
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ATHEISM/A-THEISM

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Theism, Atheism and A-theism
- 1.3 Atheism and its cousins
- 1.4 Varieties of atheism
- 1.5 The Philosophical Roots of Modern atheism
- 1.6 The Socio-cultural roots of Modern Atheism
- 1.7 The future of theism-atheism debate
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Key Words
- 1.10 Further Readings and References
- 1.11 Answers to Check your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to provide some familiarity with the different religious and non-religious views regarding Religion; with special reference to atheism and how it comes to have the prominence in the contemporary world. By the end of this unit, you will be familiar with the following:

- The idea of theism
- The distinction between atheism and other related concepts
- Non-theistic religious views (a-theism)
- Non-theistic, non-religious views (atheism)
- Different kinds of atheism
- Origins of modern atheism
- future of theism-atheism debate

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The key to understanding a variety of views that goes under the name of atheism/a-theism is the relationship between religious experience and language. Profound religious experiences present us with a paradox. On the one hand, it gives to the experiencer (or experient) an insight into the nature of reality, an insight that is so remarkable that the person feels impelled to talk about it; like the crow that has found a good source of food crows the loudest to call its friends, a person with a remarkable religious experience cannot but talk about it. On the other hand, the nature of the insight gained is such that the experient finds himself or herself dumbfounded, unable to find the right words to talk about it. The result is a whole lot of babbling that often indicates something right about the experienced reality but is never accurate; it may even be misleading, if not properly understood. This need to talk, together with not being able to find adequate

expression, can lead to contrary and even contradictory views regarding religious reality, leading to various theistic, atheistic, and agnostic views. While the theistic or at least some kind of religious view remains prominent in today's world, atheism is no less prominent with some atheistic books like Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion*, even becoming a best seller. It is important, therefore, to understand atheism.

1.2 THEISM, ATHEISM AND A-THEISM

We shall try four different approaches to understand atheism: etymology, history, common usage, and a phenomenology of doctrines.

Let us begin by considering the meaning of the word "atheism". Etymologically, "atheism" is the denial of theism. The word "theism" comes from the Greek word "theos" meaning "god". Theism, then, is belief in the existence of god or gods and— and atheism is the view that deities are creations of the human mind, imaginary beings that really do not exist. An etymological route to understanding atheism, however, is only of limited help. Besides neglecting non-theistic religious views, it also neglects the fact that there are different kinds of theism such as monotheism and polytheism.

A historical route to the definition of "atheism" also does not take us far, as it always turns out to be the denial of a particular conception of the deity. Socrates in ancient Greece, for example, was accused of being an atheist by his countrymen; early Christians were accused of being atheists by the Romans. This was in spite of Socrates claiming that gods had spoken to him, and Christians engaging in regular religious worship and prayer. The reason why the accusers of Socrates and of the early Christians called them atheists was, then, not that they did not believe in *any* deity, but that they did not venerate the deity whom their accusers venerated.

If we go by the common usage, "atheism" refers primarily to the denial of the deity as understood in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All these three traditions understand the deity to be One (hence *monotheism* with God spelt with a capital G), a benevolent personal Being who created the world and all that is in it, and continues to interact with this creation. Again, the use of "Being" with a capital B is significant because the divine reality is held to be unlike any other reality we are ordinarily familiar with. For this reason the ordinary reality is often qualified as mundane reality, contrasted with the sacred reality. If everything in the world—including human being— can be considered beings, then God is not a being at all. The difficulty in going by the common usage is that it neglects the complexity involved in the conception of the divine. Therefore, let us attempt an understanding of theism through the phenomenology of religious beliefs. This will help us to attempt some conceptual spring cleaning and distinguish between "theism" and "monotheism", "atheism" and "a-theism".

