



Sharing Your Faith With An
Atheist

Edwin Chong
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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]

Outline

Part I: Setting the Stage

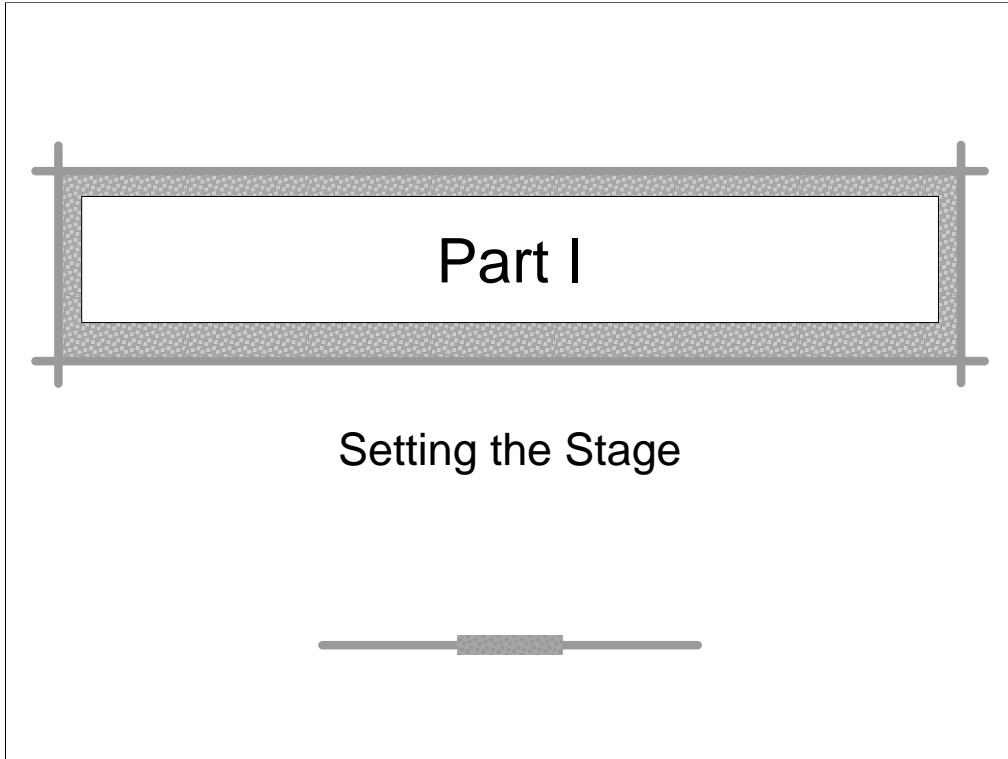
- What is Atheism?
- Some History
- Culture of Atheism
- Implications of Atheism

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.

Postmodernism

- Postmodernism rejects the all-sufficiency 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.

“God is Dead”

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

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.”

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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Has science, indeed, found God? Vic Stenger serves no god but the truth of the matter in showing that, at the start of the twenty-first century, science and most scientists find the theistic hypothesis even less necessary than it ever was. Responding with meticulous thoroughness to the hype of journalists, the hucksterism of theocratic spin-doctors, and the wishful thinking of a few atypical scientists desperate to salvage a remnant of traditional theology, Stenger courageously reminds us that science endorses no other option than to come to terms with a universe that owes us no favors and refuses to let us cheat reality.

Norman Levitt, Professor of Mathematics, Rutgers University, and author of *Prometheous Bedeviled: Science and the Contradictions of Contemporary Culture*.

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.

Quote from Quentin Smith (I)

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

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By the second half of the twentieth century, universities . . . had been become in the main secularized. The standard. . . position in each field. . . assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism. Analytic philosophers . . . treated theism as an anti-realist or non-cognitivist world-view, requiring the reality, not of a deity, but merely of emotive expressions or certain "forms of life". . . .

This is not to say that none of the scholars in the various academic fields were [sic] realist theists in their "private lives"; but realist theists, for the most part, excluded their theism from their publications and teaching, in large part because theism . . . was mainly considered to have such a low epistemic status that it did not meet the standards of an "academically respectable" position to hold. . . .

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.gnpccb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581344872.1.pdf>]

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... the Gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel which a person who is secularized will not. For the secular person you may as well tell him to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement approaching you on the street and inviting you to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Bombay, such an invitation would, I assume, appear quite reasonable and cause for reflection. I fear that evangelicals appear almost as weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, Stockholm, or Paris as do the devotees of Krishna.

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 don't care.
 - Even atheist philosophers, e.g., Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, recognized that the whether God exists makes a tremendous difference!

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.

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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Finally, I hope the reader will not come away thinking that I am just a cold, bitter materialist nihilist who sees no meaning in life. In fact, I am a happy man who has found much meaning in my life, in work and family, in art and music, in sports and travel, and, indeed, in almost everything the world has to offer, except fantasy and mythology. Science is a big part of my life, but not the only part. Someday I may write about some of the other parts, but here I will stick to the science.

No Hope?

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

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That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins---all these things, are so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.



Part II

Call to Action



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.

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]

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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False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation to be controlled by ideas which prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.

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.

Quote from Machen (II)

■ Scholarly method of procedure ...

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[The scholarly method of procedure] ... is based simply upon a profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas. What is to-day matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try to mould the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity.

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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This is not to say that none of the scholars in the various academic fields were [sic] realist theists in their "private lives"; but realist theists, for the most part, excluded their theism from their publications and teaching, in large part because theism . . . was mainly considered to have such a low epistemic status that it did not meet the standards of an "academically respectable" position to hold. The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga's influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga's even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grünbaum, and other naturalists. . . .

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga's writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians. Although many theists do not work in the area of the philosophy of religion, so many of them do work in this area that there are now over five philosophy journals devoted to theism or the philosophy of religion, such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, *Sophia*, *Philosophia Christi*, etc. *Philosophia Christi* began in the late 1990s and already is overflowing with submissions from leading philosophers.

. . . theists in other fields tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their scholarly work; they rarely assume and never argue for theism in their scholarly work. If they did, they would be committing academic suicide or, more exactly, their articles would quickly be rejected. . . . But in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, "academically respectable" to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today. A count would show that in Oxford University Press' 2000-2001 catalogue, there are 96 recently published books on the philosophy of religion By contrast, there are 28 books . . . on the philosophy of language, 23 on epistemology (including religious epistemology, such as Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*), 14 on metaphysics, [etc.]. . . .

God is not "dead" in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.

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.