



ISLAMIC INTUITIONISM: THE CASE AGAINST
ATHEISTIC EVIDENTIALISM

BY

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Philosophy, Ethics, and
Contemporary Issues

International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization
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JUNE 2014

ABSTRACT

Non-belief in God has existed alongside belief since the dawn of humanity, but has manifested itself in various forms throughout. In the contemporary period, atheism no longer is promoted as a belief in the non-existence of God, but as a mere disbelief given the supposed lack of evidence for His existence. This prompts contemporary atheists to reject belief in God as irrational and its proponents as unreasonable. Since the recent polemics by atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, many Muslims across the world have begun to become skeptical of their faith in Islam and are even abandoning it across the world. This research attempts to provide a solution to this problem by challenging contemporary atheistic thought through a systematic critique of its historical roots and dogmatic preconceptions. Through an in depth review of the relevant literature, we arrive at the understanding that contemporary atheism is driven by an ideology known as “scientism”, or the belief that knowledge can only be acquired through a scientific worldview. We then trace this belief to the early 1900’s when it was manifested as an ideology known as “logical positivism” and show how such a perspective was dealt with by philosophers in the past. Remarkably, there is very little difference between scientism and logical positivism, including the errors each view commits to, which are unjustified objectifications of reality and the abilities of human reason. We find that given these limitations of the atheist perspective, an alternative is necessary in understanding the rationale behind belief in God. Our solution is a reappraisal of a traditional Islamic argument for belief in God through intuition, which we have come to call “Islamic Intuitionism”.

ملخص البحث

لقد وجد الايمان بالله والاحاد جنباً إلى جنب منذ فجر الإنسانية ، وقد تجلى ذلك بأشكال مختلفة خلال العصور التاريخية المتعاقبة. اما في الفترة المعاصرة لم يعد يروج للإحاد كاعتقاد بعدم وجود الله ، ولكن بوصفه مجرد كفر نظراً لعدم توفر الأدلة المادية على وجوده سبحانه وتعالى كما يدعون. وبهذا فان الملحدون المعاصرون يرفضون فكرة وجود الخالق لكونها حسب رأيهم غير معقولة وان المؤمنين بالتالي يفتقرون المنطق والعقلانية. ومنذ انتشار وترويج المحاورات الانتقادية والمهجومية مؤخراً على الايمان من قبل الملحدين ، مثل ريتشارد دوكينز ، سام هاريس ، والراحل كريستوفر هيتشنز ، فان بعض من المسلمين في جميع أنحاء العالم قد أصبحوا يشككون في إيمانهم في الإسلام حتى ان منهم من انقلب على دينه. يحاول هذا البحث توفير حل لهذه المشكلة من خلال تحدي الفكر الملحد المعاصر بنقد منهجي لجذوره التاريخية و العقائدية. بعد الاستعراض المتعمق للأدبيات ذات الصلة وصلنا إلى فهم أن الإلحاد المعاصر تحركه أيديولوجيا معروفة باسم "العلموية" أو الاعتقاد بأن المعرفة لا يمكن الحصول عليها الا من خلال النظرة العلمية للعالم. وقد تتبعنا هذا المعتقد الى العام 1900 عندما تجلى ذلك كفكر معروف باسم "الايجابية المنطقية" ، واطهرنا كيف تم التعامل مع هذا المنظور من قبل الفلاسفة في الماضي. وهناك فرق ضئيل جدا بين العلموية و الايجابية المنطقية ، بما في ذلك أخطاء ترتبت على كل منهما، وتشمل الاعتراض غير المبرر لواقع قدرات العقل البشري على الاستنباط. لذا فاننا نرى بان هناك قصور في منظور الجهة الملحدة مما يستدعي استنباط منظور بديل لادراك مفهوم الايمان بالله. الحل الذي لدينا هو الدعوة الى إعادة تقييم الجدل الإسلامي التقليدي وراء الاعتقاد في الله سبحانه وتعالى من خلال الحدس. لذا قد سمينا هذا البديل "الحدسية الاسلامية".

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Philosophy, Ethics, and Contemporary Issues.

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Supervisor

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Philosophy, Ethics, and Contemporary Issues.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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Signature.....

Date.....

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*Dedicated to the Most Gracious and Most Merciful Allah and His Prophet,
Muhammad (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) the greatest mercy of this world and the
example for all mankind.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first wish to thank Allah for His infinite Mercy and Compassion towards me throughout my life; from the moment I was born, to the moment I learned of the truth from His Prophet (*sallallahu alayhi wasallam*), to the present day, for which I have much to be thankful for despite being a poor and undeserving servant.

