Atheism has become pervasive in our cultural consciousness. In an unprecedented way, it asserts itself with evangelistic zeal. In order to meet the challenge, theologians and Christian apologists tend to put their focus on refuting atheist arguments and formulating a tighter and more coherent system to defend theism. What we really need, though, is self-critical reflection on our theological understanding and articulation of God. We need to ask ourselves: have we been able to bring God’s transforming presence into our life-context in response to life issues? Is God being exalted into the stratosphere, and framed into lifeless concepts in isolation from all kinds of problems in life? To put it more bluntly, should theology be held responsible for the spread of atheism? Has it failed in its mission to breathe life into the proclamation of the church? Deep dissatisfaction with the dryness, triviality and futility in the proclamation of God can spawn atheistic reaction. We thus need
to look honestly into ourselves to see if the theological tradition we have inherited from the past is in fact a “fatal heritage.”

This essay gives a brief survey of several common types of atheists who reject God for different reasons. Their ideas are in fact quite consistent through the ages. At the dawning of the Enlightenment, there were real life experiences of immense suffering, such as the Thirty Years War (1618–48) and the Great Plague in the 17th century. Aside from rational challenge to Christian theism, these experiences called into question the goodness of God. Theologians like Leonard Lessius (1554–1623) and Père Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) seemed totally oblivious to the 1603 plague that killed 38,000 Londoners, or other outbreaks in Italy in 1629–31. They did not confront the life issues of their time, and continued to defend the obsolete Aristotelian system as if nothing had happened. We also had theologians like Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) and Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), acknowledged to be among the greatest theologians of the 17th/18th century, who tried to fit God either into a system of mechanics or into the universal mathematics. These are illustrations of how God might be framed into a God-of-the-gap. Such theological articulation of who God is would only invite intellectual scorn and spiritual discontent.