



The Trend of Western Atheistic Approaches since the Beginning of the Modern Era

Hamidreza Ayatollahy*

Emeritus Professor, Department of Philosophy, Allameh Tabataba'ii University, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article type:
**Research
Article**

Received:
2024/12/05
Accepted:
2025/01/06

In the modern era of the West, various atheistic approaches have emerged, each reflecting the philosophical perspectives of its time. This article aims to outline the evolution of these diverse approaches and demonstrate the challenges each has posed to theism. Typically, these challenges have allowed theism to refine its perspectives and rebuild its beliefs more logically. The article will then illustrate how theism has developed along this path. I identify this process as a nine-stage journey, each of which will be explained in this article. Ultimately, it will be shown how each of these challenges has become a chapter in the philosophy of religion, and the areas in which philosophical discussions about religion have been shaped will be explored. As a result, the article will present the 13 key themes of the philosophy of religion that have emerged following these challenges.

Keywords: atheism, theism, modern era, philosophy of religion, religious challenges.

Cite this article: Ayatollahy, Hamidreza (2025). The Trend of Western Atheistic Approaches since the Beginning of the Modern Era. *The Quarterly Journal of Western Philosophy*. Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 13-28.

DOI: 10.30479/wp.2025.21287.1132

© The Author(s).

Publisher: Imam Khomeini International University



* **E-mail:** ayatollahy@atu.ac.ir

Introduction

The structuring of religious propositions is not of much interest in the philosophy of religion. Rather, it only deals with the questions and problems that exist in the context of those propositions. That is, the philosophy of religion is "problem-oriented". Usually, there are problems related to religious beliefs, and arguments are made to show that the problem calls religious beliefs into question. On the other hand, some arguments are presented to solve that problem. Philosophers of religion analyze these arguments logically. These problems are usually raised by some philosophers who did not exist before. These problems, one after the other, create a process that we can call the historical trend of the issues of the philosophy of religion.

The evaluation of the problems is not limited to an academic discussion, but it encourages some people, for various reasons, to create opposing beliefs by accepting it as a religious failure. It means that these beliefs are against religious beliefs. Based on these problems, some believe that religious beliefs are wrong or that religious beliefs should be rejected. These beliefs have a wide range and are of various types. Some people deny monotheistic belief in God. Some take other religious attitudes other than belief in God. Some believe that theism is unable to prove its beliefs, and therefore, there is no reason to accept the beliefs that theism presents. Some say there is no God at all. For example, J. L. Schellenberg says that "in philosophy, the atheist is not just someone who doesn't accept theism, but more strongly someone who opposes it." In other words, it is "the denial of theism, the claim that there is no God" (2019: 5). Some people take an agnostic position and say that we do not know or cannot know that there is a God. Some argue that there is no God, not that there is no room for believing in God. For example, Robin Le Poi Devin writes, "An *atheist* denies the existence of a personal, transcendent creator of the universe, rather than one who simply lives his life without reference to such a being" (1996: xvii). There are other types of these approaches. In this section, we call all these beliefs atheistic beliefs. So, atheism has had various forms and includes a wide range of approaches. However, in this paper, we consider the broad meaning of atheism, of which all the above cases are examples.

Due to different types of stances towards theism, we are faced with a wide range of atheism, which has appeared in various forms throughout history. As a result, after examining the various positions taken in this field and its historical trend, a more comprehensive meaning of atheism and agnosticism can be obtained. So, if in this paper a type of thinking is referred to as atheism, then the strict type is not intended, and it should not be referred only to that type of belief that, for example, there is no God.

The philosophy of religion, which is a discipline in the modern era and after, conducts its investigations mostly around the types of views that have emerged since the beginning of the modern era. So, different approaches from the beginning of the modern era in the field of atheism will be our attention. In my opinion, one of the currents that have helped theism has been atheistic views. Theism has usually suffered from doctrinal deviations, epistemic deficiencies, superficiality,

inconsistent beliefs, and even superstitions. Many critics of theism have shown with their analysis that some common beliefs in the usual types of theism have problems or shortcomings. In the face of these criticisms, theists have tried to correct their set of beliefs, fix the problems of their views, and build a new and stronger structure of religious beliefs. Criticisms that atheistic approaches have presented can cause the beliefs of theists to be trimmed from semi-correct beliefs and semi-superstitions. Also, these criticisms can make many ambiguities that exist in religious beliefs and their explanations become clearer and more accurate day by day. The set of these activities has led to the growth and development of theism.

