atheism, the promotion of the status and role of women, and the end of blasphemy (and obscenity) laws. Many of her lectures were transcribed and published as pamphlets.

The most controversial action came at the end of the 1880s when she developed a relationship with Helena P. Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, she eventually left her position with the National Secular Society to head the Esoteri Section of the Theosophical Society and then to succeed Henry Steel Olcott as the society’s international president. She would hold that post for more than a quarter of a century.

Besant’s action in becoming a theosophist was seen by many atheists as a betrayal and a sharp break with her life as a secularist. Many contemporary writers simple leave her out of the history as much as possible. Others, however, have seen her move to Theosophy as a less radical move, that maintained much continuity with the Freethought. In the nineteenth century a convergence of Unbelief and Esotericism existed as both struggled with the power of the churches and traditional theology. Both movements shared roots in the Deist thinking of the previous century. Also, as a theosophist, Besant continued many of the causes she had championed as a secularist, especially the work for the upward mobility of women, and further broadened her social consciousness.

The references below are selected from Besant’s many relevant works with an emphasis on her years as an atheist working with Bradlaugh. Several collections covering these years now exist and make the more representative publications readily available. Many of the works were originally published anonymously. For a more complete bibliography, covering the atheist years as well as the other phases of Besant’s life and work, see Kurt Leland’s “The Annie Besant Shrine: A Bibliography of Annie Besant (1847-1933)” posted at http://www.kurtleland.com/annie-besant-shrine.

Collected Works


*Single titles*


Secondary Sources


Twentieth-Century Humanism and Atheism in England

Having been freed from persecution for blasphemy, atheism and its related perspectives blossomed through the twentieth century. A number of prominent philosophers who espoused atheism emerged, as did a spectrum of popular writers. The National Secular Society continues as a leading Atheist organization and it has been joined by the Ethical Culture movement and humanist groups to present a complete spectrum of perspectives to the public.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, a number of social theorists from Karl Marx to Émile Durkheim had suggested that the modernization of society coincide with a decline in religious belief and practice, a theory that also coincided with their own preference for a secular society. That view settled within the social and psychological sciences and found it greatest verification in the declining support for established churches, especially in England and France.


As the twentieth century began, the Unbelief community in England was focused on the National Secular Society, the Leicester Secular Society, the South Place Ethical Society, the Union of
Ethical Societies, and the Rational Press Association. The National Secular Society remains the most prominent and has included a string of outstanding presidents through the twentieth century including G. W. Foote, editor of The Freethinker, Chapman Cohen (president for more than three decades, 1915-1949), David Tribe, and Barbara Smoker. Smoker is also an honorary vice president of the recently formed Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

The Union of Ethical Societies moved away from Ethical Culture and its religious associations toward a secular humanist stance and in 1967 changed it name to British Humanist Association. Among its outstanding presidents were philosopher A. J. Ayer and biologist Julian Huxley. Huxley, who at various times described himself as a humanist, religious naturalist, and agnostic, actively participated in various British atheist groups. He was an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association and the first president of the British Humanist Association, and presided over the founding Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Biologist Richard Dawkins currently serves as one of the British Humanist Association’s vice-presidents. Though now most popular in the United States, the new “Neo-Atheist” movement which emerged around his writings, had its origin in England in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century (and is covered in the Contemporary Perspectives section of this bibliography).

Sources


-----.* God and the Universe: Eddington, Jeans, Huxley, and Einstein, with a Reply to A. S. Eddington.* London n.d.


John Mackinnon Robertson (1856-1933)

Born on the Isle of Arran off the coast of Scotland, John M. Robertson dropped out of school when he was thirteen but went on to become an editor at one of Edinburgh’s newspapers. As a young man he then became a dedicated secularist and joined the National Secular Union led by Charles Bradlaugh. He soon moved to London to write for the movement’s periodical, the National Reformer. He succeeded Bradlaugh as editor in 1891. He assumed leadership of the South Place Ethical Society in 1899, a post he held for several decades.

He is remembered today primarily for his monumental two volume history of Freethought and the other historical and biographical materials he authored on the pioneers of Freethought in the United Kingdom. He also wrote a large number of additional Freethought books and pamphlets. One of his favorite themes was the attack on Christianity as a religion built on a purely mythological base, and he advocated the idea that Jesus did not exist as a historical person, a subject upon which he penned several texts.

Much of his writing has now been posted online. See the Online Books page

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


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Joseph Martin McCabe was a British Roman Catholic and Franciscan priest who left the order and became an atheist. His story was initially told in *From Rome to Rationalism* (1897), later published in an expanded edition as *Twelve Years in a Monastery* (1897). He subsequently served as secretary of the Leicester Secular Society and he became one of the founders of the Rationalist Press Association. He wrote numerous books and booklets, many originally published in London by the Freethought-oriented press, Watts & Co., and later published in the United States by Haldeman-Julius either as Little Blue Books or Big Blue Books.


**Primary Sources**


Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

Philosopher Bertrand Russell, widely acknowledged as one of the great analytic minds of the twentieth century, a co-founder of analytic philosophy, was also a public atheist and advocate of many liberal social causes. He was the son of an atheist father who had asked the aging John Stuart Mill to act as the equivalent of a godfather for his son. He left a provision in his will that the children be raised as agnostics, which his wife went to court to break following his death. Young Bertrand’s move to atheism was spurred in part by his discovery of the writings of the poet Shelley during his teen years. He later attended and graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge.

He specialized in the study of mathematics and logic and early in his career collaborated with Alfred north Whitehead on the monumental Principia Mathematica. While teaching at Cambridge, Russell accepted Ludwig Wittenstein as his student and with him would begin what became analytic philosophy.

Russell lost his post at Cambridge for his pacifism during World War I, merely the first incident in an at-times tumultuous academic career. Russell eventually moved to the United States. He taught successively at the University of Chicago, the University of California--Los Angeles, and
the City College of New York. However, his career in New York was cut short when his views on sexuality were deemed unfit to share with his students. John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen edited a collection of articles on the CCNY affair in *The Bertrand Russell Case*. Russell finally made his way back to Cambridge and was able to reassume his former position at Trinity College. In 1950, his career was capped with the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Russell’s personal atheistic humanism found initial expression in his essays from the 1920s, most notably “What I Believe” and “Why I Am not a Christian.” The latter was originally delivered as a speech for the South London Branch of the National Secular Society. He would follow with a set of *Sceptical Essays* (1928) and a volume on *Religion and Science* (1935), and he included his original speech as the lead item in his 1957 anthology, *Why I Am Not A Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*.


**Primary Sources**


Includes text of debate with Frederick Copleston on the existence of God that was broadcast on the BBC in 1948.


-----. *What I Believe*. New York: Dutton, 1925


**Secondary Sources**


Antony Flew (1923-2010)

Antony Flew was a prominent philosopher and public atheist in the last half of the twentieth century. He completed his education after World War II at St John's College, Oxford. And subsequently taught at Christ’s College, Oxford, the University of Aberdeen, the University of Keele, University of Reading, and York University, Toronto. He wrote numerous books and articles, and frequently and publicly debated key issues with Christians and other believers.

After many years defending atheism, in 2005 he announced an acceptance of a Deist position, an action that raised new controversy. A few claimed that the changes was a hoax while others were led to call into question his lifetime of advocacy for Unbelief.

Primary Sources


Collaborative works


In 1998, William Craig and Antony Flew debated god’s existence occasioned by the 50th anniversary of a similar debate by Frederick Copleston and Bertrand Russell that had been broadcast over the BBC.
Unbelief in Australia and New Zealand

Unbelief in Australia and New Zealand can be traced to the immigration of freethinker Charles Southwell (1814-1860), who arrive in Australia in April 1855 and then settled in New Zealand the next year. Southwell had had a falling out with British secularist George Jacob Holyoake. His career focused more on politics than religious issues and was brief as he passed away in 1860.

He was followed by Daniel Wallwork, who founded the first Freethought organization in Australia in the early 1860s. The first periodical serving the cause was the Harbinger of Light, founded in 1870 (the same year that the government in New South Wales passed an anti-blasphemy law) primarily served Spiritualists, but was an additional indicator of the close relationship between Freethought and other forms of religious dissent. Spiritualist would also stand behind the Liberal Association of New South Wales, founded in 1881 to promote a spectrum of progressive causes. The doubts about Spiritualist phenomena would spur the formation of a number of local groups more clearly focused on Freethought and secularism.

In 1894 the community was joined by British secularist Joseph Symes (1841-1906). He would immediately assume a leading role in the Freethought community, but soon become one of its most controversial members. His colleagues complained of his autocratic ways and embarrassed by his pamphlet, Ancient and Modern Phallic or Sex-worship. During the 1890s, the cause would be decimated by the national financial crises that hit Australia, the deaths of a number of its first generation leaders, and the fragmentation of the movement.

In 1901, the various states of the subcontinent were unified into the Commonwealth of Australia. The new constitution guarantees religious freedom, including the right not to believe any religion. Soon afterwards, Joseph McCabe came from England to lecture under the auspices of the National Secular Society. While in the country, he led in the founding of the Rationalist Press Association, which in turn led to the Freethought community’s evolving into a more rationalist-oriented movement through the first decades of the twentieth century. Humanism would largely supersede rationalism after World War II. The first Humanist society was formed in 1960, and a national organization emerged five years later. However, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the current broad spectrum of organizations supporting an Unbelief perspective gradually appeared.
Also, through the twentieth century, a number of academics have made their atheist opinions known, including a set of leading philosophers such as John Leslie Mackie (1917-1981), John Anderson (1893-1962), ethicist Peter Singer (b.1946), and Graham Oppy (b. 1960).

Organized Unbelief in Australia and New Zealand is currently focused in the Australia New Zealand Secular Association (formerly the Australian National Secular Association), the Rationalist Society of Australia, the New Zealand Association Of Rationalists and Humanists, the Atheist Foundation of Australia and the Council of Australian Humanist Societies. The Global Atheist Convention, sponsored by the Atheist Foundation and held in 2010 in Melbourne, became the largest gathering of Australian in the country’s history.

Unitarianism was introduced into Australia in the 1850s and three churches were initially founded in Adelaide, Sydney, and Melbourne. The Auckland, New Zealand, congregation was organized in 1897. As the number of congregations grew, they united as the Australian Assembly of Unitarian and Liberal Christian Churches, which was superseded by the more inclusive Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association in 1974.


Sources


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Germany

Enlightenment Beginnings

Just as the first atheist in France came in the form of a closeted priest who had lost his faith, so too the first open advocate of a modern atheist perspective was a lone figure who emerged in Germany. That man was Matthias Knutzen, who seems to have emerged in Königsberg, in Prussia, in the 1670s. He termed his followers, of which there were but few, “conscienciaries,” as conscience was the only authority he recognized. He denied the existence of God and denounced the church. Though he claimed a large following across Europe, he was largely dismissed after he published a few works that circulated in Prussia. On refutation was written by a local professor, but Knutzen then passed from the scene and died in obscurity. His small effort has only been recovered by historians in the modern era as atheism itself has emerged and grown in importance.

Knutzen emerged just as the German phase of the Enlightenment, usually dated from the career philosopher Gottfried Wilhem von Leibnez (1646–1716) was beginning. It would proceed slowly, Germany still being a land divided into numerous small autonomous city states and princedoms. It would reach its zenith in the careers of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). It would make its transition to the nineteenth century, when atheism initially gained some measurable support, in the work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

Unbelief in nineteenth-century German would build on Hegel and move in a variety of directions among the young Hegelians and within the Jewish community, and find it greatest response in the writings of Karl Marx. Then at the beginning of the twentieth century a whole new thrust of Unbelief would find its basis throughout the German-speaking world in the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud.

Sources

This early eighteenth-century publication attacked Moses, Jesus and Mohammad as imposters.


Gottfried Wilhem von Leibnez (1646–1716)

Gottfried Leibnez is remembered for his work as a mathematician and his developments in calculus and binary numbering and as a philosopher for his suggesting that the Universe as we know it is the best possible one that a deity could have created, one that possesses a pre-existing harmony. By no means a religious skeptic, he helped prepare the way for atheism as an advocate of rationalism, that is, the privileging of reason as the primary way of acquiring knowledge.

Primary Sources


*Secondary Sources*


*Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)*

Philosopher Gotthold Lessing, the son of a clergyman, emerged as one of the leading voices of the German Enlightenment and a severe critic of key aspects of Christianity in his day. He is remembered for posing the problem that came to be known as Lessing’s Ditch. Relative to the use of miracles as a proof of God’s existence, he noted that the occurrence of miracles were in doubt and hence lacked any convincing power to prove God’s existence. Historical truths, which
are themselves in doubt, cannot substantiate metaphysical assertions. With supernatural events (including revelation) put on the back burner,

Lessing then argued for a Christianity based on reason without the assistance of revelation. Lessing’s position led him on the one hand to question biblical authority and on the other to call for tolerance toward the world’s religions (primarily Judaism and Islam). His call for religious toleration interacted with his friendship for Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. He most famously incorporated these ideas in a play he writes, *Nathan the Wise*.

