

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]

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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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Part I

Setting the Stage



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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.

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!

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*.

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)

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

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

- # William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, Crossway Books, 2003.
[<http://www.gnpcb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581344872.1.pdf>]

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?

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

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

- # 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.]

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?
- # Continuation of quote from Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" *Philo* 4(2), 2001.

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

- # 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.