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UNDERSTANDING ATHEISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Atheism means denying the existence of gods and goddesses. In the West, the term atheism was used as early as the sixteenth century. In ancient Greece, the first atheistic concepts were expressed by dramatists in their plays. After the Enlightenment movement in Europe, skepticism against religion and ideas of secularism were promoted. In the history of Europe, atheism was not only a religious concept but was also used as a political tool to eliminate the enemies of the state. In the West, the charge of atheism has been used to suppress political and religious opposition. Atheism at the state level got a boost when the French Revolution led to liberalism in the West about human rights. Although the church put up a lot of resistance to stop this trend of atheism, this resistance could not stop the propagation of atheism for long. Atheism increased rapidly after the West criticized the religious classes during the Renaissance and Reformation. Scientific research in the modern era, development in the social sciences and modern philosophical ideas also strengthened the movement of atheism in the West. While opening the way for development in science, along with it, the foundations of religious beliefs were also shaken. Now, in the West and many Asian countries, atheism is being promoted under government auspices. In the 20th century, many new styles of atheism emerged and the syllabi of educational

institutions also included atheistic ideas to make the society secular.

KEYWORDS: modernity, atheism, positive atheism, humanities, social sciences, oppression, new atheism

According to known historical record, human society started with Tawheed, but with the passage of time, the persistence on Tawheed was forgotten and instead of following Tawheed, various forms of polytheism and atheism flourished. In different periods of history, atheism existed in different forms; even such forms of atheism have been prevalent in human societies whose objective was compatible with true religions. However, passing through different periods, atheism has become common in the world today and it wants to turn people away from religion on the basis of its argument system.

DEFINITION OF ATHEISM

Atheism means denying the existence of gods and goddesses. Atheism is the denial of theism, that is, atheism denies even the belief that there is at least one God. (Zuckerman, 2006: 47-66) If we look at the historical background of atheism, its origins can be found in ancient and early Indian philosophy.

Atheism made a comeback in Europe after the movements of intellectual awakening of 16th century. Atheism gained prominence when the public efforts for freedom of thought were given legal approval. It is estimated that in the world at least 500 million are atheists. Atheist organizations declare that science, secular ethics, and secularism are the basis of atheism. Their arguments are also derived from the cultural, social and historical background and are also philosophical origin. Reasons for not believing in gods include the problem of evil, arguments from inconsistent revelations (Shook, 2012:55-57) and rejecting religious concepts that cannot be falsified. (Drange, 1996:61) Atheists also say that everyone is born without belief in gods. (Harvey, 2007: 35) Therefore, the burden of

argument for gods is not on the atheist, but on the one who admits gods. (Stenger, 2007: 17-18)

Scholars do not agree on the definition of atheism. (Chisholm, 1911:33) However, it is considered a rejection of the confession of religion (Paul, 2021:49; McCormick, 2010:33; Michael, 2019:69). The contradictions in the definition of atheism can be estimated from the fact that atheism is considered synonymous with agnosticism (Martin, 1990: 467–468; Holland, 2007: 34; Martin, 2006: 2) and its opposite too. (Nielsen, 2013:62; Chisholm, 1911:97)

Atheism means the denial of the existence of gods (Harvey, 2007: 35; Simon, 2008:66). In simple words, in the western context, atheism means that there is no existence of goddesses and gods and all statements about them are lies (Rowe, 1998: 102). In the West, the term atheist was used in the sixteenth century. However, the ideas of atheism and their implications have a long history (Smart, 2017:106). Atheistic thought in Europe and Asia began roughly in the sixth or fifth century BC. Firstly Greek dramatists dared to express doubt about the existence of gods. In ancient India, Carvaka was the philosophical school that started to think against the religion of the age. The explanation of the universe on a rational and material basis instead of gods was started by Leucippus and Democritus, during the fifth century BC. They gave the concept of atoms. Democritus first explained the universe under the principle that atoms are moving in an infinite space. During the Enlightenment movement in Europe, the ideas of skepticism and secularism against religion were promoted (Bullivant, 2021:203).

TYPES OF ATHEISM

Throughout history, atheism has been applied to conflicting situations and ideas. The ancient Romans accused Christians of believing their gods to be infidels

and not worshipping them, so they were atheists. The term atheism became controversial when religiosity came to be equated with acknowledging any divine entity (Martin, 2006:163). Atheism includes the denial of the existence of any deity, any spiritual, supernatural or transcendental being. Describing who would fall into the category of atheism, Baron d'Holbach said, "All children are born atheists; they have no conception of God". (d'Holbach, 2011:102) Similarly, George H. Smith said, "A person who is ignorant of theology is an atheist because he does not believe in any God. This category would also include a child who is capable of understanding the issues involved, but who is still ignorant of those issues". (Smith, 1979: 14) Atheism can be implicit or explicit. Implicit atheism refers to the unconscious rejection of religious beliefs, while explicit atheism refers to the conscious rejection of religious beliefs. (Paul, 2021:69; McCormick, 2010:103; Michael, 2019:56) Ernest Nagel did not include atheism as not being convinced of any theological belief. According to Graham Oppy, people who have never considered a theological belief and have no understanding of the concept of God, such as a one month old baby, cannot be called an atheist (Oppy, 2018:4).

