

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Atheism: A Worldview in Resurgence?**

Many scientists begin their thinking with the proposition that there is a God; others do not. For example, physicists and others who practice science have been looking for a “Theory of Everything,” a theory that explains everything in the universe. That was the passion of Newton in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Einstein in the 20<sup>th</sup>, and currently Brian Greene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Greene’s contribution is the “string theory,” postulated in his important book, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*. He posits that the universe consists of a complicated combination of vibrating strands or strings. He writes that his theory is “a framework with the capacity to explain every fundamental feature upon which the world is constructed.” The language of his book resonates with the language of awe, majesty and near worship. But he leaves out God. I actually do not know Greene’s personal faith and I do not know if he is a professing atheist but I do know that the Bible would want us to begin our thinking about the “theory of everything” with God. Colossians 1:15-20 depicts Jesus as the eternal God who created everything and who sustains His world. To not include this truth as the foundation for your knowledge and understanding of the universe is to leave out the key element of truth.

Are there consequences to rejecting God, especially the God of the Bible? Is it important to consider biblical revelation when studying science, or any other discipline of human knowledge? In our scientific quest for the “theory of everything,” should we also think about ethics, theology and practical living skills? Do we have evidence of what occurs when a person rejects not only the personal belief in God, but also the Bible and the ethics contained therein? This edition of *Issues in Perspective* examines these very questions.

- First, consider the “Clergy Project” of Richard Dawkins, the famous British atheist. The purpose of the Clergy Project is to provide “a confidential online community for active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs.” Further, it exists “to provide a safe haven, a forum where clergy who have lost their faith can meet each other, exchange views, swap problems, counsel each other—for, whatever they may have lost, clergy know how to counsel and comfort.” A recent *New York Times Magazine* article cited a pastor named Jerry DeWitt, who never attended Bible College or Seminary, but is somewhat self-taught through reading Carl Sagan, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, but who also has renounced his Pentecostal beliefs and joined the Clergy Project. He is Director of the Recovering from Religion group. The article also cites a Methodist pastor, Teresa Mac Bain, who announced quite publically her atheistic convictions. She is no longer a pastor and now serves as the Public Relations Director of the American Atheist Association. Theologian Albert Mohler recently summarized a report done by Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola of Tufts University. Dennett sees religion as serving an important evolutionary purpose that modern humanity must now overcome. What Mohler finds especially interesting is that Dennett and

LaScola “acknowledged that defining an unbelieving pastor is actually quite difficult. Given the fact that so many liberal churches and denominations already believe so little, how is atheism really different? In the name of tolerance, the liberal denominations have embraced so much unbelief that atheism is a practical challenge.” In fact, so many liberal ministers hold to no supernatural beliefs, but they also tenaciously hold to their pulpits but do not admit their atheism. The Clergy Project now identified with famous atheist Richard Dawkins, is a metaphor of our times, where churches that name the name of Christ have so dumbed-down doctrine that it is actually quite difficult to distinguish between atheism and mainline, liberal denominational belief. However, you cannot have the name and the framework of Christianity if you eliminate the supernatural from your theology. That is what mainline Protestantism has done. Now it is difficult to distinguish between some of their pastors and practicing atheists. That is rather amazing!