I am also tremendously grateful for my loving parents, Vallelyn and Dan Mackaben, whom Allah has given me, for whom without I would not have been able to succeed without their support, both emotionally and financially throughout my life and studies. I am also tremendously grateful for my in-laws, Haton Bee Ismail and Abdul Majid Yusuff for all their love, support, and duas. I pray that I have made them all proud.

I am also truly blessed and thankful for my loving wife, Haseena Abdul Majid, whom Allah has gifted me with, for whom I am not worthy of in all of her devotion and love to our religion – for I have always seen her as my better half. Without her love, support, and motivation, I would not be the man I am today. Her example has served as a major influence and guide in my life for which I trust will also be the light that guides our future children, insh'Allah.

The blessings I have been gifted further extends to my spiritual guide, Shaykh Umar Vadillo, who brought me out of the darkness of my liberal understanding of Islam and brought me back to the Sunnah of our Prophet (*sallallahu alayhi wasallam*). To be in his presence alone has made me a better Muslim.

I am also immensely grateful for my best friends, Imran Karim, Kazem Behbahani, and the late Josh Melvin, whom Allah gave me in my greatest times of need for brotherhood and support during some of my worst trials. Without these brothers, I would have made far worse decisions in my life than they allowed me. They are truly my family. My thanks and love extends equally to their families.

I am also extremely grateful to those who guided me intellectually and in matters of adab, such as Professors Martin Tracey, Bernard Toussaint, Patrick Flynn, Syed Mohamed Ajmal Bin Abdul Razak Al-Aidruss, Shaykh Uthman Muhammady, Ahmad Yousif, Amir Zekrgoo, Abdullah al-Ahsan, Kamal Hassan, and Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi. All of these amazing figures deserve to be credited for my intellectual and ethical development throughout the years.

Finally, I am grateful to my generous sponsors whom assisted me throughout my studies in Malaysia, including but not limited to, my grandparents, Mohammad Aslam, Nouman Ali Khan, and Mohammed Sayeed. May Allah reward them greatly for their kindness and hope for my future.

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INTRODUCTION

Atheism is as old as religion itself, spanning the entirety of human history as an extreme minority position among societies. It has been mentioned in the earliest of religious texts, such as the Bible as castigating the “fool who says in his heart, 'there is no God’”¹ and even the early philosophical schools of the Greeks – the Atomists – who saw only the world as being governed by the smallest particles of matter. It then gained political power during the French Revolution and the beginning of the Enlightenment under the direction of Robespierre and the “Cult of Reason”, only later to be extinguished by the blood of all those it claimed in the name of rationality. It reared itself again to the height of power during the 20th century and was manifested as the 'state doctrine' within Stalinist Russia, Mao's China and many more. Within academia it reigned supreme in Western philosophy departments, spearheaded by professors advocating a position where the natural was the only reality. Now, in our present time, it has manifested itself as a new intellectual and political grassroots movement in the form of popular books and reformed arguments in favor of – once again – an abolishment of 'poisonous religion'. The 'irrationality of religion', to these new atheists, is the root of all evil and the 'Enlightenment Project' needs to be completed.

Richard Dawkins, the Oxford biologist and author of the bestselling *The God Delusion* sees religion as a harmful byproduct of human evolution. The neuroscientist Sam Harris, in his bestseller *The End of Faith*, regards religion (and particular Islam) as a dangerous belief based not in a total disregard for reason which promulgates mass violence across the world. The late award winning journalist, Christopher Hitchens, in

¹ Ps. 14:1 NASB

his bestselling book *God is Not Great* sees religion as literally “poisoning everything” that it comes in contact with, from which no good can come. All of these views are destructive to the general beliefs of Muslims and theists at large and have had an immense impact on perspectives towards religion and God.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Islam has interacted with atheism on a number of occasions within its history, but it would be fair to say that it has not dealt with it nearly as much as its Western Christian counterpart – the culture and arguments of the latter seems to have dealt with atheism far more than the former, perhaps due to Christendom’s earlier acceptance of secularism. It can be seen that this is the case even today, as most literature in philosophy and religion that deals with the subject of atheism comes from Western non-Muslim sources.

