

CECI N'EST PAS UNE ATHEIST

A NIETZSCHEAN ANALYSIS OF "ATHEISM" IN MEMES



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ABSTRACT: In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche famously writes that "God is dead." Modern atheists, including "Internet Atheists," have taken this as their epithet. I argue that the perpetuation of the statement "God is dead" contradicts the atheistic core, such that Internet Atheists parallel theists in identity construction. Insights from Nietzsche, Jean Luc Nancy, Sigmund Freud, and Christopher Hitchens allow for an exploration of the theistic underpinnings of Internet Atheists. The doctrine of Internet Atheism, as it is represented in humorous online depictions of God, suggests an inability to confront the consequences of the death of God, an inability which Nietzsche warns against in the Parable of the Madman.

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Internet Atheists are one of the most self-righteous groups in the modern media age. The average Internet Atheist does not always make accurate claims disputing religion; nonetheless, they assert them confidently and aggressively. More troubling, Internet Atheists do not practice atheism, nor do they seem to understand this position. In this essay, through a Nietzschean analysis, I will argue that depictions of God created by Internet Atheists, primarily in memes, represent their inability to confront the death of God by simultaneously celebrating God's loss of divinity and their own absorption and enforcement of theistic ideologies, making Internet Atheists distinctly theist. I will proceed through Nietzsche's and Christopher Hitchens' descriptions of atheism, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's and Freud's fetishism.

I consider Internet Atheism to be a subsection of New Atheism. New Atheism is a contemporary position rejecting God through the rational critique of religion.¹ Internet Atheism, similarly, uses new media to reject the idea of and rationally delegitimize a literal God; these ideas are shared through internet forums and communities, and are known for belligerent attempts to disprove God through science and logic. The definition of "Internet Atheism" remains rooted in a community of people with brazen attitudes toward religion. On *VICE*, we find the article "A Reminder: Internet Atheists Fucking Suck;"² likewise, on CollegeHumor, we find "10 times Atheists Online were More Annoying than your Religious Aunt."³ As these articles point out, "Internet Atheists" are not "atheists who use the internet" but a specific community of people who denigrate the slightest mention of religion. Perhaps Urban Dictionary puts it best when they state, "Not to be mistaken for an atheist who merely uses the internet, an Internet Atheist is someone who is ubiquitous when it comes to websites or forum threads related to religion."⁴ It should be noted that Internet Atheists are not the only non-theists found on the internet. Instead, they

1 Gary Wolf, "The Church of Non-Believers," *WIRED*, November 1, 2006, <https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/>.

2 Kesvani Heusin, "A Reminder: Internet Atheists Fucking Suck," *VICE*, June 14, 2017.

3 CH Staff, "10 Times Atheists Online Were More Annoying Than Your Religious Aunt," *CollegeHumor*, August 19, 2016, <http://www.college-humor.com/post/7039-423/10-brave-atheist-warriors-who-100-confirm-there-is-no-god>.

4 Card Tricks, "Internet Atheist," *Urban Dictionary*, May 27, 2013, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Internet%20Atheist>.

5 See *The Chronicles of Jesus and Shrek, Jesus and Hitler: A Romance, Jesus Gets Nailed, and When Jesus Comes* as found on fanfiction.net.

6 Alice Marwick, "Memes," *Contexts* 12, no. 4 (November 16, 2013): 1.

7 Marwick, "Memes," 1.

8 Cited in Marwick, "Memes," 2.

are defined by controversial and belligerent methods to disprove the ideas of theism.

Internet Atheists have a different perspective of their position. T.J. Kirk, popularly known as "TheAmazingAtheist," is a prominent member of this community. Kirk gained fame by posting videos that harshly critique theism and religion on YouTube. His followers describe his work very differently than *VICE* and CollegeHumor do. Geniusbeast describes Kirk as "the most genuine human being I have ever seen. In a world of stupidity, arrogance, and silly religion, he shines." Geniusbeast represents the common Internet Atheist view: their efforts fight what they believe is ignorant dogma perpetuated by religious institutions and individuals. Internet Atheists view themselves as vigilantes working to liberate humanity from the clutches of a false god. Regardless of interpretation, Internet Atheists communicate their position through various platforms including blogs, vlogs, comments, fanfiction, and memes.⁵

Memes are a staple of internet culture. Memes are digital symbols that convey ideology through the addition of text to images already holding meaning.⁶ Memes often include parody, pastiche, and satire.⁷ Limor Schifman defines memes as "cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon."⁸ Essentially, the birth of a meme involves the creation of a meaningful image that spreads through an internet community that adds to, alters, and shares their variations of the original. Ultimately, they become so prevalent that they shape both online and offline culture.

