Source Material

- Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of “As If”*, 1924
- Carl R. Rogers *The Person of Tomorrow*, 1969, in *Sightings: Essays in Humanistic Psychology*
- S.T. Joshi (Ed.) *Atheism: A Reader*, 2000
- Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, 2005
- Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 2007
“Over the past few years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people who are atheist, agnostic or without religious affiliation. A fifth of all adults and a third of the youngest adults fit into this category.”

What secularists need to do is:
- Build their own moral philosophies
- Build their own communities
- Build their own Sabbaths
- Fashion their own moral motivation

David Brooks
Journalist
Mencken’s Thesis

• “Religion was invented by man just as agriculture and the wheel were invented by man, and there is absolutely nothing in it to justify the belief that its inventors had the aid of higher powers, whether on this earth or elsewhere.

• “It is, in some aspects, extremely ingenious and in others it is movingly beautiful, but yet in others it is so absurd that it comes close to imbecility”
How It Began

OK, here's how it works...
First, you never question anything I tell you...

The invention of religion
Human Needs and the Evolution of Religious Beliefs

- Survival
- Safety
- Belonging
- Esteem
- Actualization

- Animism
- Polytheism
- Monotheism
- Enlightenment
- Atheism
Tribal Animism

- A philosophical, religious or spiritual idea that souls or spirits exist not only in humans but also in animals, plants, rocks.
- Some theories have been put forward that the belief in animism among early humans was the basis for the later evolution of religions.
From Animism to Theism

I don’t know about you, but I’d feel safer with an invisible magic person in the sky than I do with this volcano.
Polytheism

- Local deities of nature, in a form of animism, eventually grew into larger, polytheistic deities, such as gods of the sun and moon.

Apollo, the Sun God
Polytheism

- Belief in a **plurality of gods** in which each deity is distinguished by special functions.
- Probably is a development from an earlier polydemonism and animism, characterized by a **variety of disassociated and vaguely defined spirits, demons, and other supernatural powers.**
The Pantheon of Major Gods and Goddesses

- Aztec - 8
- Babylonian - 14
- Canaanite - 9
- Celtic - 11
- Chinese - 11
- Egyptian - 15
- Greek - 12
- Hindu - 13
- Japanese - 12
- Mayan - 6
- Norse - 11
- Sumerian - 8
- Roman - 144

Grand total = 274
Monotheism

- The concept of monotheism developed gradually throughout the various books of the Hebrew Bible.
- In early books (e.g. Psalms) God is a member of a larger divine council of which El is the head.
- In the Torah (written most probably around 700-450 b.c.e.), Yahweh reveals himself as the national deity to be worshipped alone.
- (Deuteronomy 6:4): "Hear Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one."
“The One God”

- Michelangelo’s depiction of God in the Sistine Chapel.
The Birth of Monotheism

- Jews reject Baal, Ashtaroth, Dagon and Moloch as wicked (because they helped the Jews’ enemies) and embraced One God.

- First claims of global supremacy of a specific god date to Egypt’s Akhenaten’s “Hymn to the Aten” (speculatively connected to Judaism by Sigmund Freud in his “Moses and Monotheism”)

- Akhenaten identified Sun God Ra as the only god who created all other gods.

- Monotheism also adopted by Christianity and Islam.
The Three Monotheistic Religions: Judaism

- Is the religion, philosophy, and way of life of the Jewish People.
- Originating in the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanakh, and explored in later texts such as the Talmud.
- Jews consider Judaism to be the expression of the covenant relationship the Children of Israel had developed with God.
- God revealed his laws and commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai in the form of the Torah.
The Three Monotheistic Religions: Christianity

- **Differs** most significantly from the other Abrahamic religions in the claim that Jesus Christ is God the Son.
  - The vast majority of Christians believe in a triune **God consisting of three unified and distinct persons**: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- **Became the State Religion** of Armenia in 301 c.e., of Ethiopia in 325 c.e., of Georgia in 337 c.e., and then the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380 c.e.
The Holy Roman Empire

- Constantine I (272-337 c.e.) was first Christian Emperor
- Raised Christianity “from an eccentric cult to an official religion”
- Edict of Milan (313 c.e.) proclaimed religious tolerance throughout the empire.
- Proclaimed himself the “thirteenth apostle” at the Council of Nicaea in 325 c.e.
The Three Monotheistic Religions: Islam

- Regard as the completed and universal version of a primordial, monotheistic faith revealed at many times and places before, including to the prophets Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
- Koran contains the revelations Muhammad received, starting in a cave on Mount Hira in 610 c.e.
- Muhammad migrated to Medina in the year 622 c.e. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.
Thomas Aquinas

- Born: 1225
- Died 1274 (aged 49)
- Dominican priest
- Wrote: *Summa Theologica*, 1274
- Offered five “proofs” for the existence of God.
Acquinas’s Five “Proofs” of the Existence of God

- The Unmoved Mover
- The Uncaused Cause
- The Cosmological Argument
- The Argument from Degree
- The Teleological Argument, or Argument from Design
The Unmoved Mover

- Nothing moves without a prior mover.
- Something had to make the first move.
- That something we call God.

