Atheism is intellectually fashionable. In the past month, *The New York Times* has run [several](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/is-atheism-irrational/) [stories](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/arguments-against-god/?ref=atheism) about lack of faith in its series on religion. *The New Yorker* ran an [article](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2014/02/17/140217crat_atlarge_gopnik?currentPage=all) on the history of non-belief in reaction to [two](http://www.amazon.com/The-Age-Atheists-Sought-Since/dp/1476754314) [new books](http://www.amazon.com/Imagine-Theres-No-Heaven-Atheism/dp/1137002603) on the subject that were released within a week of each other in February. The veteran writer, Adam Gopnik, concludes this:

What the noes, whatever their numbers, really have now … is a monopoly on legitimate forms of knowledge about the natural world. They have this monopoly for the same reason that computer manufacturers have an edge over crystal-ball makers: The advantages of having an actual explanation of things and processes are self-evident.

This is a perfect summary of the intellectual claim of those who set out to prove that God is dead and religion is false: Atheists have legitimate knowledge, and those who believe do not. This is the epistemological assumption looming in the so-called “culture war” between the caricatures of godless liberals and Bible-thumping conservatives in America: One group wields rational argumentation and intellectual history as an indictment of God, while the other looks to tradition and text as defenses against modernity’s encroachment on religious life.

The problem is, the “culture war” is a false construct created by politicians and public intellectuals, left and right. The state of faith in the world is much grayer, much humbler, and much less divided than atheist academics and preaching politicians claim. Especially in the U.S., social conservatives are often called out in the media for reifying and inflaming this cultural divide: The rhetoric of once and future White House hopefuls like [Rick Santorum](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/santorum-presses-culture-wars-attack/2012/02/26/gIQAqSkicR_story.html), [Sarah Palin](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0908/13101.html), and [Bobby Jindal](http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/jindal-to-warn-of-silent-war-on-religion-103501_Page2.html) reinforces an “us” and “them” distinction between those with faith and those without. Knowing God helps them live and legislate in the “right” way, they say.

But vocal atheists reinforce this binary of Godly vs. godless, too—the argument is just not as obvious. Theirs is a subtle assertion: Believers aren’t educated or thoughtful enough to debunk God, and if they only *knew* more, rational evidence would surely offset faith.

To see what this attitude looks like in practice, it’s helpful to check out a new book, [*The Age of Atheists*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Age-Atheists-Sought-Since/dp/1476754314), by the British historian Peter Watson. The book interprets Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous 1882 declaration “God is dead” as a turning point in intellectual history: These words were a call to action for all the artists, writers, philosophers, and poets who tried to understand the world thereafter. Over the course of 626 pages, readers are taken on a whirlwind tour through the last 13 decades of European and American thought, touching on figures from Martha Graham and Piet Mondrian to William James and Jürgen Habermas. Watson’s version of Western intellectual history isn’t framed around economics or politics or the dialectics of power, which is a pretty radical move in a field filled with Marxists and Foucaultians and closeted Hegelians. Instead, he narrates history to answer one of the most basic questions of human existence: What’s out there, besides us? Is there such a thing as “God”?

And this yields fascinating results. To his credit, Watson includes all kinds of artists on his tour through godless thought. We learn that Isadora Duncan, a mother of modern dance, confessed that “the seduction of Nietzsche’s philosophy ravished my being.” There are tales of W.B. Yeats attending a séance where “he lost control of himself and beat his head on the table,” and Salman Rushdie almost dying in a car accident. The novels of Henry James are deconstructed to reveal religious themes, and the jazz musician Charlie “Bird” Parker is credited with the Beat-era advice to “quit thinking!”

These anecdotes are artfully woven into a broader narrative about how secular thought has evolved over time. Atheism hasn’t necessarily meant one thing throughout history, Watson argues. But in listing the many ways people have dealt with the “death of God,” he also seems to imply that atheism has covered all intellectual bases. There’s no longer any reason to believe in God or spirits or black magic, Watson appears to say—nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals have got it covered.

It’s difficult to summarize Watson’s story of atheism; after all, it took him hundreds of pages and dozens of thinkers to tell it. But, roughly, it goes something like this. Nietzsche wrote about the death of God at a time when many thinkers were starting to recognize a shift in the way Western culture related to Christianity, and throughout the West, his ideas gained traction. In Civil War-era America, this meant the rise of “pragmatist” thinkers: People like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Dewey all realized that “‘ideas are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like knives and forks and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world,’” Watson writes, quoting the Israeli academic Steven Aschheim. This idea was echoed by a group of Europeans that included Charles Baudelaire, Paul Cézenne, and Edmund Husserl. The latter’s brand of philosophy, called phenomenology, emphasized that a full experience of life is “not to be achieved suddenly through some ‘transcendent’ episode of a religious or therapeutic kind, but is more akin to hard work or education,” Watson says.

And then the world knew war. World War I “had certain Nietzschean overtones, in that war was seen as the ultimate test of one’s heroic qualities,” Watson writes—in other words, armed battle was a test of man’s strength and power in a God-free world. The recklessness of flappers and *Gatsby*and the Jazz Age followed in a whirl of materialistic nihilism, and in philosophy, thinkers like Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein called for the “verifiability” of all facts and language (God being non-verifiable, of course).