**Primary Sources**


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**Secondary Sources**


Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant remains one of the most influential of modern philosophers and the leading voice of the German phase of the Enlightenment. Both Kant’s Career and the Enlightenment were punctuated by his key publications: The first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781); *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (1783); *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785); the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787); and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). He spent his career at the University Königsburg, in the city of his birth.

According to Kant, it was reading David Hume’s critique of rationalism (in which he pointed out that one could not infer a priori cause from any given effect), that awakened him from what he termed his “dogmatic slumber.” This led to his scrutiny of reason and his understand that epistemology had much to say about the possibilities and conclusion available to metaphysics. From this starting point, and his conclusions about what can be known a priori by reason alone, Kant began his monumental reconstruction of philosophy.

Relative to the place of God, Kant critical philosophy worked to undercut traditional arguments for the existence of god, those systems that equated god with the ultimate causal ground of the visible world. Kant argued that the concept of God properly functions as a limiting principle in discussions of the causal element in the order of things. In the end, Kant undercut what traditional metaphysics had presented as proofs for the existence of God but undercutting the foundation of such arguments.

The harshest aspect of Kant’s approach to philosophical problems of God’s existence was countered by his relatively good experience of his Pietist Protestant upbringing, which left him with a positive view of religion. He came to view religion as principally a human phenomenon within which important aspects of human life interact in ways that are significant for our role in the cosmos.

Kant shifted the debates over god to questions of morality. As Laura Denis notes, “Although Kant argues that morality is prior to and independent of religion, Kant nevertheless claims that religion of a certain sort (“moral theism”) follows from morality. “Thus, “Kant criticizes atheism as morally problematic in four ways: atheism robs the atheist of springs for moral action, leads the atheist to moral despair, corrupts the atheist’s moral character, and has a pernicious influence on the atheist’s community.”
Over five decades of thinking and writings, Kant left a large body of material, frequently returning to the questions of God and religion, occasionally seeming to contradict himself, certainly leaving conclusions suggestive of different lines of reasoning on questions of ultimate important about how we think about the world and how we should live. Both theologians and radical skeptics found material from which to work and claim Kant as their own. He remained a theist all his life, but was significant in pushing aside the arguments for God’s existence for those who built on his foundation. Those who would continue to use such arguments would have to operate out of others forms of philosophical inquiry.

**Primary Sources**

The writings of Immanuel Kant have been published in English in the Cambridge University Press edition of “The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation,” edited by Paul Guyer and Alan W. Wood. All of his more important writings are available in a variety of popular and inexpensive reprints.


**Secondary Works**


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Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)

Philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte served as a bridge between the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the new directions of nineteenth-century philosophy that would be taken by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his students. Due to his poverty, he dropped out of seminary at Jena, and would later begin his philosophy career with a small book, Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung (Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation, 1792), which discussed the role of divine revelation in Kant's philosophy. As occurs on occasion, the first edition of the book was published prematurely, without Fichte's name on the title page or the signed preface. Those who initially published reviews on the book mistakenly thought it a new book by Kant. Then came forward and denied his authorship, but praised the unknown author. Fichte’s reputation soared. He subsequently became the professor of Philosophy at Jena.

Several years after assuming his position at Jena, Fichte published an essay, “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World” (1798) in which, building on Kant, he argued that religious belief became legitimate as it found its foundation in moral considerations and further that God’s existence could not be considered apart from the cosmic moral order. A cutting edge position at the time, the essay led critics to condemn him as an atheist (which had a slightly different meaning in seventeenth-century polemics) and as a result of the controversy had to leave Jena.

Fichte moved to Berlin and became a independent scholar, living off his writings and giving lectures to the public. Some of his writings were aimed at trying to clear up the misunderstandings that he felt falsely led to his being branded an atheist. He also continued work on his own unique approach to philosophy.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

A German politician and scholar whose expertise reached across a number of disciplines, Johann von Goethe is known not only for his poetry and literature, but his contributions to science and the humanities. As a young man he cultivated an interest in the law, but at the same time pursued an avocation in poetry and literature. In 1774, he published the first book that gained wide public attention, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. As a result of the book, he was invited to the court of Carl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, where Goethe became the Duke’s confidant.

Goethe’s work as a scientist led to important books on plant morphology, meteorology, and on the theory of light. He considered his 1810 publication, *Theory of Colors*, among his most important publications. Most, however, see his scientific contributions as secondary to his literary one. His most famous work, *Faust* appeared in two parts separated by many years (1808, 1832).

Goethe’s childhood Lutheran faith was shaken by the his consideration of the problem of evil as a result of the suffering engendered by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the Seven Years’ War. As early as 1782, he described himself as no longer a Christian, and the God worshipped in churches as dead to him. He rejected the atheist label that some put on him, and his religiosity seems to have evolved toward pantheism while containing elements of various diverse religions he had learned of his studies. Toward the end of his life he lamented his failure to find a truly
satisfying religion, though he had discovered mention of an ancient pagan sect, the Hypsistarians, which he described as a group who treasured the best of whatever they might come into contact with. He dissented from those of his contemporaries who believed in reason’s ability by itself to create the happy society, as other forces on culture and history were too strong.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


Unbelief in Germany in The Nineteenth century

The German-speaking state of Europe entered the twentieth century with a strong conservative academic establishment that had been deeply affected by the work of Kant and Goethe, and just enough openness that a critical enterprise could emerge and challenge the orthodox tradition largely represented in the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church and by extension the reformed and Roman Catholic Churches. That challenge ranged from a relatively mild “liberal” Christianity represented by the likes of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), to the emergence of the historical criticism of the Bible. For the first time, a number of scholars began to look at the Bible with all of the tools of modern history and to treat the Bible as a collection of historical documents. They asked questions about the integrity of the text, the evolution of ideas, and the believability of the events it recorded.

For some, philosophical and theological rumination were crucial in pushing them toward a non-theistic position. For others, the criticism of the foundational documents of Judaism and Christianity simply destroyed their confidence and them their ability to maintain any faith.

The first critical break came from a group of students of the thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). In the decade following their teacher’s death, they emerged as both philosophical and political radicals and amid their differences found some cohesion as the young Hegelians. For their radical views, most would either be denied their academic career or never be allowed to start. Their books and articles would, nevertheless, find an audience, and the deist beliefs of the previous century would evolve into a full-blown atheism.

Following his break with the Young Hegelians and his move out of Germany, Karl Marx would rise above his contemporaries and develop his economic analysis of politics, society, and history, which would be embodied in the spectrum of Socialist and Communist political parties and take up a revolutionary call for the reform of society. While affecting history throughout Europe, Marxism as it was developed by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) and Mao Žedong, (aka Mao Tse-tung, 1893-1976) would find a much larger audience than that of any of the Young Hegelians. Marx would include in his over all perspective a critique of religious belief and practice that included both a non-theistic understanding of the world and a harsh condemnation of the religious community. The suppression of religion in those countries in which Marxists came to power would strongly affect the reception of Marx’s ideas in the western world.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, psychology struggled to develop as a new secular arena of knowledge that would pose an understanding of the nature of human being apart from
the religious assumptions that had long dominated Western culture. Crucial to the emergence of psychology was the creation of the field of psychoanalysis and the dominance of that endeavor by Sigmund Freud. Integral to Freud’s work, based in German-speaking Vienna, was critique of religion that included a casting off of the beliefs in God and the supernatural. Freud gave the emerging field a decidedly negative view of all religion, especially Freud’s own Judaism and the culturally dominant Christianity. That anti-religious bias still permeates the whole field of psychology though it was somewhat ameliorated in the late twentieth century as the churches began to integrate the insights of psychology into its delivery of pastoral care.

The intellectual developments in Germany in the nineteenth century were complex and provoked a variety of responses. For the purposes of this bibliography, however, the important trend was the emergence of first a liberal Christianity that made room for some partial revisions of the tradition that included a challenge to the doctrine of the Christian Trinity and a revision of the manner in which believers approached the Bible. Those changes then opened space for more severe criticisms of the faith resulting in the emergence of secular non-theistic perspectives; the number and forms of Unbelief increased decade by decade. In the twentieth century, a significant number, if not the majority, of unbelievers in Europe would build on the foundations laid by Marx and/or Freud.

Sources


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Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)
G. F. W. Hegel was the leading German philosopher of the early nineteenth century. Unlike his Enlightenment predecessors, he was himself a largely orthodox Christian and wrote in defense of basic Christian ideas, including the deity of Jesus Christ. His importance, however, cannot be underestimated for the history of Unbelief, as several of his leading students, who took his philosophical system in a completely different direction, included many of the most vocal atheist voices of the middle- and late-nineteenth century, none more notable than Karl Marx.

**Primary Sources**


Hegel’s early writings show his indebtedness to discussions of Deism.


**Secondary Sources**

This highly selective list of books on Hegel has been slanted toward discussion of religious issues.


The Young Hegelians

The term “Young Hegelians” refers to a group of German, mostly Prussian, intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century who attempted to build on the writings and insights of philosopher Georg F. W. Hegel, but who took his thought in the most critical direction. The shared a basic commitment to the idea that their work demanded opposition to irrationality and those ideas and structures that would restrict freedom. High on their agenda was religion against which they mounted a severe critique before turning their attention to the Prussian political system, a bastion of tradition hierarchy. Hegel had suggested that history had reached a certain culmination in the Germany of his day. The Young Hegelians challenged that aspect of Hegel’s thought in that they saw the church (and synagogue) permeated with what they saw as irrational notions and the state imposing numerous restrictions on the citizenry.

The first event that gave the young scholars a sense of identity was the publication of David Friedrich Strauss’ Life of Jesus in which a set of modern historical tools were turned on the narrative in the Christian New Testament as well as the many apocryphal gospels which were frequently used to fill in details in Jesus’ life. Strauss’ work is seen as setting off a goal that has continued as one major trend in biblical studies, the “quest for the historical Jesus” amid all of the mythical, theological and ecclesiastical material that has been placed on him. For some, the work led to the conclusion that Jesus never really existed, but was a complete mythical personage. In the first instance, however, the firestorm following Strauss’ publication both revealed to the public where biblical scholarship at the time was leading and caused a conservative backlash over the direction it was taking over the insistence of judging the biblical text by the standards of contemporary historical research.

The Prussian government of the 1830s turned a deaf ear to religious controversy. It was busy building a united Protestant church that required a certain suppression of theological debate.
However, it was the arrival of a new young ruler in 1840, which moved to suppress both religious deviation and freedom of speech throughout his kingdom. His move tended further to radicalize the community of scholars and pushed two of the leading figures—Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach—toward a full-blown atheism. In 1842, two of the Young Hegelians based in Berlin, Bauer and Karl Neuwerck lost their teaching license.

Associated with the Young Hegelians, but soon breaking with them over their alternate analysis of economics as more important to the power of traditional government, were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Marx continued to build on Hegel, but had a very different critique of religion relative to its role in supporting rather than suppressing the proletariat, but can justifiably be seen as a major outgrowth of the Young Hegelians intellectual endeavor.

The major people associated with the Young Hegelians, besides Strauss (1808-1874), Bauer (1809-1882), and Feuerbach (1804-1872), would include Arnold Ruge (1802-1880), who edited a journal *Hallische Jahrbucher* (1838–41) that assisted in providing the group with some self-identity, Karl Neuwerck, Max Stirner (1806-1856), Moses Hess (1812-1875), Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), August von Cieszkowski (1814-1894), Karl Schmidt ((1819-1864)), and Bruno’s brother Edgar Bauer (1820–1886).

This section of the bibliography has been largely developed from “The Autodidact Project” by Ralph Dumain, posted at [http://www.autodidactproject.org/](http://www.autodidactproject.org/). I am most appreciative of his work.

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Bruno Bauer (1809-1882)

Bruno Bauer was a theologian and biblical scholar who in the late 1830s began to adopt a set of then radical positions relative to the Christian faith. Most notably he concluded that Jesus as a mythical personage and that Christianity owed more to ancient Greek philosophy, specifically Stoicism than to Judaism. By 1840, he had become an atheist and began to voice these opinions in his lectures at the University of Bonn. In 1842 his teaching license was revoked. He retired to a town outside Berlin and worked in his father's tobacco shop. He continued to write, however, and paid to have his books published. His major work on biblical criticism appeared in 1850/52, *A Critique of the Gospels and a History of their Origin*.

Unfortunately, most of Bauer’s work has yet to be translated into English. Some hesitancy may be due to the implicit anti-Semitism of his basic thesis relative to the role of Judaism in the emergence of Christianity, which is also seen today as historically invalid.

