



# Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World

*Mitchell Stephens*

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## **Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World** Mitchell Stephens

The historical achievements of religious belief have been large and well chronicled. But what about the accomplishments of those who have challenged religion? Traveling from classical Greece to twenty-first century America, *Imagine There's No Heaven* explores the role of disbelief in shaping Western civilization. At each juncture common themes emerge: by questioning the role of gods in the heavens or the role of a God in creating man on earth, nonbelievers help move science forward. By challenging the divine right of monarchs and the strictures of holy books, nonbelievers, including Jean- Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, help expand human liberties, and influence the early founding of the United States. Revolutions in science, in politics, in philosophy, in art, and in psychology have been led, on multiple occasions, by those who are free of the constraints of religious life. Mitchell Stephens tells the often-courageous tales of history's most important atheists— like Denis Diderot and Salman Rushdie. Stephens makes a strong and original case for their importance not only to today's New Atheist movement but to the way many of us—believers and nonbelievers—now think and live.

## **Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World Details**

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## **From Reader Review Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World for online ebook**

### **Gretta Vosper says**

My partner and I kept this book in the car to read while we were traveling anywhere. It was so well written that it made the miles fly by. At the same time, it could be read in little chunks if we were going only a short distance, each one of them offering up a wonderful little bit of information we hadn't known or hadn't shared. All of which added up to a remarkable book which is a delight to share.

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### **Justin Powell says**

A not so expansive history of famous free-thinkers over recorded history. Almost no time is given to the big names over the past hundred years or so, or at least in my opinion anyways. A majority of these characters most people will have never heard of. Such as Bradlaugh, Meslier, Diderot, d'Holbach, Shelley, or Rose. Not everyone in the book is an out right atheist. To me this is more of a history of free-thinkers. You see a slow progression leading up to our modern day "New Atheism", who indeed are mentioned at the end. The author notes that now these men do not have to publish under different names, or wait until they're dead to publish in fear of repercussions. Many of the people in this book faced persecution and other penalties for their writings and vocal opinions.

It is because of the men AND women(though they were so few due to lack of freedom for most of history) that we can study, we can investigate, we can propose, we can experiment we can challenge, we can imagine, we can push ahead with the difficult, invigorating work of creating the modern world, without worrying about offending the followers of a supernatural Being or contravening some line in their holy texts. We all owe these freedoms to those in this book, and many not mentioned.

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### **Kim Williams says**

This book was at times difficult to get through but it was worth it. The author's writing style, while he did his best to be engaging, often fell a bit flat for me. That being said, this book made me feel proud to be part of this long lineage of freethinkers who asked the question, "How can that be?" By questioning, we learn, we grow, we advance, we evolve. Humanity's progressive march has been very much the story of questioning religion and its absolute truths. To seek answers not found in a church or holy book. In all aspects of our lives, those who, at the very least, questioned God are the ones who moved humanity forward. Mental slavery to the absolutes of religion had been very helpful in keeping the population ignorant and satisfied with their lot in life no matter how low. Kings were divinely ordained and people gladly suffer in this life to reap the rewards of the next. It is a very convenient system for maintaining the status quo.

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### **Hal says**

I was glad to get the opportunity to review this book as the subject I find most fascinating and with such relevance to our daily lives. To believe or not to believe, that is the question. Stephen's book does not

directly address the rights or wrongs of such pondering but gives us an insightful and educational view of those who struggled through the centuries putting forth their view that went directly in the face of the powerful forces, the religionists.

We are introduced to familiar and unfamiliar names who in many cases risked their lives to be heard, others merely heaped with scorn. It is a fascinating and thought provoking journey that one would do well to read several times because of the many ideas to digest and reflect on. My only criticism would be that at times it bogs down into historical meanderings that might induce sleepiness in some.

Stephens does not seem to be out to convert anyone but makes some powerful arguments in the history as to the future of religion and its hold in the world. Everyone must draw their own stance on the belief questions but I can see from where we have come, give or take a few hundred years from now a book such as this will be seen as another step down the path of coming to grips with reality.

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## **Leah says**

### **Rating: 4 of 5**

Stephens mentioned in the Acknowledgments that Imagine There's No Heaven was a decade-long process, which, within the first chapter, was immediately apparent. (40+ pages in the Notes along with multiple footnotes.) It took me a few chapters to adjust to his narrative style: He'd start off with a more modern "character" or "star" of disbelief / atheism then jump back a couple decades or a few hundred years or a thousand years to someone else, who possibly influenced the person he had previously started discussing before jumping back in time.