Let us begin by considering what may be called "religious realism", or the beliefs that are common to all religious believers. All religious believers are agreed that (1) there is indeed a religious reality, a reality that is experienced by numerous people. These people say that the nature of this reality is (2) completely unlike the objects experienced in our ordinary sense experience and (3) the good of human beings (indeed, of the whole creation) consists in the pursuit of this supra-mundane reality. The vast majority of people in all generations have been religious realists in this sense. And this majority includes not only the masses but also the most intelligent ones including scientists, philosophers and mystics. However, there have been many

in the modern period who denied religious realism and called themselves atheists. Feuerbach and his followers like Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx are the best examples of atheists. Best contemporary examples are Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. All of them deny religious realism. For practical purposes, therefore, we shall take “atheism” to mean the denial of religious realism. However, there are difficulties in defining “atheism” in terms of religious anti-realism. An important consideration is that one can be religious realist and still not be a theist; there are various non-theistic ways of being a religious realist. Therefore, let us consider theistic beliefs in more detail. Theists, being religious realists, hold beliefs 1-3:

- (1) there exists a supra-mundane reality that the theists call God
- (2) This reality is said to be utterly different from all other (mundane) reality. Although the technical term for this belief is divine transcendence, there are difficulties in straight away calling it by that term because the term “transcendence” has taken a different connotation today (we shall see this in connection with modern atheism).
- (3) That the ultimate good and happiness (*summum bonum*) of human beings (and the whole of creation) consists in the pursuit of this reality.

Apart from these three beliefs common to all religious realists, theists also hold the following:

- (4) Though utterly different from the objects in this world, this reality is actively involved in this mundane world. This is called divine immanence.
- (5) This mundane reality is God’s creation.
- (6) Theists also hold that this supra-mundane or divine is better spoken of in personal terms than impersonal terms.
- (7) In addition to these beliefs commonly held by theists, monotheists hold that there is only one supra-mundane religious reality.

Since the common usage of the term “atheism” is a denial of monotheism, it would imply the denial of the doctrines 1-7. But strictly speaking the term should not apply to polytheists and therefore, should apply only to those who deny doctrines (1) to (6).

Now let us consider “a-theism”. This is not standard terminology. But when we look at the reality of religious belief in the contemporary world we need some term like this because not all who deny the existence of a theistic deity can be considered atheists and put alongside Marx, Freud, Dawkins and others. Consider, for example, Buddhism and Taoism. Since they do not agree with theists in important respects (such as the personal nature of religious reality) they are sometimes characterized as atheistic religions. But it is not appropriate call them atheists because unlike atheists like Marx, they are not anti-realists regarding religious reality. They agree with the theists not only in the existence of a supra-mundane reality (Tao, Nirvana), but also in the other two beliefs regarding religious realism, i.e., its utter difference from the mundane reality and that the pursuit of this reality is the *summum bonum* (ultimate good or fulfilment) of human existence. But they reject other theistic beliefs. Therefore, rather than call this view “atheism” we shall call it “a-theism”. They are indeed living religions, a-theistic religions.

Denial of the doctrines (2) or (4) leads to two other kinds of “a-theism” called pantheism and deism. Pantheists deny (2), i.e., that God is utterly different from the mundane reality and hold that everything is God. Deists deny the (4), i.e., the belief that God is currently involved in the world. Since the more technical term for the second and fourth beliefs are “transcendence” and “immanence”, theists are those who believe in a deity that is both

transcendent and immanent whereas pantheists deny God's transcendence and deists deny God's immanence. Deism and pantheism too might be called "a-theism" but they would not qualify as "a-theistic religions" like Buddhism and Taoism. Deism and pantheism are best considered as philosophical views *about* religions than the views of any practicing religious believers.

To sum up our definitions, then, atheism is strictly speaking the denial of a religious reality as understood by the theists. It includes denial of the doctrines 1-6. A-theism does not deny 1-3 (religious realism), but might deny any of the other theistic beliefs. A-theism may be religious (as in the case of Buddhism or Taoism) or only a philosophical view regarding religions (like deism). Having seen the differences, we shall focus on the atheism as commonly understood, i.e., as denial of monotheistic beliefs 1-7 and its historical development. But before going into the details of atheism we need to spend some time to clarify some concepts that are closely linked with atheism.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is religious realism?

