

ATHEISM –A Perspective by Dr Suraja Raman

From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see His invisible qualities-His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. (Rom 1:20).

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else (C .S. Lewis).

Atheism, in comparison to the world religions namely Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, has a stronghold on individuals and those belonging to the atheist society. In some of the major cities of the world, the members of the humanist society claiming to be atheists will hold regular meetings. These meetings are open to interested individuals.

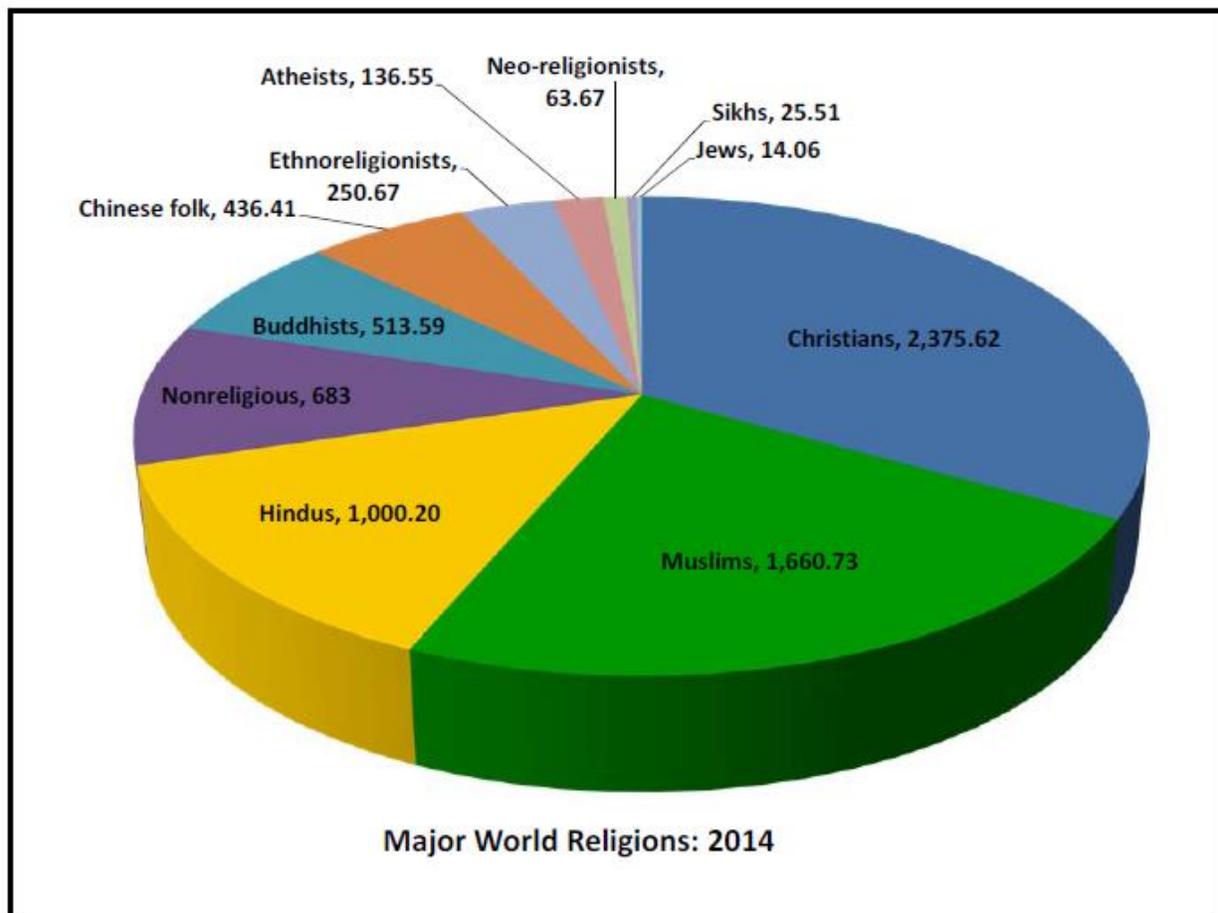


Figure 1: Major World Religions 2014

With reference to the above figure, atheism, in comparison to the world religions namely Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, has a following of 136.55 individuals. In some of the major cities of the world, the members of the humanist society claiming to be atheists will hold regular meetings. These meetings are usually open to interested individuals. Christianity has the largest number of believers, which consist of Roman Catholics and Protestants.