*Primary Sources*


*Secondary Sources*
Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872)

The German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach had begun his education looking toward being a theologian. He was diverted to philosophy and attended the University of Berlin to study with Georg F. W. Hegel, the most eminent of the German philosophers of the day. After completing his education, he taught at Erlagen, but his career was cut short by the discovery of his having published an early anonymous text *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830) in which he made the case that the individual human consciousness would be reabsorbed into the larger infinite consciousness after death. The conclusion of his argument was that belief in God and immortality were unnecessary. He added a variety of anti-religious statements to the text that infuriated his more conservative readers. Having been fired, he was unable to find further academic work.

Fortunately, he had married a wealthy young woman, and was able to pursue his career as an independent scholar. He contacted Arnold Ruge, editor of the journal, *Hallische Jahrbücher für deutsche Wissenschaft und Kunst*, which became the organ of the Young Hegelians, who saw in religion a collection of anti-progressive superstitions, and in monarchical government and blockade to freedom. The Young Hegelians attacked both. In 1841, Feuerbach published one of his most important books, *The Essence of Christianity*, in which he develops the idea that God does not have an existence independent of humans, God is ultimately the outward projection of humanity’s inward nature.

Feuerbach is often seen as carrying to its logical conclusion the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who located the basic foundation of religion in the feeling of absolute dependence upon God. His internalizing of the reality of the individual’s consciousness of God provided the opening for redefining God and the creation of human experience.

**Primary Sources**


*Secondary Sources*


Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche remains one of the more controversial figures in German philosophy. His persistent and radical questioning of the value and objectivity of truth is but one characteristic that makes him difficult to classify. Trained in philology, he became a professor at Basel in Classical Philology in 1868 at the University of Basel. He was forced to resign due to health a decade later (1879) and toward the end of the 1880s was diagnosed with a mental illness. During his rather brief career, he left behind some classic works that continue to attract broad readership.

Nietzsche’s most productive period was just beginning when he had to leave Basel, the year that Human, All Too Human appeared. Over the next decade, at least one book appeared annually, though some were not well received by any audience at the time of their initial release. The 1880s would be highlighted by the appearance of the first part of The Gay Science (1882) and Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1882-83), which appeared in four parts each with a smaller printing than the former), Beyond Good and Evil (1886-1887), On the Genealogy of Morals (1887), Twilight of the Idols (1888) and The Antichrist (1888).

Among the most provocative of Nietzsche’s insights was his observation that "God is dead," which occurred most notably in The Gay Science. According to Nietzsche, the secularization of the modern world has left no place for God. The Christian God, who supplied the foundation and meaning for Western culture, had simply faded away. This statement gained additional significance in light of the past situation. Prior to the sixteenth century, it had been relatively impossible for Westerners to conceive of a universe without God. Most of his contemporaries dismissed Nietzsche, but his writing would influence some and steadily gain respect through the twentieth century, as sociology grew and ascribed added meaning to the growing phenomenon of secularization. Nietzsche’s idea would, of course, give its name to the “Death of God” movement in Christian theology in the 1960s.
Nietzsche remains one of the most interesting figures in philosophy. Arguments remain over whether he was himself an atheist or merely a sophisticated social observer, whether his works constitute philosophy or mere cultural commentary, and whether his ideas have value given the negative twists placed on them by a variety of twentieth-century social movements.

Bibliographically, see William H. Schaberg’s *The Nietzsche Canon: a Publication History and Bibliography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). An online bibliography posted by the Philosophy Department at Wright State University can be found at [http://www.wright.edu/cola/Dept/PHL/Class/Nietzsche/BIB.HTML](http://www.wright.edu/cola/Dept/PHL/Class/Nietzsche/BIB.HTML).

**Primary Sources**


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Karl Marx and Marxism

Karl Marx (21818-1883) grew up in a German Jewish home. As a college student in Berlin, he associated himself with the Young Hegelians. Unable to find a job at a university, he went into journalism. He moved to Paris in 1843 and began to combine the radical Hegelian philosophy with French socialism. He met Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and they developed a life-long friendship and literary collaboration. The pair became the major theoreticians of an emerging Communist movement. In 1847, they produced the Communist Manifesto, which served to project Marx’s followers as a significant element in the anti-monarchical revolutions that appeared in several European countries in 1848. Marx had returned to Germany to participate in the revolution there, but in 1849 was forced out of the country and would spend the rest of his life in exile in England. Engels partially supported him with money from his family’s business in Manchester.

In London, he completed the work for which he is largely remembers, the three volume study of the economic structure of society, Capital (1867). Meanwhile he worked on the building of the Communist International movement, founded in 1864. He died March 14, 1883, and was buried at London’s famous Highgate Cemetery. Shortly after Marx’s death, Engels published one of his more important book, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (1884) and then worked on editing the manuscripts of the second and third volumes of Capital and saw to their publication.

Though they saw the emergence of a large international following, neither Marx nor Engels lived to see their ideas put into actions. That would come with their twentieth century students, most notably Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), Mao Zedong, (aka Mao Tse-tung, 1893-1976), and

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Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969). The pair did however, set in motion a current of atheist thought that became and remains the largest form of Western atheism, relative to the number of adherents.

Though he had a much more sophisticated view of religion, Marx is well-known for his statement that religion is the opiate of the people, something that puts them to sleep relative to their best interests in opposing autocracy. As Marx and Engels generally opposed state-aligned churches that used their position to support autocracy, so they praised those movements that aligned with the proletariat as they understood it and seemed to contribute to the upward rise of people who challenged the state’s arbitrary rule. Marxist governments have tended to lose that more sophisticated approach to religion and oppose all religion as counter-evolutionary.


**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924)

Revolutionary architect Vladimir Ilyich Lenin grounded Karl Marx’s abstract ideas and turned them into a successful program for seizing control of a country and turning it into a working model of a proletarian republic. Of noble Russian background, much of Lenin’s revision of Marx concerned the role that intellectuals have in educating the working class and in taking the lead in creating the revolution, the vanguard of the working class. The working class will not of themselves rise up and take control of the state and the means of production.

Lenin’s revisions to Marx and the subsequent rise of the Soviet Union opened the gate for a spectrum of variations on Marxist themes, many prompted by the need to solve real problems in running a country.

Lenin’s institution of anti-religious policies and his suppression of the Russian Orthodox Church have opened a debate over the relationship of atheism, the Soviet Union’s policies on religion, and the many deaths of religious people during the time that Lenin and his successors, especially Joseph Stalin (r.1922-1953) were in office. While atheists have attempted to attribute the brutalities of especially the Stalin years to other than atheist ideological commitments, the debate continues, with no signs of reaching an immediate resolution.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Developing Marxism—the Soviet Union and China

The success of the Bolshevik and then the Chinese Revolution set the stage for the spread of Marxist thought globally. Marxism in turn became the vehicle for the rapid spread of both non-theistic and anti-religious views, the later often emerging in a program of forceful suppression of religious belief and activity. In the west, Marxist perspective were almost always atheistic and dismissive of religion, but rarely accompanied by a program of active suppression of religious groups.

The citations below sample the literature on post-revolutionary Marxism especially in relation to issues of atheism and religion. The rise of the Soviet Union led to the establishment of atheism as a state-backed perspective, the suppression of religion through the growing territory under Soviet hegemony, and then the global rise of atheism among the admirers of the soviet experiment. The most notable extension came in China following the coming to power of the Maoist forces. Equally important for modern atheist history has been the reversal of fortunes suffered by the atheist cause with the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent revival of the Russian Orthodox Church and the steady growth of religion (including Islam) in post-Soviet lands.

The Chinese Revolution led to a period of massive suppression of all outward expression of religion in China during what was termed the Cultural Revolution. At the end of the 1970s, however, china ended its harshest measures against religion (except in Tibet), and the last generation has seen a remarkable recovery by Buddhism (the largest religious community in China), Islam (in the northwest), and Christianity (in the more populated eastern provinces along the Pacific Ocean from Shanghai to Hong Kong). While atheism remains the policy of the state, significant steps to accommodating religion have been made as China recovered from the near bankruptcy during the last years that Mao was in power.

Sources


Marxism

Marxist thought attracted numerous thinkers through the twentieth century. Almost all were non-theists of one form or the other, and atheism was assumed in their writings. At the same time, politics and economics were far more important than religious issues and a relatively small percent of their writings directly dealt with the subject of the existence of god and/or argued for or against a role for religion in the world. This list concentrates on Marxist comments relevant to the basic issues surrounding their atheism.

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Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), a neurologist residing in Vienna, Austria, developed psychoanalysis as a means of treating patients through exploration of the unconscious using conversations between the psychologist and patient as the primary technique. Success came as the patient was able to balance the needs of the various elements of the psyche—the ego, id, and superego. In the process of developing psychoanalysis, Freud offered a map of the interior world of the individual that became widely though far from universally accepted.

Freud’s early exploration of the unconscious produced a purely mundane understanding of the forces shaping the individual and led to a severe critique of traditional understandings of the spiritual realm as presented in both Christianity and Freud’s own Jewish tradition. In its simplest form, religion was seen as an illusion and God as a projection of unresolved issues with a child’s father. He drew heavily on the nineteenth century explorations of “primitive” peoples still living in tribal cultures, which he then reinterpreted through the psychoanalytic lens.

While Freud seemed to be revising his opinions of religion in his later life, the earlier works, which became available in English in the years between the two world wars, became the dominant literature in the burgeoning field of psychotherapy and dominated the field through the twentieth century. It would suffer in the late twentieth century from a lack of evidential base and the general critique of Freud from other weaknesses in his work, not the least being the male orientation of his overall analysis. This later reappraisal of Freud does not lessen the understanding of his influence on the understanding of religion and his role in supporting the spread of atheistic views of reality. As Marx had attacked the outward trapping of religion and its social impact, so Freud undermined the individual’s claim to inner spirituality.

All of Freud’s writings on religion are included in what is now the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud published by Hogarth Press, but the major texts are also available in multiple reprint editions.

**Primary Sources**


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North America
American Freethought—Eighteenth-Century Deism

Deism was passed from Europe, especially England, to the American Colonies. In England, it has developed through the eighteenth century as an opinion expressed by members of the Church of England, the established church, to which all belonged who did not specifically declared themselves dissenters of various kinds—mostly Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, or Roman Catholic. It took no separate organizational form but was a popular topic for discussion in various kinds of gatherings including the lodges of the Freemasons, who shared both a rejection of many points of Orthodox Christianity and a similar understanding of a distant deity.

In the American colonies, it developed as an opinion among the emerging intelligencia and was especially popular at several of the institutions of higher learning, most notably Harvard and William and Mary. As in England, it did not take on a separate institutional life though there was on short-lived attempt to found a Deistical society by Elihu Palmer, a ministerial convert to the perspective. Most adherents remained a member of the Anglican Church (after the war known as the Protestant Episcopal Church, or the Congregational church. In the nineteenth century deism died out in Episcopal circles, but would evolve into the Unitarian movement that eventually split the Congregational Church.

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Wood, James E., Jr., and Derek Davis, eds. The Role of Government in Monitoring and Regulating Religion in Public Life. Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1993.

**John Adams (1735-1826) and Abigail Adams (1744-1818)**

One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams was born John Adams was born October 13, 1735, at Quincy (then known as Braintree), Massachusetts. After graduating from Harvard he became a lawyer. He later became a leading theorist of the leader of the American Revolution, and went on to become the first vice-president and second president of the United States. Abigail Adams, his wife, was born Abigail Smith in 1744 at Weymouth, Massachusetts. Both her father and grandfather were Congregational ministers. Along with her husband, Abigail joined First Parish, Braintree, where the minister, Lemuel Briant (1722-1754), was an early Unitarian. His denial of some major Calvinist doctrines (original sin, election, and salvation by arbitrary grace) led to a trial by a church council

Abigail died in 1818. John died July 4th, 1826, just a few hours after the passing of Thomas Jefferson. He was laid to rest in a crypt beneath the church he long attended.


**Primary Sources**


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**Ethan Allen (1738-1789)**

Ethan Allen was a hero of the American Revolution, best known for the efforts he and the Green Mountain Boys made in the taking of Fort Ticonderoga. Returning to farming after the war, he emerged in the public spotlight as the author of one of the new nation’s first skeptical religious treatises, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*. Drawing on themes from British Deism, he attacked the conservative New England clergy for denigrating the dignity of ordinary people. Though widely condemned by the ministers it attacked, it found a popular public audience. Allen died in 1789. His brother Ira wrote a history of the exploits of the Green Mountain boys.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

Benjamin Franklin, a leading figure of the American Revolution, was born on January 17, 1706, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the tenth of seventeen children. Destined for the ministry, he was unable to get the required education due to the financial limitations of his parents. Moving to Pennsylvania, he became a successful printer and publisher. He developed a number of social improvement efforts, made a number of inventions, and became politically active. Franklin was elected to the Second Continental Congress and served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. He later served as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and became a signer of the Constitution. He died on April 17, 1790.

