Neo-Atheism on the University Campus

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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]
Part I

Setting the Stage

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.
- Common secular solution: Subjectivist only about ethics and religion, not about science.
- Classic modernity in fashionable new guise!

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.

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!
- What about the “new atheism” (neo-atheism)?

The Neo-Atheists
The New Atheism

- Battle cry of new atheism: **Theism is wrong!**
- Wrong in what sense?
- Not just wrongheaded.
- Also *morally* wrong!

Quote from Hitchens’ book

- "An intellectual willing to show his teeth in the cause of righteousness."
Quotes from Wolf’s article


“[The New-Atheists] condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it’s evil.”

“Bad ideas foisted on children are moral wrongs. We should think harder about how to stop them.”

Why the Hostility?

We need to think harder about this question.

We are far from creating a cultural milieu that is even remotely friendly to the Gospel.

But what can we do?
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]

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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.

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