A DEFINITION OF ATHEISM

Most atheists will affirm or make a statement that ‘there is no God.’ The tendency is to deny the existence of God. (McGrath 1993: 15-20).

Atheists claim to comprise one-fifth of the world’s population. They deny the existence of supernatural beings. The notion of God is fiction created by human beings. Their way of life is conducted without the reality of the truth of God.

Testimonies: Philosophers & Free Thinkers on the different underlying causes of such beliefs “God is dead,” is a slogan used by different theologians and critics of orthodox Christianity (Douglas 1991: 253).

Atheists are people who do not have a common belief system, sacred scripture or atheist Pope, thus they disagree on many issues and ideas.

From philosophers & thinkers on the different underlying causes of such beliefs a look into the Age of Enlightenment and the Reformation will be helpful for the reader. For example, The term *atheism* was coined in France in the sixteenth century. The word *atheist* appears in English books at least as early as 1566. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (17th century) concerning natural laws explained the workings of the universe. According to Geoffrey Blainey, the Reformation in Europe had paved the way for atheists by attacking the authority of the Catholic Church, which in turn “quietly inspired other thinkers to attack the authority of the new Protestant churches” (McGrath 1993: 15-20).

Then Kazimierz Łyszczyński, a Polish philosopher, wrote concerning his work, *De non existentia Dei*, that humankind is a creator of God, and God is a concept and creation of human beings. Hence, the people are architects and engineers of God and God is not a true being. Then simple folks are cheated by the more cunning with the fabrication of God for their own oppression For example, see Baron d’Holbach (1723–1789) in his 1770 work, *The System of Nature*. Also in 1819 Caricature by English caricaturist George Cruikshank. This is titled “The Radical’s Arms”; it depicts the infamous guillotine. “No God! No Religion! No King! No Constitution!” is written in the republican banner (Hick 1963: 4).

Atheism (derived from the Ancient Greek ἄθεος *atheos*, meaning “godless; denying the gods; ungodly”) is the absence or rejection of the belief that God or any other deities exist. Although the term originated in the sixteenth century and open admission to positive atheism was not made earlier than the late-eighteenth century, atheistic ideas and their influence have a longer history. Over the centuries, atheists have arrived at their point of view through a variety of avenues, including scientific, philosophical and ideological notions. As a percentage of the global human population, public adherents of atheism remain but a small minority.

Atheistic notions slowly gained traction in certain intellectual circles in Europe following the Renaissance and Reformation. Atheism was championed by some French Revolutionaries who sought to purge France of religion. Atheism made great inroads following the First and Second World Wars, when Communist regimes promoting state atheism were established around the world, called Marxist–Leninist atheism (McGrath 1993: 15-20).

Insights from the the Middle Ages will reveal that the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza contended in the 17th century that God did not interfere in the running of the world, but rather that natural laws explained the workings of the universe (Hastings 2000: 49-51).

ATHEISM CHALLENGES CHURCH MINISTRIES

Generally the Christian community is saddened when encountering an atheist. “I am shocked and very sad to hear their disbelief or denial of a true and living God,” declares a leader of a growing church in Singapore. Attempts to reach out to these atheists are in the growing stage.

Several in the Christian community confessed their lack of skills and knowledge of atheism. A few testified, “I am helpless in my personal witness to them, having felt challenged by their convictions.”

The following are some factors for the Christian community to ponder during times of interaction with the atheists: 1) Absence of God in physical form and touch 2) Absence of scientific proof of God (evidence) 3) Philosophy – Intellect – Spiritual 4) Belief system (another religion) 4) God’s Purpose and Reasons 4) The Truth 4) The heavens and earth 4) Faith – Hope – Love.

The Faith of an Atheist: A discussion with Alister McGrath (AM),
An Interview conducted by John Halford (JH).

JH: Many Christians, when confronted with arguments against the existence of God, become intimidated and go on the defensive, as though the absence of scientific proof of God makes atheism a scientifically sound position. You don’t do that. Why not?