Perhaps, however, this trend (or lack thereof) in the Muslim world to interact with atheism needs to change. Recently, a survey conducted by *WIN Gallup International*, concluded that in 2012, 5% of the people in such places as Saudi Arabia considered themselves “convinced atheists”.² The fact that atheism is *rising* in what are considered Islamically conservative countries should shock the Muslim world at large.

While there are most likely many factors accounting for this rise in irreligiosity in the Muslim world such as, political grievances, general disapproval of the way religion is interpreted in certain regions, to even confusion and strife due to certain

² Ijaz Shafi Gilani, Rushna Shahid and Irene Zuettel, eds., *Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism 2012* (Win Gallup International, 2012), accessed August 03, 2013, <http://www.wingia.com/web/files/news/14/file/14.pdf>

forms of cultural integration, the following research wishes to focus primarily on what it considers one – a lack of appropriate intellectual arguments.

As the Muslim world is continuously facing the imposition and exportation of Western ideals and cultures, it must also face their various perspectives and arguments, all of which may have, and seem to have had, an enormous influence.

The arguments employed today by atheists are by and large, *epistemological* and question the *rationality* of belief in God before His Existence. They are more concerned with undermining any reason to explain His existence rather than challenging said explanations head on. This approach is most popularly supported by a theory of knowledge known as “evidentialism”:

[T]he view that the epistemic justification³ of a belief is determined by the quality of the believer's evidence for the belief. Disbelief and suspension of judgment also can be epistemically justified. The doxastic attitude⁴ that a person is justified in having is the one that fits the person's evidence.”⁵

This epistemology is usually further understood as defining 'evidence' as that brought forth by scientific reasoning, manifesting in what is called “scientism.” As such, atheists claim that it is irrational to believe in God because of their scientific assumption that there is lack of evidence to support such a being's existence.

Those who have employed arguments against Evolutionary theory and used more classical arguments have mistakenly believed that they have met this evidentiary standard set by atheists. It will be argued, however, that these approaches have fallen into a trap of premeditated unfair standards to those attempting to meet them, since the contemporary atheists' perspective on what counts as 'evidence' is automatically exclusionary of any supernatural claims. More importantly, the very foundation of

³ Epistemically justified means “justified as knowledge”.

⁴ A doxastic attitude is an attitude of belief or disbelief towards a proposition.

⁵ Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, “Evidentialism,” *Evidentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004.), 83.

contemporary atheistic evidentialism itself is flawed and self-defeating. The following research hopes to offer a critical analysis of current popular atheistic evidentialism and a new systematic philosophical response to this intellectual problem in the Muslim world.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

This study has been conducted for the sake of combating the contemporary rise of non-religion, or anti-religion, across the globe – particularly within the Muslim community. While Christian philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, have been producing systematic responses to atheism in the past few decades, Muslim philosophers (the few that there are), have been lagging behind in providing similar sorts of arguments. Hence, this study hopes to bring about an awareness of a principle objection made by atheists against belief in God, while offering a response that suits the current philosophical-intellectual environment in hopes to curb the rising non-belief and skepticism among the Muslim community at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following research has been conducted by reviewing the philosophical and polemical literature surrounding contemporary atheism and its objections against belief in God. The primary literature used for this study is as follows:

Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. London: Yale University Press, 2009 was perhaps the first book read by the researchers that opened up their understanding to the dangers of contemporary atheist thought. Written from the perspective of an atheist communist, Terry Eagleton attacks

both Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens for their theological, historical, and scientific ignorance showing how their perspectives ultimately lead to tyranny in thought and inhumane political practices. He traces much of their thinking to the historically oppressive regimes that attempted to govern society on the basis of “reason alone” and also ties their ideas in with contemporary problems associated with anti-religious sentiments, such as the failing and overbearing capitalist system. While Eagleton does not touch up on the philosophical aspects of this research, his work is the primary motivation behind our critique.

Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996 is another influential work that has influenced us greatly in our understanding of science and the nature of knowledge. Kuhn’s work was essential to overturning the understanding of science as ‘objective’ and also was helpful in limiting its scope in regards to metaphysical concepts, which are solely the subjects of philosophical inquiry. Kuhn also introduced a number of concepts which are later utilized in the critique of atheistic evidentialism, particularly the concept of paradigms and how ideas are actually part of a coherent, unfounded structure of beliefs.

Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1972): 29-49 is an essential piece of literature for this study, since it is the first formal philosophical taxonomy on the nature of atheism written from the standpoint of an atheist philosopher. Flew is the first to distinguish between “negative” and “positive” atheism, which helped to reformat the discussion between atheists and theists (in favour of the former) till the present period. The differences between the two positions are evident in *how* non-belief is considered. Negative atheism promotes an attitude of disbelief by merely believing that the theist position is

unsubstantiated, whereas positive atheism believes that god simply does not exist. The positions are different in that the former argues from an epistemological viewpoint of establishing knowledge and rationality, while the latter argues from an ontological viewpoint of establishing existence. Both however rely primarily on a platform that requires justifiable evidence.

Flew's essay put theists on the defensive indefinitely in having to prove the existence of God, requiring the negative atheists to hold no burden of proof for their position. Since then, atheists have often claimed that the burden of proof is exclusively on the theist and that they hold no positive claims.

George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1979 is another important book that argues along the lines of Flew, but is more forceful in distinguishing the various forms of atheism. Smith does not believe that there is such a thing as "positive atheism" and that all atheists make no claims revolving around the existence of or knowledge about God. Even the belief that "theism is irrational" is not a positive position for Smith, but a natural response to a theist's lack of evidence. Smith also argued that the only meaningful explanations that could be given for reality were those that were directly taken from the natural (phenomenal) world and the scientific worldview. His views would ultimately be adopted by contemporary atheists in the form of 'scientism'.

Cafer S. Yaran, *Islamic Thought On The Existence of God: With Contributions From Contemporary Western Philosophy of Religion*. Washington, D.C.: Council For Research In Values and Philosophy, 2003 is an important study and relied on heavily to explicate the various classical approaches to atheism from the traditional Islamic perspective. Yaran traces three major arguments in the Islamic theological and philosophical tradition: The Cosmological Argument, the Teleological Argument, and

the Argument from Religious Experience. Each of these has various forms argued from different figures in Islamic history. His study is utilized to make a brief survey of all the traditional responses.

Stephen P. Schwartz, *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy: From Russell to Rawls*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 is an extremely important work in this study and makes up the backbone of Chapter Two. Through this recent historical expose of Analytical Philosophy, one is able to trace the beginnings of contemporary atheistic evidentialism through the thinking of Bertrand Russell till the movement known as “Logical Positivism”. Drawing from the framework of this study, several primary sources are utilized to add to its historical overview. Schwartz explains in great detail the evolution of Analytical Philosophy up until and passed the logical positivist movement and ties in several figures and their ideas helpful to our study.

Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science*. London: Routledge, 1991 is a necessary work in that it helps us to understand scientism as a movement. This source was primarily used as a guide rather than citation material. It assisted in understanding the basic ideas of scientism and allowed us to look to other sources for the ideologies origins.

Curtis White, *The Science Delusion: Asking Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2013 is another work that attacks the notion of science as an ideology fit for all knowledge. White argues that such a conception depreciates other things valued in life, such as art and beauty, and calls for a return to a culture that limits science in determining what is valued in everyday life. White’s book is a direct response to contemporary atheists such as Richard Dawkins and mocks the latter’s book *The God Delusion*.

Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*. London: Coronet, 2012 is another book titles the “Science Delusion” and also attacks contemporary atheism. Sheldrake critiques the current popular idolization of science as the only path to knowledge and analyses eleven principle doctrines of this worldview. Adding several historical examples and studies of peer reviewed science that go against contemporary myths perpetuated by the scientific community – ironically – Sheldrake takes on those who see science as the greatest form of knowledge and calls them out on their uncritical perspective.

Muhammad Naqib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995 is the primary reference of Chapter Three and is helpful in offering the alternative approach to atheist evidentialism. Al-Attas’ ideas are foundational to our research and his explication of the different forms of intuition and how they operate are necessary for critique of contemporary atheists’ thought.

Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1998, was a helpful guide to Al-Attas’ major ideas, for which without our interpretation of his main work would have been confused or inconsistent.

Arif, Syamsuddin. “Intuition and its Role in Ibn Sina’s Epistemology.” *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)*, 5 no. 1 (2000): 95-126 was a helpful guide in understanding the definition and concept of intuition in Islamic thought. Syamsuddin offers a comparative analysis

between other conceptions and Ibn Sina's. This work is also helpful in that al-Attas also derives some of his thoughts on intuition from Ibn Sina.