- Second, consider the recent decision from the trial of Norway’s mass-killer Anders Behring Breivik. In July 2011, Breivik killed 77 people in Norway—8 in a car bomb in Oslo and 69 he shot on Utoya Island, a summer camp where teens were vacationing. A fanatical killer, Breivik admitted to his actions “but not to his guilt.” Norwegian law permits Breivik to be imprisoned for only 21 years, despite the premeditative nature of his slaughter of 77 people. Most sociologists consider the Scandinavian nations to be the most secular nations on earth. In the words of theologian Albert Mohler, these nations are “post-Christian. The specific religious worldview they have lost or rejected is that of Christianity—the faith that shaped the culture of these nations for many centuries.” Christianity affirms the infinite value of human life and the premise of personal moral responsibility. As Mohler argues, “The rejection of the Christian worldview and the loss of biblical moral instincts produce a very different system of justice. Norway abolished the death penalty in 1902. Later, the nation abolished the sentence of life in prison, claiming that it was too extreme.” Does it matter then that Norway is post-Christian? The case of Anders Breivik demonstrates powerfully that with the loss of a Christian worldview comes the diminishment of personal responsibility and the sense of punitive justice. In addition, the value and worth of human life is diminished and the culture adopts the position that even virtually all forms of punishment are barbaric!! Capital punishment is a practice rooted in the talionic system of justice in Scripture. It is first articulated in Genesis 9, and is tied carefully to the image of God characteristic of each human being. To ruthlessly kill in a premeditative manner is to sacrifice your right to life as well. Arguably difficult to defend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, capital punishment preserves the infinite value of human life and a reasonable system of justice. But what we saw in that Norway courtroom was compelling evidence of a civilization that has lost both. Mohler writes: “The post-Christian condition is fully on display in that courtroom. The man who committed the worst single-handed mass murder in Europe since World War II is on trial—and the maximum term to which he can be sentenced amounts to less than 3.3 months for each of the 77 people he murdered.”

Does a secular, atheistic worldview have consequences? The Secular Project and the trial of Anders Breivik provide practical evidence of what occurs when a civilization abandons its belief in a commitment to the supernatural—to a God who has revealed Himself to us in His Word. When we choose to abandon both, what is left is an enormous vacuum with enormous and very sad consequences.

- Third, what then should we do? Below are three bridges we can build to someone who embraces atheism as a worldview. This is a section from my book on comparative worldviews and gives us tools to deal with the logical consequences of atheism.

**Bridge #1.** Atheism affirms the value of human life and sees human happiness as its core value. This meshes with biblical Christianity, which also affirms the value of human life. However, atheism has no basis for its claim for the value of human life, for helping people, or for showing compassion. Why engage in such things if humans are simply the product of chance? Christianity affirms the value of life because humans bear God's image (Genesis 1:26ff). It provides the reason for compassion, care and concern that is missing in atheism. It is most vulnerable on this point and we must lovingly press it.

**Bridge #2.** Atheism claims that in terms of religious beliefs and ethical standards it is impossible to have absolutes. In other words, there are absolutely no absolutes. In making such a claim, it affirms something absolute. That is a glaring inconsistency and as Christians we can point this out. Christians can press atheists to seriously reflect on the inadequacy of standards for truth and ethics. Are they willing to bank everything on there not being a God? What if there is? What if there is accountability? The Holy Spirit of God can use this inconsistency within the atheistic worldview to bring conviction.

**Bridge #3.** Atheism teaches that at death there is extinction. Therefore, there is no hope of ever seeing loved ones again. Ultimately, there is no hope for the atheist, for it provides no real incentives for living or for dying. This physical world is all there is, they argue, and we must live that way--for the moment. If there is no death, then there is no accountability and no motivation for virtue or goodness. Most people cannot live with this kind of teaching. Here is where Christianity is so compelling. It offers hope because there is life after death; there is hope of seeing loved ones and friends. Christianity also offers the certainty of salvation, which guarantees heaven and eternal life with God. Atheism offers no counsel to a family who has lost an infant in death, or to someone with a terminal illness, or to a wife who has lost her husband in an automobile accident. The atheist can offer nothing; Christianity offers everything. It is in the real world of life that atheism's bankruptcy becomes evident. Naturalism pervades western civilization and is currently institutionalized in the academic centers of the West. It remains powerful, influential and informs so much of modern education. It will retain its position of importance only as long as the West seeks its purpose and its meaning from technology, science and reason. Its antisupernaturalism is difficult for most people, however, because the average person cannot live without some sense that there is a transcendent realm, that there is something beyond death, and that the physical is not all there is. Only genuine, biblical Christianity answers that quest for meaning and purpose.

See David Enger in *Our Daily Bread* (22 August 2012); Albert Mohler in [www.AlbertMohler.com](http://www.AlbertMohler.com) (19 April 2012 and 29 August 2012); Robert F. Worth in the *New York Times Magazine* (26 August 2012); and James P. Eckman, *The Truth about Worldviews*, pp. 24-25.