.....
.....
.....

2) What are the basic religious convictions of monotheists?

.....
.....
.....
.....

3) How is atheism differentiated from a-theism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

1.3 ATHEISM AND ITS COUSINS

There are a number of concepts that are similar in some ways to atheism because of which they are often confused with it. The most used among such concepts are naturalism, materialism, agnosticism, and secularism. Let us consider these.

Naturalism is literally the view that only natural entities exist. A corollary of this view is the denial of the supernatural—either God or spirit—that is independent of the natural but impinges on it (through creation, preservation, provident care, etc.). Thus it is the denial of religious

realism. However, naturalism is a broader term than atheism and can refer to a whole philosophy of life. In the contemporary world with its high premium on science, naturalism has also come to mean the epistemological thesis that science is the only reliable means of knowing. This is epistemological naturalism. This would also imply that the world as explained by scientific laws is all that exists. Besides the metaphysical and epistemological naturalism, there is ethical naturalism which holds that moral life does not require God or such supernatural factors. Apart from such full-fledged naturalism found in the modern world, there have been various naturalistic views in the ancient world such as the *Carvakas* and the *Ajīvikas* of India and those like Democritus and Epicurus in the West.

Materialism is almost identical with the metaphysical component of naturalism (the view that only natural entities exist). It says that matter is the only reality and that everything in the world, including thought, will, and feeling, can be explained in terms of matter. Since it entails a denial of spiritual beings or processes, materialism is typically allied with atheism. Apart from this metaphysical view, materialism has also a derivative sense according to which comfort, pleasure, and wealth are the only or highest goals or values. The Indian *Carvakas* were not only naturalists but also materialists in this sense as they considered pleasure as the ultimate good. While atheism, naturalism and materialism involve definite metaphysical views, agnosticism is a suspension of belief in metaphysical issues. Unlike the atheists who deny the existence of God, agnostics neither affirm nor deny the existence of God; agnostics only say that they have no evidence either for believing or for denying the existence of such metaphysical entities as God, soul etc.

Secularism is another term that often crops up in the vicinity of atheism. This word has a variety of meanings. Coming from the Latin word *saeculum*, originally the word denoted (1) the present world of change. This was contrasted with the religious world that was taken to be eternal. This merely contrastive use of the word would eventually give way to the oppositional meaning where secularism meant (2) an antireligious, atheistic outlook. According to a third meaning “secularism” is not seen in anti-religious terms, but refers to an outlook that limits itself to the world of here and now without any considerations of God or the hereafter. It may be remarked that the word “*lokayata*” (another name used for *Carvakas*) clearly points to this meaning of secularism, as it comes from *lōka*, meaning this world. From this meaning of secularism arises a fourth meaning according to which secularism refers to the autonomy of the political realm from the religious sphere. In the contemporary usage, this fourth meaning is the most prominent, although the others are not absent. This idea of the exclusion of the religious from the political realm takes two different forms. In the west it was seen in terms of the separation of the Church and the state whereas in India with its diversity of living religions secularism is seen in terms of equality before law irrespective of one’s religious belonging.

1.4 VARIETIES OF ATHEISM

Atheism can be classified in different ways depending on the basis of classification. One way to classify it is terms of its relation to life. From this perspective, atheism has been classified into practical and theoretical. When psalmist refers to the “fool” saying in his heart that there is no God (Ps. 53:1), it is worth noting that the “fool” does it only in his or her heart, and not to others. “Fool” in the biblical understanding is the one who puts his trust wealth and possessions and not in God. (Cf. Luke 12:20) This is practical atheism. It refers to a manner of life that is lived as if