Antony Flew (Flew, 1976: 14ff) and Michael Martin (Martin, 2006:66) divide atheism into hard and soft types. The hard atheism is also called as positive or strong atheism and the soft one is also called as negative or weak atheism. Positive atheism refers to the absolute and complete denial of the existence of God. Since other forms of atheism are involved in negative atheism, so it is not a clear atheism. According to Michael Martin, agnosticism consists of negative atheism (Martin, 2006: 2; Martin, 1990: 467–468) i.e. agnosticism covers both atheism and agnosticism (Oppy, 2018:103). While many agnostics do not consider this doctrine to be atheism (Huffington, 2013:114; Kenny, 2006: 158). To atheists,

unproven propositions, whether religious or non-religious, are equally refutable. Atheists disagree with agnosticism that the disconfirmation of God's existence means neither the existence nor the non-existence of God. (Baggini, 2003: 22) According to J.J.C. Smart, when an atheist calls himself an agnostic, he means that our knowledge is limited to only the facts described by mathematics and formal logic. (Smart, 2004:203) Atheist writers, such as Richard Dawkins, distinguish between atheists and agnostics because of the possibility of theological confession, since each of them has the possibility of existence of God (Dawkins, 2006: 50).

One form of atheism is ontological monism. This is the theory of philosophical materialism. This theory refers matter as the basic substance in nature and consequently abolishes the prospect of an immaterial divine existence. (Adorno, 1973:117) Physicalism is a school of thought which is the opinion that only physical realities are worth existing. (Oppy, 2019: 14-15; Stoljar, 2019: 201) There are many philosophies like dualism, idealism, and different forms of monism which opposed the materialism or physicalism (Stubenberg, 2017:88; Zdybicka, 2005: 19; Witmer, 2021:119). The refutation of metaphysical realities has also been supported by naturalism, which describes that the existing realities are only natural ones. So the concept of any supernatural being is unacceptable. (Papineau, 2018:35). An estimated 56.5 percent of philosophers lean toward physicalism and 49.8 percent toward naturalism (Bourget et al, 2019: 133). According to Graham Oppy, the naturalism and atheism are of same opinion. So adopting one means adopting the other. Due to their contrary point of view, naturalism and theism cannot be considered correct simultaneously. (Oppy, 2013: 33) According to Fiona Ellis, Naturalism is unable to explain many dimensions of human experience which are not covered by the capacity of rational interpretations. (Ellis, 2016:201)

Christopher C. Knight emphasizes theistic naturalism (Knight, 2009:189) and he presents the presence of evil in the universe as an argument against theism (Oppy, 2013: 55-60).

Sociologist Phil Zuckerman describes the denial of God in the context of people's social and economic condition. In the light of social sciences research on secularism and irreligion, he said that social well-being has a positive relationship with irreligion. Atheism and secularism are much lower in poorer, less developed nations, especially in rich industrial democracies in Africa and South America (Norris, 2004:133; Bruce, 2003:204) where people are anti-Semitic, racist, bigoted, racist, closed-minded, and authoritarian. Similarly, US states with high numbers of atheists have lower than average homicide rates, while most religious states have higher than average homicide rates (Zuckerman, 2009: 949-971; Guardian September 2, 2010).

ATHEISM AS A TOOL OF OPPRESSION

The relationship between state and religion is also a factor in the background of atheism in the West. Religious belief was also used to determine the legitimacy of the Western state, which later became the Roman Empire. During this period, anyone who did not believe in a state-sponsored deity was accused of atheism and condemned as a criminal. In other words atheism was used as a political tool to eliminate the enemies of the state. In the early days of Christianity, when they were deniers of the Greek and Roman gods, Christians were declared atheists at the state level. (Herbermann, 1913: 76; Winiarczyk, 2016: 61-68; Ferguson, 2003: 556-561) The tradition of executing on the religious grounds goes back to Roman Empire when Christians were given punishments for not accepting or following the imperial religion of ancient Rome. (Sherwin, 1964:118; Maycock, 2015:77) However, this situation

changed during the reign of Theodosius I when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD.

