

# Why Question Atheism From a Political and Moral Perspective?

# Atheism – A Search for Truth and Justice

*Many atheists are admirable people, committed to free inquiry, human rights, and justice for the oppressed.*

*Noam Chomsky, linguist and social critic*

*Emma Goldman, activist*

*Simone de Beauvoir, philosopher*

*Peter Singer, philosopher*

*Kai Nielsen, philosopher*

*Margaret Sanger, activist*

*George Eliot, author*

*Sir William Golding, author*

*Primo Levi, chemist and author*

*W. Somerset Maugham, author*

*Salman Rushdie, author*

*Salvador Allende, statesman*

*Francis Crick, scientist*

*Sam Harris, scientist*

*Richard Dawkins, scientist*

*Stephen Jay Gould, scientist*

*Robin Lane Fox, historian*

# A Starting Point for Discussion: What Best Explains This?

## War Related Deaths (including civilians)

16 <sup>th</sup> century:	1.6 million
17 <sup>th</sup> century:	6.1 million
18 <sup>th</sup> century:	7.0 million
19 <sup>th</sup> century:	19.4 million
20 <sup>th</sup> century:	108.0 million

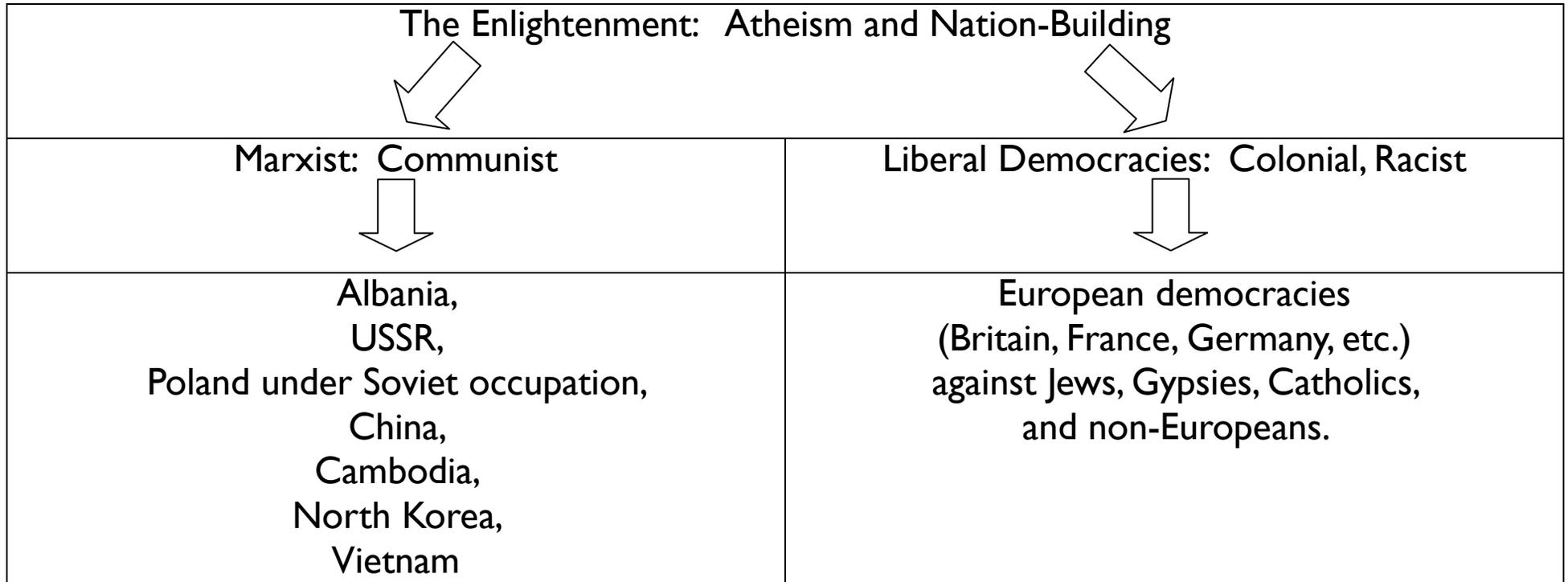
Organized Religion

Nation-Building

Organized Atheism

# Why Question Atheism?

**Historically, atheism and nation-building went hand in hand in the Enlightenment, to create 'rational communities' as opposed to irrational 'religious communities.'**



How have these two trajectories treated human beings?