God did not exist, but does not bother to talk about it or argue about it. Such practical atheism is contrasted with theoretical atheism that engages in reasoning in an attempt to show that God (or gods) does not exist. In that process, not only did they deny the existence of gods, but also put forward theories to explain the existence of gods. Jan Bremmer credits the ancient Greeks with the discovery of theoretical atheism, which can be considered a necessary corrective to inadequate ways of understanding the divine. For example, if God is conceived to be just like human beings (with all their frailties like lust and jealousy), except that these beings have greater power, then others with greater moral sensibility are bound to criticise such deities. Similarly, if God is identified with natural powers like the sun, any naturalistic attempt to understand the sun is bound to be considered atheistic. Such was the case in ancient Greece. Theoretical atheism of this kind has great value since it performs a therapeutic role by helping future generations to come to a better understanding of the nature of the divine. On the other hand, it has also been dangerous to its protagonists as it offends the sensibilities of the more common believers. It is worth recalling that one of the charges against Socrates, when he was sentenced to death, was that of being an atheist. Thus, “atheism” in the ancient world came to be used more for labelling one’s opponents than any set of beliefs.

A more important distinction is the one between classical or perennial atheism on the one hand, and modern atheism on the other. There are three important distinctions that could be pointed out between them. First, this division, as the name indicates, is based on the chronological factor. Classical atheism—whether practical or theoretical—has a perennial quality about them. Thus, there have always been and there will always be people whose lives are not guided by religious values and considerations; and there will be intensely religious people in every age who criticize the inadequate ways of conceiving God. Modern atheism, on the other hand, is a peculiar development in the cultural history of the West, eventually spreading to other parts of the world. Second, unlike earlier times when “atheist” was a term of insult used for one’s opponents, modern atheists loudly and proudly called themselves atheists. They took it as a badge of honour to be an atheist. This is perhaps the most important feature of modern atheism. Thirdly, modern atheism is both theoretical and practical. It is theoretical in as much as they were passionately involved in giving reasons for their atheism, critiquing the arguments for existence of God, and questioning the very coherence of the idea of God. For this reason, modern atheism is best defined not only as a rejection of theism but as a conscious and reasoned rejection of theism. Modern atheism is also practical in as much as it marks a significant shift in the values that one holds dear. But it should not be thought that modern atheists are immoral persons. There are professed atheists who are as concerned, and perhaps even more concerned, with matters of justice and peace than many believers. What is being said is that the value system of modern culture (and not of individual atheists) is significantly different from that of the religious believers. If the biblical fool is one who relies not on God, but on power and wealth, these are the very foundations of modern culture. Unlike the earlier cultures that did not consider wealth as an end in itself and even considered it antithetical to religious values, modern culture (that is inseparable from the development of capitalism) came to consider the production of wealth as an end in itself. So too, with political power.

Another way of classifying atheism is in terms of procedure and motivation. Seen in these terms, atheism can be divided into critical or philosophical atheism and dogmatic atheism. The former are open-minded intellectuals who seek to promote intellectual honesty in thinking about God, whereas the latter consider theism as a plague to be eradicated and go about doing so with little concern for intellectual engagement with theists. Antony Flew (1923-2010) is an excellent

example of the former whereas Richard Dawkins is an example of the latter. Whereas the former produced a philosophical classic like “Theology and Falsification” the latter’s *God Delusion* is a bestseller that draws a caricature of God and then goes about demolishing it. Dogmatic atheism is an offshoot of modern atheism and is sometimes referred as “New Atheism”.

Philosophical atheism is a form of theoretical atheism that disputes theistic claims. Their chief arguments can be found in David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The most important argument is perhaps the argument from evil. The basic argument is that if God is both all powerful and all good, as theists claim, then the quality and quantity of evil and pain seen in this world is inexplicable. Therefore, the believers will be compelled, they say, to withdraw their claim about the existence of God or at least one of the two claims regarding God (being all powerful and being all good). What needs to be noted is that the experience of evil is part of the human condition and theists grapple with it as much as the atheists, and ardent theists have tried to grapple with it for centuries, even before there emerged any cogent argument from evil emerged.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What are the different meanings of the word “secularism”?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2) Theoretical atheism in the ancient world had a therapeutic value. Explain.