This essay will focus on two strands of memes: "God in Action" and "Advice God." Both are appropriations of classical images of a divine God aiming to analyze the concept of God. The "God" represented does not necessarily accurately portray God (it is a false God, which will be discussed later), nor do the memes differentiate between God, god, or gods of different religions, texts, or cultures; they generally describe popular atheist assumptions of the Abrahamic God, though they do not generally recognize this as their position. Rather, Internet Atheists assume a totalizing stance on God and religion in general. Even when misrepresenting God, Internet Atheist discourse reveals their position regarding theism.

I will be focusing on what this discourse reveals about Internet Atheists without consideration for whether their representation of God is accurate. However, due to Internet Atheism's implicit focus on Abrahamic religions, when referring to theism I will focus on Abrahamic religions in my analysis.

Internet Atheists may not understand a specific religion's concept of God, nor, as I will discuss, do they fully understand their own position in the atheism-theism dichotomy. However, these concepts do have general definitions. Nietzsche describes their fundamental structure: God, atheism, and theism converge at one event—the death of God. Nietzsche, through the madman, proclaims that God is dead.⁹ This is not a physical death, but rather the death of God is the destruction of the power that God held over humanity.¹⁰ Thus, when “alive” so to speak, God enforced meaning, stability, and control. Dictating that these ideologies originate in God, rather than humans, allows them to be accepted as universal, “natural” laws of order and knowledge. Thus, God's ideologies are the only truth; when God is dead, there can be no “natural” law. The death of God occurs when individuals no longer believe the metaphor to be literal. If God is not a literal higher power, then God's laws are not divine. Like the madman in Nietzsche's parable, without God we cannot orient ourselves: we cannot understand where we are moving, if we are moving, what will happen to us.¹¹ As Nietzsche's madman demonstrates, those that understand the consequences of the death of God experience a disoriented world.

Based on Nietzsche, atheists and theists must share a common dead God. The ideologies of both group can be seen as a dichotomy. Atheism is a complete loss of God in both existence and the consequence of this loss for God's unequivocal order, understanding, and meaning. From the parable of the madman, we see that to fully understand God's death is to relinquish all ideologies associated with God because of their arbitrariness without God's authority.¹² Society is built on these ideologies, so removing them requires a complete restructuring of how we view and live in the world. An atheist comprehends that without God there is chaos; all paradigms that previously gave meaning, value, and understanding no

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House Inc., 1974), 181.

10 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

11 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

12 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

13 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 167.

14 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 167.

15 This will be seen in the “Advice God” memes further in the essay.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy, “God, Charlie, No One,” *The Philosophical Salon*, March 2, 2015, <http://thephilosophical-salon.com/god-charlie-no-one/>.

longer apply, and thus atheism is a paradigm shift from believing that God and God's values are natural universal properties to understanding that there are no natural universal properties. Atheism is full rejection of every aspect of God.

Alternatively, there are individuals who recognise that God does not exist but do not realize the loss of order, understanding, and meaning attached to God's death. These individuals often identify as atheists, but their actions in the world do not match the true atheist's. By not realizing the consequences of the death of God, these individuals continue to exist through God's meaning, values, and understanding. These individuals are in the shadow of God.¹³ As Nietzsche suggests, to live in the shadow of God is not to be free of God.¹⁴ Thus, individuals in the shadow of God cannot be atheists.

I propose that those who practice and perpetuate the ideologies of God conform to theism regardless of their belief of whether God exists. Contra the madman, theists understand the world through ideologies associated with God; this includes accepting ideologies dictating a singular truth or morality with supreme value. Like the self-diagnosed “atheist,” an individual may recognize that God does not exist, but if they do not recognize the impact of the death of God, then they still live through God's order. Thus, belief or unbelief in God is not a requirement for theism; it is the behaviours and understanding of the world that define it. The only difference between the theist that believes in God and the one that doesn't is the understanding of where order originates. Both behave as though the world has natural order; whether or not they dispute God's existence is semantic.¹⁵ Atheism purges all God's ideologies, while theism upholds the paradigms of God. Internet Atheists perpetuate the ideologies of God and are thus theist.