# Why Question Atheism?

## Trajectory #1: Marxist Atheism

**Problem: Why did atheism lead to political intolerance?**

Albania under Hoxha, the “first atheist state”

USSR under Stalin: 20,000,000 deaths<sup>1</sup>

Poland under Soviet occupation

China’s Cultural Revolution: 3,000,000<sup>2</sup>

Cambodia under Pol Pot: 1,500,000

North Korea

Vietnam

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore. *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. p. 649: “Perhaps 20 million had been killed; 28 million deported, of whom 18 million had slaved in the Gulags.” Dmitri Volkogonov. *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime*. p. 139: “Between 1929 and 1953 the state created by Lenin and set in motion by Stalin deprived 21.5 million Soviet citizens of their lives.” Alexander N. Yakovlev. *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia*. Yale University Press, 2002, p. 234: “My own many years and experience in the rehabilitation of victims of political terror allow me to assert that the number of people in the USSR who were killed for political motives or who died in prisons and camps during the entire period of Soviet power totaled 20 to 25 million. And unquestionably one must add those who died of famine — more than 5.5 million during the civil war and more than 5 million during the 1930s.” Robert Gellately. *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe*. Knopf, 2007, p. 584: “More recent estimations of the Soviet-on-Soviet killing have been more 'modest' and range between ten and twenty million.” Stéphane Courtois. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 4: “U.S.S.R.: 20 million deaths”. Robert Conquest. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, Oxford University Press, 1991 (ISBN 0-19-507132-8).

<sup>2</sup> Chang, Jung and Halliday, Jon. *Mao: The Unknown Story*. Jonathan Cape, London, 2005. p.569

# Why Question Atheism?

Some atheists rebut, 'But that's not atheism. It's murder, dictatorship, genocide, or something else.'

**Yet these were broad movements that called themselves *atheist*.**

'Religion is the opium of the people: this saying of Marx is the cornerstone of the entire ideology of Marxism about religion. All modern religions and churches, all and of every kind of religious organizations, are always considered by Marxism as the organs of bourgeois reaction, used for the protection of the exploitation and the stupefaction of the working class.'

(Lenin, Vladimir. *About the attitude of the working party toward the religion.*

Collected works, v. 17, p.41)

**How does a 'Liberal Democracy' atheist reason with a Marxist atheist?  
Does switching political structures solve the problem?**

# Why Question Atheism?

## Trajectory #2: Liberal Democracies

### Problem: Why did atheism lead to racism?

‘Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in **the white race**. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples.’  
Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Huxley (1825 – 95), nicknamed ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’ for contributing to the widespread acceptance of evolution: “**No rational man, cognizant of the facts, believes that the average Negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the white man.**” In fact, questions of whether blacks were even of the same species as whites changed to questions of whether or not Africans could survive competition against Europeans. The answer was a resounding no. **The African was the inferior** because he represented the “missing link” between ape and man, according to the evolutionists.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Bernasconi, ‘Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race’, in Bernasconi (ed), *Race* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) argues that Kant, while not the first person to use the word ‘race,’ was the first to give the term a precise definition. ‘By setting out clearly the distinction between race and variety, where races are marked by hereditary characteristics that are unavoidable in the offspring, whereas the distinguishing marks of varieties are not always transmitted, Kant introduced a language for articulating permanent differentiations within the notion of species’ (p.17).

# Why Question Atheism?

## Trajectory #2: Liberal Democracies

### Problem: Why did atheism lead to racism?

‘The Enlightenment and the French Revolution brought a new religious freedom to Europe in the 18th century **but did not reduce anti-Semitism**, because Jews continued to be regarded as outsiders.’ (*Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*: ‘Anti-Semitism’)

‘This development was due not only to the **rising nationalism** of the 19th cent., but also to the conscious preservation, especially among Orthodox Jews, of cultural and religious barriers that isolated the Jewish minorities from other citizens.’ (*German Literature Companion*: ‘Anti-Semitism’)

