

Atheophobia

An Ancient Prejudice, and Yet So Prevalent Today

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“Better to be hated for what one is than loved for what one is not.”

— André Gide

A Prejudice as Old as Antiquity

Ever since human beings invented their first gods, the atheist has been marginalized. Alienating themselves from their own innate moral sense by projecting it onto imaginary divinities, or onto the unique, despotic “God” of a monotheistic religion, humans convinced themselves that any individual who fails to recognize these divinities must be amoral and depraved. Such individuals became targets of utter distrust, accursed and anathematized. This hatred for and antipathy towards atheists and atheism is called *atheophobia*.

Plato was apparently the first to formulate and codify this hatred. In his *Tenth Book of the Dialogue on Laws* or *Against the Atheists*, he advocates draconian measures against atheists, the impious and several other categories of individual (magicians, sorcerers) which he tends to lump together with atheists. According to the historian Georges Minois (*Histoire de l'athéisme*, Fayard, 1998), Plato thus invented, in one fell swoop, religious intolerance, the inquisition and concentration camps.

The bible asserts the moral degradation of atheists: “The depraved says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.” (Psalms 14.1) Throughout the long history of Christianity, miscreants, “buggers,” heretics and Jews were condemned and often confused with each other in an attitude of all-encompassing intolerance. During a papal audience in 1999, John-Paul II reminded his listeners that “The psalmist calls foolish” anyone who does not believe in god. As for the coran, it declares: “the curse of Allah will be upon the disbelievers.” (Surah 2.89) “And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. [...] Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.” (Surah 2.191).

Few voices were raised against this monolithic hatred. One notable exception was that of Pierre Bayle, a dissident protestant Christian, who dared to write in his *Thoughts on Atheism* that “Atheism does not necessarily lead to the corruption of morals.” To us in the 21st century, such a declaration sounds banal, even timid, but in the 17th, it expressed exemplary courage.

The Enlightenment

In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophers denounced religious intolerance and obscurantism, but not all broke with the old anti-atheist prejudice. In his novella *The Story of Johnny; or, The Atheist and the Sage*, Voltaire writes: “Belief, then, in a God who rewards good actions, punishes the bad, and forgives lesser faults, is thus most useful to humanity. It is the only restraint on powerful men, who insolently commit public crimes, and on others who skillfully perpetrate secret offences.” It follows therefore that “The atheist is a monster,” although less to be feared than the superstitious. In his *Treatise on Tolerance, On the Occasion of the Death of Jean Calas* (1763) Voltaire associates atheism with depravity and declares that “it is better [...] to be subject to all possible superstitions, as long as they are not murderous, than to live without religion.”

Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, although a deist like Voltaire, belonged to a more recent generation and began to question this attitude of general mistrust. Observing (in a letter dated June 13th 1814) that Diderot, D'Alembert, D'Holbach and Condorcet were reputed to be both atheists and virtuous, it followed that their virtue must have some basis other than the love of god.

Atheophobia is founded on the belief that the divinity is the source and guarantor of all morality. This is probably the most widespread and the most dangerous of all religious beliefs. In *The Sacred Contagion* (1768) D'Holbach succinctly explains this danger: "If it is divine will which decides what is just and what is not, then God is the master of all virtue; by his word, crime may become virtue, and virtue crime. Thus morality is subordinated to the whims of those who interpret that divine will. [...] Any man vain enough to believe himself to be chosen by his god must regard with contempt all those who do not benefit from such favour."

A consequence of atheophobia is the myth that religious believers are morally superior to nonbelievers. This notion is the sugar coating on the poison pill of irrational belief, making it easier to swallow.

