

## **Week 6: Responding to Atheists and Agnostics**

Atheism has one main tenet—no divine being exists. From this point all sorts of ideologies and principles have diverged, some under the heading “atheism,” some under “agnosticism,” some under “irreligion,” etc. Unlike systematic religions (like Hinduism or Islam), atheism has no underlying principles or sacred texts to make it easily categorized beyond the main idea of divine absence.

### **Q1: When and where did atheism start?**

- a-theos, “not god”
- Psalm 14:1; Romans 1:18–32
- Christians the first atheists?
- 17th, 18th Centuries
  - René Descartes: “I think; therefore, I am.”
  - Enlightenment, “Age of Reason”
    - Empirical knowledge and certainty (David Hume) over emotion, mystery, sensibility
    - Deism, functional atheism
  - French Revolution largely atheistic, anti-theistic
- 19th, 20th Centuries
  - Karl Marx: Money
  - Friedrich Nietzsche
    - Power
    - “God is dead.”
  - Sigmund Freud: Sex
  - Existentialism, secular humanism, nihilism, rationalism, feminism
  - State atheism (Albania, 1967)

### **Q2: What about atheism today?**

- Where are they? China (47%), Japan (31%), Czech Republic (30%), France (29%), South Korea (15%), Germany (15%), Netherlands (14%), Austria, Australia, Ireland (10%)
- In America
  - 67% male, 38% ages 18–29
  - Coming to terms
    - 14% self-identified atheists believers in God
    - 7% Americans non-believers; 2.4% atheists
- “New Atheism”

### **Q3: What are the sacred writings of atheism?**

- No “sacred writings” as such, but direct and indirect thinkers
- Yesterday: Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Kant, Hume, Russell
- Today: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett

#### **Q4: What do atheists believe about God?**

- Positive atheism: "There *ARE* no divine beings."
- Negative atheism: "I *DO NOT* believe in any divine beings."

#### **Q5: What do atheists believe about the purpose of life and salvation?**

- Informed by various "-isms"
- Inconsistent "belief system"

#### **Q6: What are some of the distinctive practices of atheism?**

- Often syncretistic (Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.)
- Passive and aggressive
- Kind and cruel
- Tolerant and intolerant
- Rational and emotional
- "What Led You to Become an Atheist? Some Surprising Answers," David Murray  
<<http://headhearhand.org/blog/2014/10/28/what-led-you-to-become-an-atheist-some-surprising-answers/>>

#### RESPONDING TO ATHEISTS

**1. Most of what we've talked about before applies.** Be hospitable. Invite them into your home. Be conscious of their culture. Be gender-sensitive. Ask questions. Don't assume they understand your meaning of "Christian." Take time to build a relationship. Remember that you don't have to be a super-Christian to share the gospel with them. Talk about Jesus.

- Study apologetics reasonably.
- Fight fire with Scripture.
- Pray for eyes to see, ears to hear.
- Consider the nature of faith: not blind optimism but confidence based on reality.

#### **2. Be aware of some key questions and concepts:**

- Pascal's Wager (and the "Atheist's Wager")
- St. Anselm's *ontological argument*: "that than which nothing greater" can be conceived
- Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*
  
- Hitchens' Razor
- Russell's Teapot
- Dawkins' "Ultimate Boeing 747"
  
- How can a good God exist alongside pain and suffering?
- How could there be a God (or Christianity be true) with so much evil done in his name?
- If there is an omniscient, omnipotent and perfect divine being, wouldn't it have created other morally perfect beings instead of imperfect ones?
- Aren't God's supposed properties incompatible? (Think love and wrath, for example.)
- How can a loving God exist while so many do not know of him?
- Why would an omnipotent and omniscient being create anything, let alone people?
- How can you be sure your revelation of God is superior to others'?
- Isn't your God another myth just waiting to be debunked?
- Don't you only believe in God because you were born in a conservative Christian family?

### **3. Questions to ask atheistic friends/neighbors/co-workers:**

- Doesn't it take more faith to believe this world came from nothing than to believe God exists and created it?
- How can you be sure of your own logic, reason, science, etc?
- The Problem of Good: Where did you get your notion of what is good (or evil)?
- How do you explain concepts like beauty?