.....
.....
.....
.....

3) What are the characteristic features of modern atheism that makes it distinct from classical atheism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

1.5 THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF MODERN ATHEISM

As in the case of any historical event, it would be too simplistic to trace the origins of modern atheism to any single factor. There are philosophical, social, religious, political and economic factors that come together in the emergence of the modern world and modern atheism was one of its offshoots. Our primary focus in this section will be on the philosophical roots of this phenomenon and point out some of the other factors in the next section. Even in looking at the philosophical roots of modern atheism, we shall limit our considerations to the changes in the understanding of transcendence and immanence that lie at the heart of theism.

Since modern atheism is a conscious and reasoned rejection of theism, we must begin with the manner in which moderns understood theism. What we saw in the introduction about our inability to put into human language the experienced reality is at the root of the various ways in which theistic beliefs (1-7) come to be understood. As long as the person who has the experience is involved in the discussions, he or she can steer the conversation in the proper direction. But when the focus shifts from the experience to its doctrinal articulations and the analysis of those articulations by others there is all the likelihood of matters going haywire. Such is the story that we find at the origins of modern atheism.

Consider the belief in transcendence and immanence of God. We have seen it in terms of the utter unlikeness of God with the mundane reality and yet being involved in it. In the theistic understanding, therefore, transcendence and immanence always go together and they are never opposed to each other. But it is not unusual (even standard practice) to define it in terms of outside/inside distinction. The Wikipedia article on transcendence is a good example. It tells us that the first meaning of transcendence is that “God is completely outside of and beyond the world, as contrasted with the notion that God is manifested in the world.” The definition of authors like Peter Berger is hardly different. When the distinction is seen in terms of outside/inside distinction it becomes a logical contradiction to say that God is both immanent and transcendent, as theists do. Apart from the logical problem, there is also the difficulty that God’s involvement in the world seems to go against the autonomy of natural laws. As a matter of fact, David Hume’s definition of divine miracle is in terms of the suspension of natural laws. Deism was the solution found by some of the early modern thinkers to overcome these difficulties. They held that God created the world but does not intervene in it, but lets it run on its own laws, like a wound clock. This solution was surely unacceptable to the theistic believers.

The important question is how the moderns came to understand transcendence and immanence of God in this manner. In order to answer this question we must begin with the realization that western Christian theism (whose womb bore the baby of modern atheism) is a unique combination of Jewish religious insights (filtered through the eyes of Jesus Christ and his early followers) and Greek philosophy. The religious insight of the Jews was that of a religious reality that is utterly unlike the mundane reality. It was so utterly unlike the reality of ordinary human experience that this reality could neither be named nor uttered. Yet, this reality was so closely involved in the lives of the people, especially attentive to the cries of the oppressed. If the former (unlikeness) indicated the transcendence of the divine, the latter (involvement) indicated divine immanence. On the other hand, this immanence, by the very fact of its special inclination towards scum of the earth, is also a manifestation of the utter unlikeness of the values of the divine reality as the Jews understood it. In other words, the Jewish God was both ontologically and morally transcendent to the mundane world, but very much present in it.

Enter Greek philosophy. Neo-Platonism with its utterly transcendent One (that is also the Good), which at the same time gives reality to the things in this world through “participation” fitted the

Jewish (and Christian) understanding of God like hands and gloves. But there was a rub. The Greek One was so other-worldly that it was difficult to see how this One could be considered a Christian God who considered this world so valuable as to send his only son to save it. There comes Aristotle to the rescue. This disciple of Plato had blended the Platonic Ideas with an excellent appreciation of this world in his philosophy. This was adapted by the Christians in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Everything seemed to go well.