In the West, the charge of atheism was also used to suppress political and religious opposition. Pope Boniface VIII, who believed in the political supremacy of the Church, was also posthumously accused of improperly holding such a high position in the Church, even though he did not believe in life after death and immortality of spirit. He held this position in order to obtain power and political supremacy through the Church. (Draper, 1864: 387) Many communities were condemned as sinners or atheists during this period (Schultz, 2016: 39).

According to John Arnold these attitudes saused many people to deny the church and religious rituals. He gave examples of many prominent people who never went to church and even excluded the church from their social life and events such as marriage. According to Arnold, the trend of denial of religion and disbelief arose because of ill attitude of the church. One purpose of the incidents of insulting religion by atheists was to directly attack the religious faith and details of the faith (Arnold, 2005:44).

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND ATHEISM

The French Revolution accelerated the spread of atheism in Europe. Blainey writes that in revolutionary France in the 1790s, atheism took over every aspect of life and secular symbols replaced the cross. The Christian calendar of France was abolished. Monasteries, convents and church properties were confiscated and monks and nuns were expelled. (Blainey, 2011: 397–8) During the French Revolution, Jacques Hébert, Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, and their supporters developed the atheistic Cult of Reason. This was a result of the “de-

Christianization” of French society during the Revolution.

The Cult of Reason was popularized to such an extent that vandalism of churches, desecration of religious icons and royal images became a routine. Instead of Christian martyrs, the “martyrs of the revolution” took center stage in the celebrations. A pamphlet called the *Answer to Dr. Priestley’s Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1782) was published in Britain as a declaration of atheism. It was signed by the pseudonym William Hammon as its author. Some historians attributed it to Matthew Turner. (Berman 1988, Ch.5) It means until then in Britain the authors of atheistic writings were afraid to appear openly.

The French Revolution of 1789 opened the way for the politicization of atheistic thought, rationalism, liberalism and liberal movements in Western countries. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 –1822), a Romantic poet of the Enlightenment, published a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* in 1811. Atheist influence in Germany began with Ludwig Feuerbach’s (1804–1872) writing *The Essence of Christianity*. It also influenced prominent nineteenth-century German atheist thinkers such as Karl Marx (1818-1883), Max Stirner (1806-1856), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). The gradual influence of atheism in politics is exemplified by the refusal of Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891), a several-time member of the British Parliament, to take the religious oath in Parliament. He was the first atheist to sit in Parliament. He also participated in the amendment of the Oaths Act (Hansard, 1888:12).

In the West, revolutionary France’s campaign of state atheism was taken over by communist governments in the 20th century. The Russian Orthodox Church was closed down by the Soviet government (Blainey, 2011: 494) and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church

was arrested in 1922. (Blainey, 2011: 493) The Russian Church suffered from state persecution from Vladimir Lenin to Joseph Stalin (Martin, 2003: 30-31; Alan, 1993: 412). Many priests were killed and imprisoned. Thousands of churches were closed or turned into hospitals. Even the Central Asian Muslim states under Russian occupation were not immune from this anti-religious persecution of Russia. For decades, Central Asian Muslims were extremely persecuted. They remained oppressed until after the breakup of Russia when these states got their freedom from Russian occupation (Richard, 1994: 339–340; Blainey, 2011: 494).

The history of atheism in the West shows that during the renaissance and reformation, when a lot of criticism of religious classes began, this criticism was not considered equivalent to atheism. The term atheism was coined in France in the 16th century, and the use of the word atheist in English books began in around 1566 (Martiall, 1566, Vol-203: 51). The concept of atheism appeared in the 18th century and was then used by those in important positions against those classes who denied God. It was not considered to mean the denial of religion or the denial of God (Armstrong, 1999: 288). When the book *Theophrastus redivivus* containing atheistic ideas was published in Europe during the seventeenth century, its author was anonymous. Until that time, atheism was the denial of only moral rules and regulations (Hecht, 2004: 325).

Geoffrey Blainey describes the history of atheism, stating that during the Reformation in Europe, atheists paved the way for an attack on the authority of the Catholic Church. From this, many thinkers started talking about the supremacy of the Protestant Church over the Catholic Church. During this time, ideas like Deism started in France, Croatia and England, which meant believing in a God who had nothing to do with

the affairs of the universe. Even during this time, many followers of Deism were atheists and many religious people. If we look at the followers of Deism in today's environment, they will appear to us as believers. Later, when the scientific discoveries of Copernicus, Newton and Descartes came out, they paved the way for the new secular concept of the universe based on the laws of nature (Blainey, 2011: 388).

GRADUAL ACCEPTANCE OF ATHEISM IN THE WEST

In the western world before the eighteenth century, there was so much belief in the existence of God that there was no possibility of true atheism. Admitting God was called theistic innatism, meaning that all people believe in God from birth. In other words, atheism meant the denial of a basic and natural reality. (Cudworth, 1678:36) In this environment, some atheists even challenged the term "atheism". Sam Harris wrote in his book *Letter to a Christian Nation* that the term "atheism" should not even exist because there is no room for denial of transcendental facts. He said that atheism is nothing more than a criticism of the irrational religious beliefs of scholars (Harris, 2006: 51).