Based on the history of critical encounters with religious propositions, different approaches can be seen in this field, which I have categorized into the following nine stages based on my personal opinion. This does not mean that these approaches are all of them, but other people can either provide another division or show other approaches that I have not noticed. In the following, I will try to show each approach by explaining the axes of each claim and its arguments, as long as it does not lead to a long discussion. But another important point is to show how useful this approach has been for theism.

To understand the problems of interest in the philosophy of religion, the contexts of those problems must be shown. Then we can understand what the philosophy of religion considers to be its main problems that it must evaluate. By analyzing different approaches to atheism, we can understand many of these problems. In this way, it will be determined what basic questions we should examine and what the background of these questions.

Different approaches to atheism since the beginning of the modern era in Western thought

In my opinion, different approaches to atheistic views can be shown historically in the following stages.

The first stage, abandoning traditional approaches to religion and ignoring religious authorities

During the Renaissance, with the development of humanistic views, some intellectual and artistic activities ignored religious values and, in a way, questioned the official religion and the authority of the church. But this did not mean that they ignored some religious beliefs, such as the existence of God and his presence in the natural process of the world. Rather, on the contrary, instead of the authority of the church, all kinds of religious approaches centered on human reason were brought to their attention. This approach is the same deism that was noticed by some scientists and thinkers in the 17th century, like Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who lived from 1671 to 1713. Michael B. Gill (2021) proposes his position: "Shaftesbury's position on religious belief has negative and positive aspects. The negative aspect is opposition to belief based on revelation. The positive aspect is the affirmation of a perfectly good God based on

observation of the natural order”.

Cartesian subjectivism gave the centrality of human thought to the subject. From then on, instead of explaining the world, "the world from my point of view" was analyzed. Humanism was formed with this kind of epistemological view and became the religion of the modern era. The reference for recognizing the truth was the subject and the self-founded reason of the human being decided on this issue. Even the explanation of God was changed to "God from my point of view," so that I had to prove him with my reason. Each of the philosophers of this era, based on their interpretation of this type of God, believed in Him. Therefore, each of these philosophers was interested in certain characteristics of God. God, according to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Malebranche, Locke, Barclay, Newton, and Pascal, each had characteristics that they considered based on their philosophical attitude. Such philosophical interpretations of God were more important in terms of belief in his existence and nothing more. It seems that believing in God is a kind of philosophical attitude toward the truth of the world. But this God was not a God who should be worshiped and ruled over everything, especially human relationships. This God was not considered the resourceful of the universe and the guide of human life. In other words, during this era, God's Lordship was ignored and even denied. So, I call this type of atheism "atheism in God's Lordship".

However, the authority of human reason was also faced with new scientific findings that increased the power of human explanation and showed that it can make scientific predictions based on that. For this reason, special attention was paid to the relationship between this type of God and science. Science made some explanations in which the role of God could not be seen, so it encouraged some to show God in situations where the explanatory power of science was impaired. It was in this way that the "God of gaps" appeared. This view reflected a misunderstanding of God prevalent at the time, which saw divine intervention (God of the Gaps) in unexplained phenomena as evidence of God's existence.

This distinct approach from official theism caused the religious authorities to reconsider the structure of their beliefs or reform unnecessary or unjustified religious teachings, and make reforms either in the form of the church reform movement or in the form of other Catholic changes, and make them more reasonable. It also urged theists to consider scientific findings and scientific laws in their views. If they present a theological view, it should also consider scientific facts.

So, in my opinion, in this era, the approach of atheism in God's Lordship emerged.

The second stage, the denial of all kinds of argumentational viewpoints in the theism of the first era

Since in the previous era, human self-based reason was the authority in regulating religious beliefs instead of official religious authorities, there were many attempts with this rational approach, religious beliefs that were centered more on the existence of God, were to be shown in the form of justified arguments.

On the other hand, by mentioning some defects in scientific explanations, it is supposed to be a place for God. But during this period, the arguments for the existence of God, which were the philosophical basis of theism and deism, were questioned by Kant's and Hume's fundamental criticisms. With these criticisms, the efforts made by theists to justify their views became fruitless. Although Kant himself believed in God as the basis of ethics and could understand God within the scope of ethics, he showed that any theoretical way to prove God's existence was unsuccessful. Although the failure of arguments to prove God cannot be proof of denying God's existence and its logical result is agnosticism, the failure of theism in this context cast doubt on the existence of God. Even though the inability of arguments for the existence of God in rationally explaining his existence can only lead to skepticism and agnosticism, it still leads some to conclude the non-existence of God from this inability. Some thinkers like McLaughlin conclude that the absence of grounds supporting a positive existential statement (like "God exists"—however, "God" is understood) is a good reason to believe that the statement is false (McLaughlin, 1984). The atheism of this era was due to the doubts that arose in the intellectual foundations of theism.

