Atheism
From the University to Society

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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

Part I
Setting the Stage
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.

Historical Perspective

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

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!

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


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*. 
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.

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)


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.
Quote from Craig


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.
No Hope?


Part II

Call to Action
Strategy

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

Can Anything Be Done?

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

- “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)

[As quoted by Craig, cited before.]

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 …

But We’re Not Scholars!

- But we can still read!
  - Culture
  - Philosophy
  - Theology
- Engage intellectually in our faith.
Quote from Quentin Smith (II)

- Is there any indication that we can be successful in changing the cultural milieu?

Short Term Solutions

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

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!
Further Reading