In Europe, the expression of atheistic ideas began in literary writings. In Harfnkell, a 13th century tale, the narrator argues that belief in gods is folly. Most of the characters in the literature written during this period seem to rely on their own strength and character instead of trusting in the gods according to traditional religious belief (Jacob, 1982: 6). These literary works are an expression of the lack of belief in gods of the people of this period, confidence in their own strength, intellect, character and abilities and a practical belief in social rules independent of any supernatural being.

By the 1770s there was a gradual change in Christendom that atheism was no longer a dangerous charge to fear punishment or condemnation. An open

denial of the existence of God in this period is found in Baron d'Holbach's (1723–1789) book *The System of Nature* of 1770. He also had effective connections with leading intellectuals of the period such as Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Benjamin Franklin. However, cautiously, he published this book under a pseudonym instead of his real name. The book was banned and later publicly burned. When Diderot, editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedie*, wrote that philosophy was based on reason and that Christianity was recognized only because of the respect it held in society (Diderot, 2009:47), he was imprisoned and his writings were burned.

Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas are at the forefront of efforts to prove the existence of God in the middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas gave five arguments for affirming the existence of God, while Anselm talked about affirming God in his existential arguments (Bullivant et al, 2015:92). Thomas Aquinas was not only confronting and countering the atheism of his day, but also advancing the arguments of early Christian writers such as John of Damascus who held that knowledge of God was placed in human nature and its basis is the natural desire to achieve happiness (Frederick, 1950: 336–337). Thomas said that although the desire for happiness also provides the basis for the proof of God's existence in man, more research is needed on this point. This is the happiness that can only be obtained from God. It is not related to wealth, worldly comforts or sexual pleasure.

Matthias Knutzen is considered to be the first openly atheistic writer in the German language of modern times, who published three atheistic works in 1674 (Winfried, 2010: 8; Rececca, 2011:131). Matthias Knutzen is considered to be the first person in modern times who openly professed and communicated atheism (Mortimer, 1789:67). In 1689, Kazimierz Lyszczyński, a

Polish nobleman, denied the existence of God in his philosophical work *None Existencia*, for which he was imprisoned. He was later recommended by King Sobieski but sentenced to death. Before he was beheaded in Warsaw, his tongue was pulled out with a hot iron and his hands were slowly burned. Atheists of this period gradually popularized the concepts that the creator of God is man himself i.e. God is the imagination and creation of man. There is no real existence of God, but His existence is only in our mind (Nicholas, 2004: 33). They also popularized the idea that the concept of God was invented so that oppression and subjugation of people can be given religious sanctity and whenever someone with knowledge and wisdom tries to free the people from this oppression even the people themselves should crush him (Bakunin, 1910:134).

The writing by French Catholic priest Jean Meslier (1664–1729) is considered a milestone in the development of atheism in modern times. In his posthumous essay *Thoughts and Feelings of Jean Meslier ... Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Religions of the World* (Meslier, 2009: 88) he rejected the concepts of God, the Spirit, miracles and Christian theology. According to Michel Onfray, Jean Meslier's work marks the beginning of the history of true atheism in West (Onfray, 2007: 29).

Italian fascism was also a variant of the atheistic movement in Europe. Their leader, Benito Mussolini, was an atheist and steadfast opponent of the church. (Blainey, 2011: 495–6) When the first Fascist program was published in 1919, it called for the secularization of Italian church property. (Carsten, 1976: 77) Later on making a deal with the papacy, Mussolini allowed religion to be taught in offices and schools (Blainey, 2011: 495–6). Nevertheless, in his 1931 encyclical, Pope Pius XI called Mussolini's fascist movement a “pagan worship of the state” and “a revolution that takes the

youth away from the Church and Jesus Christ”. In Nazi Germany (Richard, 2003: 60–61, 298) despite limited endorsement of Christianity (Shirer, 1960: 238–39), the Nazi regime worked to diminish the impact and inspiration of Christianity in Germany. Here, organizations and educational institutions belonging to the churches were taken over (Evans, 2009: 546). According to Richard J. Evans, Hitler called Nazism based on secular ideology and modern science. He said that in the future, National Socialism and religion could not coexist. (Evans, 2009: 547; Trevor, 2013: 8)