On the other hand, the God of gaps, which was an incorrect explanation of God's presence in the world and his mode of action, was gradually pushed aside with the development of scientific explanations. As science advanced, the "God of the gaps" found diminishing relevance. For instance, when Laplace demonstrated the movement of the Earth and planets through physical laws and addressed the unknown factors from Newton's era, he presented his comprehensive work to Napoleon without mentioning God. When asked why he omitted any reference to God, Laplace responded that he no longer required this hypothesis.

In this way, the God of gaps also lost his role. So, in this era, belief in God was also questioned from this point of view. These two characteristics, i.e., the negation of the proofs of God and the abandonment of the God of gaps, were the main characteristics of atheism of this era.

Kant's fundamental criticisms of the arguments for the existence of God were still accepted by many modern thinkers for 200 years after him.

Following these criticisms, a theoretical despair arose among theists. This made them present other ways to justify their belief in God. Schleiermacher brought religious experience to the field. He tried to show that religious experience, which is an inner state, no longer needs the theoretical proof of God. He paid attention to the realities of God's presence within religious people and paid serious attention to a new element called religious experience, which opened a new way to believe in God. After him, the case of religious experience was developed by others such as William James, so one of the elements of theism after this period became the issue of religious experience.

The third stage, the period of doubt in the cause of believing in God

In my opinion, the 19th century was the peak of atheistic activities. In this era,

instead of questioning the *reason for* proving God, the *cause of* believing in God was questioned. These causes were mostly questioned from a psychological, sociological, anthropological, or economic point of view. Because of the emptying of theists' hands from theoretical arguments for the existence of God, and the rejection of God of gaps, and because of the design of religious experience in this era, theists emphasized the reality of God's presence within the religious people. The atheists, despite all their theoretical efforts, could not seriously influence and lead many people to abandon their religious beliefs.

Each of the thinkers of this era somehow created some doubt in the realness of such beliefs. Feuerbach considered the belief in God as a result of the projection of human desires to reach infinite power and knowledge. The attributes of the Christian God are determined by the most fundamental wishes of the Christian believer (Gooch, 2023). He showed, with this anthropological and psychological analysis, the reason for believing in God to be illusory.

Based on some Christian description of trinity as The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, Freud (1989, 1990) considered the belief in God to be the result of the Oedipus complex, and also the importance of the existence of totems in primitive societies, which had a unifying role in society, and the resulting idolatry as the source of belief in God, which is this totem in its most advanced state that he saw in Christian theism. Through psychological (Oedipus complex) and sociological (totem) analyses, Freud considered belief in God to be a natural reaction of people to their circumstances, not belief in something beyond material nature.

Marx considered belief in God (as well as ethics and aesthetics) to be affected by the economic infrastructure of society. He considered these beliefs to be influenced by the production instruments that determined the economy of each era, in his opinion. Therefore, he reduced the role of religion and its beliefs to the level of a painkiller and drug in society. "Religion is the opium of the masses", he said ([1843] 1970). Therefore, in his opinion, religious beliefs arise and change under the influence of social and economic factors, and cannot have originality.

August Comte thought that belief in God is caused by human ignorance of the causes of nature's relationships and events. In his opinion, mankind has gone through three eras: religion, philosophy, and science. Man, firstly, used to analyze world events with religious justifications. Then, with the intellectual development of mankind, philosophy took charge of this issue, and religion was gradually abandoned. Finally, in his opinion, with the growth of human understanding, the scientific laws that were discovered one after another explained the changes in the world. So, in his opinion, Philosophical explanations of influential factors in world changes, like Aristotelian explanations, lost their value. This is what was previously stated by Francis Bacon in rejecting final and effective causes to explain the cause of natural events. He stated that the era of believing in religious beliefs has already passed, and with his crude positivism, August Comte believed that science had eliminated religion.

Science gained such a wide scope in the 19th century that valuable explanations of various sciences were presented one after another. In this era, science also had

another stunning effect called technology, which was able to create more prosperity for mankind. These new powers that humans get with science captivated him, while religion could not provide any new achievement for man. Therefore, there was no place for religion in this era. This was an aspect of the atheism of the 19th century.