By understanding these worldviews in relation to God, the distinct ways Internet Atheists understand the world become evident. In “God, Charlie, No One,” Jean-Luc Nancy discusses God's representation. Nancy states that naming or depicting God undermines the divine's stature because it suggests it is possible to understand God. If God can be understood, then God is not divine.¹⁶ Memes give God an image and characteristics; memes define God. By defining God, Internet Atheists create a

position in which they can defy God; particularly through memes, they primarily, if not always, communicate an identity in contrast to their conception of God. Without identifying “God”, Internet Atheists could not exist as a distinct group. However, when God is named or depicted, the resultant refers to a false god.¹⁷ Thus Internet Atheists are disputing what they assume God to be. The false God is a fetish, and the fetish becomes a meme.

Freud conceptualizes fetish through the mother/son relationship. The son assumes his mother has a penis. When he discovers her lack, he fears his own castration;¹⁸ this fear makes the son unwilling to consciously accept that the mother does not have a penis.¹⁹ Thus, he represses her lack of penis and creates a substitute to prevent the trauma of the truth. The last association made before the trauma, often women’s underwear, becomes the substitute or “the fetish.”²⁰ God imagery has become fetishized to protect against the trauma of God’s death.

When individuals discover the lack of God, they fear the consequences. The meaninglessness and chaos of a world without God is recognized unconsciously. If this recognition becomes conscious, the individual will experience trauma. To protect against trauma, a fetish is created out of the last sign of safety. God, being the last instance of meaning, understanding, and purpose, is thus fetishized—particularly images of God from periods where God held meaning (before God’s death).

In creating the fetish, the mind is divided: conscious and unconscious. Both sections recognize reality and both know that the mother lacks a penis and that God is dead. However, they do not both act in accordance. The unconscious recognizes the fears of the truth: castration and chaos. These are what prevent the conscious mind from understanding reality. Instead, the conscious understands the fetish. In the Internet Atheists’ case, the conscious admits that God is dead but does not recognize the full meaning of it. Internet representations recreate the death of God while refusing to accept its meaning.

“God in Action” is a meme parody in which God from Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*²¹ is inserted into various mortal situations. For instance, God is photoshopped into a basketball game mid-slam-dunk, his arm reaching an imposed basketball (Figure 1). In another,

17 Nancy, “God, Charlie, No One.”

18 Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *Collected Papers Volume 5: Miscellaneous Papers 1888-1938*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere, 1st ed., vol. 5 (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1959), 198.

19 Freud, “Fetishism,” 199.

20 Freud, “Fetishism,” 200.

21 Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1512, Fresco, 9’2” x 18’8”.

22 ben, “God in Action,” *Meme Center*, 2012, <https://www.memecenter.com/fun/91977/God-in-Action>.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

23 Michelangelo, *Creation of Adam*.

24 “The Creation of Adam, by Michelangelo,” *Michelangelo.org*, 2011, <https://www.michelangelo.org/the-creation-of-adam.jsp#pre-tyPhoto>.

25 Michelangelo, *The Creation of the Sun, Moon and Vegetation*, 1511, Fresco, 9’2” x 18’4” 1511.

26 “Advice God Memes,” Search, *Meme Center*, n.d., <https://www.memecenter.com/search?query=advice+god>.

God reaches toward Waldo in a game of *Where’s Waldo* (Figure 2). In another, God is imposed onto a motorcycle, his arm reaching to steal a woman’s purse (Figure 3).²² Through these images, Internet Atheists fetishize the image of a divine God by placing God in human situations. On the surface, this is a celebration of God’s death. Michelangelo’s God represents the world before the death of God; *The Creation of Adam*²³ is a “vision of the sublimity of God and the potential nobility of man.”²⁴ God represents omniscience and omnibenevolence: an ordered, structured, and comprehensive world of human life and understanding. This visual substitute protects from the trauma of life’s chaos without God. However, appropriating God’s image from the divinity of the painting perpetuates the death of God; God is no longer represented as immortal.

Depicting God in human situations revokes God’s power and divinity. In this way, Internet Atheists recognize that God is no longer divine or omnipotent. A true atheist would feel the loss of meaning in God’s death, but the Internet Atheist’s memes place God in comical situations meant to celebrate God’s lack of power over the individual. The humour stems from the disruption of God’s divinity by juxtaposing God with mundane or immoral tasks. Like Nietzsche’s market-goers in *Parable of a Madman*, meme creators and consumers laugh at and celebrate the death of God without considering the event’s repercussions.