ATHEIST PHILOSOPHERS OF WEST

Western philosophy began in Greece during the 6th century BC. The early Hellenic philosophers were not atheist. In contrast to their contemporary religion, they tried to explain the various phenomena of the universe in the light of the laws of nature instead of relying on giant stories. They attributed the breaking of the winds and the separation of the clouds to lightning (Edward, 2007:231). According to them, the cause of earthquakes was a change in the balance of hot and cold of the earth. They criticized the traditional religious concepts. According to them, the giant stories about the gods were the result of the superstitious imagination of man. Xenophanes of the 6th century BC said that if cows and horses had hands, they would also make their gods in the form of cows and horses (Drolsum 2011, 574). When Anaxagoras of the fifth century BC declared the sun to be bigger than the Peloponnese, the mythological region of Greece, he was accused of a great sin and was forced to flee from Athens (Pseudo, 2014:46). The first complete materialism philosophy was introduced by the philosophers of atomism Leucippus and Democritus in the fifth century BC. They tried to explain the various phenomena of the universe in the light of the random motion of atoms moving in infinite space.

Because Socrates did not believe in state gods, he was labeled an atheist. (Whitmarsh, 2016:345) The Athenians regarded Socrates as belonging to a pre-Socratic philosophy that rejected religious arguments to explain the phenomena of nature. (Burkert, 1985: 311–317; Bremmer, 2006: 14–19) In 423 BC, Aristophanes, in his comedy *The Clouds*, presented the scene of Socrates teaching his students that the traditional Greek gods does not exist. (Burkert, 1985: 311–317; Bremmer, 2006: 14–19) Later, on the charge that Socrates worshiped foreign gods instead of the gods of the state, he was put on trial and executed (Brickhouse, 2004: 112). Historical record testifies that Socrates was personally a very good man and worshiped the sun according to the religious traditions of the time (Cicero, 1985:201). The names of Strato of Lampsacus and Theodorus the Atheist are more prominent among the philosophers who have atheistic ideas of different schools of ancient Greek philosophy (Cicero, 1985:210). Theodorus wrote a book called *On the Gods* to negate the gods of his time, in which he explained his thoughts.

Epicurus is the prominent Greek thinker who advanced atheistic thought as a system (Grafton et al., 2010: 96–97). Building on the ideas of Democritus and other atomic thinkers, he tried to give a materialistic philosophy according to which the phenomena of the universe can be explained with laws that do not require divine intervention. Although Epicurus did not deny the existence of God, he rejected the notion of divine intervention in the order of the universe and in human affairs. Epicurus' aim was to end the state of mental restlessness or ataraxia by rendering divine wrath irrational. His supporters later extended this denial to the denial of life after death (Kelly, 2022:135). Epicurus' thought is best described in Lucretius' book *On the Nature of Things* written in the first century BC. In it, this aspect of his concern was explained that gods do

exist but fearing them in the name of religion is the cause of human pain and suffering because gods do not involve themselves in the affairs of the world (BBC, June 2012; Long, 1985: 144–149). Similarly, he denied life after death (Nigel, 2013: 263). However, he did not confess to being an atheist, due to fear of the punishments meted out to atheism in that period (Sedley, 2013: 131).

Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century presented the claim about God that God does not interfere in the running of the affairs of the world, but that the affairs of the universe are proceeding according to the laws of nature. Even up to that time, the denial of religion had very dangerous consequences, for example Etienne Dolet was strangled to death for denying God in 1546 and later burned. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was also accused of atheism but he denied the charge of atheism leveled at him. His atheism was quite different and unusual in terms of contemporary religious trends because he considered God to be a material being. Earlier, British playwright Christopher Marlowe was also accused of atheism after his writings about denying the divinity of Christ were found in his home. He was not given a chance to defend himself against the charge but was killed. Giulio Cesare Vanini was also accused of being an atheist and burned in 1619.

According to Geoffrey Blainey, Baruch Spinoza was probably the first semi-atheist in the Christian society of the West in the modern period to start expressing ideas based on atheism. However, there is no evidence against the existence of God in any of his writings (Stewart, 2007: 352; Simkins, 2014:164). It is generally understood that he accepted a kind of monotheistic belief by declaring God as the material universe (Picton 1905: 126; Fraser, 1895: 163). When Baruch Spinoza protested against the teachings of the rabbis in his synagogue, he was not allowed to worship there, but was expelled from the synagogue. In 1661, he

wrote a book called *Short Treaties on God*. Geoffrey Blainey says that although Baruch Spinoza was condemned by the religious community as an evil person, in private life he was a pious man who lived his life according to very good moral values. If there were some atheistic views of him and some scholars were convinced, he never expressed these views in public (Blainey, 2011: 343).