AM: I think it was a process of about two months. I was, as you say, a very aggressive atheist as a schoolboy. I believed the sciences had made belief in God impossible. I believed that atheism was the way of the future, and that religion was an evil relic of the past.

So nowadays, when I read books expounding atheism, I can say: “that was me, once.” I can recognize the tone of voice very easily. There were several things that made me change my mind. I began to discover while still at school—although the implications didn’t crystallize until later—that the sciences cannot disprove God. Scientific knowledge is provisional. We think this *now* but as time goes on we might change our mind. But I didn’t see in my atheistic reading any recognition that scientists change their minds like this. I began to realize that maybe people might think atheism was right today. But what is further down the line? It was a nagging doubt—not yet a conversion.

Then I discovered two things when I went to Oxford University. One was that I had misjudged Christianity. It was far more intellectually resilient and more spiritually exciting than I had imagined. Christianity gave me a lens that let me see things. I found it to be true then, and have ever since.

The other thing was not just intellectual—it was personal. I noticed that my friends who were Christians had something about them that I did not have. It is extremely difficult to describe this. A sense of peace and purpose. An inner conviction. They discovered something that was not just *true* but was *real*. I have often reflected on how important that is.

JH: Does the fact that you came to your Christian understanding from a position of a scientist and an atheist help you to think more profoundly about the truth of the gospel?

AM: I understand the atheist mind-set. I know the arguments that I used to use as an atheist. So I keep asking myself how I can develop approaches that are going to make sense to atheists and challenge their belief system.

That is natural for me because of my history and my experience. I think the difficulty is that if you have been a Christian all your life, you haven't really developed an understanding of how the rest of the world thinks. We need to raise up a generation of apologists and evangelists who are able to enter into the mind-set of atheism and postmodernity, to be able to speak to it in terms it can understand, using arguments that are persuasive.

A dynamic apologist, Dr Ravi Zacharias had addressed the subject, "Why I am not an atheist," in several forums, and in academic debates. In his writings he had inspired Christian readers to take up the task to minister to the atheists during our encounters. There are two approaches that Zacharias suggested, are helpful while interacting with atheists:

Two approaches theists may use as starting points (Zacharias 2004, *Atheism*: 162-3):

Approach 1

1. Yes, there is evil in the world.
2. If there is evil, there must be good.
3. If there is good and evil, there must be a moral law on which to judge between good and evil.
4. If there is a moral law, there must be a moral law giver.
5. For the theist, this points to God.

Approach 2

1. There is evil in the world.
2. There is nothing inconsistent about evil and the freedom of the will within the framework of a loving Creator.
3. Concepts of love and goodness are unexplainable unless there is a God.
4. Since human beings do experience love and goodness, it argues for the reality of God.
5. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to believe that God exists.

The following are responses from converts.

I AM NO LONGER AN ATHEIST

The person that we all admired and had access to several of his books is C. S. Lewis. He had captured the attention of the Christian community, and one of them had to say this of Lewis:

“only after reading the New Testament did he acquire the knowledge and begin to understand what eventually formed the basis of his faith” (Nicholi 2002:93).

There were confessions of former atheists who boldly proclaimed that “Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6).

Thio Li-Anne, a professor of law, with the University of Singapore, miraculously came out of atheism. She testified of her conversion experience in an article in the “Regent Journal of International Law” (Vol 7: 28, 18th March). As a convert, she is grateful to the Christian community for reaching out to her. She writes,