Franklin was known for generally supporting religion in Philadelphia, and gave money for the building of various religious houses. His own opinions about religion, significantly liberal for his day are best presented in two works, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725), and early satirical work in which he lampooned contemporary religion, and *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion 1728*), the most complete statement of his personal spiritual beliefs, with obvious deistic leanings.


**Primary Sources**


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**Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)**

Born in 1743 in Albemarle County, Virginia, Thomas Jefferson went on to become the main author of the declaration of Independence and later the third president of the United States. He attended the College of William and Mary, and then went on to become a lawyer. He also ran a plantation, the site of his mansion, Monticello. An intellectual of prominence, he thought about religious issues and published from his then radical deistic and anticlerical perspective. That perspective led to a variety of actions from his producing an abridged edition of the Bible to his writing a bill establishing religious freedom, in Virginia, enacted in 1786. Jefferson also proposed the phrase “wall of separation” to describe the perspective to the Bill of Rights on the relation of religion and government. He died on July 4, 1826, the same day that John Adams also passed away.


**Primary Sources**


Secondary Sources


James Madison (1751-1836)

James Madison, the fourth president of the United States, was born on March 5, 1751, at Port Conway, Virginia. He later attended the Presbyterian-sponsored College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He helped write the Virginia Constitution of 1776, later served in the Continental Congress, and was active in the Constitutional Convention. He is best known as the co-author of the Federalist essays, still basic documents on the United States government. He died on June 28, 1836, the last of the founding fathers to pass away.

James Madison, an Episcopalian, attended St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington during his years as President, though theologically, he was a Deist. He often shifted his position on different issues relative to freedom of religion and separation of church and state as he encountered variant political realities. Often cited is the so-called “Detached Memorandum” in which he argued against hiring chaplains for the congress. This brief document is posted at http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions64.html.

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For a more complete bibliography on Madison, see “Bibliography—James Madison (1751 - 1836)” posted at the site of the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia: http://millercenter.org/scripps/onlinereference/bibliographies/madison.

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James Monroe (1758-1831)

James Monroe, the fifth president of the United States, was born on April 28, 1758 and grew up in Virginia. He attended the College of William and Mary, but dropped out to fight in the American revolution with the Continental Army. He later studied law with Thomas Jefferson. While president, in 1823, he articulated what has become known as the Monroe Doctrine, still a major building block of American foreign policy, which set American opposition European expansion and intervention throughout the Western Hemisphere. In 1831, he became the third of the early US presidents to die on July 4.

Little has been written by or about Monroe’s religious views. He appears to have been a Deist, and like many of his Deist colleagues was both a Freemason and a member of the Episcopal Church, though never confirmed and not particularly active. Monroe reportedly burned much of his family correspondence in which references to religion might have been made. Correspondence that survived included no comments about spiritual matters. His public statements and speeches are remarkably silent about religious matters, and lack citations of the Bible and any references to Jesus Christ. References to God are limited to a few stock phrases common to Deists. David L. Holmes suggests that “...James Monroe may have been the most skeptical of the early presidents of the United States.”

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


**Thomas Paine (1737-1809)**

Thomas Paine, possibly the most important and oft-quoted of the eighteenth-century American Deists, was born January 29, 1737 in Thetford, Norfolk, England. His religious dissent began with his Quaker father. Paine met Benjamin Franklin in London, and afterwards migrated to the American colonies (1774). He emerged as an advocate American independence, and won the hearts of many colonists to the cause with his pamphlet “Common Sense,” which appeared in 1776. As the war began, he wrote a series of pamphlets under the collective title “The American Crisis” that inspired many especially during the years that the struggle appeared all but lost.

After the war, in 1791, Paine published *Rights of Man,* in support of the French Revolution, which the British government saw as seditious. Paine already in Paris, nevertheless was jailed for opposing the execution of King Louis XVI. While in prison, he wrote the “Age of Reason,” in which he attacked orthodox religion and stated his own Deistic views. He wrote a second volume when he got out of jail.
Returning to the United States, he found some support from then President Thomas Jefferson, but died in relative obscurity, denounced by many as an atheist and infidel, common labels applied to deists by orthodox Christian believers. He died in New York City on June 8, 1809.

Because of the controversy surrounding his religious views, Paine’s role in the Revolution was often downplayed, though he was never fully forgotten and has always had his advocates. Numerous edition of his writings have appeared during the last generation. Possibly the most succinct statement of Paine’s religious views is found in his essay “Of the Religion of Deism Compared with the Christian Religion,” a copy of which is posted at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/paine-deism.html.

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Elihu Palmer (1764-1806)

Elihu Palmer, an early advocate of Deism through the revolutionary Era, was born in Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1764. He attended Dartmouth College after which he became a minister at the first Presbyterian church of Newtown (New York). He left after he came to reject both the particular Calvinist beliefs and more generally the essentials of Christian orthodoxy. He became first a Universalists and then a Deist. He initially settled in Philadelphia as a lawyer but caught yellow fever which left him blind. He later settled in New York City, where in 1796 he founded the Deistical Society of New York, the first such religious organization in the United States.

He spoke often and published much, though principally remembered for his *The Principles of Nature, or A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species*. He died in 1806.

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George Washington (1732-1799)

Among the founding fathers, George Washington, the leader of the Continental Army and then the first president of the United States, remains among the hardest to pinpoint religiously. He was a life-long Episcopalian, Never confirmed, he attended church with his more devout wife, Martha, but unlike her did not partake of the sacraments. He was also a Freemason. There is little in his papers to suggest that he was anything other than a Deist Episcopalian and little to suggest that he paid much attention to what might be considered the essential and peculiar beliefs of orthodox Christianity.

Washington made occasional mention of God in his correspondence and his public papers, but did so in an abstract and distant manner, speaking, for example of the “Supreme Author of all Good,” or the “Father of Mercies.” He does not speak of Jesus or make personal references to the deity. His utterances appear to have been made to reflect a general high regard of all the various religious divisions of his own day and the needs to unite people of differing persuasions of the needs of loyalty to the young nation.

One popular bit of Washington lore concerns his being overseen while in private prayer for the troops at Valley Forge. This incident has been called into question by scholars and remains a most disputed point. Largely refuted is the rumor that Washington was baptized by Baptist minister John Gano has also been thoroughly refuted.

From the vast literature on Washington, items have been selected for this bibliography that highlight reflections on Washington’s religious views and his relations with a spectrum of religious bodies.

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The Novaks attack the notions that Washington was a deist, that his religion was a marginal Christianity that lacked any depth of conviction; and that he merely affirmed an impersonal divine force that he spoke of as “Providence.”


Includes two works: (1) “George Washington and Religion” by John C, Fitzpatrick and (2) “Washington’s Own Words on Religion” compiled by Albert Bushnell Hall.


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**Unitarianism and Universalism**

Both Unitarianism, a monotheistic Christian perspective that affirms the existence of one deity and by implication denies the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (three persons in a single Godhead) and the deity of Jesus Christ, and Universalism, a perspective that affirms that ultimately all will be saved and denies the doctrine of an eternal punishment of those who die in a state of sin, emerged in eighteenth century North America to challenge the more dominant orthodox and traditional Anglican and Calvinist theological on view. Both perspective led to the formation of competing churches with found their greatest support in New England. These two movements emerged side-by-side but existed as two distinct organizations until their merger in the 1960s.

Unitarianism had a strong affinity with Deism, both affirming a single deity in place of the Christian Trinity, while at the same time coming out of different contexts and producing different results. Deism developed in the context of the Church of England and offered a much more skeptical outlook. There was greater emphasis on what it denied than what it affirmed and adherents only rarely attempted to give their beliefs any organizational expression. Unitarianism, which slowly emerged and then thrived in the context of New England Congregationalism, was an attempt to build what was seen as a more believable Christian theology, that still assigned
some authority to the Christian Bible and ascribed a central role to the figure of Jesus. It also led to the formation of church congregations.

Unitarian belief arrived in America from England, one of the primary exponents being Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), who settled in Pennsylvania in 1794 and soon afterwards founded the first Unitarian church in the New World in Philadelphia. Unitarian belief subsequently spread northward among the Congregationalists and in 1807 asserted its presence at Harvard with the appointment of three liberal professors to the faculty. The movement found a champion in the person of William Ellery Channing (1780-1842).

New Englanders debated Unitarianism in each of their congregations through the first decades of the nineteenth century. There being but one congregation per parish, when a majority accepted the Unitarian perspective the parish church became Unitarian. In such cases, the orthodox Congregationalist minority then faced the reality of having lost their church and being forced to start over. King’s Chapel, the single Anglican Church in Boston, somewhat disconnected from the larger Episcopal Church, also voted to become Unitarian. An organization of Unitarian congregations, the American Unitarian Association was established in 1825, the same day that the British Unitarians formed the British and Foreign Unitarian Association.

The Universalist Church in America is generally traced to John Murray (1741-1815), who became a Universalist in England and subsequently arrived in the colonies in 1770. The movement grew in stages over the next twenty years but a significant point was reached with the meeting of the first general Universalist Convention convened at Oxford, Massachusetts, in September of 1785. The Universalist General Convention (later the Universalist Church of America) was formed in 1866. It merged with the American Unitarian Association to form the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961. By this time both the Universalists and Unitarians had moved further away from the Christian contexts that had given them birth and the debates that had energized them in the nineteenth century and moved more into alignment with the larger community of unbelief.

Sources


Benjamin Rush (1745-1813)

Benjamin Rush, the most prominent physician in the American colonies as the Revolutionary Era began and a notable Universalist, was born December 24, 1745, near Philadelphia. After studying medicine in Europe, he set up practice in Philadelphia. He later was a delegate to the Continental Congress and an enthusiastic signer of the Declaration of Independence. Though early a member of a Presbyterian church, he withdrew from formal religious connections after espousing universal salvation and redirected his energies to a variety of social reform movements, most notably the abolition of slavery. He was a good friend with Joseph Priestly, after the latter’s move to America in the 1790s, and John Adams. He died on April 19, 1813.

Rush wrote voluminously, and had received attention from various perspectives due to his broad interests and activities. For a more complete survey of the literature, see Claire G. Fox, Gordon Miller, and Jacquelyn Miller Benjamin Rush, M.D: A Bibliographic Guide (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

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or, A defence of the West-India planters from the aspersions thrown out against them by the author of the Address.” By a Pennsylvanian. Philadelphia: J. Dunlap, 1773.

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William Ellery Channing

William Ellery Channing, who emerged as the champion of Unitarianism in the 1820s was born in Newport, Rhode Island on April 7, 1780. He studied for the Congregationalist ministry and in 1803 became the minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston. In 1815 he was among those attacked by fellow Congregationalist minister Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) in The Panoplist, a Christian periodical, as an example of the liberal Boston Unitarian clergy. Channing responded on several occasions, most notably in 1819 on the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks when he delivered the sermon “Unitarian Christianity.” He remained the minister at Federal Street until his death on Oct. 2, 1842,

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


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**John Murray (1741-1815) and Judith Sargent Murray 1751 -1820**

John Murray, from whose career Universalism in America is generally dated, was born in Alton, Hampshire, England, on December 10, 1741. He became a lay preacher in the Countess of Huntington’s Connexion, the Calvinist Methodist movement associated with George Whitefield. When it was discovered that he had become a Universalist, the church disfellowshipped him and his wife, and, broke and in debt, he left for America in 1770. He eventually settled in New Hampshire and founded a congregation (1774). After the Revolution, he would participate in the first Universalist convention held at Oxford, Massachusetts, in 1785 and eventually become the pastor of a Universalist congregation in Boston (1793).

Judith Sargent Murray, John’s wife, deserves mention in her own right. A writer/thinker, she wrote on subjects as varied as metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and politics. She was an early North American feminist who published an essay on women’s equality in 1790. She was also responsible for much that her husband got into print, and after his death she compiled and edited his papers.

Murray wrote some of the early Universalist hymns, some of which were initially published in a reprint of British Universalist James Relly’s *Christian Hymns, Poems and Sacred Songs, sacred to the praise of God, our Saviour* (Portsmouth, NH: 1782) in which Murray added five of his own songs.

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Hosea Ballou (1771-1852)

Hosea Ballou, for a half century a prominent Universalist theologian, was born on April 30, 1771, in Richmond, New Hampshire. His conversion to Unitarianism from a traditional Calvinist perspective occurred in stages, and along the way he was strongly influenced by his reading Ethan Allen’s *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1784). Ballow showed his creative thinking early with his Universalist discussion of salvation in *A Treatise on Atonement* (1805). Ballou began his ministerial career at Portsmouth, New Hampshire (1815), but spent most of his life as the pastor of Second Universalist Church in Boston (beginning in 1817).