Modern Atheophobia

In the modern era, expressions of blatant, explicit atheophobia have become rarer in some circles as the absurdity and injustice of this nasty old prejudice begin to be recognized — or at least that is what one would hope. Nevertheless atheophobia persists, especially among fundamentalists and creationists, but not only among them. In many Muslim-majority countries, apostasy is subject to severe punishment, even the death penalty; given that Islam is normally imposed at birth and reinforced throughout childhood by indoctrination in schools, becoming an atheist is thus a serious crime. In 2014, Saudi Arabia adopted legislation which classifies many forms of dissidence, in particular atheism explicitly, as terrorism.

The priest Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief of the American religious journal *First Things*, published an article in the Aug./Sept. 1991 issue baldly claiming that atheists cannot be good citizens. Furthermore, several American states still have legislation which forbids atheists from holding public office. These provisions are incompatible with the federal American constitution, but they have nevertheless not been formally repealed. As recently as this summer 2016, a Kentucky judge refused to marry an atheist couple because their vows failed to include any mention of "God."

But in the 20th and 21st centuries, atheophobia normally manifests itself in a more subtle form; it has evolved under the corrosive effect of reason. It has been transformed into a profound mistrust of atheist activism, associating the activist's frank criticism of religion with extreme repression — a threat to freedom of conscience — and with totalitarianism. To observe this, it is enough to read, for example, the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, 2007 recipient of the Templeton Prize which rewards public promotion of religion.

Whether explicit or subtle, atheophobia motivates all sorts of myths and distortions. Some say that atheism is a question of blind faith, just like religions. Yet the atheist does nothing more than abstain from belief. If atheism is a religion, then health is a disease, baldness is a hair colour, and refraining from astrology is a form of astrological practice. Some people accuse atheists of "fundamentalism" but this is nonsense, as the only fundamental principle of atheism is the simple affirmation of lack of belief in gods. This non-belief implies nothing either about what attitude one should adopt towards believers, or what particular form of government to prefer. Some say atheists are arrogant, but how could one possibly attain even an infinitesimal fraction of the arrogance of a religious leader who claims to have detailed intimate knowledge of the will of "God"?

Out of the Closet

Atheophobia is no less prevalent among nonbelievers. Even atheist spokespersons for secular organizations rarely dare to mention publicly their non-belief in order not to offend the exaggerated sensibilities of believers, as if the mere mention of atheism constituted a threat to freedom of belief. The negative connotations of the word “atheism” are often invoked to justify its omission from the names and statements of principles of such associations. But given the fact that the stigmatization of atheism is founded on religious intolerance, this situation constitutes a very solid argument *for* the use of the word.

Any individual who openly declares himself or herself an atheist is taking a stand against the suffocating silence which sustains atheophobia. Indeed, although atheists constitute a marginalized minority, atheism can be seen, paradoxically, as a universal value, because every person is an atheist with respect to the gods of others. To fight for the freedom of conscience of atheists is to defend that freedom for everyone.

Definition

In light of the above considerations, I propose the following detailed definition:

Atheophobia, noun: literally, fear of or antipathy towards atheists and/or atheism. To be more precise:

1. the belief that atheists are morally inferior to religious believers;
2. the belief that atheism leads necessarily to moral degradation;
3. the notion that atheism, especially atheist activism, leads necessarily to extreme repression of religion, to the persecution of religious believers and even to totalitarianism;
4. fear or shame of being identified as atheist.

Points 3 and 4, especially the latter, typify internalized atheophobia, that is, the form which manifests itself among non-believers themselves.

The use of the term “atheophobia” should in no way be construed as an attempt to limit free discussion of the reality it is meant to describe (as opposed to the term “Islamophobia” which was invented with the evident intention of stifling criticism of Islam). I use the term with the aim of opening a debate, not to forestall one, by explicitly identifying a social phenomenon which is almost omnipresent.

Conclusion

As atheists, we owe it to ourselves to take a major step which most of those who came before us were prevented from doing: coming out of the closet in order to affirm our atheism, fully, openly and without compromise. In so doing, we take aim at the most malicious of all religious beliefs, the myth of the moral inferiority of atheists, and, by weakening that odious old fiction, all other baseless religious beliefs will consequently be weakened as well.