Atheism From the University to Society Edwin Chong April 2, 2006

Hebrews 11:6

 ★ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. [NIV]

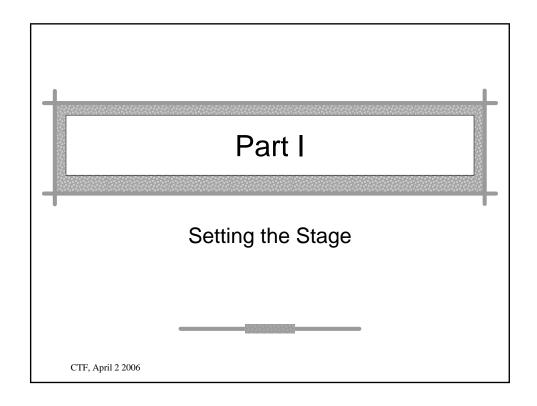
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Outline

- # Part I: Setting the Stage
 - What is Atheism?
 - Some History
 - Culture of Atheism
 - Implications of Atheism
- # Part II: Call to Action
 - Strategy
 - Preparation and Motivation
 - Some Pointers

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Atheism

- # No God.
- # Strong atheism:
 Belief that God doesn't exist.
- # Weak atheism:
 No belief that God exists.
- # Agnosticism: [T. H. Huxley, 1876]
 Belief that we do not (empirical) or cannot (strict) know if God exists.

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Historical Perspective

- # Modernity and The Enlightenment.
- # Postmodernism.
- # Secularization of higher education.
- # Secularization of societies.

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Modernity

- # René Descartes (1596-1650)
 - Influenced by early developments in science and mathematics.
 - Knowledge based on *reason* alone.
 - Knowledge of God.
- # The Enlightenment (18th century)
 - Pursuit of knowledge by means of unfettered human reason alone.

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Seeds of Atheism

- # Although most of the original Enlightenment thinkers were theists, theological knowledge was increasingly viewed with suspicion.
- Counter-currents to the Enlightenment rationalism (e.g., Romanticism) were no more sympathetic to traditional theism.

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Postmodernism

- Postmodernism rejects the allsufficiency of human reason championed by free thought.
- # A welcome development for Christian believers?
- # Not so: The cure is worse than the disease!

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More Atheism

- ♯ Postmodernism denies universal standards of logic, rationality, and truth.
- # Incompatible with the Christian idea of God.
- ☐ Christianity is reduced to but one voice in a cacophony of competing claims, none of which is objectively true.

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"God is Dead"

- # Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
- # The Gay Science (Die fröliche Wissenschaft).
- # God as the basis of Western civilization's truth and morality has lost its validity.

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Atheism All Over the Place

- Psychology: God is a psychologically inspired father-image [Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)].
- # Sociology: God is a concept created by the bourgeois class (financial elite) to hold down the proletariat class (poor and destitute) [Karl Marx (1818–1883)]. "Religion is the opiate of the people."

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Atheism Today

- Both extremes of modern rationalism and postmodern subjectivism are clearly unacceptable.
- # Secular solution: Subjectivist only about ethics and religion, not about science.
- # Classic modernity in fashionable new guise!

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Quote from Norman Levitt

- # Victor J. Stenger, Has Science Found God? The Latest Results in the Search for Purpose in the Universe, Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Quote from back of book by Norman Levitt, Professor of Mathematics, Rutgers University, and author of *Prometheous Bedeviled:* Science and the Contradictions of Contemporary Culture.

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Atheism in Academia

- # University: Single most important institution shaping Western culture.
- # Training future political leaders, journalists, lawyers, teachers, business executives, artists.
- # Students at university absorb the worldview that will shape their lives.

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Presumption of Naturalism

■ Naturalism: The view that nature is all there is and all basic truths are truths of nature.

[R. Audi, 1996, "Naturalism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Supplement*, p. 372].

- # Naturalism is the *default* position.
- Secularization of academia and society.

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Quote from Quentin Smith (I)

Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" *Philo* 4(2), 2001.