He delivered thousands of sermons and authored a number of hymns and essays. He was the founder/editor of *The Universalist Magazine* (1819), superseded by *The Universalist Expositor* (1830), later renamed *The Universalist Quarterly and General Review*. Less known is his open correspondence with former Universalist minister turned Freethinker Abner Kneeland eventually published as a book, *A Series of Letters in Defense of Divine Revelation*. Ballou died in Boston on June 7, 1852.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**
Theodore Parker (1810-1860)

Theodore Parker, a Unitarian preacher and religious and social reformer, is credited with pushing Unitarianism away from its specifically Christian roots and engendering an activist stance toward broader social participation. In the face of the loss of much of his large family to tuberculosis while still a young man, he rejected Orthodox Christianity and emerged as a convinced Unitarian. Too poor to attend college, he educated himself, even in the biblical languages, to the point that he was accepted at Harvard Divinity School even without a degree. Beginning his career as a traditional Unitarian, his study of the new findings of German biblical criticism convinced him that miracle stories were myths and the Bible not a revelation of Divine truth.

In the 1830s, Parker adhered to the new Transcendentalist movement, his leadership role confirmed in his controversial 1841 sermon, “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity.” As a result of the sermon, many of his Unitarian colleagues concluded that he was no longer a fellow Christian, even of the Unitarian kind. Unitarians debated his expulsion throughout the 1840s, and despite his rejection by Unitarian clergy, he had the largest congregation. In 1845, Parker’s followers formed a free church which offered him a stable place from which to regularly voice his perspective to a growing audience. By the end of the decade, he was a national figure representing the most liberal wing of the religious community. At the same time he developed a perspective on society that would become a basis of social activism aimed at its improvement. He became a staunch member of Boston’s abolitionist community.

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Free Religious Association

In the 1860s, as Unitarianism was taking on the characteristics of a separate denomination, the issue arose as to it specifically Christian nature or its openness to religiously liberal people of all religious persuasions. When the new Unitarian organization took shape in the mid 1860s, the majority voted to adhere to their Christian roots. This decision prompted the most liberal among them in 1867 to form a separate body, the Free Religious Association. Leading members of the new group included Octavius Brooks Frothingham (the first president), Francis Ellingwood Abbott, Cyrus A. Bartol, William James Potter, John Weiss, David Wasson, John White Chadwick, Louisa May Alcott, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The group was compatible with the idea of outgrowing Christianity in favor of a more universal theism that allowed individuals to think about God in a variety of ways.

The Free Religion movement as originally constituted did not survive the 1870s, but it continued to reemerge, especially among the Unitarians outside New England, and operated as a force to continually urge Unitarianism toward the left religiously. It would lead to the formation of the National Liberal league and the American Secular Union (which in 1885 chose Robert G. Ingersoll as its president). Many of the FRA founders would go on to distinguished careers both inside and outside of the Unitarian fold.

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Francis Ellingwood Abbott (1836-1903) and the American Liberal Union

Unitarian minister Francis Ellingwood Abbott rejected the affirmation of the 1865 founding meeting of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches that affirmed its members to be “disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Newly ordained, he failed to convince his colleagues to adopt a more inclusive stance, and thus in 1867 (while still serving a Unitarian pulpit) joined with his more liberal colleagues in the formation of the Free Religious Association. He ran into problems in 1868, when a New Hampshire Court ruled that the radical supporters he pastured at Dover were non-Christians, and hence forbidden to use the local church building as a meeting place. He resigned and moved to Toledo, Ohio, as the minister of the local Unitarian Society.

Abbott also edited and published the Index, the magazine of the FRA. In 1873, he moved the magazine to Boston, and began to call for the formation of numerous local Liberal Leagues to oppose what he saw as the Christian bondage into which the nation had succumbed. Those local groups came together in 1876 to form the National Liberal League. Robert Ingersoll became the organization’s vice-president. Two years later, both Abbott and Ingersoll resigned from the League over its support of D. M. Bennett who had been arrested for circulating obscene material in the form of a book on birth control. This case brought the league into opposition with the infamous Anthony Comstock. In 1880 Abbot turned the editorship of The Index to William James Potter (1829-1893) and pursued a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard University. He graduated in 1881, and became an instructor at a boy’s school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While there, he wrote his most heralded text, Scientific Theism (1885), in which he laid out the principles of what he saw as a religion of scientific realism.

Meanwhile, in 1883 the National Liberal League changed its name to the National Secular Union under which name it would exist for the next decade. Freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899), who described himself as an agnostic, would serve as one of its presidents. In 1892, freethinker Samuel P. Putnam (1839-1896) formed the Freethought Federation of America which in 1894 merged with the National Secular Union to form the American Secular Union, which continued as a Freethought organization into the 1920s. Among Abbot’s last book was The Way
Out of Agnosticism, or The Philosophy of Free Religion (1893), which continued to offer his scientific religion in place of the more secular perspective that the Union was pursuing.

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Nineteenth-Century American Freethought

Sources


Abner Kneeland (1774-1844)

Abner Kneeland, a Universalist minister, and later outspoken Freethinker became the last man to be convicted of blasphemy in the state of Massachusetts. Beginning his adult life as a Baptist preacher, he converted to Universalism after reading the works of British Universalist Elhanan Winchester. He later met and became good friends with Hosea Ballou. Ordained as a Universalist, he was sent to his itinerant work in New Hampshire with and ordination sermon by John Murray.

By 1818, when Kneeland settled into a pastorate in Philadelphia, he was already doubting his religion. In the city, he eventually became acquainted with commutarian and skeptic Robert Owen, whose skeptical views he slowly adopted. Moving on to New York (1825-17), he began to share his views with is parish, and by the end of 19267 he and his supporters left to form a new congregation. the city’s Second Universalist Society. He further offended his Universalist colleagues by opening his pulpit to Frances Wright, the radical feminist, social activist, and religious thinker. In 1829, Kneeland renounced his remaining Christianity and resigned from the Universalist Church.

In 1831 Kneeland moved to Boston as the “lecturer” of what was called the First Society of Free Enquirers. Toe the large crowds that gathered to hear him, he articulated beliefs that could best be termed pantheist—identifying God with the nature in which humans move and have their being. In 1833, he penned a public letter in which he stated that the god of the Universalists was but “a chimera of their own imagination.” This statement led to a trial in which he was accused of being an atheist. He defended himself by arguing that he did not believe in the Universalists god and that he was a pantheist, not an atheist.

The courts would have none of his fine distinctions, and also was opposed to the broad social changes he advocated. Convicted, he spent sixty days in jail in 1838. His incarceration led to a number of prominent citizens demanding his pardon, most notably William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, William Lloyd Garrison, and Bronson Alcott. This celebrated case became the last instance of a person being jailed for blasphemy in the United States.

After being freed, Kneeland moved to Iowa, and founded an intentional community called Salubria.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899)

Robert Green Ingersoll was a lawyer, politician, popular orator, and advocate of Freethought. He was popularly called the Great Agnostic, and labeled his skeptical opinions agnosticism. A Civil War veteran, he served as Illinois’ Attorney General (1867-69) and was an active Republican. He delivered the nominating address for James G. Blaine, for President. Already a popular lecturer,
his religious opinion, especially his attacks on orthodox religion, cut his support to the point of
his being passed over for national office. He moved to Washington, D.C. in 1878 and then settled
in New York City (1885).

His lectures were widely popular. They were repeated from platforms around the country and
widely published both singularly and in anthologies. Most popular on religion were his lectures
“Some Mistakes of Moses” and “The Gods and Ghosts.” He was a family man, but supported
women’s rights.

In 1876, Ingersoll identified with the National Liberal League, founded by Ellingwood Abbott,
and became its vice-president. The socially conservative Ingersoll resigned when the League
chose to support Freethinker D. M. Bennett, who had been arrested for violating the laws
preventing the circulation of obscene material. In 1885, the Liberal League changed its name to
the American Secular Union, and Ingersoll rejoined and became the union’s president.

Ingersoll became a hero to the continuing Freethought movement and then for twentieth-century
atheists and humanists. His birthday (August 11) is kept as a holiday for many, and his birthplace
in Dresden, New York, is now a museum. There is a statue of him in Peoria, Illinois, where he
lived for many years.

The many popular reprints of Ingersoll’s lectures created a bibliographical nightmare which
Gordon Stein made sense of in his monumental study Robert G. Ingersoll: A Checklist. (Kent,
OH: Kent State University Press, 1969). See also Herman Kittridge’s Ingersoll: A Biographical
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pp.

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DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett, who spent his young adulthood among the Shakers, a celibate Christian communal group in nineteenth-century America, left in 1946 and married another former member Mary Wicks. He subsequently worked as a druggist, having gained some knowledge of herbs while a Shaker. His wide reading finally led to his conversion to Freethought, the writing of Thomas Paine being the most convincing.

In 1873 while living in Peoria, Illinois (where the popular agnostic lecturer Robert Ingersoll also resided), Bennett found the local newspapers refusing to print some of his letters that voiced his now radical religious views. In response, Bennett founded his own periodical, *The Truth Seeker*. Before the year was out, he moved to the more welcoming environment of New York City. It became, by the time of Bennett’s death a substantial journal with a national audience. For a time, it was the official periodical for the National Liberal League.

In 1878, Bennett attended the initial gathering of the New York Freethinkers Association, and a short time later was arrested for circulating obscene material in the form of a book called *Cupid’s Yokes* by Ezra Heywood, a birth control advocate. The book had been sold openly at the convention. Following a trial in 1879, he was fined $300, and sentenced to thirteen months in prison.

*The Truth Seeker* has continued under various managements, and was later associated with the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, through the twentieth century to the present. Bennett died in 1882. A number of Bennett’s hard to find books may be found in the library of the University of Wisconsin and Madison.

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**Secondary Sources**


**Freethought Women Leaders and Writers**

Feminist historians in the last generation have recovered much of the neglected history of women’s participation in various social reform programs and the cause of women’s rights. As might be expected, many women came to see the church as an instrument in their subjugation. Some rejected Christian orthodoxy and moved into liberal churches, most notably the Universalists and Unitarians, while other rejected religion altogether and became freethinkers.

The refusal of conservative male leaders to allow women full participation in the abolitionist movement would lead to a gathering of women at Seneca falls, New York, the radical Wesleyan church there offering their building for the meeting, and launched the women’s rights movement that after the civil war began the push for suffrage and worked on a host of issues of vital importance to women. The women’s movement included a spectrum of organizations from the very conservation Women’s Christian Temperance Union, to the more secular-based National Woman Suffrage Association.

Relative to the history of Unbelief, women’s history is still in its beginning states, as much more effort has gone into exploring the role of women in religion, while secular studies have concentrated on their contributions to other fields, from sports to politics. Annie Laurie Gaylor’s book provides a good starting point.

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Twentieth Century
Individual Freethinkers/Atheists

Joseph Lewis (1889-1968)

Freethinker Joseph Lewis was a self-educated atheist who developed his perspective from his reading of Robert Ingersoll and Thomas Paine. He moved from Alabama to New York City in 1920 where he founded Freethinkers of America and its associated publishing arm the Freethought Press Association. He began issuing a periodical, *Freethinkers of America*, in 1937 (later renamed *Freethinker* and then in the 1950s *Age of Reason*). In the 1930s, he also founded the Eugenics Publishing Company to publish materials on various medical issues. Over the years Lewis, published, and reprinted a variety of books on Atheism.


Sources


Clarence Darrow

Attorney Clarence Darrow, most famous for his defending taking a number of high-profile people charged with criminal offenses, also emerged as an agnostic of note. Born in Kinsman, Ohio, on 18th April, 1857, his father was an unbeliever who had lost his faith while training for the Unitarian ministry. Young Clarence attended Allegheny College and the University of Michigan Law School, and began his career in Ohio in 1878. He moved to Chicago in 1887.

Darrow’s first major case was a defense of Eugene Debs, president of the American Railway Union, and Darrow became identified with the cause of American labor. Along the way he, in 1906-7, he successfully defended William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, who headed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He also became a socialist and was a co-founder of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. In his most famous criminal case, he defended two wealthy students (Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb) who had kidnapped and murdered a young boy. His defense saved them from the death penalty.

Over time, with the continued defense of a literal interpretation of Genesis by conservative Christians, Darrow’s 1925 defense of John T. Scopes, charged with teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school, had emerged as his most famous case, the subject of a Broadway play that was turned into a movie on four occasions. He lost the case, though the conviction was later overturned on a technicality. Darrow died on 13 March, 1938

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Marcet Haldeman (d. 1941) and Emanuel Julius (1889-1951)
Shortly after their marriage, in 1919, Marcet Haldeman and Emanuel Julius purchased a publishing concern in Girard, Kansas, and for the next decades published hundreds of small inexpensive booklets through which they spread their related and for-the-time very radical set of ideas on religion, politics, and history. They published under the last name Haldeman-Julius.

Julius was born in Philadelphia in 1889, the son of Russian Jewish parents. The anti-Semitism he experienced as a youth led him to reject all religion. Though he dropped out of school in his teens, he read Socialist literature, which he could acquire for little or no cost, and found himself much attracted to its views. In 1915, he moved to Girard to write for Appeal to Reason, a socialist periodical. A short time later he met Marcet Haldeman, a feminist and sister of social reformer Jane Addams. They combined their last names to symbolize their belief in gender equality.