On the other hand, with his theory of evolution, Darwin dealt another blow to theism. The theory of evolution considered God's conscious presence in the world unnecessary and tried to show that nature, without the need for such consciousness, without awareness of its processes, has caused all kinds of evolution due to accidents and conflicts for survival over millions of years. This evolutionary analysis dealt a fundamental blow to the teleological argument, which was still of interest until then.

Evolutionary atheism, which emphasized the self-sufficiency of nature and its laws, raised a serious question that is still being debated. The main impact of the theory of evolution was on Christian beliefs. The structure of Christian beliefs emphasized the creation of Adam at once, the original sin, the fall of Adam, the incarnation of Christ, and his redemptive death in this process. The teachings of the Bible were such that it was assumed that no more than ten thousand years had passed since the creation of the earth. The hypothesis of evolution questioned the entire process of the universe based on Christian teachings. Therefore, this hypothesis created a type of atheism that harmed both the belief in the existence of God (general atheism) and doubted specific Christian teachings (specific atheism). This kind of atheism made some atheists like Michael Martin (1990: 463–464) join to define “atheist” as someone who lacks the belief that God exists, which refers to believing in God rather than his real-ness.

We cannot ignore the role of Nietzsche's populist views in this era. He presented numerous and scattered views instead of questioning the religious beliefs that, in his opinion, their era had been over. He was able to get many people's attention to his views.

In contrast to these atheistic analyses, theism was not very active. At the beginning of this period, the religious experience of Schleiermacher and in the middle of this period, Kierkegaard's fideism based on his existentialistic view is considered the most important activity of believers in God.

At the end of this era, another factor led to the strengthening of atheistic views. By expanding scientific thinking from mechanics to electricity, thermodynamics, electromagnetism, and optics, and then from physics to chemistry, science succeeded in discovering a wide range of scientific laws in the material world. But the biological affairs in which the issue called life was raised had nothing to do with the scope of the materialistic topics of physics and chemistry, and could not be explained under their rigid scientific laws. On the other hand, psychology was also analyzed with soul and spirit, which was different from materialistic explanations. Especially, the existence of a factor such as free will actions in human beings removes it from the scope of any definite scientific laws. Social relations were not seen as scientifically analyzable, as well.

At the end of the 19th century, with the activities of people like Freud, human behavior was subjected to a series of scientific laws, and scientific psychology emerged. August Comte also tried to present sociology under scientific analysis and based on its laws. As a result, these two sciences were also added to scientific thinking. With evolution, biology also acquired scientific methods for its analysis and was included in the collection of all types of sciences with their laws. So, at the end of the 19th century, scientism developed so much that it was able to gain absolute sovereignty over human thought. On the other hand, religion could not find such expansion and remained in a narrow range. Religion, also, could not have had the huge impact that science, with its technology, had on human life. The effectiveness of religion compared to that of science became so weak that it no longer had a place in scientific meetings. Therefore, the atheistic approach of the 19th century not only questioned the belief in God but also showed the inefficiency and needlessness of religion with its scientific advances.

On the other hand, theists tried to rebuild their religious ideas, especially in the face of science. Instead of justifying the challenging traditional ideas of God, they should change their interpretations of God to a more realistic intervention of Him in the world and remove wrong attitudes from their religious thinking. They tried to bring up the positive roles of belief in God in psychology, such as inner peace, and show the positive social effects of religion on social development. Theists tried to show that Marx's view has paid attention to a specific type of religious ideas and a partial aspect of it, and has ignored the many roles of religion and its positive social effects. So, such efforts of theists led to the development of religious thinking in terms of the psychological and social effects of religion. It was in this way that more precise dimensions of religion were raised in the context of scientific thinking.

The first thing that happened in favor of the theists was the events that questioned the absolute sovereignty of science. At the beginning of the 20th century, with the development of branches in philosophy called the philosophy of science, it was shown that the crude attitude towards science was not so true. Science does not show the reality of the world through observation, hypothesis, several experiments, and introducing a scientific theory, but it analyzes the reality based on our mental and value background. In other words, science is partially what we want to observe in the world. So, not only was its authenticity questioned, but its realism also faced challenges. It was a good opportunity for religious people to get rid of the authoritarian pressure of science.

Also, at the beginning of the 20th century, human beings were intoxicated with their scientific and technological advances, and these two were shown to bring happiness to humanity. But with the occurrence of the First and Second World Wars, in which more than 45 million people were killed, all the dreams that science and technology had made were suddenly doubted, and disillusionment with the absolute authority of science and technology. These issues made human beings think again of seeking refuge in religion.