METHODOLOGY

The method of this study will revolve around a critical analysis of contemporary atheist evidentialism based on a review of the philosophical and historical literature. The atheistic evidentialists' epistemology will be traced from its historical origin to the most current arguments against belief in God, as supported by George Smith. This history will then be *deconstructed*, which is a continental philosophical technique – popularized by Heidegger and Derrida – of dismantling traditional lines of thinking. A proper definition of our methodology is stated in the following:

Such a critical conception of tradition is what Heidegger calls the *Destruktion* (de-structuring) or *Abbau* (dismantling) of the history of metaphysics, words that the young Derrida sought to render into French as *deconstruction*. The controversial concept of deconstruction should be approached uncontroversially, then, and thought of as an attempted critical dismantling of the tradition in terms of what has been unthought within it and what remains to be thought by it.⁶

While deconstruction can be looked at as an entirely negative approach, it should be remembered, in the words of Derrida, that, “deconstruction... is not negative. Destabilization is required for ‘progress’ as well”.⁷ However, there is some baggage pertaining to the term ‘deconstruction’ as it has been for some time now used to infer that it is a *never-ending process* that can even be applied to itself. It should be emphasized that the method of deconstruction utilized for this research rests on the idea that there are in fact real truths to be uncovered and that deconstruction is *not* a non-goal oriented process. Hence, the method will be renamed a process of

⁶ Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68-69.

⁷ David Wood, *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics After Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 132.

“Theoretical Unveiling” – assuming that there is something behind the ‘veil’ of the self-proclaimed constructs of atheists; the truth of what has yet to be revealed. This is closely tied to the *sufi* term *kashf*, but is aimed at intellectual propositions and theories rather than self-purity.

After this process of ‘unveiling’, an alternative will be offered which the researchers call “Islamic Intuitionism”; a contemporary argument from religious experience based in the Islamic tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

ATHEISM AND ISLAM: TAXONOMY AND CLASSICAL RESPONSES

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge...All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons.

- Christopher Hitchens¹

Were they created without any agent? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No! They do not have faith...Even if they saw a piece of heaven falling down on them, they would say, 'Just a heap of clouds,' so leave them, Prophet, until they face the Day when they will be thunderstruck, the Day when their snares will be of no use to them, when they will receive no help.

- Al Qur'an (52: 35-46)

WHAT IS ATHEISM?

Whether or not God exists has been a question pondered and debated throughout human civilizations.² Long before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the revelation of the Qur'an, Judaism and its scriptures (the Torah and Talmud) – thousands of years prior – acknowledged the phenomenon of non-belief in an incredulous manner: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt,

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 64-65

² For the sake of brevity, the concept of 'God' here will primarily be in reference to the interpretations given by those considered followers of monotheism: belief in a literally Eternal, All-Knowing, All-Powerful, Absolute Existence distinct and transcendent from the natural world – which is contingent on such a Being. It may also be interpreted to include deistic (non-religious) and polytheistic (multiple deities) concepts. The researcher will take this as a given and hesitates to include pantheistic depictions – that God is the material world itself, or is manifested in humanity – given that this research argues for a very distinct perspective and views the former's definition a meaningless repetition of what they actually mean. Hence, these conceptions will also be considered 'atheistic'. The term 'God' will also be used as a general concept in conformity with the given definition, substituted for 'Allāh' when referring specifically to the traditional Islamic understanding.

they do abominable deeds, there is no one who does good.”³ Other ancient religions have even disregarded belief in God as part of their theology, such as traditional Buddhism⁴ and some early Hindu schools of thought – particularly the Mīmāṃsā School, which saw no need for a God to explain the existence of their holy scriptures (the *Vedas*).⁵ In general, it would appear that non-belief in God has existed side-by-side with belief throughout the entirety of human history and would eventually come to be called '*atheism*'.

'Atheism' is derived from the French *athéisme* (16th century) and originates from the ancient Greek noun *ἀθεότης* (*atheotēs*) – a combination between the privative *ἀ* and *θεότης*⁶ – literally translated “without god”. It was first uttered as a pejorative⁷ towards those considered in need of “severe censure and moral condemnation”⁸ and would famously be used in this connotation during the trial of Socrates, when one of his accusers, Melitus, had accused him of “corrupting the youth” and “encouraging them not to believe in the city's gods” because of the former's constant probing of people's beliefs. The term would later evolve to be rightly applied in this sense to those who rejected a particular conception of the divine, specifically Jews and Christians assimilated into Hellenic Greek society.⁹ Future debates among various religions, such as between Christians and Muslims, would exemplify similar usage – both sides exchanging the term 'atheist' because of theological disagreements on the

³ Ps. 14:1 NASB

⁴ Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 50.

