

Encountering the Heart of Atheism and Secular Humanism CPC Adult Sunday Studies

Part I: Understanding the World We ALL Share

- Relying largely on *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K. A. Smith, let's consider the worldview we all inhabit, to a varying degree, with atheists and secular humanists (AASH). In this way, it's a bit of a different study from previous religions we've looked at, since it assumes we are all impacted by this worldview inside and outside the church.

1. **Our cross-pressured situation** - The secular touches everything - it makes unbelief possible, but also touches belief
 1. **Haunting Immanence** - we're all doubting Thomas now, believing as we doubt, living in the twilight of the gods and idols, who refuse to leave
 1. Julian Barnes - "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him"; no intellectual problem of evil, and no chronological snobbery of the New Atheists, but still a form of humanism or atheism prevails
 2. David Foster Wallace - whose characters are unsatisfied by the "almost suffocating immanence" of late modernism - "God is dead, but he is replaced by everybody else"
 2. **Doubting Transcendence** - believers are "fragilized", and rival stories are always at the church door, ready to enter
 1. Burden of belief is on the believer, not the skeptic
 2. The "Secular Age" as used here describes the fact that belief in God is simply one option among many in our culture, and therefore is contestable.
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2. **Secular Humanism is more than subtracting from religion, but contains its own Worldview**
 1. 3 Features of Medieval Age that have vanished: 1. Nature pointed beyond itself; 2. Earthly societies grounded in heavenly kingdom; 3. Enchanted world that was open and vulnerable, not closed and sufficient
 1. Shift of interest to nature - though it was originally theological - led to disenchantment
 2. Nominalism - though it too was theological in trying to guard God's sovereignty and power - led to conceiving the world as a mechanistic universe where only efficient causality exists - causality that pushes, rather than pulls according to a

thing's essence. God becomes more and more irrelevant, as the cause itself becomes sufficient.

2. **Individualism - Buffered Self** becomes necessary - one cannot simply reject God and face the open, spiritual world alone, so there must be a protected individual self to take refuge in. We are no longer "porous" in the way people considered themselves open to divine intervention or demonic possession.

3. The Religious Path to Exclusive Humanism: From Deism to Atheism

1. Four anthropological or anthropomorphic shifts

1. No need to transcend humanity or nature for our flourishing - becomes constrained to a *this*-world benefit
 2. Eclipse of grace - Pelagianism
 3. Mystery fades since God's book (nature) is totally open and perspicuous
 4. No divine transformation or participation
2. **New Apologetics** assumes modernity's starting points, especially the buffered self - "while earlier the terrors and burdens of evil and disaster would have cast us upon the help of a Savior, 'now that we think we see how it all works, the argument gets displaced" and then theologians try to respond with the game already lost
3. **God becomes unnecessary** and irrelevant to science, government, medicine, etc.
 1. The Modern Moral Order and the Rise of Civil Religion - "it builds for the buffered identity a buffered world." (55) - a cultural Pelagianism emerges that doesn't get bogged down by the uncertainties and differences about religious transcendence
 4. "The 'religion' of this impersonal order is also de-Communion-ed, de-ritualized, and disembodied. . . . **Excarnation** . . . - an aversion of and flight from the particularities of embodiment (and communion). This will be a 'purified' religion - purified of rituals and relics, but also of emotion and bodies - of which Kant's 'rational' religion is the apotheosis. With the body goes the Body; that is, with the abandonment of material religion we see the diminishment of the church as a communion as well" (58).

Part II: Interacting with AASH

1. As Sympathetic Insiders

1. We share a lot of the same worldview, that we can't or don't want to escape
 1. Examples from above?
2. Realizing that many of our assumptions - about nature, science, purpose, identity, etc. - are historically and culturally relative helps us to both identify with AASH ("yea, I know, it's hard to believe that God is always near me and knows my heart"), but also

challenge them in showing that we're not trapped by our doubts and assumptions (since they haven't been obvious to most people who ever lived).

2. As Critical Outsiders

1. Be aware of your **historical** and cultural biases!
 1. Don't be a historical snob!
2. The historical relativism shows our need for God to enter from outside ourselves. We need a transcendent God

3. Social justice and individual rights

1. Christians agree, and the modern concern even comes from Christianity, which provides the foundation for "why?"

4. Relativism & pluralism

1. Appreciate the hunger underneath them, which is usually benevolence and tolerance.... and yet it undercuts any solid foundation for benevolence or love.
2. All religions canNOT be the same - they make mutually exclusive claims. A universalist is ultimately changing all religions so that they become one in essence.
 1. I.e. the Elephant or the Mountain metaphor

5. Nihilism

1. Are you really willing to face the abyss that this implies? No moral imperatives and no higher standard than "might makes right"?
2. We often don't think through to our conclusions, but ultimately an atheist cannot act as if it's no big deal that God doesn't exist (Nietzsche's "nihilism without the abyss")