When I first came to America to attend Harvard Law School, I thought I was going to die of spiritual malnutrition. I felt this way because I went to a church in Boston and left feeling very disgusted. I was disgusted because all I saw was a kind of anemic cultural Christianity. A young woman had just come back from a mission trip in Guatemala and all she had to share in this church was, “I’m so glad that I am an American. I’m so glad I live in comfort.” I was disgusted. I was a very young Christian at the time. I did not become a Christian until I was a first-year undergraduate at Oxford. Prior to becoming a Christian, I was actually pretending to be an atheist. I used to happily read Fredriche Nietzsche, John Stuart Mill, John Locke – God was preparing me for a career in constitutional law without me even knowing it. I became a Christian in my first term at Oxford, as an undergraduate, when I had a very dramatic encounter with Christ at a Christian Union meeting. Please understand that back then, I was kind of wild and rebellious. I went to Oxford to join the Oxford Union, not the Christian Union only nerds join that, right? I was more interested in rock music than worship. I ended up becoming a worship leader many years later God even redeems and puts to use the playing of guitars! But the Lord spoke to me as a first-year undergraduate. I had studied comparative religion and was very interested in philosophy. You don’t get to Oxford by being stupid. I had devoted two and a half years of my life studying to gain entrance into Oxford and I was very proud of it. Intellectual pride was certainly there. But I met God there at a Christian Union meeting. It was an Acts chapter two kind of encounter. What the Lord said to me was this: “Li-Ann, I am sick of your half-heartedness; Follow me with all of your heart or stop.” Very intelligently I said, “Huh, you really exist.” I found myself speaking to the Lord and asking him: “What do you want me to do?” We had a conversation. He referred to two people that I knew and told me He wanted me to tell them about Christ. I replied that I could not, that I did not even own a Bible, and did not know about the four spiritual laws. Plus, these were the people I used to party with and they would laugh hysterically if I told them about Jesus. Nevertheless, He said to me: “If you saw a car accident, could you go to a court of law and describe it?” I replied, “Yes, sure I can describe things. I don’t need theology to describe things.” He said, “That’s all I want you to do.” Those are the first five minutes of my meeting Jesus Christ. That tells you the kind of direction that I’m coming from.

In the research materials on C. S. Lewis, a look into his life will be meaningful as we reflect on the subject, “I am no longer an atheist.” Lewis came from a religious family. He became an atheist at age 15, paradoxically “angry with God for not existing”. The separation from Christianity began when he began to view his religion as a chore and a duty. At Cherbourg House he became an atheist, because of an interest in mythology and the occult. Then Lewis strongly resisted conversion, “kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape. More of this area in his life is written in his book, *Surprised by*

Joy (Lewis 1984). Lewis testified that “in the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, knelt and prayed.” As Oxford professor and writer; Lewis is well known for *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, and for his apologetic writings found in *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 2012).

An Anonymous convert writes, “However, looking back, I see that my time as an atheist made me a better Christian. When you lose God through rational analysis, you contemplate life from a materialistic philosophy. Then I could see Life with New Eyes, and Truth is Truth. Finally, I heard the words, ‘Come, follow me.’”

Another convert testifies,

Christians get upset over doctrinal differences. I used to get terribly upset. But now, I approach all human knowledge with greater humility. When you lose God through rational analysis, you contemplate life from a materialistic philosophy. This perspective shows you that a person’s ideas about God are flawed. I believe again, but I also believe no church sect has figured out the Great Mystery. I have doctrinal beliefs, but I know some of them may be wrong. I just don’t know which ones. That means I hold my faith with open hands instead of closed fists. The beliefs of others don’t bother me. I am happy to hear what they believe about God, and how they arrived at that belief. Everyone has something to teach me—even atheists.

These converts were able to testify because “light has broken through their world of darkness,’ namely, atheism. God has entered their lives, made them aware of their condition, and offered them a way out. (Harper 2003: 43).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONS & MINISTRY

From the research findings, a look into Converts from Atheism in areas for adjustment into the agape community of the church are as follows:

Scriptures exhorts us to consider the discipleship of living according to how Jesus Christ would have us live. See the following for our response:

The Power of Missional Intercession

Scripture: Acts 12:5-17; Mt 18:19-20.

“Intercession is a way of loving others” (Foster: Prayer).

“Intercession is coming to God on behalf of another” (Tan: Disciplines).

“All Christians are given the role of intercession” (Smith: Veil).

The Ministry of Intercession

A Listening heart: Acts 12: 5...The church interceded for the imprisoned Peter. Our hearts need to be filled with God’s love for the atheists in need of prayer.

A Listening mind:

- Acts 12: 6-11 God heard the prayers of the believers and intervened on the night before the trial.

- Prayer for Peter in prison took place in the believer's home. Our minds need to be alert for the many urgent concerns for intercession, that the enemy will be defeated.