During the Age of Enlightenment, the traditional religious concepts prevailing in Europe gradually came under criticism. Jean Jacques Rousseau challenged the Christian notion that man was tainted by eternal sin. He said that originally humans were born good, but later as human civilization progressed, humans became worse. Voltaire also popularized such concepts among his audience. Voltaire was cited as a major cause of the French Revolution and the widespread atheism that followed. But Voltaire, instead of adopting absolutely atheistic concepts, had presented his alternative views on religion somewhere. According to Geoffrey Blainey, he admitted in his writings that the fear of God was a necessary necessity to keep this chaotic world in order. If the existence of God was not sure, he would have to be invented (Blainey, 2011: 390–391). When John Toland published his *Treatise of the Three Impostors*, which contained the denial of the three Abrahamic religions, Voltaire responded in his writings and presented his ideas (Voltaire et al, 2018:67). When the Frenchman François-Jean de la Barre was tortured and beheaded for breaking the cross, Voltaire tried for his pardon, but was unsuccessful.

When David Hume wrote his six-volume *History of England* in 1754, he gave the impression that God did not exist, and that even if God did exist, whether he was powerless in the face of European revolution. Hume also denied miracles, although he did not explicitly reject Christianity. In Hume's time, Edinburgh became famous

as a “refuge of atheism” (Blainey, 2011: 392). The culte de la raison began during the French Revolution. During this period, many churches in Paris were converted into Temples of Reason in the atmosphere of massacres in revolutionary France. The churches were closed in May 1793. Karl Marx (1818-1883) wrote in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* in 1844 that religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. Marx wrote that religion exposes the believer to social control and exploitation in this world because all his hopes are for relief and justice in the afterlife (Marx, 2009:201-9).

When Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent nineteenth-century philosopher, coined the term “God is dead,” the term became a symbol of atheism in the West. He wrote that the moral foundation of the Western world is Christian theism as a belief system. Its degradation is natural as a result of modern thinking i.e. the concept of the death of God. The nihilism that will arise from this degradation will have to re-evaluate the old values so that by creating new values, humans can attain a higher state. He named it *Übermensch* or Overman. Atheist feminism also began in the nineteenth century. Atheist feminists oppose religion on the grounds that religion is a source of oppression of women and gender inequality.

In the twentieth century, atheism also permeated the philosophies of the Western tradition. Western philosophical schools such as logical positivism, Marxism, anarchism, existentialism, secular humanism, objectivism, feminism (Overall, 2007: 233–246), and the general scientific and rationalist movements all came under the influence of atheism. Neopositivism and analytic philosophy rejected classical rationalism and

metaphysics in favor of empiricism. A. J. Ayer emphasized the unverifiable and meaningless nature of religious statements. Bertrand Russell, J. N. Findlay, and J. J. C. Smart argued against the existence of God. Naturalist and materialist thinkers such as John Dewey (Zdybicka, 2005: 16; Smart, 2004:46) called the natural world the basis of everything.

Skepticism is based on David Hume's ideas, according to which certain knowledge about anything is impossible, so it cannot be said with certainty that God exists. Hume rejected unobservable metaphysical concepts as sophistry and illusion (Hume, 1748: Part III). Michael Martin called atheism a legitimate and true rational belief by saying that all our contemporary theories are in a state of disagreement among intellectuals, so we will consider atheism as correct under our ordinary and scientific rational practice (Hume, 1748: Part III). Atheists deny the existence of God, calling basic religious terms such as "God" and religious propositions such as "God is omnipotent" meaningless or incomprehensible. According to theological non-cognitivism, saying that "God exists" is not a meaningful proposition. Philosophers A. J. Ayer and Theodore M. Drange reject both atheism and agnosticism because, for both of them, "God exists" is a meaningful proposition (Drange, 2013: 119; Ayer, 1946: 115–116).

One of the reasons for the prevalence of atheism is the different concepts of Gods held by the different schools of thought that acknowledge God, which are often contradictory. Atheists highlight the contradictions in these various attributes and concepts: such as perfection, creator-status, immutability, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, transcendence, personhood (a personal being), non-physicality, justice, and mercy etc (Oliver et al., 2019:216).

According to atheists, the world cannot be reconciled with these attributes of God. An omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God is incompatible with a world where there is evil and suffering and where divine love is hidden from many (Drange, 2007:133). Epicurus was the first to raise the problem of evil in support of atheism. David Hume, in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), formulated this argument of Epicurus in the form of several questions: (Hume, 1779:145)

Is the existence of evil is will of God or He is unable to end it?

Is he able to do so?"

Is He not willing to eradicate it?

If so then He is evil,

Or is He both able and willing?

Then what is the origin of evil?

If He is neither able nor willing, then why is He called God?

In Buddhist philosophy similar arguments have also been given for atheism (Gunasekara, 2022:55).