The fourth stage, *atheism based on the challenge of the meaningfulness of religious propositions*

With the emergence of linguistic analytical philosophies at the beginning of the 20th century, theists faced a new challenge. Analytical and linguistic philosophers, following Wittgenstein I, showed that some propositions that people make are not subject to truth and falsity, but they are such that it is not possible to show the conditions under which the truth or falsity of that proposition can be evaluated. They considered these propositions meaningless. So, the meaning of statements must be determined before their truth and falsity. They presented, first, the criterion of verifiability, then the criterion of falsifiability to distinguish meaningful propositions from meaningless propositions. Wittgenstein stated that with this philosophical analysis, ethical, aesthetic, metaphysical, and even religious propositions cannot be considered meaningful propositions. Ayer (1936), after him, examined this issue in detail about religious propositions and tried to show that religious propositions, both the existence of God and his actions in the world, cannot be meaningful to be able to talk about their truth or falsity. The meaningfulness challenge exposed religious beliefs to new attacks. Logical positivism had found a good excuse to expose religious beliefs to a new challenge. This challenge brought forth a new type of atheism, which was caused by assuming religious propositions to be meaningless. Some thinkers like Anthony Flew and William Rowland expanded this idea through their propaganda.

This kind of atheism made the work of the believers more difficult. They should have shown, first, that the statements they are trying to prove are meaningful; after passing this test, they should prove them or provide evidence that shows that those statements are true and refer to a reality.

However, Logical positivism itself faced contradictions, and its extremism was strongly questioned and declined very quickly. Wittgenstein, who was the founder of the “Picture Theory of Language”, realized the problems of this type of view after several years, and in the second stage of his life, he considered the meaning of sentences in the way they are used among people, not the language's picture of reality. “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 2009: 43). He brought the practical theory of language to the stage. This theory refers to different meanings in different forms of life or language games and family resemblance. Therefore, religious propositions found their meaning in the way of life of religious people. Science, which has a different form of life, could not raise doubts from its perspective about the meaning of religious propositions, which are in a different form of life. Theism was saved from the attacks of positivists with this linguistic turn of Wittgenstein and his followers in the second period of his life, but his view on the meaning of religious propositions led to a kind of fideism that ignored some other aspects of theism.

However, theists should analyze their views with the questions that arose about the meaning of religious propositions. Linguistic philosophical views taught theists that they should explain religious propositions in such a way that they are less caught up in meaninglessness and show the circle of correct meaning

statements. Some superficialities in the expression of religious views should be abandoned, and they should look in favor of clearer and more specific expressions. This refinement was one of the results of the presence of this type of atheism.

Another event happened in the 20th century. Molecular biology could reduce the distance between biology and chemistry and make the presence of physicalism more serious.

In this era, people like Richard Dawkins, using genetics, molecular biology, and evolutionary explanations, brought popular books to the market to bring atheism to ordinary people. Paul Draper (2022) defines these activities as new atheism by saying “It is a popular label for a movement prominently represented by four authors—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—whose work is uniformly critical of religion, but beyond that appears to be unified only by timing and popularity.”

The fifth stage, *arguing for rejecting the existence of God*

In the second era, the arguments to prove the existence of God were questioned by Kant and caused the theoretical way to prove the existence of God to have problems. But the logical requirement of that inability of the arguments was to be agnostic. Bertrand Russell, in his famous debate with the theist Frederick Copleston, which was broadcast on the BBC in the first half of the 20th century and was later written down and is considered a document in the philosophy of religion, takes an agnostic position towards Copleston and said that “I don't consider the proofs authentic, but I can't say that there is no God”. T. H. Huxley defines agnosticism as “the position that neither theism nor atheism is known, or most ambitiously, that neither the belief that God exists nor the belief that God does not exist has a positive epistemic status of any sort” (Huxley 1884 and 1889).

From the second half of the 20th century, some philosophers tried not only to say that God cannot be proven but also to say that we have found ways to prove that there is no God. J.L Mackie was the most prominent of them. but how? These atheists tried to show that the concept of God and the God that theism shows us have an internal contradiction. Just like a quadrilateral triangle has an internal contradiction, and therefore it can be certain that such a triangle cannot exist. In Mackie's opinion (1983), the definition of God as omnipotent and benevolent, together with the facts of evil in the world, causes either clear contradictions or complex contradictions. So, God cannot exist. This type of atheism was much harder than the previous types, along with more claims than all the previous types. They tried to show that there is a contradiction between these three beliefs. But the first two types were part of the concept of God, and the problem of evil is a reality of the world that is not necessarily included in the concept of God. If they want to show a contradiction, they should show only the concept of God, not a reality in their opinion outside of the concept of God. The requirements of the facts of evil cannot necessarily lead to an idea that contradicts those previous attributes of God. Perhaps, it can be said that there is an opposition between them, not a contradiction.