But there was a difficulty. The hinge that connected Aristotle's philosophy of this world with Plato's transcendent world was the arguments that sought to prove the necessity of a First Cause, a Prime Mover, etc., to account for observed change in this world. This hinge proved to be too fragile to hold the weight of the Platonic (and the religious) understanding of transcendence. This will be understood only when we realize that although Aristotle assimilated the Platonic ideas into his own theory of categories, there is a world of difference between the two. Plato's forms and the ultimate Form (One) are utterly different from this world (hence, ontologically transcendent). But the Aristotelian categories are categories of this world. These are organized logically, the ultimate Form being the all-inclusive Form of all forms. In other words, the First Cause to which Aristotle's arguments lead is a logical requirement of his philosophical account of *this world*, a kind of scientific explanation of the time. Thus is lost the Platonic as well as the Jewish notion of transcendence, with no heartburns at all. Unlike Plato's and the Judeo-Christian understanding of this world (as dependent) on a transcendent religious reality for its existence (participation in Plato, creation in Judaism), Aristotle's world is a self-contained system. This comes to be re-enforced during the modern period with the development of Newtonian physics.

In adopting the Aristotelian system, Aquinas was sensitive to the religious notion of transcendence. Therefore, even while adopting Aristotle's argument for existence of God he knew very well that the Christian God could not be a logical requirement of the system, as in Aristotle. This prompted him to smuggle in the Platonic notion of participation such that the utter transcendence of God is maintained. But with the idea of modern science that the world is a gigantic clock that functions on its own, the notion of participation becomes superfluous. To affirm the transcendence of God in a self-regulating world is to think of some entity outside the system; immanence, then, becomes the arbitrary intervention of this external power into the functioning of a mechanical cosmos. When the moderns rejected this notion of God, the Aristotelian-Thomistic type of natural theology had become so well-entrenched that the energies of the modern defenders of theism was expended not in correcting the skewed notion of transcendence and immanence to bring it in line with the religious understanding, but in constructing newer versions of natural theology using the latest findings of science. Michael Buckley's authoritative study, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* gives us a detailed account of these futile attempts. What is typical of these modern arguments is that God is conceived along the lines of a scientific hypothesis. They proceed from some observed features of the world to God as the explanation of those features. Religious thinkers are only beginning to come around to the view that the real force of the arguments for God's existence consists not in their logical force, but in pointing to certain "natural signs" that can function as invitations to religious insights. This is the basic thrust of a recent book by Stephen Evans.

1.6 THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ROOTS OF MODERN ATHEISM

No account of the emergence of modern atheism would make sense apart from its indebtedness to Christendom. "Christendom" is the term used to designate the Christianity that emerged as a

successor to the Roman Empire. Christendom was at once many things. It was a magnificent human achievement that combined within it a delicate balance of temporal power and spiritual dynamism. The architecture of St. Peter's in the Vatican, with its outstretched arms embracing the world is a good symbol of the magnificence of Christendom. It was a unifying power in a fragmented Europe, a multinational spiritual empire of prayer and learning done in its monasteries, and a civilising force among the barbarian chieftains. But it had also a soft underbelly, in as much as it was also the centre of political intrigue and moral degradation.

It was the degradation that became the focus of the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther. Its impact was even more traumatic to the Western world than that of the scientific revolution. Whereas the scientific revolution took apart the magnificent intellectual synthesis built by Aquinas on the foundations of Aristotle and Plato, the Protestant Reformation broke up the unity of Christendom as a socio-cultural force. The nationalist urges that were kept under check by the unifying power of Christendom reasserted itself with the Protestants on the side of the nationalists and Catholics on the side of Rome. The European soil was soaked in the blood of martyrs who fought protracted religious wars, creating an anti-religious atmosphere where atheism could sprout among the thinking sections of the population.