According to Joseph Baker and Buster Smith, atheism is more a moral concept than a religious one (Baker et al., 2015: 100). The essential result of following atheism is the moral relativism, demolishes the moral and ethical foundation (Gleeson, 2006:65) and then makes life meaningless and miserable (Smith, 1979: 275). Blaise Pascal elaborates on this theory in his book *Pensees* (Pascal, 1669: II) and states that atheists are quick to believe in God in times of crisis, that atheists change their views on their deathbeds, or that that "there are no atheists in foxholes". (Pressley, 1996:34-9) Standard ethical systems that are built by ignoring the

principles and rules of religions, such as virtue ethics, deontological ethics, consequentialist ethics and utilitarianism, fail to fill the void of a standard ethical system.

In the Euthyphro dilemma, Plato did not describe the role of the gods in determining right and wrong as indispensable, but as unnecessary and arbitrary. Historically, the notion of deriving morality from God has been more political than philosophical. (Smith, 1979: 275; Kant, CPR: A811) For example, the wrongful act of killing a human being is seen as divine law. Atheism does not rely on the legislator for morality as such as other laws do (Baggini, 2003: 38).

According to philosophers Susan Neiman (Susan, 2006:67) and Julian Baggini (Baggini, 2003:40), morality adopted only under divine command is not true moral behavior but merely blind obedience. According to them, atheism is a superior basis for morality because apart from religious requirements, the moral basis is necessary according to which the requirements of ethics can be evaluated. Here, they gave a very unscientific example and wrote that even if a religion instructs theft, theft will remain an immoral act while no religion teaches it. (Baggini, 2003: 43)

Atheism in Modern Times

After the Second World War, the new communist states of Eastern Europe opposed religion and persecuted religious leaders, (Peter, 1993: 211; Norman, 2003: 566 & 568) closed many church schools and church buildings. Atheism was taught in educational institutions and thousands of priests were imprisoned. (Blainey, 2011: 508) Albania became an officially declared atheist state under Enver Hoxha in 1967 (Wuthnow, 2013:51; Majeska, 1976:301; Derek, 1999: 161–172). Other countries followed the same track. Article 37 of the Albanian Constitution 1976 states: The

State does not recognize any religion and supports atheistic propaganda in order to instill in the people a scientific materialist worldview (Temperman, 2010:34).

The campaign of state atheism that started in the West spread throughout the world. Communist regimes abolished religion in China and North Korea. China became a communist state in 1949 under the leadership of the Communist Party. Although some religious practices were allowed to continue under state supervision, religious groups were suppressed as a threat to state governance. Religious schools and social institutions were closed, foreign Missionaries were expelled, and local religious affiliations were discouraged. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao fought against four archaic concepts: “old ideas, customs, culture, and habits of mind”. In 1999, the Communist Party launched a three-year campaign to promote atheism in Tibet. The campaign stated that intensifying the propaganda of atheism is particularly important for Tibet because atheism is the key to economic construction and social development in the region. It plays a very important role in promoting socialist spiritual civilization. (BBC 12 Jan 1999)

In India, a campaign against Hinduism was carried out on the basis of dividing people on the basis of caste and religion. (Michael, 1999: 31; Hiorth, 2008:42) According to Thomas Aiello, a different attitude towards religion emerged in the United States. Here the title of “Godless Communists” reinforced the idea that atheists were untrustworthy and unpatriotic. (Aiello, 2009:309) Against this background, the words “under God” were inserted into the pledge of allegiance in 1954, and the national motto was changed from E Pluribus Unum to In God We Trust in 1956 (Broadway, 2002: B09).

But at the non-governmental level, the attitude of atheism was similar to that of other countries. Atheist Vashti McCollum was a plaintiff in the landmark 1948

Supreme Court case (*McCollum v. Board of Education*) that ended religious education in American public schools (Martin, 2006:341). Madalyn Murray O'Hair appealed to the Supreme Court in 1963 and presented the *Murray v. Curlett* case, which banned worship and prayer in public schools. In 1963, he founded the American Atheists, an organization dedicated to protecting the civil liberties of atheists (Jurinski, 2004: 48; Beliefnet.com: 5). He has also received support from various anti-religious organizations such as the Religious Freedom Foundation.

The development of atheism under various philosophies and intellectual themes such as secularism and humanism continues in the Western world. This has increased the number of those who are not affiliated with any particular religion. (Harris, 2009:145; Biema, 2007:197) Various atheist organizations are working to promote the ideology of natural scientific world (Dawkins, 2009:185) and defending the human, civil, and political rights of non-religious people (UIO 2011). The books by scholars like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Lawrence M. Krauss, Jerry Coyne, and Victor Atheist and of scientists such as J. Stenger have become bestsellers (Egan, 2007:56; Stenger, 2009;; TED 2009). In the present day, "New Atheism" is becoming common. It refers to outspoken critics of religion (Wolf 2006:178). This view was further developed in a series of articles published in late 2006. Representative works of these books are *The God Delusion*, *Breaking the Spell*, *God is Not Great*, *The End of Faith*, and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Sheridan, 2021:34; Amarnath Amarasingam, 2010:241). On December 16, 2016, then US President Barack Obama signed the Frank Wolff International Religious Freedom Act. This Act amends the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to

specifically provide protections for non-religious persons. Follow a particular religion (Winston, 2017:196).