“Advice God” and “Scumbag God” also fetishize God by appropriating divine representations. Like “God in Action,” “Advice God” recognizes and perpetuates God’s death by representing God without divinity; it is a visual argument against the plausibility and morality of a literal God. “Advice God” features Michelangelo’s representation of God in *The Creation of the Sun, Moon and Vegetation*.²⁵ A summarized religious value or “truth” appears above “God’s” head—meant to replicate “God’s” thoughts. Below the head of “God” appears a contradiction of the religious truth above. The latter invalidates the former and, thus, the religion’s credibility.

In one variation, the top states, “create entire universe out of nothing” and below “need Adam’s rib to create 1 more thing” (Figure 4).²⁶ The above portion attributes

creation to God, while below an inconsistency in the process of creation is questioned thus also questioning belief in God. The meme suggests it is contradictory to believe that God can create out of nothing yet is incapable of creating Eve in like manner. Contradicting religious truths attempts to discredit God through religion.

The Internet Atheist's often view their position differently than I describe. Returning to the followers of popular YouTuber Kirk, they claim their vigilantism frees humanity from religion's limitations by appealing to reason and morality.²⁷ YouTube user Scorpion Firesome argues that individuals who believe in God "do good things out of fear of death" and those who do not "do the right thing because it's the human thing to do."²⁸ In this comment, Firesome suggests that theists and atheists act similarly but with entirely different moral codes. Believers fear God whereas Internet Atheists act according to a moral code "natural to humanity." By analyzing the perceived ideologies of God and religion, Internet Atheists aim to improve the condition of humanity.

Similarly, Internet Atheist's use memes to explain what they deem the flawed reason of religion in order to return humanity to its natural logical tendencies.²⁹ Internet Atheists use memes to point out perceived inconsistencies in religion's nature.³⁰ Another "Advice God" meme illustrates this by attempting to invalidate God's logic and morality. In this case, the top states "Makes you gay" followed by "hates you for it" (Figure 5).³¹ This text suggests that God is not logical or moral because a being with those characteristics would not intentionally create a hateful thing. Ultimately, Internet Atheists argue they are fighting against God's anti-human ideas in order to liberate humanity and create a society built solely on reason. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that the Internet Atheists' goal instead parallels the "reason," "morality," and identity of theists.

Foremost, these memes' attempts to subvert a literal God are distinctly theist. A major focus of "Advice God" is truth and morality, the origin and value of which is God. New Atheism guides Internet Atheism in this fight against God through theism. Christopher Hitchens describes how New Atheism disagrees with religion, including the source of truth and morality. These concepts are seen in Internet Atheist memes.



Fig. 4

27 T.J. Kirk, *God Sucks*, Digital Video, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c2mj2n3Yg>.

28 Scorpion Firesome, "Atheists Do the Right Thing Because It's the Human Thing to Do," Comment, *You Tube*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c2mj2n3Yg>.

29 AdviceAnimals, "Scumbag God," Image, *REBRN*, January 20, 2014, <http://rebrn.com/re/scumbag-god-694197/>.

30 Kirk, *God Sucks*; AdviceAnimals, "Scumbag God."



Fig. 5

31 AdviceAnimals, "Scumbag God."

32 Ps. 119:160 NV.

33 Ps. 86:11 ESV.

34 imasillypiggy, "Advice God," Thread, *Know Your Meme*, 2011, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-god>.

35 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Twelve Publishing, 2009), 4.

36 sillybeggar, "Scumbag," *Urban Dictionary*, November 19, 2012, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Scumbag>.

The concept that there can only be one truth is distinctly theist. Theism relies on the maintenance of a singular truth to structure the world in a way that positions God indisputably. Psalms states, "All [God's] words are true; all [God's] righteous laws are eternal."³² This passage suggests that God creates indisputable laws of truth. Thus, anything that contradicts God cannot be true. As such, theists follow God's laws. In the Bible, David prays, "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth."³³ David relies on God's guidance to understand the world. Therefore, God is the single, meaningful truth that gives understanding.

Theists each have versions of the single truth. Creationism is an example of a singular truth because it is considered the indisputable way in which everything originated. Internet Atheism perceives creationism to be religion's greatest sin, and memes target this. From the perspective of God, a variation of the "Advice God" meme states, "Everything needs a creator" followed by "Except me."³⁴ This meme questions God's origin using the belief that everything comes from a creator and subverts the singular truth of creationism. The Internet Atheists disagree with single truths put forth by God.