- HOWEVER:
- Leads to an infinite regress.
- What moved God?
- Assumes that God is immune to the regress.
- The logical postulate of a First Mover cannot be proved or disproved by the empirical observation of what is in motion.
The Unmoved Mover

- Philosophical concept described by Aristotle as the first cause that sets the universe into motion.

- Modern physics has many examples of bodies being moved without any moving body, seriously undermining the first premise of the Prime Mover argument, that every object in motion must be moved by another object in motion.
The Uncaused Cause

• (1) There are events.
• (2) Every event has a cause distinct from it.
• (3) Every causal chain of events must have beginning (i.e., a first member).
• (4) There is a first, uncaused cause of all that happens.
• (5) God exists.

• HOWEVER:
• The objection is that (5) does not follow logically from (4), that it is not a deductive consequence of (4). It could be false even if (4) should be true.
The Cosmological Argument

• There must have been a time when no physical things existed.
• Since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence.
• That something we call God.

• HOWEVER:
• Another regress.
• God invented to terminate the regress.
Current Cosomology

- **Big Bang Theory**: the universe originated approximately 20 billion years ago from the violent explosion of a very small agglomeration of matter of extremely high density and temperature.

- Astronomy, relativity, electro-magnetism, thermodynamics, and quantum physics all have something to say about the evidences one can observe about the Big Bang.

- The conclusion is that the **findings in all of these areas of physics are consistent with the Big Bang model**. There is no other known model that brings all of these fields together.
The Argument from Degree

- Things in the world differ in degrees.
- Degrees are judged only by comparison with a maximum.
- Humans are both good and bad.
- Maximum goodness cannot rest in us.
- The maximum that sets the standard for perfection is called God.

HOWEVER:
- What about other human qualities? (e.g., smelliness)?
- Is God the “pre-eminently peerless stinker”? 
- Comparisons on other dimensions lead to equally fatuous conclusions.
Teleological Argument

- Intricate design implies a designer.
- The complex structure of reality could not have occurred at random, by chance alone.
- Design requires a designer.
- God is the designer.

HOWEVER:

- Evolution and *natural selection* produce excellent, intricate designs.
- Natural selection is not random, “by-chance-alone”
- Is a slow, cumulative process of adaptation.
Current Teleological Argument

• “Intelligent Design”
• Certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process.
• It is a modern form of the traditional teleological argument for the existence of God.
• “Natural selection” is the rational alternative
The Birth of Atheism

• Jean Meslier (1664-1729)
• French Catholic Priest
• Wrote: *Memoir of the Thoughts and Feelings of Jean Meslier: Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Religions of the World.*
• Precursor: Jesuit Cristovao Ferreira’s book: *The Deception Revealed* (1636)
The Persistence of Religious Beliefs

“After at least twenty-five hundred years in which some of the keenest human minds have established the extreme unlikelihood of the major religious tenets - that God exists; that human being are made in the image of God; that the ‘soul’ is immaterial and immortal; that God is guiding the human race in some particular direction - the great majority of the human populace continues to embrace these views with blind and unthinking tenacity, and even those who claim a more reasoned ‘faith’ are unwilling to abandon them in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”
Pentecostal Holiness Churches in Appalachia

• And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. —Mark 16:17-18
Other Arguments Supporting Theism

- Source of Morality
- Protection from Malevolent Forces
- Eternal Life
- Explanation of Miracles
Source of Morality

• Scriptures are **not the best source** for “morality”

• **Deuteronomy 13:6, 8-15** - If someone “entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’…you shall not yield to him…but you shall kill him."

• Nearly 250 verses in **the Koran** justify and legitimize holy war, jihad.
Darwinian Roots of Morality

- Genetic kinship
- Reciprocation
- Acquiring reputation for generosity and kindness
- Conspicuous generosity
- All have individual and species survival value

Richard Dawkins
Natural Selection and Morality

- **Genetic Kinship**
  Animals tend to share resources with, warn of danger, or otherwise show altruism towards close kin because of the statistical likelihood that kin will share copies of the same genes.