Stephens also presented two sides of an argument - sometimes within a few sentences of one another - so that I had to pay close attention if I wanted to discern his personal take on a particular argument from his sharing one side's perspective or simply asking questions for readers to ponder.

For the most part, Stephens managed to report history rather than sprinkle "truths" in among personal commentary. In other words, his personal *beliefs* did not overcome or overshadow the facts. Since I was unfamiliar with the history of disbelief, and many of its lesser known "stars", I found this book a thought-provoking, albeit dense, introduction.

Not recommended to readers in the mood for something light - there's way too much information, jumping around in time, and open-ended questions for this to be mainstream entertainment. Nor would I recommend it to anyone who's already performed their own extensive research in the subject and its history - those individuals would probably find this book too basic and/or redundant.

*Received hardcover from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Lana says**

The first ~half of this book failed to grasp my attention, it took me *forever* to finish and when I read it in bed, I would start falling asleep after reading only a couple of pages. BUT the second half was absolutely amazing. I am so glad to have "learned" about such personalities as Ernestine Rose, Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Charles Bradlaugh, in such detail. The tone of the book reminded me of my previous history/social

studies books because it was pretty dull at certain parts. Also, I think having "Atheism" in the title is a bit misleading because not all the "characters" are exactly atheists.

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### **Melissa Pugh says**

Why, oh why, when you are an experienced writer, would you ever start a sentence, let alone EVERY OTHER SENTENCE, with a conjunction?? It may not be important to some, but to me, it completely took away from a fascinating topic I am very interested in, which is the history of Atheism. Maybe I'll try again when I'm not so grammatically anal.

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### **Paul Anderson says**

I received this book as a Goodreads FirstRead. There were definitely elements that I found very interesting. For instance, there were many aspects of the French Revolution about which, for whatever reason, I had been ignorant, and the level of detail about those events was enlightening. This was also the case when discussing various notable free-thinkers, especially Americans, who are relatively unknown and unappreciated despite their strides toward women's suffrage, abolition, and other civil rights causes in addition to their outspoken atheism.

There were, on the other hand, a number of issues I had with this book. For one, it seems unclear who the audience is supposed to be. The author is trying to present an objective historical record and tie it to his thesis that the rise and development of atheism can be traced as a direct, parallel trajectory with the rise of human liberty. However, all too often, he will informally address the reader, in a way that assumes that the reader is an atheist who is already on board with this thesis. (For the record, I agree with him, but I also don't think that thesis is especially profound...) There are also a few points that are almost apologetic, he says that the idea of shadow gods, or over reliance on science or reason can be dangerous, and takes the time to recognize that the book itself is close to falling into that camp. That lack of confidence in his own argument seemed distracting to me.

One other shortcoming I found, and to his credit, the author addresses this himself, is the shortage of representation from non-western atheists. Granted, there is a chapter that mentions two or three individuals in the middle east, but no one from Asia, Africa, or South America is discussed. Especially in heavily theocratic nations, one could draw a very direct line between the over-reliance on religion and lack of progress in human rights advances. Maybe that was too obvious to include? Perhaps the voices of former Islamic atheists, while admittedly probably much harder to find, could be included in a follow up book?

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### **Miriam Downey says**

Read my full review here: <http://mimi-cyberlibrarian.blogspot.c...>

It is all a mystery, and the longer I live, the more I live in the Mystery. The book Imagine There's No Heaven by Mitchell Stephens contributes to the mystery. My husband and I read it aloud over several months and found it fascinating read.

First it must be said that it is not a polemic against religion, but the book is a history of the fascinating

figures who contributed to the atheistic thinking of the last many centuries and certainly contributed to the current lack of religious enthusiasm in Western culture. He begins with the Greeks and ends with Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, and explains how each generation of disbelievers helped move society and science forward.

This is a history that most of us haven't read because it has been relatively under the radar. One reviewer says that it has "usually been downplayed or outright denied by conventional histories." Certainly I didn't read about any of these people in all the courses I took on religious history. Quite frankly, my only exposure to modern atheism was a woman at my small country church who would stand up at church with a petition against Madalyn Murray O'Hair. She'd wave the petition in her hand and announce "Madalyn Murray O'Hair is at it again!" My husband and I would chuckle, because we were all for free speech and freedom of (or from) religion.

There are many fascinating characters in the book (and one has to imagine these were all "characters" as they bucked the system) including Voltaire, Diderot, Marx, and Camus, among many others. They all reflect the five types of disbelief that Stephens outlines. The first is skepticism—"how could that possibly be?" The second is just the mandate to live joyously and concentrate on living in the now. The third type of disbelief comes from knowledge of a better answer. The fourth is that religion is often a tool of repression and thought control. And the fifth is that when the mind is open to all sorts of ideas, it is difficult to concentrate on one set religious beliefs.

