

Religion Research Paper: Atheism

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Abstract

The object of this paper is to discuss the major beliefs and ideas that surround Atheism—whether the belief in the human mind and self-reliance, or the belief in science. The paper argues for Atheism as a belief system, but it also discusses the idea that Atheism might not be considered a belief system or a religion, but simply the absence of faith in a higher power. This paper also discusses Atheism in the classroom setting. There are several difficulties for atheist students in a traditional classroom. Since Atheism isn't usually a component of religious study, students may feel left out or even bullied. Teachers may also have a difficult time connecting to these students because they are quiet about their beliefs, or are hard to relate to based on their beliefs. However, Atheism can and should be integrated into the classroom setting and an educator can accomplish this by incorporating beliefs into discussion and being open and accepting of all student and parent perspectives.

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Atheism is the belief in nothing. This is a statement I have heard in my middle school and high school classrooms many times. This is a statement, I am ashamed to admit, that I have made myself. Saying that an atheist does not have a belief system is naïve and sadly, a common misconception. Atheism, by its simple definition, stems from the root word ‘theism’ which is the belief in a higher power or deity; thus, ‘a-theism’ is the lack of belief in this deity. It is not the belief in nothing. Rather, it is the absence of faith in a godlike figure and instead, a faith rooted in other sources.

There are several avenues of beliefs for atheists. Many believers, rather than resting their faith in a god, believe in the power of the human mind. In her essay “The Philosophy of Atheism,” author Emma Goldman, says that the major philosophy of Atheism is focused on the growth and continual development of the human mind (McGowan, 2012). She believes in the power of rational thought—that all truth and understanding of the world stems from the mind and understanding of one’s own mind. In her opinion, the mind is continually expanding, whereas the “philosophy of theism...is static and fixed” (McGowan, 2012). Her view expresses one of the major ideas behind Atheism—that humans are perfectly capable of running their own lives and gods only get in the way of humans taking responsibility for themselves. To explain this further, she says, “...the God idea express[es] a sort of spiritualistic stimulus to satisfy the fads and fancies of every shade of human weakness...Atheism in its negation of gods is at the same time the strongest affirmation of man, and through man, the eternal yea to life, purpose, and beauty” (McGowan, 2012).

Goldman, like many other atheists, believes that humans need to free themselves from a belief in gods in order to focus on the self and make the best out of life. Atheists that follow this

avenue of thought focus on the shortcomings of theism and other god-based religions, expressing that morals and ethics are always changing based on man—on rules, on social stigmas, on societies. They argue that right and wrong is changing and can only be determined by humans themselves, rather than a god or belief in a god that has only created (in the opinion of some atheists) self-righteous and hypocritical believers.

Goldman's beliefs are strong, but they are not the only beliefs that atheists may follow. Rather than focusing on the mind, some atheists argue for science over theism. Instead of simply negating theism, they argue for principles of research and reason.

What is difficult about Atheism in a classroom setting, first and foremost, is that there isn't a set belief. One atheist student may believe in the human mind or in science; another student may simply not believe in a god and have neither a reason why, nor a belief in anything else. As a teacher, working with students that simply do not agree with any form of higher power may prove to be a challenge because they might be unwilling to study religions or participate in classroom activities. It is difficult in general to engage students in something they do not follow nor agree with; it will be even harder engaging students in something religious-based or spiritual.

A lack of participation will obviously be a challenge, but beyond that, another challenge of teaching atheist students is that they are often neglected because the study of religion, more often than not, does not include Atheism as a topic. In a chapter entitled, "Invisible, Marginalized, and Stigmatized: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Atheist Students," authors Goodman and Mueller explain that, "Atheist students, like atheists in the broader society, are often stigmatized as immoral, evil, or god hating. Because of this stigmatization, it is common for atheists to hide that aspect of their identity, rendering them invisible. Educators contribute to that invisibility when they fail to include non-believing perspectives in religious

and spiritual development work with students, thus marginalizing students further” (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). As this section describes, atheist students are often left out of classroom study or discussions, merely based on the fact that Atheism is not usually recognized as a ‘belief’ by educational standards. Because the curriculum does not include Atheism, these students are often quiet about their beliefs—this is another challenge, because in order to support these students, a teacher must know their beliefs. If they are quiet then they will be, as the article states, invisible and marginalized (Goodman & Mueller, 2009).