The weakening of Roman power enabled the new merchant class to assert its autonomy, with private property and mercantile interests replacing common land and common good. (Earlier such interests were held in check with avarice being condemned as a grievous sin). It was from this bloody mix of religious fervour, nationalist political ambitions and a developing capitalist economy that a group of intelligentsia emerged that proudly proclaimed itself atheistic. Modern atheism was seen as an escape route from religious intolerance and the entry point for building a new world on the foundations of the newly developing physics and economics, aided by the failure of philosophical thinking we saw in 1.5.

1.7 THE FUTURE OF THEISM-ATHEISM DEBATE

Atheistic arguments, we have seen, is always directed against some specific understanding of theism, as we have seen. That understanding is hardly ever in keeping with what believers themselves say. If ancients like Socrates and the early Christians never owned up the accusation of being atheists, the moderns took pride in being atheists. But modern atheism, as we have seen, is the repudiation of a particular historical-cultural development in the understanding of theism that misrepresented the basic theistic conviction regarding immanence and transcendence of God. Thus, theists and atheists seem to be speaking past one another than speaking to each other. Given this situation, does this debate have a future? On the one hand, if we learn from Wittgenstein's idea about the autonomy of language games, it would seem that this debate would have no future unless the legitimate autonomy of religious language game is respected. Vincent Brümmer is among those who consider this debate to be doomed as long as theism is treated as a scientific hypothesis. On the other hand, even if it was a historical mistake to think of God as an explanatory hypothesis along the lines of a scientific hypothesis, in as much as this manner of arguing for God's existence has a long history, the critics are not likely to easily acknowledge this autonomy. Therefore, it is hard to see the debate making any headway.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does the modern understanding of immanence and transcendence differ from the theistic understanding?

.....
.....
.....
.....

2) What is the significant difference between the neo-Platonic One and the Aristotelian First Cause?

.....
.....
.....
.....

3) What were some of the social factors that contributed to the emergence of modern atheism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

1.8 LET US SUM UP

Atheism is as old as theism stretching from ancient Greeks and the Indian *lokayatas* to the present. It appears in various forms that vary from critiques of some prevalent ways of understanding the divine without denying religious realism (as with different forms of “atheism”), to a complete denial of religious realism in favour of naturalism. But due to various reasons, atheism that remained a term of abuse for centuries became very attractive to many intellectuals of the modern period and its fascination has not waned since. But religious convictions continue to remain strong and it is not likely that the theism-atheism debate is likely to make any headway in the near future, until they learn to listen to one another.

1.9 KEY WORDS

Atheism = a word with many meanings, but for practical purposes, atheism is understood as the denial of religious realism.

Religious realism = the view that (1) there exists a religious or supra-mundane or supra-natural reality that is (2) utterly unlike the objects experienced in our ordinary sense experience. It also holds that (3) the ultimate good of human beings consists in the pursuit of this supra-mundane reality.

Transcendence = the view that divine reality is utterly unlike beyond the ordinary reality of sense-experience. But during the modern period this comes to be understood in spatial terms, i.e., the view that divine reality is outside the cosmos.

Immanence = refers to the presence and activity of the divine reality in this world of ordinary experience.

A-theism = is used for a variety of views like that of Buddhism, that are religious but not theistic.

Deism = a philosophical view that accepts the existence of a creator God, but denies that God intervenes in the affairs of the world after its creation. Seeing divine “transcendence” and “immanence” as a matter of being outside/inside the created world, they deny divine immanence.

Pantheism = is the counterpart of deism. They too understand transcendence and immanence in spatial terms and go on to deny God’s transcendence while affirming divine immanence.

1.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Buckley, Michael. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
Corlett, J. "Dawkins' Godless Delusion," in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (2009): 125-38.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press, 2006.

Evans, C. Stephen. *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Karuvelil, George, "Secularism" in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Johnson Puthenpurackal, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010. 1266-69.

Kitcher, Philip, "Militant Modern Atheism," in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2011): 1-13.

Martin, Michael, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

McGrath, Alister E, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005.

Tarnas, Richard, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1991.