- **Genes ensure their own selfish survival** by influencing organisms to behave altruistically.

- **Reciprocation**
  Reciprocal altruism works because of asymmetries in different species’ needs and in capacities to meet them.

- **Symbiosis**
  I’ll scratch your back if you’ll scratch mine.
Natural Selection and Morality

- **Reputation For Kindness**
  - There is Darwinian survival value in not only being a good reciprocator, but **fostering a reputation** as a good reciprocator too.
  - In human societies, we add the power of language to spread reputations.

- **Conspicuous Generosity**
  - Altruistic giving may be an advertisement of dominance or superiority.
  - Advertisements of superiority are authenticated by their cost.
  - **Superiority has survival value.**
Protection from Malevolent Forces

• “Fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that which every one in himself calleth religion”
  
  Thomas Hobbs, 
  Leviathan, 1651

• Pray for good things to happen.

• Ask God to protect you and watch over you.

• No harm will come to you if you believe in the Lord.

• “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me…..”
“The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal - God is the Omnipotent Father - hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates.” Quoted in Dawkins, p. 58 [italics added]
Freud on the Patriarchal Nature of Religion

- Wrote “The Future of an Illusion”.
- God is Dad.
- An outgrowth of the Oedipal complex.
- Religion is an expression of underlying psychological neuroses and distress.
Eternal Life

• Eases the pain/fear of death
  “On this date, So-and-So ascended into heaven to meet his creator and sit by His side in eternal life”

• Beliefs in reincarnation, ghosts, angels, etc. all serve this purpose.

• Bernard Shaw: “The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.”
Borrowing from Physics to Justify Immortality

- **The Law of Conservation of Energy/Matter.**
- Often cited to support belief in immortality.
- “When we die, none of the atoms of our body (and none of the energy) are lost. Therefore, we are immortal.”
- Most find this to be an absurd notion.
The Immortal Soul

- “…incorporeal persons are no more a sort of persons than are imaginary, fictitious, or otherwise nonexistent persons” - Anthony Flew

- “To assert that somebody survived death, but disembodied, is to contradict yourself.” - Anthony Flew

- “If a man talks to me of ‘a round quadrangle’; or ‘accidents of bread in cheese’; or ‘immaterial substance’;…I should not say that he was in error, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd” - Thomas Hobbes

- Is a holdover from primitive superstition
Quote from Stephen Hawking

• “I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”

Miracles

- One day’s lamp-oil burning for eight days (Hannukah)
- The parting of the Red Sea
- Immaculate Conception
- Resurrection
- Mohammed's “night flight” to Jerusalem
Objections to Miracles

- A thing of the past (like prophets, seers, witchdoctors.)
- Usually the result of fraud, conjuring, outright fabrication, or gaps in knowledge.

Christopher Hitchens
Mencken on Miracles

• “To argue that the gaps in knowledge which still confront the seeker must be filled, not by patient inquiry, but by intuition or revelation, is simply to give ignorance a gratuitous and preposterous dignity” (p. 261)
Einstein’s “Religion”

• “If there is something in me which can be called religious, then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it”

• “I am a deeply religious nonbeliever.”

• “The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naïve.”
“Religious” Non-Believers

• Can a non-believer be religious?
• If individuals nevertheless neglect none of their duties to others and consistently behave according to principles which indicate the greatest consideration for the rights of others and for the common good, then this is true and genuine religion. (Paraphrase of Vaihinger, p. 325)
The Religion of “As If”

• It is not the belief that the “kingdom of God” is coming which constitutes religion.
• Rather, it is the endeavor to make it come, even though we believe it will never come, that is religion.
• True and genuine religion is to act as if, by our action, a moral world-order could be brought into being.
What Would an Atheist Miss without Organized Religion?

• Community
• Ceremonial Rituals
• Emotional Comfort
• Aesthetic Enjoyment
Community

- Consist of others upon whom we can depend for **support and understanding**.
- No fear or façade, because we share the same values, beliefs, history, condition of life.
- Can other groups (other than religious groups) provide this?
- **Where does the atheist find community?**
Atheist Communities

- Atheist Alliance International (www.atheistalliance.org)
- Freedom from Religion Foundation (www.ffrf.org)
- The Brights (www.the-brights.net)
- American Atheists (www.atheists.org)
- Other “non-religious” communities:
  - bridge clubs, book clubs, bowling leagues, fraternal organizations
Non-Theistic Communities in San Diego

- **Humanistic Judaism** offers a non-theistic alternative in contemporary Jewish life.
- In the **Unitarian-Universalist Church**, the non-theistic members now outnumber the theological Unitarians.
Ceremonial Rituals

• Prescribed events and/or behaviors designed to convey symbolic meaning, comfort, security, serenity and/or a “sense of belonging”.