Life is frankly a lot easier when there is a set religious doctrine to believe in and to provide comfort and answers to questions. Although this is not my personal concern, I understand the concept of "just tell me what to believe." I was very intrigued about a movement in the Catholic church to ordain women. This is a dissident Catholic movement, and a woman in Kalamazoo was ordained over the weekend. The Bishop of West Michigan issued a warning that anyone who attended the ordination service risked ex-communication. Other than the obvious, the interesting thing to me was that the decision of the bishop was questioned by the press. They asked questions like "What difference does it make if Catholics went to the ordination?" These kinds of questions are indicative of the kind of intellectual indifference to religion that is permeating society.

Because Stephens is writing an historical look at Atheism, he leaves the readers with no conclusions—which I guess in itself is a free-thinking style of ending. He mentions that "we have just begun to tackle the question of how to find meaning without relying upon some external dispenser of meaning." Individuals who throw off their religious identities are free create their own lives.

There is much more that I could write. My spiritual faith wasn't threatened in any way, although I do have to say that I have long been dealing with issues about organized religion. At any rate, my husband and I had a great experience reading the book. Sometimes we had to force ourselves up from the breakfast table to begin our day.

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today...  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one  
John Lennon

The review in The Humanist: [http://thehumanist.com/arts\\_entertain...](http://thehumanist.com/arts_entertain...)

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### **Mike says**

A bit dry, but this was very carefully researched and gives a a detailed tour of famous and infamous atheists and their contributions to the modern world -- starting with Anacreon and the Carvakas of India, and moving through to the late 20th century, the author spotlights some forgotten heroes of free thought, profiling abolitionists, artists, and reformers alongside the more well-known philosophers and scientists. Of particular interest to me was his discussion of skepticism and unbelief among non-literate cultures, as the assumption has usually been that "primitive" people are more superstitious than us. The excerpts from a Victorian adventurer's journal which recounts the debate he clearly lost with his unbelieving porter was great.

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### **Graham Knight says**

I loved this book! It sets how to show how the loosening of religion's stranglehold enabled scientific progress to be made. It introduced me to a whole history of atheists writers & thinkers that I was unaware of. There is a lot more reading to be done!

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### **Meredith says**

This was a very lukewarm book for me. I was happy and eager to learn about the history of outspoken atheism, and fine with that tying into a bigger picture of modern innovations and lack of faith allowing further prodding into the universe. However, the 'creating the modern world' aspect was not really discussed all that much, and when it was I sometimes found the leaps kind of ridiculous (mostly in regards to modern art movements). I didn't mind that it wasn't addressed much, because the history was the interesting part.

However, there were aspects of this book which truly annoyed me. In the opening chapter the author states that "one of this book's purposes is to search for an ethic of atheism." This came up regularly throughout the book, but not so much that you'd guess this was one of his purposes. While old-time atheists felt the need to come up with proofs and evidence that religion was false, they lived in a very different world, one in which professing disbelief could be a death sentence and religion had a much more prominent role in daily life, not to mention the legal system. I am an atheist but it's simply shorthand for "I don't believe in any gods." I find it disturbing when atheism is turned into a philosophy (just become a Buddhist if you want that).

The author seems, at times, convinced that atheists can't be good, moral people without a specific ethic to refer to (because no one professing to be religious does anything against their religions rules? Yeeaaaah...). He states that "Most of our conclusions about what is good and what is worthwhile can be connected...to myths, revelations, commandments, prophecies, gospels..." This seems to ignore that humans are communal animals, and that quite a lot of good behavior stems from having to live successfully in communities. I did not grow up with any religion at all, but learned every important moral lesson just from being part of a family and being in school. "Non-believers must contemplate His (god's) absence," was another line that had me scratching my head, along with we are "just discovering how to find meaning without relying on some external dispenser of meaning."

The tone of the book makes me feel like the author must have been a very sincere believer in god at least

until age 18 (vs just a body in a pew). These questions are so far removed from my experiences and even those of my parents who DID grow up with a typical church focus and were born in 1948 and 1951.

In the end, the history of early outspoken atheists was very interesting, the writing isn't a joy to read but it isn't (generally) painful to read either (at times it read more like it was meant to be a spoken lecture), and main concern of the book seems to skip around a bit. I feel like there are probably better histories of atheism that are both more complete and don't go on about giving atheism a specific philosophy.