In 1919, they purchased the Appeal to Reason and its printing plant. Among their first publications was a novel they had written called simply Dust (1921). They subsequently became famous for the many small paperback booklets they published, most reprints of older literature which were sold at an ever-decreasing price. Through the 1940s, some 6,000 titles were issued. The booklets were aimed at informing the general public about things the publisher believed that people in power wished to keep them ignorant. Topics forbidden included topics included religion, personal freedoms, and birth control.

In 1933, the Haldeman-Julius’ legally separated. Marcet died in 1941. Emanuel died in 1951, from an accidental drowning.

At the time of his death, his firm had published more than 500 million books, and represented the first wave of what in the 1950s became the paperback revolution. Originally intended as throw-away volumes, in recent years the few surviving copies have become collectors’ items, and putting the bibliographical record of the company together a librarian’s nightmare. See the “Laughingly Incomplete Checklist of Little Blue Books Cover Titles.” Posted at [http://little-blue-books.com/articles/LBBChecklist.html](http://little-blue-books.com/articles/LBBChecklist.html).

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**Mangasar Magurditch Mangasarian (1859-1943)**

M. M. Mangasarian was a Turkish-born American Freethinker. He had already been ordained as a Presbyterian minister when he arrived in the united States at the beginning of the 1880s to attend Princeton University. In 1885, he resigned the pastorate he was serving to become an independent preacher. He eventually drifted to the Ethical Culture movement, but left it in 1900 when he organized the Independent Religious Society of Chicago, an autonomous rationalist
group, which he led until his retirement in 1925. He is remembered for the many booklets he wrote and published.

**Sources**


**Charles Lee Smith and the AAAA**

The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (AAAA) was an atheist organization founded in 1925 by Charles Lee Smith (1887-1964), a lawyer converted to atheism from his reading Freethought books. He subsequently became a writer for *The Truth Seeker*, an independent Freethought journal published in New York City. Smith promoted the AAAA and his perspective by engaging a variety of controversial actions, including multiples debates with Christian on various topics. Eventually the AAAA attained a membership of around 2,000, many university students.

In 1930 Smith purchased *The Truth Seeker*, which continued as an independent journal. It and the AAAA suffered in the 1930s from the depression and then increasingly from Smith’s anti-Semitism and racism. Just before his death in 1964, Smith sold *The Truth Seeker* to James Hervey Johnson, who moved it and the AAAA to San Diego. The AAAA continued by remained small, around 200 members in the 1970s. Being an atheist was a requirement for membership. It ceased to exist following Johnson’s death in 1988. *The Truth Seeker* continues to be published to the present.

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**H. L. Mencken (1880-1856)**

Journalist H. L. Mencken developed a large national following for his irreverence, wit, and command of the English language. In the half-century since his death, he maintains a large following, and in the twenty-first century, a new generation of Unbelievers has discovered his writings on religion. Mencken described himself as an agnostic, but his opinions differ little from
contemporary atheism. His coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial appears as relevant in the midst of the current public debates on evolution as when they were originally written, and we still use his term, the “Bible Belt,” to describe the South.


The highly selective list below centers on biographical materials and Mencken’s writings that touch on religion.

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Unbelief in the Jewish Community

Secular Jews, who dissented in both belief and practice from traditional Judaism, appeared in measurable numbers the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, various organizational forms, asserting allegiance to Jewish culture and traditions, but developing a certain distance from religion and the behavioral patterns it produced, appeared in a variety of movements from the agricultural communal movement to Zionism. The Reform movement emerged as an alternative between a purely secular approach to Judaism and the traditional Jewish religious life that reasserted itself as modern Orthodoxy in its several cultural variations (German, Eastern European, Hasidic).

In North America, a new non-theistic perspective on life and society was articulated by Felix Adler, a perspective that Jews could see as a secular form of Judaism. Beginning within New York’s Jewish community, over time the Ethical Culture movement lost much of its specifically Jewish flavor and attracted a number of members and leaders from the general population. Then through the twentieth century, even as the economic condition of the community was rapidly improving, a significant minority of Jews identified with various forms of Marxism. They also looked to other and movements led by intellectual leaders who like Marx combined a Jewish background with an attack upon traditional Jewish theism—Sigmund Freud among the most prominent.

Given the Jewish emphasis on education, it is not surprising that, beginning with Adler, a disproportionate number of the twentieth century leaders of the emerging atheist and Humanist communities were Jews. (In like measure, in the late twentieth century, a disproportionate number of American Jews assumed leadership roles in the new wave of Eastern religions.) Many Jews found their way to Ethical Culture, but just as many emerged elsewhere. Their leadership proved a necessary antidote to the anti-Semitism that came to dominate the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism.

At the end of the twentieth century, a new Humanist push within the Jewish community was founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine who led what he termed a Humanistic Jewish synagogue in suburban Detroit. Out of his work a new Association for Humanistic Judaism emerged along with an International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews based in Israel. The association is committed to maintaining Jewish culture while searching out the implications of unbelief in the deity traditionally credited with revealing the law as His will. Other secular Jewish organizations, wishing to affirm both a non-theistic approach to life and values they found in Jewish ethnicity, nationality, and culture, include the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations.
and the Center for Cultural Judaism in New York City (http://culturaljudaism.org/). The Center publishes two journals: *Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought*, an annual imprint journal and a web journal, *Secular Culture & Ideas*. Jewish Unbelievers, like the larger community of Unbelief, disagrees over its assessment of the value of religion, with or without God.

**Sources**


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**Felix Adler (1851-1933) and Ethical Culture**

Felix Adler, a young immigrant from Germany, initiated the New York Society for Ethical Culture and the whole Ethical Culture movement with a sermon he delivered on May 15, 1876. In this and subsequent lectures/sermons he developed a philosophy of moral existence drawing heavily from Immanuel Kant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a spectrum of additional contemporary thinkers. He attracted large attendance at his lectures which increasingly included those beyond the Jewish base he had originally established. Soon additional leaders emerged and new centers appeared in other American cities and even Europe. These ethical societies would later be associated through the American Ethical Union. The Union would become aligned with Ethical culture societies outside the United States and eventually make common cause with Humanists in the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Adler emphasized action over affirmation and developed a number of welfare projects in New York City. He was named to a chair in political and social ethics at Columbia University in 1902, a position he retain until his death in 1933. As the Humanist movement developed within Unitarian circles in the decades after World War II, individual leaders and members moved freely between the two movements leading to a significant amount of cross-fertilization.

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Eustace Haydon (1880-1975)

Canadian Eustace Haydon, a prominent historian of religion at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School began his adult life as a Baptist minister. He subsequently earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and in 1919 was named the chair of the Chair of the Department of
Comparative Religion (still an emerging field at the time). He taught at the Divinity School for almost four decades.

Though still formally a Baptist, Haydon moved toward the new Humanist movement within the Unitarian church and commuted on the weekends to serve a Unitarian society in Madison, Wisconsin, as its minister (1918-1923). The subsequently became involved with the ethical Culture movement in Chicago and would serve as its leader for a decade following his retirement in 1945. By this time he had publicly identified himself with the larger Humanist movement and was among the original signers of the first Humanist Manifesto (1933).

In 1956, the American Humanist Association’s named him the Humanist of the Year.

Sources


Herbert Wallace Schneider (1892-1984)

Dr. Herbert Wallace Schneider, a Humanist affiliated with the Ethical Culture Movement in New York, was for many years a professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. Born in Ohio, he attended Columbia where he studied under John Dewey. After receiving his Ph.D., he became Dewey’s teaching assistant. He then served on the Columbia faculty for almost four decades (1918 to 1957). He later taught at Colorado College (1958-59) and the Claremont Colleges in California (1959-1963). He passed away in 1984

Schneider continued the Humanism of his predecessor, and, as Dewey had signed the original Humanist Manifesto, he signed the second.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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Joseph Leon Blau (1909-1986)
Joseph Blau was an American philosopher and Jewish historian. Born in Brooklyn, New York, he attended Columbia University, where both John Dewey and Herbert Schneider taught, and from which he received his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. (1944). He subsequently taught at Columbia for 34 years (1944-1977). He became chair of the Department of Religion in 1968-1977.

Blau was one of the signers of “A Secular Humanist Declaration” in 1980, and for many years a Member of the Fraternity of Leaders of the American Ethical Union.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


**Howard B. Radest**

Howard B. Radest, a prominent contemporary Ethical Culture leader, is Dean Emeritus of the Humanist Institute and a member of the National Council of Ethical Culture Leaders. He attended Columbia College (B.A.), and received his M.A. at The New School for Social Research and his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Columbia University. Over the years he has served as
Leader of the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, NY (1956-1963); Executive Director of The American Ethical Union (1963-1969); Director of The Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City (1979-1991), and as Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at The University of South Carolina-Beaufort (1992-2008). He has served on a variety committees and board for various Humanist organizations and the Ethical culture movement and is widely known for his expertise in medical ethics.

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**Horace Meyer Kallen (1882-1974)**

Horace M. Kallen was the son of a rabbi. Born in Germany, he migrated to the United States with his family as a five-year old boy. He later attended Harvard, from which he graduated in 1908. While in Cambridge, he became acquainted with William James, edited his last book, and developed a life-long interest in psychical research. He later developed a friendship with
Immanuel Velikovsky. In 1919, He became one of the founders of the New School for Social Research in New York City and would remain there until 1965.

Kallen was an unabashed pluralist. Philosophically, he focused the variety manifest among humans and throughout nature and society. He celebrated the processes of change, and the hope that a new future could bring. Culturally, Kallen argued that each ethnic and cultural group in America contributed to its richness as a national entity. At the same time he was Zionist, who worked for an independent Jewish nation.

While retaining a strong role within the Jewish community, Kallen developed a Humanist perspective and frequently addressed a spectrum of Humanist organizations. He was invited by John Dewey to sign the Humanist Manifesto, but turned down the opportunity out of a general opposition to creedal-like statements. He later joined with Dewey in writing a defense of Bertrand Russell when he was denied a teaching position due to his views on sexuality and marriage.

**Primary Sources**


Jewish Humanist Movement

The Jewish Humanist movement emerged in the 1960s among a group of rabbis who desired to combine the religious life, their affirmation of their Jewishness and a Humanist perspective. Leading the way was Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine (1928–2007) who in 1963 founded the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit. He was soon joined by Rabbi Daniel Friedman who had led Congregation Beth Or in Deerfield, Illinois, to adopt humanistic thought and practice. Together, they led in the formation of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Association for Humanistic Rabbis in 1969. Secular Humanistic Judaism grew into an international movement, and the global umbrella organization, the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, was established in 1986 in Detroit, Michigan.

Humanistic Jews value their Jewish identity but offers a non-theistic approach to the celebration of Jewishness. While appreciating the Jewish past, they attempt to present it in ways consistent with the best insights of modern scholarship. They value rationality, personal autonomy, feminism, the celebration of human strength and power, and the development of a pluralistic
world with mutual understanding and cooperation among all religions and philosophies of life. Ethics and morality are deemed to rest upon a human foundation. Each individual must be responsible for ethical decisions and their consequences.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) 29 affiliated congregations and groups (2008) in the United States and Canada, and additional affiliates in Israel, Australia, Belgium, France, Italy, Mexico, Russia, and Uruguay. It cooperates with the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations in sponsoring the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, with centers in Jerusalem and Michigan, which functions as the rabbinic seminary for Humanistic Judaism. The Sherman T. Wine Papers have been deposited with University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library.

Sources


Atheism in North America—Post World War II

Madalyn Murray O’Hair (1919-1995) and American Atheists

The most flamboyant, and in many ways tragic, figures of modern atheism was Madalyn Murray O’Hair (1919–1995). A controversialist who attracted media, she brought atheism to the attention of a mass audience, while at the same time embarrassing and angering many already committed to the cause who rejected her often acerbic style.
In 1963, O’Hair founded what became American Atheists, Inc., originally based in Honolulu but soon moved to Austin, Texas. The organization became the largest of the several Atheist organization formed during the century, with many supporting her lawsuits to stop mandatory prayer and bible reading in America’s public schools and to end tax-exempt status for religious property. American Atheists became the umbrella for a set of related organizations—the International Free Thought Association of America, the Society of Separationists, and the Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives. O’Hair was both staunchly non-theistic and actively antireligious. She specifically rejected Christian beliefs in the authority of the bible, the historicity of Jesus, a life after death, and the authority of the Bible.

Murray met a violent end. In 1995, she and her two children, Jon Garth Murray and Robin Murray O’Hair, were kidnapped and murdered in a robbery scheme. Their bodies were not discovered until 2001. In the wake of Murray’s disappearance, the organization relocated to New Jersey and has continued. Ellen Johnson became the new president of American Atheists, a post she held until disagreements with the board led to her resignation in 2008. She was succeeded by the current president Frank Zindler.