*Sir Arthur Keith* (1866 – 1955), Britain’s leading evolutionary scientist of the mid-20th century: “To see evolutionary measures and tribal morality being applied vigorously to the affairs of a great modern nation, we must turn again to Germany of 1942. We see Hitler devoutly convinced that evolution produced the only real basis for a national policy... The means he adopted to secure the destiny of his race and people were organized slaughter... **The German Fuhrer, as I have consistently maintained, is an evolutionist; he has consciously sought to make the practice of Germany conform to the theory of evolution...war is the necessary outcome of Darwin’s theory.**” (*Evolution and Ethics*, Putnam, New York, 1947, p. 230)

**But there are deeper problems.**

# Why Question Atheism?

## Trajectory #2: Liberal Democracies

### Problem: Can atheism define a person?

For example, Princeton philosopher *Peter Singer* argues that certain people – fetuses, infants, those with certain cognitive disabilities, and certain elderly people – are not “persons” because they can’t express their will to live *in a way that we recognize*. Singer writes: “Only a *person* can want to go on living, or have plans for the future, because only a *person* can even understand the possibility of a future existence for herself or himself. **This means that to end the lives of people, against their will, is different from ending the lives of beings who are not people.** Indeed, strictly speaking, in the case of those who are not people, we cannot talk of ending their lives against or in accordance with their will, because they are not capable of having a will on such a matter...killing a *person* against her or his will is a much more serious wrong than killing a *being that is not a person*. If we want to put this in the language of rights, then it is reasonable to say that only a *person* has a right to life.” (*Rethinking Life and Death*, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995, p. 197–198)

Singer argues that newborns lack the essential characteristics of personhood: “rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness” (*Taking Life: Humans*, Excerpted from *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edition, 1993). Therefore, “killing a newborn baby is never equivalent to killing a person, that is, a being who wants to go on living.” (Singer, Peter. *Peter Singer FAQ*, Princeton University, accessed March 8, 2009)

# Why Question Atheism?

## Trajectory #2: Liberal Democracies

### Problem: Can atheism define a person?

“If it’s true that only ‘individual rights’ matter, then **our descendants really don’t matter** because they’re not individuals yet. This is what the West just has not been able to deal with. This is why the West pushes off to the future **environmental pollution, global warming, government deficits, the energy crisis, the global food shortage, the global water crisis,** and so on. The truth is: we have not inherited this earth from our parents; we are borrowing it from our children. And we are leaving nothing left for them. It’s **taxation without representation across time.** The idea of ‘individual rights’ is likely to be the fatal flaw of the West, especially since we give huge corporations more ‘individual rights’ than our future children.”

# Why Question Atheism?

**Thus, in both Marxist and Liberal Democratic trajectories:  
Atheism has not articulated the value of each human life.**

The Enlightenment: Atheism and Nation-Building	
Marxist: Communist	Liberal Democracies: Colonial, Racist
Albania, USSR, Poland under Soviet occupation, China, Cambodia, North Korea, Vietnam	European democracies (Britain, France, Germany, etc.) against Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, and non-Europeans.

**The common problem: What is the value of each and every human life  
when what's most important is the nation?**

# Why Question Atheism?

Martin A. Nowak, Harvard professor of biology and mathematics, Director of the Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, explains that, by itself, intellectual scientific life is '**inherently unstable**,' and is unable to answer the kind of questions religion can — like the meaning of life, or the value of each human life.

This is not to say that all atheists are racists, politically intolerant, or hedonists. It may not be intrinsic to atheism. **But there are no intrinsic barriers to such powerful forces either. Said another way, racial justice, real political tolerance, and deep concern for future generations are not intrinsic to atheism.**

How could atheists of today argue against more self-centered atheists on rational grounds? There does not appear to be such grounds from within the atheist framework itself.

**Atheism has no moral stability.**

So, while there are very admirable atheists who try not to be racist, who argue for compassion for all humanity and each human being and not just some, who are tolerant of religion, it is **an emotional commitment.**

# Atheism – A Search for Truth and Justice

## *Questions and Directions*

1. If the mistakes of Christians are significant to deciding against Jesus, how are the mistakes of atheists significant to you?
2. How does the moral instability of atheism strike you?
3. Does that lead you to be more open to a religious tradition?
4. What other factors are important to investigating the truth claims of atheism and a religious tradition?