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## Maphead says

Stephens has written a kind of atheist's history of Western Civ. While the historical stuff makes for interesting reading, my favorite parts of the book dealt with humanity's attempts to find meaning in life when confronted by a godless universe. (Without trying to create gods of our own to slavishly follow – French Revolutionary extremism, Communism, Nazism, etc.)

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## Tim says

Everyone knows curiosity killed the proverbial cat. Yet it likely also is responsible for the death of God, at least in many people. Although that death may not have been premeditated, it is the result of a natural human tendency to seek explanations. Moreover, Mitchell Stephens suggests, were it not for atheist thought, Western civilization may never have seen the scientific revolution or the "Age of Reason."

Stephens makes a strong case for his view in *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World*, an exploration of the impact of atheist thought on Western civilization. Put simply, he shows that these ideas were engaged in a "virtuous cycle" with growing exploration and understanding of the natural world.

Although *Imagine There's No Heaven* examines several mainsprings of disbelief and their development, it seems clear the linchpin is our innate desire to understand the world around us. The same could even be said for religion. Even earliest man wanted explanations for why certain things happened or what caused them. Given the methods available, a god was as valid an explanation as anything. But knowledge is a formidable thing. We notice that seasons seem to be associated with movement of the Sun and the stars. We then ask why they are moving. As Galileo and others discovered, the correct answer may threaten religious beliefs. But a correct answer leads, in turn, to more questions, including efforts to validate or invalidate prior answers. As Stephens observes, "Questioning -- doubt -- is where atheism begins."

Stephens looks at how, although perhaps slow to develop, this cycle led to what we now call "the scientific method." Equally important, once Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* launched the scientific revolution, the cycle was even more active. As Neil deGrasse Tyson suggested in the opening episode of the reboot of *Cosmos*, two words may best describe the scientific method: "question everything." That approach would necessarily encompass or involve gods and religious beliefs. "Religion explains. Science explains," writes Stephens. "After Newton it became hard to deny that -- on many subjects at least -- science explains better."

Yet *Imagine There's No Heaven* also points out atheism's impact beyond natural science. It explores how the writings of various atheists or similarly inclined individuals influenced political thought, especially prior to and after the French Revolution. These ideas were in part founded on tolerance and included justice, freedom, equal rights and other democratic ideals. This in turn reinforces the virtuous cycle because, as

Stephens notes, tolerance requires taking a step back from our own beliefs. He is not blind, though, to the adverse effects some ideas had, pointing out the role some atheistic concepts played in the French Revolutions "Reign of Terror."

In that respect, while Stephens is an advocate, he does not appear to be overly biased. There may be a few times he could be accused of overreaching and cherry picking, but *Imagine There's No Heaven* is a thoughtful examination. Perhaps more important to the reader, the book explores its topic from pre-Grecian times to the 21st Century through the stories and ideas of specific individuals, some famous and some unknown to most. As such, it makes what could be a dry topic much more readable and easier to comprehend.

Ultimately, some may wonder why it takes a book to point out atheism's impact on Western civilization if it, in fact, was as influential as Stephens claims. Wouldn't it be part of our history classes or generally recognized? After all, we're certainly aware of religion's role in history. Here, Stephens makes a telling point.

Even if we ignore the destruction of "blasphemous" material throughout history, hand copying was necessary to reproduce texts before the printing press. Where was most of that copying done? In monasteries. Thus, early books, plays and other writings considered even slightly irreligious weren't at the top of the reproduction list, making them few and far between by the time Gutenberg's invention allowed mass distribution. For several centuries after that, the church dominated European society and life. As a result, comparatively speaking, atheism's role in ideas and culture may appear to be only a recent development. *Imagine There's No Heaven* is a strong step in correcting that record.

(Originally posted at A Progressive on the Prairie.)

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### **Scott Lupo says**

A pretty interesting book telling the history of the most prominent nonbelievers from Ancient Greece to today. It's not a complete history by any means as that would be a very long book. However Mitchell Stephens chooses those nonbelievers that had the most impact on society at those times in history. As he points out there were probably other significant nonbelievers but much of that history was blotted out and destroyed by religious zealots over the years. So what remains are the most compelling characters who risked their lives and their family's lives to believe not to believe. The basic premise is that without nonbelievers we would still be steeped in religiosity and would not have the modern world we have now. Of course there is truth to this. Would we know love without hate? Happiness without sorrow? Life without death? Surely not. Opposites exist in order to compare and contrast our likes, dislikes, passions, desires, rights and wrongs, etc. So it is with Atheism and Theism. I personally found these characters inspiring and courageous to be able to look at the status quo and question it even in the face of such bigotry, hate, and ignorance. That's how society progresses and moves forward, sometimes quickly sometimes glacially. Always with struggles.

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