The several thousand members of American Atheists are found in local chapters scattered across the United States. The organization may be contacted at PO Box 5733, Parsippany, NJ 07054-6733, or through its webpage at http://atheists.org.

**Primary Sources**


The autobiographical account of one of O’Hair’s sons who converted to Christianity.


**Secondary Sources**


African American Unbelief

In the wake of a generation of attention to African American religion, attention has finally been directed to Unbelief in the African American community. While some scholars have been asking why people of color did not turn away from religion because of its support of racism, Humanist and atheist scholars have responding by pointing to the many that did abandon any reference to faith, and a growing body of literature has appeared documenting that turn.

Sources


-----.


W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963)

African American activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, a professor of economics and history, was born at Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on February 23, 1868. He attended Fisk University but later earned his several degrees from Harvard, completing his Ph.D. in 1895. Du Bois was a cofounder (1905) of the Niagara Movement, which evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In response to the passing of the Jim Crow laws, Du Bois demanded full and immediate civil and political equality for African Americans. He coined the concept of the “talented tenth,” those elite African Americans who should accept the responsibility of assisting their less fortunate brothers and sisters.

In 1910, after thirteen years at Atlanta University, Du Bois became editor of Crisis, the periodical of the NAACP, and where he would remain for the next quarter of a century. He returned to Atlanta University in 1934. Over the years he became alienated from the direction taken by many of his colleagues who called for racial integration and gradually emerged as a separationist. His position was manifest in his later life with his retirement from the university (1944), his joining the American Communist party (1961) and in the end, his renouncing his American citizenship. He spent the last year of his life in Ghana, where he died in 1963.


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**Secondary Sources**


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**Hubert H. Harrison (1883-1927)**

Hubert H. Harrison, African American activist and agnostic, is little known outside the African American community, but one of the important voices of the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century. He was born in on St. Croix, in what was then the Danish West Indies and moved to New York in 1900, and emerged as part of intellectual circle of independent Black thinkers and developed a radical political position informed by his racial consciousness. He opposed American capitalism which he saw as dependent on white supremacy. As a socialist, he participated in the Marcus Garvey movement, one of the early movements with an international scope.
Harrison worked as a black organizer and theoretician in the Socialist Party of New York, founded the Liberty League) and edited the militant periodical *The Voice*, which he founded, and later the *Negro World*. Less known are his activities as a pioneer in the Freethought and birth control movements. He died at the relative young age of 44.

A collection of his papers are now housed at Columbia University.

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


**Humanism—North America**

By Humanism, we are referring to that new non-theistic movement that emerged primarily within among Unitarians in the early twentieth century, though sharing roots with the nineteenth century Freethought. It had an early center in the University of Chicago where a variety of scholars were creating the field of comparative religions (or History of religions) and theologians at the Divinity school were exploring non-theistic perspectives. As originally developed, Humanism was pro-religious and found a home among the Unitarians, Universalists and various liberal (and congregationally organized) Christian churches (including the Disciples of Christ).

The movement found an early focus in the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 (available online at [http://www.americanhumanist.org/who_we_are/about_humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I](http://www.americanhumanist.org/who_we_are/about_humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I)), which argued for a naturalistic approach to life in an uncreated universe. It specifically branded
as outdated theism, deism, modernism (then a popular perspective in many of America’s largest churches), and the several varieties of “new thought” (a popular perspective in a spectrum of metaphysical churches). It proposed a Religious Humanism that looked to the “complete realization of human personality” as a sufficient goal of the spiritual life. More than half of the signers were Unitarians.

Further manifestos representing the continued evolving of the movement in rapidly changing times would be issued in 1973 (available online at http://www.americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II), 1980 (available online at http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=main&page=manifesto), 2002 (available online at http://www.iheu.org/amsterdamdeclaration), 2003 (available online at http://www.americanhumanist.org/who_we_are/about_humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III), and 2010 (available online at http://paulkurtz.net/).

The new movement would find its primary organization representation in the American Humanist Association, which would come to have a number of fraternally related groups around the world. The internationalization of the movement, and its recognized alignment with the Ethical culture movement, led to the formation of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in 1952. In 2002, at its fiftieth anniversary gathering, the IHEU issued the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 as a statement of the fundamental principles of modern Humanism.

Humanists have argued about the role of religion in human life, some deriding it, some appreciating its contributions, and some attempting to articulate a way to be religious without God. Though at times conversations have been acrimonious, as a whole, the movement has been able to hold together and a full spectrum of perspectives are present in the IHEU. This issue became focused in the late 1970s when Paul Kurtz, a prominent Humanist intellectual withdrew from the American Humanist Association and formed the Council for Secular Humanism. The Council attempted to articulate a specifically non-religious form of Humanism. Kurtz had been important in creating the network that signed the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II and creating the new anti-pseudoscience movement. The Council would go on to become a national organization that would take its place beside the American ethical union and the American Humanist Association a major Humanist community. It associated Prometheus Press would grow into North America’s major publisher of Humanist, atheist, and skeptical literature. Meanwhile, those Humanists who remained within the Unitarian and Universalist churches formed the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, which evolved into The Friends of Religious Humanism, and most recently the Humanists.

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The Humanist Manifestos

The early years of the Humanist movement was marked by the publication of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933. Thirty-four of the leading spokespersons of the movement endorsed the statement. Forty years later, during with the issues at the center of the movements had shifted and the movement itself grown and developed significantly, a new manifesto with an even larger set of endorsements was widely circulated. During the next forty years, the movement continued to grow, its primary organizational expressions developed an international cooperative organization, and it further split along ideological lines.
In the years after the second manifesto, philosopher Paul Kurtz raised the issue of religion and left the American humanist Association to found the Council for Secular Humanism, the latter organization rejecting the idea that humanism was another religious option. In 1980, he issued a third manifesto, a declaration of Humanism as a secular ideology. In 2000 Kurtz released a book, *Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for New Planetary Humanism*, a full length exposition of the basic points of the previous manifesto.

In 2002, the International Humanist and Ethical Union issued the Amsterdam Declaration, the event coinciding with its fiftieth anniversary. The brief statement now serves as a handy definitional summary of the Humanist consensus. The following year, the American Humanist Association, on what would be the seventieth anniversary of the original Manifesto, issued its updated version of Manifestos I and II.

Most recently (2010), Paul Kurtz developed a set of disagreements with his board over what is termed the New Atheism. The differences led to his resignation from a set of organizations he had established over the last thirty years, founded a new organization, the Institute for Science and Human Values, and issued a new “Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values: Personal, Progressive, and Planetary.”

Together, these manifestos offer a quick overview of the movement, the notables who supported it, and the issues that have given it its focus.

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**John Dewey (1859-1952)**

John Dewey, a major figure in American religious history made significant contributions in psychology and education, but is best remembered for his pragmatic philosophy. He was also a dedicated Humanist, active in the gathering of endorsement for the first Humanist manifesto in 1933, who trained a number of students that went on to assume leadership roles in the American Humanist community.

He attended the University of Vermont and later earned his Ph.D. at John Hopkins University. He taught at the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago before beginning a quarter of a century as a professor of philosophy at Columbia University (1904-1930). His most active years as a Humanist came in the decades following his retirement. He sat on the advisory board of First Humanist Society of New York, one of the first such institutions in the United States, headed by Charles Francis Potter. In 1936, he was elected an honorary member of the Humanist Press Association (1936).
He also worked for academic freedom. In 1940 he joined fellow Humanist Horace M. Kallen to produce a series of articles concerning the denial of a teaching position to philosopher Bertrand Russell.


**Primary Sources**


Secondary Sources


Sidney Hook

The son of Austrian-Jewish immigrants, Hook later attended the City College of New York and Columbia University (Ph.D., 1927), where he studied philosophy with John Dewey. He then joined the faculty at New York University, where he remained until his retirement in 1972. He was a Marxist in his early years but was critical of Stalin especially after the denunciation of Leon Trotsky. In 1939, he formed the Committee for Cultural Freedom, to oppose "totalitarianism" on both ends of the political spectrum. After the war, he cooperated with the CIA in efforts to dissuade Americans intellectuals from supporting the Soviet Union.

Hook moved further to the right in the decades after World War II. He opposed the New Leftists who supported a broad range of social change. His more controversial position found him in support of the Vietnam War and support of the Vietnam War and defending then California Governor Ronald Reagan in his effort to remove African American Marxist feminist Angela Davis as a professor at UCLA. Davis was a member of the Communist Party. He finished his career as a fellow of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University.

For a more complete bibliography on Hook, Barbara Levine’s *Sidney Hook: A Checklist of Writings* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1989).

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**Corliss Lamont (1902-1995)**

Corliss Lamont, a socialist and Humanist philosopher, was born into a wealthy family in New Jersey. He attended Harvard University and received his Ph.D. from Columbia where he studied philosophy with John Dewey. His dedication to various minority causes led him to the American Civil Liberties Union, which he directed for more than twenty years (1932–1954). He also chaired the *National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee*, which successfully challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy’s senate subcommittee. At one point Lamont was cited for contempt of Congress, but the appeals court overturned the indictment.

In later life, after he inherited his parent’s wealth, he used the money to make large gifts to several schools. He endowed a chair in civil liberties at Harvard. His gifts to Harvard allowed the construction of the Corliss Lamont Rare Book Reading Room at Columbia University. The Room houses among its collections the Corliss Lamont Papers.

**Sources**


Paul Kurtz (b. 1925)

Paul Kurtz, a Professor Emeritus in the department of Philosophy of the State University of New York at Buffalo, emerged step-by-step as the leading apologist for Secular Humanism through the last three decades of the 20th century. After receiving his Ph.D. from Colombia University, he taught at several schools before landing at Buffalo. He drifted from the Marxism of his early years toward Humanism and affiliated with the American Humanist Association. In 1969 he founded Prometheus Books, a press that published a number of books on Humanism and related topics.

In the 1970s Kurtz helped author Humanist Manifesto II (1973). He also created a network of scientists and others to attack the growing presence of astrology that led the next year to the founding of the Scientific Committee to Investigate the Claims of the Paranormal (now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry). This work gave the longstanding effort to counter pseudoscience in the public arena a new foundation.

Then toward the end of the 1970s, Kurtz developed a spectrum of issues with the American Humanist Association, among them a desire to establish Humanism not as a non-theistic religion, but as a totally secular cause. He assumed the designation “Secular humanism,” used as a
popular derogatory term by conservative Christians, and hailed it as the perspective of the future. He founded the Council on Secular Humanism, from which a number of related organizations were subsequently created. All the while, Kurtz was writing books and Prometheus Press was steadily building its list of publications.

As the head of a “secular humanist” movement, Kurtz attempted to build a movement that was not religious, but open to working with liberal religious people to reach common goals. In the new century, he ran into the Neo-Atheist movement which took an oppositional stance to all religion, about which it had nothing positive to say. The division within the Council and its several auxiliary organizations over the Neo-Atheist perspective led to Kurtz’s being stripped of his power and eventually to his resigning and beginning a new organization, the Institute for Science and Human Values.

Through his long career, Kurtz has been a most productive scholar and defender of the Humanist cause. A more complete list of his writings can be found in Ranjit Sandhu and Matthew J. Cravatta’s Media-graphy: *A Bibliography of the Works of Paul Kurtz, Fifty-one Years, 1952-2003.* (Amherst, NY: Center for Inquiry, International, 2004).

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**The Chicago School**

In the early twentieth century, the University of Chicago became the meeting place of a number of scholars who were among the most liberal and radical in the country, some, like James Luther Adams being Unitarians and some like Edward Scribner Ames being members of more mainstream churches. Their radical explorations of religion led them to Humanism and related non-theistic perspectives.
Sources


Canada
While strongly interacting with Humanism and atheism in the United States, the Freethought tradition has a separate and independent, if under-studied, tradition in Canada. In addition, Unitarianism was established in Canada in the early nineteenth century. Today, the community is focused in two national organizations—the Humanist Association of Canada and the Freethought Association of Canada—and a number of local groups.

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Science and Pseudoscience

1800-1960

The emerging sciences of geology, evolutionary biology, and sociology combined in the middle of the nineteenth-century to challenge the worldview of Protestantism in the English-speaking West. Geological observations of volcanic processes and fossils suggested that the earth was far older than the six thousand years offered by a literal reading of the biblical records. Evolutionary theories provided an alternate explanation of the many species and genera, and tied humankind to the animal world in a way that suggested humans were not the special unique creation of god. Sociology offered mundane explanation of human social ills and offered human ways of reorganizing society to correct such ills.

Adding to the impact of the new sciences were intellectual corollaries in biblical textual criticism, Social Darwinism, and socialist utopianism. One school of German biblical criticism offered a compelling picture of the editorial process by which a set of texts were put together to make the present five books of Moses, whose traditional authorship of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy was also challenged. Social Darwinism applied the laws of natural selection to the human society underpinning laissez-faire capitalism and the extremes of a free market. Socialism pushed in the opposite direction for a state-controlled economy with the promise of the benefits of a non-competitive utopia. Neither Social Darwinists nor socialists had any use for a distracting church ideology and the clergy who led it.