⁵ Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 42.

⁶ In ancient Greek, 'ἀ' was placed in front of words as a sign of negation.

⁷ The adjective used in conjunction with this term was *ἄθεος* (*atheos*).

⁸ Anders Bjoern Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (London: Gyldendal, 1922), 6.

⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*. (New York: Doubleday, 2004.), 8.

nature of God.¹⁰ The term would continue to be used as a general insult, which no one would dare to ascribe to themselves or the philosophy they held.¹¹

The contemporary usage of the term – to denote a universal and explicit disbelief in God¹² – would first be used around 1630 as European culture was beginning to transition into modernity leading to many more noticeably outspoken individuals willing to profess their non-conformity to traditional society.¹³ However, the definition would primarily be used in the positive sense as an overt rejection of God's existence and would not cover the various other ways in which atheism manifested itself. It would take many more centuries for this label of non-belief to be explicated in full and would begin with a British atheist philosopher by the name of Antony Flew (d. 2010), considered the most famous defender of atheism of his time.¹⁴ In his 1971 lecture at the University of Arizona, Flew's ideas would come to be called the *Presumption of Atheism*. His basic ideas can be summed up as followed:

Whereas nowadays the usual meaning of 'atheist' in English is 'someone who asserts that there is no such being as God', I want the word to be understood here much less positively. I want the originally Greek prefix 'a' to be read in the same way in 'atheist' as it customarily is read in such other Greco-English words as 'amoral', 'atypical', and 'asymmetrical'. In this interpretation an atheist becomes: not someone who positively asserts the non-existence of God; but someone who is simply not a theist. Let us, for future ready reference, introduce the labels 'positive atheism' for the former doctrine and 'negative atheism' for the latter.¹⁵

Utilizing the privative 'a' in the words 'atheism' and 'atheist', Flew would be the first to formally distinguish between the *belief* in God's non-existence and the

¹⁰ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993), 69.

¹¹ Armstrong, *A History of God*, 36.

¹² *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd ed.*, s.v. "Atheism", accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref9780199541430-e-278?rkey=bsU4Y8&result=279>

¹³ Hyman, Gavin. *A Short History of Atheism*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.), 4-5

¹⁴ Flew, Antony, and Roy Abraham Varghese. *There Is A God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. (New York: HarperOne, 2007), vii

¹⁵ Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1972): 32.

mere *lack of belief* in God's existence. However, this appears to be a mere semantic trick as there seems to be little difference between *believing* that God doesn't exist and *lacking* the belief that He does. For Flew however, a positive position is a substantial belief with arguments in its favour, whereas a negative position is that which simply is unaware of or considers the positive position put forth as unsubstantiated. In the context of the positive proposition "God exists", the negative atheist would simply respond with "prove it", rather than contradict the notion, which sounds curiously like agnosticism.¹⁶ Flew would respond to the contrary:

The introduction of this new sense of the word 'atheism' may appear to be a piece of perverse Humpty-Dumptyism, going arbitrarily against established common usage. 'Whyever', it could be asked, 'don't you make it not the presumption of atheism but the presumption of agnosticism?' But this pardonably petulant reaction fails to appreciate just how completely noncommittal I intend my negative atheist to be. For in this context the agnostic - and it was, of course, in this context that Thomas Henry Huxley first introduced the term - is by the same criterion of established common usage someone who, having entertained the existence of God as at least a theoretical possibility, now claims not to know either that there is or that there is not such a being. To be in this ordinary sense an agnostic you have already to have conceded that there is, and that you have, a legitimate concept of God; such that, whether or not this concept does in fact have application, it theoretically could. But the atheist in my peculiar interpretation, unlike the atheist in the usual sense, has not as yet and as such conceded even this.¹⁷

For Flew, the negative atheist is someone who has not even been convinced of the legitimacy of the proposition in question or who is otherwise unaware of what the concept entails. His semantic play has drastic and substantial consequences on the nature of discussion between atheists and those who believe in God (theists):

What the protagonist of the presumption of atheism, in my sense, wants to show is: that the debate about the existence of God ought be conducted in a particular way; and that the issue should be seen in a certain perspective. His thesis about the onus of proof involves that it is up to the theist: first, to introduce and to defend his proposed concept of

¹⁶ The belief that the concept of God cannot be proven to be true or false at a given time or indefinitely.

¹⁷ Flew, "Presumption of Atheism," 30.