Theists like Alvin Plantinga (1977) showed that there is no necessary

contradiction between the reality of evil in any way we assume and God's attributes. It is possible to show the attributes in such a way that there is no contradiction. He showed that evil is necessary for God's action in the creation of the world and man with free will. If a human wants to exist on Earth and act by their own free will, there will be a context for doing evil as a requirement. Since God's power cannot be defined in the circle of impossibilities, the existence of a world with free human beings and without evil is impossible. Therefore, the reality of evil in the world does not harm God's omnipotence and benevolence. His statement is called a free will defense.

Other atheists tried to find other ways to find contradictions in the concept of God. Several other types of these claims were also presented, like the contradiction that can exist between Divine foreknowledge and human free will (See Zagzebski, 1991). Some also put forth a claim of divine hiddenness to prove their atheism (See Howard-Snyder and Moser, 2002). Some also brought up evil again, but to show it as evidence for God's non-existence (Row, 1996). Anyway, this was another attack on the belief in God. So, the believer must first prove that his beliefs do not include the contradictions raised against him, then determine the meaningfulness of the existence of God and his attributes, and in the third stage, prove such a God. Although some philosophers do not accept any argument for the existence of God, they also think that the arguments against the existence of God are invalid. Anthony Kenny (1983: 84–85):

I do not myself know of any argument for the existence of God which I find convincing; in all of them, I think I can find flaws. Equally, I do not know of any argument against the existence of God which is totally convincing; in the arguments I know against the existence of God, I can equally find flaws. So that my own position on the existence of God is agnostic.

With this type of atheism, the discussion of evil in the world became one of the most important topics in the philosophy of religion. One of the fruits of this type of atheistic claim for theism was to clarify the meanings of God's attributes and be careful in presenting them correctly and precisely so that they can be consistent with the facts in the real world. Also, the problem of evil, which until now has been in the hidden corners of the minds of some believers and was referred to in various ways in the works of writers and with which they attacked the belief in God, was exposed to philosophical analysis by theists. This problem, instead of being treated with sarcasm through the attack of non-believers, became possible to be explained in rational ways, and made theistic philosophers examine it.

The sixth stage, the negation of the God of monotheistic religions and the tendency to other concepts of spirituality or divinity in other religions

Many people have found connections with other concepts of divine or spiritual affairs due to the conditions created by globalization. The abundance of media, the information network of the world community, easy access to other ideas, and

the direct encounters of the world traveler, all created situations so that many people notice the diversity of religions and many spiritual ideas. Especially, each of them has claimed to be right. This caused doubts about the success of theism of Abrahamic religions and created tendencies towards other types of spirituality or divinity. This type of approach is also considered a form of atheism (Le Poi Devin, 2010). Schopenhauer was one of the first who take these confrontations with other religions seriously, such as Indian or Buddhist religions, and may be considered the founder of this type of atheism.

Theists, on the other hand, paid attention to the diversity of religions and their authenticity and tried to present theories such as religious pluralism or religious exclusivism with different philosophical analyses for these types of differences in religious approaches and provide arguments for explaining them.

The seventh type, *the postmodern atheism*

Postmodern thinkers, who did not understand the metanarratives of the modern era and found the narrow forms of modernity unsuccessful and unsuitable for the contemporary era, tried to take a stand against all kinds of attitudes of the modern era. One of them was religious attitudes, as well as the metanarrative of negation of any divinity. Postmodern thinkers tried to present postmodern theories to justify religious thought between the two meta-narratives of "there is a God in the universe who is the creator of the world" and the meta-narrative of "there is no God in the world and nature is self-reliant". They discarded both meta-narratives. These thinkers talked about "God without being" (Marion, 1982) "the religious" (Caputo, 2002) "secular theology" (Crockett, 2001) "Religion Without God" (Billington, 2002) and presented various post-modern theological views following the ideas of people like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Whitehead, Derrida, and Levinas. Since these attitudes were different from the intellectual foundations of theism, they can be considered an atheistic viewpoint and I called it "postmodern atheism", which changes religious beliefs based on its own theoretical principles.