Traditional religionists and the new realms of intellectual speculation set the stage for what Henry Dickson White would term the warfare between science and religion. It would take several generations for the leadership in the Christian Church to produce a modern form of religion that engaged the new sciences but by the early twentieth century a spectrum from separatist fundamentalism to Unitarianism would emerge, with the largest blocks being formed
by the neo-evangelicals and the post-modernists liberals, the later distinguished by their acceptance of biblical historical criticism, taking an accommodationist stance toward biological evolution, and the development of a social gospel.

Through the twentieth century, non-theists have considered science their natural ally while Christian polemicists have moved from denouncing science to using it in their apologetic treatises. In the scientific phase of atheist vs. Christian polemics, evolution has paid a key role. After the significant defeat many religionists felt following the monkey trial in Tennessee in the 1920s, a variety of new approaches to science developed among the more conservative fundamentalist and evangelical movements, usually referred to as creation science, Christians differing among themselves regarding new earth (less than ten thousand years) versus old earth approaches. The former received the most attention as several of its advocates such as the Bible Creation Society in San Diego produced a plethora of materials and attempted to affect public school curricula. Responding to creation science has been a major focus of atheist works on science.

Sources


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**Darwin, Evolution, and Creationism**

The struggle of the discipline of biology (and the related field of paleontology) to establish itself in the public school curriculum came to a head in 1925 in Dayton Tennessee following the passing of a law by the state legislature against teaching biological evolution. John Scopes, a high school teacher, allowed himself to become the focus of a test case of the Tennessee law which had originally been championed by Texas fundamentalist Baptist minister William Bell Riley who presided over the Worlds Christian Fundamentals Association was instrumental in recruiting former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan to take the case for the prosecution while agnostic lawyer Clarence Darrow spoke for the defense. Though Bryan won the case, the court of public opinion favored Darrow.
Many felt that the creationist cause has been defeated once and for all, but it slowly rebuilt its support and in its various forms now claims a substantial portion of the religious community, both Christian and otherwise. In the last generation it found a new expression in what was termed intelligent design, which argued for God as the intelligence that was the best explanation for the design found throughout nature. In the 1990s, it briefly replaced creation science as the best alternative for having some form of anti-evolutionary ideology replace evolution as the model for the study of biological sciences in the American public schools. It was largely dismissed by the 2005 court case *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* which found intelligent design to be a religious ideology not a scientific theory.

**Sources**


1960-Present

While the issues between religious and scientific cosmologies persisted, a new concern arose over the appearance of bad science with its subversion of scientific methodology in a world where the love of science apart from any understanding of the rules by which it operates (scientism) has popping up in a multitude of settings. In the post-Enlightenment nineteenth century, a variety of attempts were made to substantiate a number of religious and metaphysical ideas by claiming scientific credentials for them. Among the first were the claims of Franz Anton Mesmer and his students of a universal cosmic power that undergirded and enlivened the cosmos. Reference to Mesmer’s fluid became the basis of a variety of alternative healing claims as well as the revival of magic. Spiritualists claimed to demonstrate scientifically the picture of survival into the afterlife they advocated. In the twentieth century scientific claims would be made for yoga, transcendental meditation, and telepathic contact with alien life.

In the late nineteenth century, the discipline of psychical research attempted to find a scientific basis of the claims of Spiritualism which as a movement offered to demonstrate scientifically the individual survival of bodily death. Many of those who flocked to the field were clergymen who had lost their faith or the children of clergymen who wished to attain the faith of their parents. Psychical research was victimized to the widespread fraud that permeated Spiritualism and would be replaced by parapsychology which attempted to bring psychic phenomena into the laboratory.

As science became the domain of highly trained scientists, hope dwindled for the amateur to make a real contribution, while the few successes by amateurs motivated a wide variety of people to go looking for neglected areas of research especially some that would have a significant payoff to the person who succeeded when all around him/her said that they were on a fool’s pathway. From the hope of finding a new species of monstrous proportions, fields like cryptozoology emerged. Ancient astronauts proposed alternative ways of interpreting archeological remains. A variety of healing treatments of questionable values continue to offer hope to those with terminal illnesses.

In the 1970s, a new movement formed to focus concern on the whole realm of flawed science from scientific endeavors marred by weak methodologies and fraudulent endeavors in the scientific community, to religion passing itself off as science, Skeptics made shining the light of rationality upon what was termed “pseudoscience” their goal.

Humanist Paul Kurtz spearheaded the new movement and launched it by calling together the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (or CSICOP), now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. CSICOP called the public to back an initial broadside against
the growing popularity of astrology, a statement against any claims to scientific truth by astrologers signed by a number of prominent scientists. While the attack upon astrology proved more difficult than originally imagined, over the years CSICOP broadened its concerns to include a variety of phenomena of questionable scientific status, and spawned a number of similar organizations with variant related emphases such as the Skeptical Society and the James Randi Educational Foundation.

The pseudoscience issue has spawned a host of books and articles (see the Internet sites for the Committee for Skeptical Inquirer or the Skeptics Society for numerous articles on the many topics covered by the term pseudoscience). The list below is representative of the philosophical stance of the skeptical movement and the issues that have swirled around it. No attempt has been made to even sample the many topics covered nor to list the particular publications that have most come under attack.

The skeptical movement, while based in the atheist/humanist community, has attracted a variety of religious people who for whatever reason are committed to attacking pseudoscience, including many conservative Christians who see the attacks upon psychic phenomena tied to the Esoteric (or New Age) religious community and who see skeptics as an ally in their Christian apologetic endeavor.

The skeptical movement has had mixed results and experienced some setbacks with the emergence of cable television and the popularity of documentaries and others shows on ghosts, UFOs, ancient astronauts, and cryptology.

Sources


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Spiritualism attracted a variety of people, including a set of would-be mediums that made it their business to convince people of Spiritualism’s teachings by presenting stage magic as real psychic phenomena. The tricks ranged over a wide field from various ways to fake clairvoyance and telepathy to elaborate materialization séances. Beginning with Harry Houdini, magicians have taken offense at people who practice stage magic but pass it off as something supernatural.

A few such as Milbourne Christopher and James Randi have actively opposed such magic tricks on ethical grounds and have joined in efforts to expose them. Randi became convinced that fraud lay behind much parapsychology and regularly called for trained magicians to be part of any teams doing psychical research. Though regularly overstating the extent of fraud, he found enough fraud in unexpected places, including the world of popular healing evangelists, to provide substance to his attacks upon the paranormal in general. Most recently, the popular team of Penn and Teller has taken up the attack upon paranormal fraud.
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**Contemporary Unbelief**

**Current Advocates**

As the twenty-first century begins, non-theistic perspectives on the world and engagement with the larger culture in the western world as become a pervasive element in the struggles of individuals to create a viable worldview and the debates in society over the spectrum of issues which will determine the shape of the community for the next generation. Atheist literature now runs the gamut from outspoken atheists’ forceful presentations of the rationale for a non-theistic,
non-religious life, to people who happen to be atheists writing their opinions on various issues without mentioning their views relative to a deity, religious beliefs and practices. One could with relative ease construct a book-length bibliography of materials written by atheists just since the beginning of 2000 and just in English. Below are some of the more important and relatively available items that convey the present state of discourse on the atheism vs. theism issue.

**Sources**


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The Death of God Movement

The Death of God Movement burst on the Christian community suddenly in the spring of 1966 when *Time Magazine* featured a cover story on the small group of theological radicals who largely in reaction to (1) the problem of evil posed by the Jewish Holocaust and/or (2) the secular world in which they lived suggested to their religious colleagues that a non-theistic form of faith was necessary. The movement prompted both a reactionary response by theologians offended by the audacity of the pronouncement of God’s death, a phrase borrowed from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and drawing inspiration from the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and a more tempered response by theologians who rejected the conclusion but were sympathetic to the issued the Death of God theologians raised. The phrase also drew directly from some of the more radical pronouncements of two mid-twentieth century theologians, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had separated the concepts of religion and Christianity and hinted at a religion-less form of faith. The movement lasted only a few years but placed the issue of contemporary secularization clearly on the theological agenda.

Among the voices of the movement, the single Jewish voice, Richard Rubenstein continued to exercise an influential voice in the decades since the Death of God movement expired. He continued to reflect on the meaning of the Holocaust and secularization, defended Israel’s right to take possession of a homeland, and developed a long-term relationship with the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church.

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**Neo-Atheism**

Neo-Atheism, a term coined by journalist Gary Wolf in 2006, burst on the scene in the middle of the first decade of the new century as a new aggressive form of atheist thought, characterized most notably by the willingness of their proponents to attack religion as a harmful delusion and their anger that conservative advocates of what they saw as anti-scientific opinions were gaining power. Adding to their motivation were public surveys showing the persistence of anti-evolutionary perspective among conservative Christians, opinions shared by many conservative Muslims.

While particularly targeting Conservative Evangelical Christians, Neo-atheists also included all religious believers in their attacks, and in so doing found themselves at odds with proponents of non-theistic religions (especially proponents of religious humanism and Ethical Culture). Their critique also called into question the idea of making common cause with people holding liberal religious perspectives on issues such as separation of church and state, public funding of private religious schools, and the teaching of biological science in the public schools.
Neo-Atheism has been built upon the successful books of its major exponents, beginning with British biologist Richard Dawkins. In the United States, author Christopher Hitchens, has been joined by Sam Harris (with a Ph.D. in neuroscience), philosopher Daniel Dennett, and physicist Victor J. Stenger in leading the charge for a more public role for atheists. They have become frequent guests on television talk shows and made themselves available to the press. While energizing the core of atheist unbelievers, it is yet to be seen whether their efforts will substantively enlarge the support for non-theism in the larger population. The movement has, however, provoked a massive reaction among Christian scholars and polemics, most notably Anglican theologians and converts from atheism, Aleister McGrath, and a veritable flood of anti-Neo-Atheism books have begun to flow from the Christian press, both Protestant and Catholic.

Humanist and atheist critics of Neo-Atheism have argued that the content of Neo-Atheism is not new, only restated in a new aggressive manner. They are also seen as destroying coalitions which atheists need to accomplish many of their goals, since, especially in the United States, they remain a minority in an overwhelming religious environment. The internal debates within the atheist community have already led to battles for control of various atheist organizations, most notably the Council for Secular Humanism and its associated Centers for Inquiry scattered across North America.

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Global Perspectives

Contemporary atheism traces its beginnings to Europe and the sixteenth century critique of Christianity. Beginning in the nineteenth century, it has spread globally, primarily through Marxism, but took different forms as it encountered different host cultures. With the rise of an outspoken secularism in post-World War II Europe (somewhat countered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cultural Revolution in China), the state of atheism in both its Marxist and non-Marxist forms has become a continuing topic of interest. The essays in *Atheism and Secularity*, Phil Zuckerman’s two volume anthology, summarize most of what is currently known about the global atheist community.

While this bibliography concentrates on atheism in North America and Western Europe (especially the United Kingdom, Germany, and France) that topic naturally leads into the more global perspectives. The Atheist Alliance International, an international coalition of Atheist organizations was founded in 1991 by mostly North American Atheist organizations, but though still dominated by American groups, now includes representative groups from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia. In like measure, the International Humanist and Ethical Union has grown to include representative groups from more than 40 nations.

Sources


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Unbelief—Sociological and Demographic Studies

Sociology began as a discipline that was decidedly secular and like psychology spawned several generations of scholars who not only believed that religion was declining and on its last legs, but looked forward to a society without religion. As religion continued to grow through the twentieth century, especially in North America, a new sub-discipline of the field, the sociology of religion, emerged and through the last half of the twentieth century created a mass of material on religion, offered a critique of secularization theories, and has attempted to explain the counter intuitive success of religion globally.

Sociologists of religion neglected the study of atheism, a topic that did not immediately yield to their analysis, but since the 1990s, that lacunae in the study of the place of religion in the modern world is beginning to be filled. An ever growing body of social science literature has developed on Non-belief, much attempting to measure the present size of the non-believing community, with additional studies attempting to understand the nature of people who choose to be atheists, partially an attempt to correct opinions about the irreligious spread by religious polemicists.

The material cited below has been selected from the growing abundance of social science observations of the atheist community and that element of the population which expresses no support for religion and/or belief in a deity, primarily in North America and Western Europe. Emerging with a leading role in producing and nurturing such studies is the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. ISSSC, established in 2005 by Barry Kosmin, attempts to understand the role of secular values and the parallel process of secularization in society and culture. Also, most recently (2011), Sociologist Phil Zuckerman has established a unique interdisciplinary degree program in secularism at Pitzer College in Claremont, California.
Sources