A Listening will: Acts 12: 12-17 Peter went to the House of Prayer. The prayers of the Christian community had been answered. God has done an extraordinary thing THROUGH THE INTERCESSION OF THE PEOPLE.

Missional Reflections:

- 1) As a church we ought to-
 - Send out members from the community, interceding for these members, and those who call themselves atheists. As a community, let's continue to-
 - Pray & be on the mailing list to receive regular prayer updates of those who had become believers. Utilize time during cell meetings to pray for those who are ministering to the atheists and also for the work of missions around the world. Plan to visit those who are on the mission field and when they are home.
- 2) As a church we ought to participate in the weekly prayer meeting of the church. The prayer meeting is a power house to intercede with other members of the church and especially when we learn of the existence of atheists in our society. God works powerfully through intercessors and the results are encouraging.
- 3) As a church we ought to worship in the Sunday services for the ongoing mission ministries of the church. Our presence in the Pre service prayer on Sunday is a meaningful time to meet the Lord and intercede for God to work in the lives of the ministry workers who are reaching out to those in need of the gospel, especially those who professed to be atheists.

CONVERTS FROM ATHEISM ADJUSTING IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The church, faithful to its obligations both to God and humanity ought to have dynamic teachings, by presenting true teachings to the full and complete life of the church and of its members. An important aspect for practical witness is a living and mature faith.

The Community support (be there) in the major events of life, to encounter doubt, questioning, and hold regular dialogue that is sincere and prudent.

Our church fathers exhorted us as a community:

The church, faithful to its obligations both to God and humanity, cannot cease, as in the past, to deplore, sadly yet with the utmost firmness, those harmful teachings and ways of acting which are in conflict with reason and with common human experience, and which cast humanity down from the noble state to which it is born. It tries nevertheless to seek out the secret motives which lead the atheistic mind to deny God. Well knowing how important the problems raised by atheism, and urged by its love for everyone it considers that these motives deserve an earnest and more thorough scrutiny.

The church holds that to acknowledge God is in no way to diminish human dignity, since such dignity is grounded and brought to perfection in God. Women and men have in fact been placed in the world by God, who created them as intelligent and free beings;

but over and above this they are called as daughters and sons to intimacy with God and to share in his happiness. It further teaches that hope in a life to come does not take away from the importance of the duties of this life on earth but rather adds to it by giving new motives for fulfilling those duties. When, on the other hand, people are deprived of this divine support and without hope of eternal life their dignity is deeply impaired, as may so often be seen today. The problems of life and death, of guilt and of suffering, remain unsolved, so that people are frequently thrown into despair.

Meanwhile, everybody remains a question to themselves, one that is dimly perceived and left unanswered. For there are times, especially in the major events of life, when nobody can altogether escape from such self-questioning. God alone, who calls people to deeper thought and to more humble probing, can fully and with complete certainty supply an answer to this questioning.

Atheism must be countered both by properly presenting true teaching and by the full and complete life of the church and of its members. For it is the function of the church to render God the Father and his incarnate Son present and as it were visible, while ceaselessly renewing and purifying itself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is brought about chiefly by the witness of a living and mature faith, one namely that is so well formed that it can see difficulties clearly and overcome them. Many martyrs have borne, and continue to bear, a splendid witness to this faith. This faith should show its fruitfulness by penetrating the entire life, even the worldly activities, of those who believe, and by urging them to be loving and just, especially towards those in need. Lastly, what does most to show God's presence clearly is the familial love of the faithful who, being all of one mind and spirit, work together for the faith of the Gospel and present themselves as a sign of unity.

Although the church altogether rejects atheism, it nevertheless sincerely proclaims that all men and women, those who believe as well as those who do not, should help to establish right order in this world where all live together. This certainly cannot be done without a dialogue that is sincere and prudent. The church therefore deplores the discrimination between believers and unbelievers which some civil authorities unjustly practice, in defiance of the fundamental rights of the human person. It demands effective freedom for the faithful to be allowed to build up God's temple in this world also. It courteously invited atheists to weigh the merits of the Gospel of Christ with an open mind.

