

# 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]

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2

# Outline

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## # 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

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# Atheism

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- # 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

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

## Modernity

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

## Seeds of Atheism

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- # 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

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- # 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

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- # 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”

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- # 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

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- # 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

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- # 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!

## Quote from Norman Levitt

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- # 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

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- # 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

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- # 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)

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

## Impact on Evangelism

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- # 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

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

## Range of Responses

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- # 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

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- # 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.

## No Hope?

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

## Part II

### Call to Action

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## Strategy

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

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24

## Can Anything Be Done?

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

## Apologetics

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- # 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

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- ‡ 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)

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- ‡ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11, 1913, p. 7.  
[As quoted by Craig, cited before.]

## Scholarly Apologetics

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- # 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)

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- # Scholarly method of procedure ...

## But We're Not Scholars!

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

## Quote from Quentin Smith (II)

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- # 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

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

## Intellectual Engagement

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- # 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

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- # 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

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- # 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.