

This thinksheet is an exercise in religious-language analysis. I'm more concerned about the process than about the result. For this, "atheist" is a good word because it's three meaning-levels--root, denotatum, connotata--are dramatically distinct from each other.

1. On the right are the pertinent RHD entries, which please study. Note "God" is the biblical deity (def. #1), capitalized--as this "God" is capitalized in def. #1 of "godly," and in the first meaning under "atheist," which is accordingly "one who denies or disbelieves the existence of" the biblical God. Thus, too, "atheism" is, first of all, not unbelief in the supernatural, but quite specifically "the doctrine or belief" that the biblical God [note the capital letter] does not exist--the conviction stated in the formula that appears in the Psalms, and in street statements of many atheists, "There is no God." SUMMARY: The common meaning of "atheist," on the religious side, in our culture, is anybody who does not believe in the God of the Bible, viz. humanity except for Jews and Christians [and in modified senses, Muslims and Sikhs].

2. The ROOT meaning, however, is broader, as are the meanings of the terms above except for their first-listed meanings: "god-less" [which appears as an article, and in the articles "atheism" and "atheist!"]. The Gk. stem is just "not-god"; the root itself means reverence--therefore, the neg. is "irreverent." Religious innovation always strikes the authorities as irreverent, so Socrates and Jesus are experienced by the authorities as "against God or the gods," i.e. as threats to traditional religion--as indeed they were! We have thus arrived at the denotatum [primary meaning]: the "atheist" is somebody whose life-deeds-words so go against the grain of the conventional pieties as to call down upon them, from the religious authorities if not also from the masses, the charge of impiety, blasphemy, and/or demon possession. [Kittel TDNT 3.65-128, esp.120f, lists 7 kinds of atheism in the biblical world!] In the Bible, the actual word occurs only in Eph.2.12: Before our conversion, We Christians were "godless"--i.e., unbelievers in the true God; cp.1Thes.4.5 and Gal.4.8f.]

3. CONNOTA are the extra meanings a word acquires with use. If we follow out the plant analog, connota are the branches off from the stalk [the denotatum] which grows up from the "root." In the case of our word, the connota are wild! "Atheist" is connotatively a conflictual, rhetorical, hot, rejective word--though denotatively it's cool and descriptive [as in religious studies we say that except in their popular, low-culture forms, these religions are atheist: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism; and of course humanism, including its various psycho- and socio- expressions [e.g., "humanistic psychology" and "the human potential movement"]. In the article "godless" we hit upon another connotatum: "wicked; evil; sinful." [Note that this ethical-moral meaning is not in the articles "atheism" and "atheist!"] We get the Vietnam war when we talk about "godless Communism," when we should speak about Communism as "atheist." Note that, as usual in Eng., the Gk. word is precise and technical and close-to-the-root, while the A-S word carries the heavy freight of connotata.

a-the-ism (ā/ṭhē iz/əm), n. 1. the doctrine or belief that there is no God. 2. disbelief in the existence of God or gods. [< Gk *athe(os)* godless + -ism]
a-the-ist (ā/ṭhē ist), n. one who denies or disbelieves the existence of God or gods. [< Gk *athe(os)* godless + -ist]
 --Syn. ATHEIST, AGNOSTIC, INFIDEL, SKEPTIC refer to persons not inclined toward religious belief or a particular form of religious belief. An ATHEIST is one who denies the existence of a Deity or of divine beings. An AGNOSTIC is one who believes it impossible to know anything about God or about the creation of the universe and refrains from committing himself to any religious doctrine. INFIDEL means an unbeliever, especially a nonbeliever in Mohammedanism or Christianity. A SKEPTIC doubts and is critical of all accepted doctrines and creeds.
a-the-is-tic (ā/ṭhē is/tik), adj. pertaining to or characteristic of atheists; involving, containing, or tending to atheism; *atheistic literature; atheistic people*. Also, **a/the-is/ti-cal**. [ATHEIST + -ic] --**a/the-is/ti-cal-ly**, adv. --**a/the-is/tic-ness**, n.

God (god), n., v., **god-ded**, **god-ding**, **interj.** --n. 1. the one Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe. 2. the Supreme Being considered with reference to a particular attribute: *the God of battles*. 3. (l.c.) one of several deities, esp. a male deity, presiding over some portion of worldly affairs. 4. (often l.c.) a supreme being according to some particular conception: *the god of pantheism*. 5. *Christian Science*, the Supreme Being considered with reference to the sum of His attributes. 6. (l.c.) an image of a deity; an idol. 7. (l.c.) any deified person or object. 8. (often l.c.) **Gods**, *Theat.* a. the upper balcony in a theater. b. the spectators in this part of the balcony. --v. t. 9. (l.c.) to regard or treat as a god; deify; idolize. --interj. 10. (used to express disappointment, disbelief, weariness, frustration, annoyance, or the like): *God, there she goes singing off key again!* [ME, OE; c. D *god*, G *Gott*, Icel *godh*, Goth *guth*]

god-king (god/king/, -king/), n. a human sovereign believed to be a deity or to have godlike attributes.
god-less (god/lis), adj. 1. having or acknowledging no god or deity; atheistic. 2. wicked; evil; sinful. [GOD + -LESS] --**god/less-ly**, adv. --**god/less-ness**, n.
god-like (god/lik/), adj. like or befitting God or a god; divine. [GOD + -LIKE] --**god/like/ness**, n.
god-ling (god/ling/), n. a minor god, esp. one whose influence or authority is entirely local. [ME; see GOD, -LING]
god-ly (god/le), adj., -li-er, -li-est. 1. conforming to the laws and wishes of God; devout; pious. 2. *Archaic*, coming from God; divine. [ME; OE *godlic*. See GOD, -LY] --**god/li-ness**, n. --Syn. 1. religious, saintly, holy, righteous, good. --Ant. 1. wicked, impious.
God-man (god/man/, -man/), n., pl. -men for 2. 1. Jesus Christ. 2. (l.c.) one who possesses the combined attributes of a deity and of a human being; demigod.

NOTES ON THE SLIPPERY TURNINGS OF THIS FIGHTIN' WORD, from NT times: Apollonius of Tyana hated Jews as "atheists" [Jos.Ap.2.148], and thus were Christians hated--and accepted the accusation of atheism: "We are atheists" to all gods but the true God [Just.Apol.1.6]--and of course Eph.2.11f. Just before he was martyred in the Roman arena, 86-year-old Polycarp was commanded to look at the Christians and cry "Seize the atheists!" That he did, looking up!