Rebuking the singular truth is a product of rejecting God's ideologies. Without a literal God, no single truth can be believed. The atheist recognizes that the death of God allows a plurality of truths to be valid: there is no longer a supreme authority on what is "true." However, Internet Atheism replaces God's "truth" with their own. Science and reason substitute the specific teachings of religion. Science becomes the dictator of truth and aims to empirically prove a single truth.³⁵ Thus, Internet Atheism does not rebuke the ideology of singular truth. Instead, science becomes the new supreme authority, just as God was before.

Memes represent this transfer of truth from God to science. A variation of "Advice God" called "Scumbag God" follows the same visual and argumentative structure but differs in that it imposes a backwards baseball cap (appropriated from another meme) onto God as an expression of contempt. As per internet lexicon, a "scumbag" is an individual without morals or concern for others.³⁶ In this meme, God is the "scumbag." A variation of *Scumbag God* substitutes God for a strand of DNA and

reads “Let’s give you facial hair, a flat butt, big shoulders, a deep voice” followed by “and a vagina,” suggesting that biology dictates appearance.³⁷ The DNA implicates science as creator and ultimate power. Science becomes the God of Internet Atheism. Thus, its truths must be the only acceptable ones. This acceptance of singular truth upholds the theistic system of order.

Additionally, morality’s value is a fundamental principle of theism. As with truth, singular morality is upheld. In Luke, Jesus says, “No one is good except God alone.”³⁸ God functions as the source of morality by representing the ultimate good. Further, God’s goodness defines the relationship between God and humans; Proverbs states that if one follows God’s wisdom and world structure then they “will walk in the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous.”³⁹ Thus, humans relate to God through morality. Internet Atheists disagree that God is good and that individuals should emulate God. Another “Scumbag God” meme reads, “Scumbag God Says ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’ followed by ‘Proceeds to Kill Millions,’” suggesting that God hypocritically dictates not to kill and is thus not the ultimate good. The meme correctly identifies that God is the original source of the moral ideology that poses murder as reprehensible. An atheist would reject morality because of its origin and would recognize that the death of God indicates that morality, and its principles, are not natural properties.

Instead, the “Scumbag God” meme demonizes God for breaking the moral code. Internet Atheists compare God’s morality to their own. New Atheists argue that religion allows, encourages, and permits individuals to behave in morally questionable ways. For example, Hitchens states that God calls for the killing of civilians so that holy objects can be created.⁴⁰ “Advice God” memes often depict religion as immoral through its own structure. For example, a meme from God’s perspective states “makes murder a sin” followed by “forces Abraham to kill his son Isaac,” suggesting that Internet Atheists believe even God is inconsiderate of God’s own moral structure.⁴¹

In contrast, Hitchens argues that atheists behave in morally acceptable ways. The “Godless” method of learning morality is said to be effective based on the “low crime rates” of New Atheists.⁴² Whether or not

37 imasillypiggy,
“Advice God.”

38 Lk. 18:19 ESV.

39 Prv. 2:20 NIV.

40 Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 4.

41 imasillypiggy,
“Advice God.”

42 Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 4.

43 Mk. 7:22 NIV;
Ps. 11:5 NIV.

44 Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), 10.

this is true, the moral ideology that greed and violence are fundamentally and categorically wrong is a theistic ideology.⁴³ The inability of New Atheism to refuse God’s principles suggest that New Atheism does not recognize the impact of the death of God.

Memes demonize God, positioning Internet Atheists as the good. By defining God, Internet Atheists create a position of the other, then create their own identity in contrast to the other.⁴⁴ If the other is bad then Internet Atheists, who do not accept what they assume to be the other (God), are good. However, this ultimately reverts to God’s dichotomous conceptualization of the world as good and evil. Although Internet Atheism holds that God does not exist, it continues to conform to the principles, values, and morality of God.

Fundamentally, Internet Atheist judgments of truth, morality, and goodness are an analysis of the enactment of God’s ideologies based on God’s ideologies. This puts Internet Atheists in a position where they analyze God through God’s logic while proclaiming God’s death. Ultimately, Internet Atheists attempt to give order to the world by imposing a single ultimate system assumed to provide meaning and understanding. The specific rules and values they give overlap those of theism. More importantly, by trying to impose any single system, they reinforce the theistic system.

Internet Atheists understand that God is dead but do not cognate the consequences of this death. Instead, they create memes to protect themselves from the fear of losing the guidance that God provides. These memes unconsciously appropriate, propagate, and enforce theistic structures. Consequently, Internet Atheists are not truly atheist; instead, they replicate theistic ideologies thereby reinforcing and continuing God’s reign within society.