

# Neo-Atheism on the University Campus

Edwin Chong  
UniverSanity  
January 25, 2008

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

## 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]

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

2

# Part I

## Setting the Stage

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

## Historical Perspective

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

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

4

## Modernity

---

- # 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

---

- # 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.  
[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

---

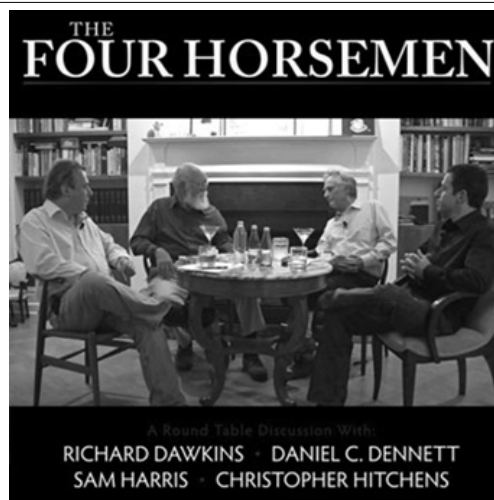
- # William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, Crossway Books, 2003.  
[<http://www.gnpccb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581344872.1.pdf>]



## 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!
- # 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

---

- # Back cover of: Christopher Hitchens,  
*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons  
Everything*, 2007.
- # "An intellectual willing to show his teeth  
in the cause of righteousness."

## Quotes from Wolf's article

---

- # Gary Wolf, *The Church of the Non-Believers*, Wired 14.11, Nov. 2006.
- # “[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

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

## Strategy

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

UniverSanity, Jan. 25 2008

24

## 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.

## 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.