For the church knows full well that its message is in harmony with the most secret desired of the human heart, since it champions the dignity of humanity's calling, giving hope once more to those who already despair of their higher destiny. Its message, far from diminishing humanity, helps people to develop themselves by bestowing light, life, and freedom. Apart from this message nothing is able to satisfy the human heart: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rest in you." (St. Augustine's Confessions, I: 1)

THE DISCIPLESHIP OF LIVING ACCORDING TO JESUS

Spiritual directors are reaching out to us to be "salt and light," for our spiritual growth (Raman 2013: 59). In worship we experience God's greatness, and mercy. We are impacted with His desire to do good by trusting and depending on His Word. In prayer and intercession we depend on God for all our current and urgent needs. In service we enter into acts of helping others in the

day-to-day experiences of life. Jesus's teachings on loving God, to deny oneself and take up the Cross are challenges which enable us to make choices in life. By learning to be like Christ we look forward to the challenges in everyday life (Raman 2013:12-13, 59).

The importance of spiritual growth need to be emphasized. In worship, we are reminded of God's greatness, his mercy, and his desire to do well in our lives. We are reminded that we can trust him and that we depend on Him. The discipling of new believers and the renewal of one's faith cause us to meditate on the Apostles' Creed (Tennent 2011:15).

In prayer, we acknowledge that we depend on God, and we ask him for the help we need—such as food, intervention, and spiritual change. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Phi. 4:6). ‘Desire is the soul of prayer. Along with desire, the second most important secret of effectual prayer is believing.’ (Dunnam 2013:14).

In Bible study, we read and think about the works and words of God. Jesus studied Scripture and used its words to help him resist temptations (Matt. 4:1-11). He said that humans do “not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (verse 4). Spiritual life needs spiritual nourishment. “The word” here stands for the message about Jesus, which was the divine message (Keener 2014: 622).

In the church, we interact with other people in the same Christ-focused training program. We learn from our interactions about how to express love, and we grow in appreciation for people who have talents and abilities different from our own. Jesus created the church not just to preach the gospel, but to help us grow, because that is also part of his work and purpose.

In service, in helping others, we act the way Jesus would. We learn by experience that service gives us more life satisfaction than selfishness does. Being involved in the work of God is the most satisfying feeling of all, for it will be of eternal value. Rms 12:1-8. (Keener 2014: 448).

Toil and trouble or in the day-to-day experiences of life, we have opportunities to learn to be like Jesus, to choose to be patient, to be considerate, to help others, to pray. On the job and in our homes, the Word of God exhorts us to live our lives characterized by obedience, love, and belief, thus longing to journey towards holiness (Oswalt 2014: 56).

CONCLUSION

The results of Missional Intercession is an encouragement to the ongoing work of missions to the atheists, and this is because of God's intercessors. Those who had come out of atheism need our continual prayer, and biblical teachings to be firmly grounded in the Word, and also our encouragement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

1. List some ways whereby we can participate in the missional intercession of the church for the atheists.
2. In my desire for God, what are some insights for a creative missional ministry of outreach for the atheists?
3. Relate a testimony of the conversion of an atheist. What are the factors contributing to the Christian conversion and development of these former atheists?
4. What are atheists saying regarding their current condition?
5. Suggest for the local church a Christian ministry that could be available for discipling converts coming out of atheism.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- 1) There is a need to continue the interviews of those claiming to be atheists. This will enlighten believers to be effective witnesses for the Kingdom of God.
- 2) There is a need to visit the websites of the society of atheists in our respective countries. Plan to call and make an appointment with the members of the society to have an initial discussion.
- 3) There is a need to encourage those who had come out of Atheism to send their testimonies to a local church Newsletter or to a mission agency. This will strengthen the Christian community for the task of evangelism.
- 4) There is a need to disciple new converts from Atheism by encouraging them to attend Alpha courses at a church close to their homes to build relationships with the Christian community. Impact on them the importance of joining a cell group to grow in their new faith.
- 5) See also the following for further enrichment:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_atheism

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._S._Lewis

<https://carm.org/what-is-atheism>

<http://www.conversiondiary.com/2008/01/from-atheism-to-christianity-conversion.html>

<http://www.bethinking.org/is-christianity-true/from-atheism-to-christianity-a-personal-journey>

More testimonies are provided in <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/how-being-atheist-made-me-better-christian>

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