In Germany, Nazism drew on Nietzsche and contemporary writers like Martin Heidegger for its philosophical heft. Amidst the chaos in Europe, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus developed existentialism, which Sartre described as such:

Man is free; but his freedom does not look like the glorious liberty of the Enlightenment; it is no longer the gift of God. Once again, man stands alone in the universe, responsible for his condition, likely to remain in a lowly state, but free to reach above the stars.

In post-war America, Watson says, pop psychology and self-help started providing people with frameworks for how to live. This had been foreshadowed half a century earlier in the writings of Freud, who was responsible, Watson says, for “the dominant shift in thought in modern times, which has seen a theological understanding of humankind replaced by a psychological one.” He points to Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and popular writers like Benjamin Spock as psychologists who gave their craft new purpose: It became a way to help people find value and meaning, presumably in the absence of traditional faith. The Beatniks, for their part, abandoned the search for meaning altogether; they looked to desire and spontaneity and improvisation to inspire their art. And then there were the hippies who dropped acid and traded in free love, all in the spirit of humanism, not godliness.

The story of the last few decades is a little hazier. Watson writes of “therapy culture” and the rejection thereof, along with the search for meaning in poetry (Hans-Georg Gadamer) and community (Richard Rorty and Ronald Dworkin). People like E.O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins have popularized today’s most recognizable brand of atheism, which relies on the argument that evolution and biology disprove the existence of God.

All of this leads to Watson’s conclusion: Religious belief is simply insufficient to explain the complexity of the modern world. It has led to violence and intolerance, yes, but more fundamentally, the idea of God—a unifying, singular lens for understanding everyday life—has been debunked, six ways to Sunday. Or, to mix metaphors: Modern people can pick their poison for killing God. But die He must.

The problem with Watson’s argument is not that it lacks evidence—there’s a lot of history crammed into his book. Rather, it’s that Watson assembles anecdotes into a scatterplot that undeniably points toward the impossibility of God in the modern world, or so he claims. And this is where the intellectual snobbery comes in: Watson assumes that because a group of smart, respected, insightful people thought and felt their way out of believing in God, everyone else should, too. Because intellectual history trends toward non-belief, human history must, too.

This is problematic for several reasons. For one thing, it suggests that believers are inherently less thoughtful than non-believers. Watson tells stories of famous thinkers and artists who have struggled to reconcile themselves to a godless world. And these are helpful, in that they offer insight into how dynamic, creative people have tried to live. But that doesn't mean the average believer's search for meaning and understanding is any less rigorous or valuable—it just ends with a different conclusion: that God exists. Watson implies that full engagement with the project of being human in the modern world leads to atheism, and that's just not true.

We know it's not true because the vast majority of the world believes in God or some sort higher power. Worldwide, religious belief and observance vary widely by region. It’s tough to get a fully accurate global picture of faith in God or a “higher power,” but the metric of religiosity serves as a helpful proxy. Only 16 percent of the world’s population was not affiliated with a particular faith as of 2010, although many of these people believe in God or a spiritual deity, according to the [Pew Research Center](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/). More than three-fourths of the religiously unaffiliated live in the Asia-Pacific region, with a majority (62 percent) living in China. In other regions, the percentage of those who say they have no religious affiliation are much smaller: 7.7 percent in Latin America; 3.2 percent in sub-Saharan Africa; 0.6 percent in the Middle East.

Arguably, Watson wasn’t writing for the whole world—he stuck to Western thinkers and artists. But even if we focus on Europe and North America, his implicit argument isn’t supported by statistics. Eighteen percent of Europeans are religiously unaffiliated, but again, many of those people believe in God—30 percent of unaffiliated French people do, for example. And even though Christianity is growing fastest in Latin America and sub-Saharan African, as of 2010, Europe was still home to a quarter of the world’s Christians—the largest population in the world.

In America, which sociologists often describe as a uniquely religious country compared with the rest of the Western world, a vast majority of people have faith. According to Pew, 86 percent of Millennials, or people aged 18-33, [say they believe in God](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf), and 94 percent of people 34 and older say the same. It’s true that a growing group say they’re “not certain” about this belief, and it’s also true that [affiliation with formal religious institutions is declining.](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/) But in terms of pure belief, self-described atheists and agnostics are a small minority, making up only six percent of the population.

The Western world in particular is probably less religious than it was 150 years ago, and the dynamics of belief and observance have certainly become more complex—the growing number of people who are unaffiliated with a specific religion is especially fascinating. But if the age of atheism started in 1882 as Watson claims, most people still haven't caught on.

*The Age of Atheists* will likely stay confined to certain intellectual circles: The casual philosopher, the dogmatic non-believer, the coffee-table book collector. But insofar as its argument represents a broader pathology in contemporary conversations about belief, this book matters. Most people form their beliefs and live their lives somewhere in the middle of the so-called "culture divide" that outspoken atheists and believers shout across. The more these shouters shout, the more public discourse veers away from the subtle struggle of the average person's attempt to be human.