Following the thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, Robert G. Ingersoll, Voltaire and the novelist José Saramago, the contemporary atheists such as Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins have criticized beliefs and the practices of religions (Harris, 2005:123). The 19th century German political theorist and sociologist Karl Marx described religion as the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a soulless world, the soul of a soulless situation, and the opium of the people. It is imperative to eliminate the concept of imaginary happiness from religion (Marx, 1976: V. 3).

In view of the centuries of exploitative role of religion in the West, Sam Harris criticizes that the West has surrendered itself to the authoritarian and dogmatic divine authority of religion (Harris, 2006:139) The traditional religion of religious fundamentalism (Moreira et al, 2006:203) is closely related to authoritarianism, dogmatism, and bigotry. (Kahoe, 1977:145) In addition to these arguments, many historical events also made serious scholars of the West hate religion, such as Crusades, inquisitions, witch trials, and terrorist attacks, etc. (Harris. 2005:21) In response to this objection, it was said that governments supporting atheism, such as The Soviet Union committed mass murder on the basis of atheism (Feinberg et al, 2010:197; D'Souza, 2016:141). However, atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins called Stalin's atrocities not atheism but the result of socialist dogma. (Dawkins, 2006: 291; Blackford, 2013: 88)

Most atheists are consciously or unconsciously irreligious. Some sects in many major religions reject the existence of a personal and creative deity (Winston 2004, 299). It is also said that atheism is not entirely separate from any system of religious and spiritual beliefs, such as

Neopagan movements (Johnson et al, 2005: 194; Matthews, 2009: 115). In recent years, the number of atheists has increased in some religious sects, such as atheistic or humanistic Judaism (BBC, 2006:197; Levin, 1995:156) and Christian atheists (BBC May 17, 2006; Altizer, 1967: 102–103; Lyas, 1970:56-9) Hinduism (Michael, 1999: 31–33), Jainism, and some forms of Buddhism (Chakravarti, 1991: 71).

In the 20th century, atheism spread throughout the world. Atheistic ideas have spread under various headings such as Marxism, logical positivism, existentialism, humanism, feminism (Overall, 2006: 233-246) and the general scientific movement (Overall, 2006: 112). Naturalists such as Bertrand Russell and John Dewey flatly denied belief in God. Analytic philosophers like J.N. Findlay and J. JC Smart also opposed the existence of God (Zdybika, 2005: 16). State atheism emerged in Eastern Europe and Asia, particularly in the Soviet Union under Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin (Victoria, 2018:203) and communist China under Mao Zedong. (Richard, 1994: 339-340; Blaney, 2011: 494) Stalin toned down his opposition to Orthodoxy during World War II to improve public acceptance of his regime (Madsen, 2014: 588).

In 1966, *Time* magazine asked the following question in the context of the Death of God theology movement: “Is God dead?” According to the information received in response, almost half of the people of the world lived under some anti-religious ideology (*Time* April 8, 1966).

New styles of atheism are emerging in the 21st century. In the early 21st century, a movement called the “New Atheism” began. According to this, religion should not be tolerated, but wherever it has influence, it should be confronted, criticized, and exposed through rational argument. (Hooper, 2010:141-5) This movement is associated with the ideas of atheist thinkers

such as Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor J. Stenger. (Gribbin, 2011:39-41; Stenger, 2009:231) Now in the United States, the science curriculum is being changed by adding creationist ideas and the religious ideas of the “new” atheists. The creation of a more secular society has been taught by presenting the ideas of the “new” atheists as an argument. (Garfield, 2013:129)

CONCLUSION

This review of the history of atheism in the West makes it clear that in the beginning atheism did not mean denying God. But later, when religion was used to stop the development of science in the western society, in response, atheism became the theory of denying God. When atheism with this meaning began to flourish, the Church resisted its justification. But this resistance did not prove to be effective. Later, many social and political factors also played an important role in popularizing the attitude of atheism in the western society. Earlier, atheism was a denial of religion, but now it has become a religion itself. Since many economic, political and social interests have been associated with atheistic ideas, it is being promoted in the western society under the patronage of the state. As a result of the goals that were set in advance to promote atheism, the development of atheism is causing more harm than benefit to the human society. Therefore, the development of atheism has become a sign of concern for intellectuals and academia today to look into the growing atheism in order to make the international human society possess high moral values on a permanent basis.

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