The eighth type, *the atheism of secular ethics, to solve environmental problems*

At the beginning of the 20th century, when scientific discoveries boasted the absolute power of science and the technological capabilities of man showed his indisputable power, the highest value was to acquire more capabilities in the use of technology for the welfare of mankind and the use of any instruments for the development of discoveries. With the First and Second World Wars, this absolute value of the modern era was gradually questioned. Until the end of the 20th century, the environmental crisis of the use of technology and the fear of the effects caused by scientific advances, especially in some sciences such as genetics, nuclear sciences, etc., received serious attention from scientists. Environmental hazards caused by the use of technology were shown one after another. Therefore, environmental considerations dominated any scientific thinking and technological use. "Environmental ought and ought not" were created limitations for science. This is how moral values find a fundamental role in any scientific thinking and

technological use. Science and technology were limited by ethics. At the beginning of the 20th century, not only was no attention paid to environmental issues, but no restrictions, especially moral issues, could be raised. Scientific materialism was at the peak of its thoughts, along atheism relied on it. With the emergence of ethical values in science in the late 20th century, which is the main element of religion, religion can no longer be ignored. So, a retreat for that kind of early 20th-century atheism occurred. In this new situation, religion could find opportunities to attend scientific meetings. Since ancient times, religions have promoted moral values that could somehow be effective in solving environmental problems.

In contrast to this new attendance of religion, a new type of atheism tried to show that there is no need for religion in this field either, and scientists themselves can provide secular ethics. This type of atheism can be called "secular moral atheism". Ted Peters (1998) talks about scientific imperialism in this context, that science is trying to show that what was considered a part of religion is within the scope of science itself, and science has added these domains to its territory.

This type of atheism made theists realize that they should seriously consider the relationship between ethics and religion and should be able to show the advantages of religious ethics, especially regarding the environment, such as executive guarantees in reward and punishment in the afterlife.

The ninth type, *nihilistic atheism*

One of the consequences of machine life in the modern era was the emergence of nihilism. Nietzsche showed well that this nihilism was caused by modernity and became the hero of nihilism. After the world wars, as a result of the disillusionment and despair caused by them, many thinkers showed nihilistic approaches in their works. The continuation of machinery life made this nihilism a serious issue among Western societies. Accepting nihilism as a school of thought, some rejected any values, especially religious values, and created a kind of nihilistic atheism. For this reason, the discussion on the "meaning of life" in the early 21st century became the concern of many people, and thinkers tried to provide a detailed scientific and philosophical analysis in this field or show different models for it.

This situation allowed believers to show that theism can play a fundamental role in the meaning of life (for example, Mawson, 2016). This type of atheism had a positive result for theism. The theistic thinkers took action to elaborate religious views in response to the question of the meaning of life. They tried to show that they could provide valuable solutions for today's human problems.

Conclusion

The various atheistic approaches that emerged in the modern era demonstrate that theists must analyze and address the rational explanations and philosophical examinations that challenge their beliefs. They need to articulate their position in response to criticisms that atheism, in its various forms, has levelled against theism. In this way, both theists and atheists must scrutinize these issues with philosophical rigor, each presenting their arguments clearly, while the other

responds with rational counterarguments. This dynamic interaction has brought the core themes of the philosophy of religion to the forefront. Consequently, from these engagements between theism and atheism, we can identify the following central themes in the philosophy of religion:

1. The various arguments for the existence of God and the validation or invalidation of each.
2. The relationship between science and religion.
3. Religious experience.
4. The language of religion.
5. The problem of evil.
6. The attributes of God.
7. Reason and faith.
8. Religious epistemology.
9. The diversity of religions and their conflicts.
10. The relationship between ethics and religion.
11. The meaning of life.
12. The environment and religion.
13. Religion and politics.

Each of these themes must be subjected to rational scrutiny in light of existing challenges to respond to atheistic perspectives in the modern Western context. These evaluations often occur within the framework of Western Christian thought. However, since the challenges can be more widespread, Muslim scholars must offer responses and perspectives rooted in Islamic thought. This approach will open a new approach in the philosophy of religion, one that examines its issues from an Islamic perspective.