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Impact on Evangelism

- # What impact does the cultural milieu have on evangelism?
- # Tremendous impact!
- # It forms the backdrop for the Gospel.
- # The idea of God is excluded before you even sit down at the table to look at the evidence.

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Quote from Craig

■ William Lane Craig, Hard Questions, Real Answers, Crossway Books, 2003.

[http://www.gnpcb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581344872.1.pdf]

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Range of Responses

- # I don't believe that God exists.
- Nobody knows if God exists.
- # I don't need the concept of God.
- # The idea of God doesn't make sense.
- **I** I don't care.
 - Even atheist philosophers, e.g., Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, recognized that the whether God exists makes a tremendous difference!

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Implications of Atheism

- # If atheism is true, then ultimately life is meaningless.
- # If atheism is true, then ultimately we must live without hope.
- # If theism is true, then not only does life have meaning and hope, but there is also the possibility to know God and his love personally.

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Life is Meaningless?

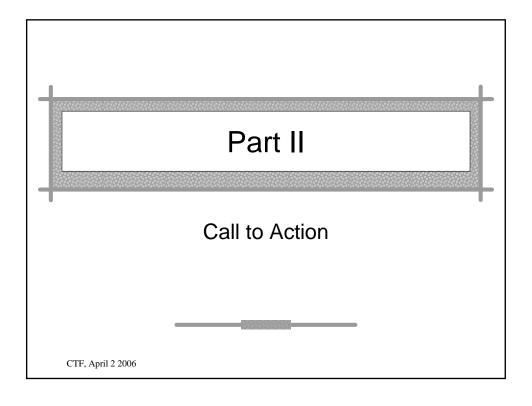
- **#** Quote from Stenger again.
- # For an atheist, life may have *relative* meaning, but not *ultimate* meaning.
- # For an atheist, life may have *subjective* purpose, but not *objective* purpose.

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No Hope?

Quote from Bertrand Russell, Selected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Random House, 1927, p. 3.

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Strategy

- # Create a cultural milieu that is friendly to the Gospel.
- # Short term & long term solutions.

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Can Anything Be Done?

- # The playing field is not level.
- # What can we do?
- # Can we really do anything?

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Apologetics

- # Apologetics: Defense of the reasonableness of the Gospel.
- # "But no one comes to Christ through intellectual arguments!"
- # Short-sighted!
- # Value of apologetics extends far beyond one's immediate evangelistic contact.

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Goal of Apologetics

■ To help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. [Craig]

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Quote from Machen (I)

J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11, 1913, p. 7.

[As quoted by Craig, cited before.]

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Scholarly Apologetics

- The root of the obstacle is to be found in the university, and it is there that it must be attacked. [Craig]
- # "Popular-level apologetics" aimed at the masses will not suffice.
- # Need scholarly level apologetics.

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Quote from Machen (II)

Scholarly method of procedure ...

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But We're Not Scholars!

- # But we can still read!
 - Culture
 - Philosophy
 - Theology
- # Engage intellectually in our faith.

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Quote from Quentin Smith (II)

- # Is there any indication that we can be successful in changing the cultural milieu?
- Continuation of quote from Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" *Philo* 4(2), 2001.

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Short Term Solutions

- # Engage intellectually in your faith.
- # Be firmly rooted in your faith.

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Intellectual Engagement

- # Read widely; be credible.
- # Be firmly rooted in Biblical truth.
- # Sharpen your critical thinking and reasoning.
- # Understand where the atheist stands.
- Understand the "standard" arguments for/against atheism.
- Understand the "standard" arguments for/against theism.
- # Pray!

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Spiritual Life

- # Make sure you're right with God.
- # Be firmly rooted in Biblical truth.
- Develop your personal relationship with God through Christ.
- # Practice spiritual disciplines.
- # Pray!

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Further Reading

- # William Lane Craig, God Are You There? Five Reasons God Exists and Three Reasons It Makes a Difference, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), 2002.
- # Charles Taliaferro, Does the Idea of God Make Sense?, RZIM, 2002.
- # James Beilby and David K. Clark, Why Bother with Truth? Arriving at Knowledge in a Skeptical Society, RZIM, 2000.

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