• Weddings, funerals, High Mass, Pilgrimage to Mecca, Seder dinner, lighting the Christmas Tree

• Are there non-religious events which can provide these same experiences?
A New Ritual

PLACE YOUR HAND ON DARWIN’S "ORIGIN OF SPECIES" AND REPEAT AFTER ME...

HOW ATHEISTS TESTIFY UNDER OATH.
Emotional Comfort

• Can come from “community”
• **Friends are good medicine**
• Develop good “coping skills”
• Hire a professional “comforter”
Aesthetic Enjoyment

• Atheists enjoy Handel’s “Messiah” for its beauty alone
• Church and gospel music can be enjoyed for its own sake
• Church/temple/mosque architecture may be awe-inspiring examples of human creativity.
An Atheist’s “Church”
A Tribal, Feudal, Barbaric Past

- Religious doctrines fashioned out of the **conditions and understandings of the past**
- What would a 21st Century Secular world look like?
- **Mental paradigm must shift to contemporary understandings.**
Rogers’ Person of Tomorrow

- Values **authenticity**.
- Opposed to *all* highly structured, inflexible institutions.
- **Religious institutions** are perceived as irrelevant and frequently damaging to human progress.
- Seeks new forms of community, of closeness, or intimacy, of shared purpose.
- Education involves the application of relevant knowledge; **not indoctrination**.
The “Atheist” of Tomorrow

• He has a trust in his own experience and a profound distrust of external authority.

• Neither Pope nor judge nor scholar can convince him of anything which is not borne out by his own reason and experience.

Paraphrase of Rogers, p.226
The Good Book: A Humanist Bible
Published in 2011 by Walker & Company

• British philosopher and author.
• In the tradition of Thomas Jefferson’s Bible.
• Jefferson’s “truths”: history, principles, parables and inspirations.
• Omitted: supernatural, church ceremony, sexual behavior, commandments.

A. C. Grayling
(1949 -)
A 21st Century Enlightenment

• Rekindling the spirit of 18th Century “Age of Enlightenment”

• Applying the Western rationalist tradition to the obscurantism of religion.
  • In the footsteps of:
  • John Locke (1632-1704) *Letter Concerning Tolerance*
  • De la Mettrie (1709-1751) *L’Homme Machine*
  • Holbach’s (1723-1789) *Le Systeme de la Nature*
The Baron’s Salon

(From A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment, by Phillipp Blom)

“The vision they discussed around the baron’s dinner table was one in which women and men would no longer be oppressed by the fear and ignorance instilled by religion, but could instead live their lives to the full. Instead of sacrificing their desires to the vain hope of reward in the afterlife, they would be able to walk freely, to understand their place in the universe as intelligent machines of flesh and blood and pour their energies into building individual lives and communities based on their inheritance of desire, empathy, and reason. Desire, erotic or otherwise, would make their world beautiful and rich; empathy would make it kind and livable; reason would allow an understanding of the world’s immutable laws.”
Countervailing Forces

- Fear of the wrath of the righteous.
- “Atheist” has been assiduously built up as a terrible and frightening label.
- Shunned by others as “Godless” and thereby suspect.
- Fear of one’s own repressed atheism.
- “Standing out from the crowd” is uncomfortable.
- It is easier and safer to plead Agnosticism.
- Labeled as weird, misguided, or Communist.
- Seen as unpatriotic (“..nation under God”)


The Wrath of the Righteous

Saudi Arabia: death penalty for atheists
What Is an Atheist To Do?

• Insist on engaging in meaningful debate on the truth or falsity of religious tenets, without being subject to accusations of impiety, immorality or impoliteness.

• Guard against encroachment of religion in areas where it has no place: e.g., education and politics.

• Speak vigorously and pointedly when the devout put forth arguments manifestly contrary to all the acquired knowledge of the past two or three centuries.
A Final Word

Religion is:

“and emotionally seductive system of irrationality,”

An Alternate Path
Questions, Comments?

Live Long and Prosper

Thank You