References

- Ayer, Alfred Jules (1936). *Language, Truth and Logic*, London, V. Gollancz Ltd.
- Billington, Ray (2002). *Religion without God*, London & New York: Routledge
- Caputo, John D. (ed.) (2002). *The Religious*, Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Crockett, Clayton (ed.) (2001). *Secular Theology*, London: Routledge.
- Draper, Paul (2022). "Atheism and Agnosticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>>.
- Flew, Anthony; Hare, Richard and Mitchell, Basil (1971). "Theology and Falsification" in Basil Mitchell (ed.) *The Philosophy of Religion*. (pp. 1-13) Oxford.
- Freud, Sigmund (1989) *Totem and Taboo*, London WW Norton.
- Freud, Sigmund (1990). *The Future of an Illusion*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Gill, Michael B. (2021). "Lord Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury]", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/shaftesbury/>>.
- Gooch, Todd (2023). "Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

- Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>>.
- Hart, Kevin (1998). "Introduction to Jacques Derrida: How to Avoid Speaking" in Graham Ward (ed.) *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, (159-167) Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel and Moser, Paul (eds.) (2002). *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huxley, Thomas Henry (1884). "Agnosticism: A Symposium", *The Agnostic Annual*, Charles Watts (ed.), pp. 5–6.
- Huxley, Thomas Henry (1889). "Agnosticism and Christianity", reprinted in his *Collected Essays, Volume 5: Science and the Christian Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894, pp. 309–365.
- Kenny, Anthony (1983). *Faith and Reason*, (Bampton lectures in America, no. 22), New York: Columbia University Press.
- Le Poi Devin, Robin (1996). *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Le Poi Devin, Robin (2010). *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. (1983). *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Marion, Jean-Luc (1982). *God without Being*, Trans. T.A. Carlson, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, Michael (1990). *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Marx, Karl ([1843] 1970). "Introduction". *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by A. Jolin and J. O'Malley, edited by J. O'Malley. Cambridge University Press.
- Mawson, T. (2016). *God and the Meanings of Life*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- McLaughlin, Robert (1984). "Necessary agnosticism?" *Analysis*, 44(4): 198–202.
- Peters, Ted (1998). *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, Colorado & Oxford: Westview Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin (1977). *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Rowe, William L. (1996). "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, 262–85.
- Schellenberg, J. L. (2007) *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Schellenberg, J. L. (2019). *Progressive Atheism: How Moral Evolution Changes the God Debate*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, Mark C. (1984). *Erring: A Postmodern a/theology*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2009). *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, 4th edition, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (eds. and trans.), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zagzebski, Linda (1991). *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, New York: Oxford University Press.



فصلنامه علمی

فلسفه غرب

سال چهارم، شماره اول (پیاپی ۱۳)، بهار ۱۴۰۴

شاپا چاپی: ۲۸۲۱-۱۱۶۴

شاپا الکترونیک: ۲۸۲۱-۱۱۵۴



روند رویکردهای الحادی غربی از ابتدای دوران مدرن

حمیدرضا آیت‌اللهی*

استاد بازنشسته گروه فلسفه، دانشگاه علامه طباطبائی، تهران، ایران.

اطلاعات مقاله	چکیده
نوع مقاله:	در دوران مدرن در غرب رویکردهای الحادی مختلفی، متناسب با دیدگاه‌های فلسفی هر دوره وجود داشته است. در این مقاله در نظر است روند این رویکردهای مختلف بازنموده شود و نشان داده شود که هر کدام چه چالشی را برای خداباوری ایجاد کرده‌اند. این چالش‌ها معمولاً فرصتی برای خداباوری بوده‌اند تا به پیرایش دیدگاه‌های خود و بازسازی منطقی‌تر باورهای خود بپردازد.
دریافت:	سپس نشان داده می‌شود که چگونه خداباوری در این مسیر رشد کرده است. من این روند را نه مرحله‌ای می‌دانم که هر کدام را در این مقاله تبیین خواهم کرد. در نهایت، بیان خواهد شد که چگونه هر یک از این چالش‌ها عنوان فصلی در فلسفه دین شده‌اند و مباحث فلسفه دین در چه زمینه‌هایی شکل گرفته‌اند. در نتیجه، سبزه محور اصلی فلسفه دین که در نتیجه این چالش‌ها شکل گرفته، نشان داده می‌شود.

کلمات کلیدی: الحاد، خداباوری، دوران مدرن، فلسفه دین، چالش‌های دینی.

استناد: آیت‌اللهی، حمیدرضا (۱۴۰۴). «روند رویکردهای الحادی غربی از ابتدای دوران مدرن». فصلنامه علمی فلسفه غرب.

سال چهارم، شماره اول (پیاپی ۱۳)، ص ۲۸-۱۳.

DOI: 10.30479/wp.2025.21287.1132



ناشر: دانشگاه بین‌المللی امام خمینی (ره) حق مؤلف © نویسندگان.

* نشانی پست الکترونیک: ayatollahy@atu.ac.ir