There are other viewpoints on the classroom setting. Author Patrick West expresses in his article that Atheism should not be taught in the classroom because it is simply a disbelief in religion in all its forms (West, 2004). This notion can be a challenge for teachers because the teacher might want to include Atheism in the religious studies, but may be faced with an atheist student who is against this idea altogether. Other challenges that an atheist student may face are disrespect or bullying from classmates, or spiritual confusion. Because Atheism isn’t always incorporated into the school curriculum, when this belief system is brought to the attention of other classmates, it can become a negative, bullying situation. As for spiritual confusion, some atheist students may struggle with what they believe about themselves and about the world. They may be sure that no god exists, but might still be unsure about science or other avenues of faith. As a teacher, it will be difficult to guide these students without influencing them with personal beliefs. It can also be difficult to relate to them, based on the teacher’s personal religious background.

There are many challenges in working with atheist students; however, making sure that these students feel comfortable in the classroom is the ultimate goal. In order to be a successful teacher, one of the things I plan to do in my classroom is make sure that the learning

environment is comfortable for all students—this means discussing religion as more of spirituality and morality rather than a set system of beliefs. I also plan to include some information on Atheism. Despite the argument against having atheistic beliefs discussed in the classroom, I think allowing students to feel comfortable not believing in a god is just as important as allowing students to feel comfortable believing. In doing this, however, I will make my lessons unbiased in order to keep from preaching or advocating for a specific religion. I truly believe that students can benefit from understanding the perspectives of Atheism. According to an article about religious education, it is important for teachers to “take time to learn more about Atheism, including its history and principles, as well as related myths and misconceptions” (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Atheism needs to be ‘normalized’ in the classroom; in other words, not having faith in a god should be just as acceptable as having faith (Watson, 2008). For my future classroom, I will make sure that students feel comfortable and able to discuss their beliefs under the umbrella of spirituality and overall moral development.

There are many ways that I plan to accommodate and work with atheist students and parents in my future classroom. First, I will make sure to inform all students and parents about the religions that will be discussed in the classroom beforehand. There will be a note sheet of some sort that the students will take home with them, outlining the major topics of the semester (since I am an English teacher, the religions will mostly deal with different novels, for example: *The Scarlet Letter* and Puritanism). If I inform students and parents beforehand, I am opening the door for discussion and for parents to come to me with any concerns. I will also make sure that during classroom discussion, I stop students if they are expressing their beliefs to the point that it could potentially make others uncomfortable; I can also substitute open discussion for personal written responses to eliminate any issues. I also plan to keep my personal beliefs from interfering

with the classroom—this can be simply by not discussing my faith in front of students or parents. If there is a religious holiday, I will also make sure to keep this from interfering with the curriculum, for example, not having a classroom Christmas party so that students who don't celebrate Christmas won't feel uncomfortable.

Overall, atheists do not believe in a god or deity. Atheism is not necessarily considered a religion, nor is it always considered a belief by its followers; however, it is, in its own right, a faith that can and should be incorporated in the classroom setting. Being a future English teacher, I know that I may have to work with atheist students. I need to be open to their beliefs, bring them into the classroom discussion, and allow these students to feel comfortable and not invisible. There will be many challenges in working with students without faith in a higher power; however, my focus should be on educating the student as a person, not persuading him or her to believe in a certain thing. Challenges will make classes difficult at times, but if I am receptive to student beliefs, then I will have a successful and wonderfully diverse classroom.

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