

St Matthew Church -- Adult Education Forum – September, 2010

Talking about The New Atheism

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Session 1

What is the new Atheism?

Identified with four authors, Sam Harris (*The End of Faith; Letter to a Christian Nation*); Donald Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*); Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*); Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*). But the best known New Atheist overall seems to be TV personality Bill Maher (*Religulous*).

Have in common a more aggressive attitude toward traditional religion. They see no value to it whatsoever and lump all kinds of religion together. They treat theological traditions (like ours), fundamentalist ones, and even religious fanaticism as intellectually and morally the same. In at least half of these authors (Dawkins, Hitchens, Maher) wit and literary style are much more important than philosophical or scientific argument.

Some responses, not necessarily Christian:

Georgetown theologian John Haught (*God and the New Atheism*), English Literary Critic Terry Eagleton (*Reason, Faith and Revolution*); Biologist H. Allen Orr:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/jan/11/a-mission-to-convert/?pagination=false>

The audience seems to be those who identify themselves as atheists and who feel they are at a disadvantage – political, social, etc. – in American society. It is an English language movement, at least so far, and it often refers to related to the religious extremism associated with 9/11. They are angry and impatient.

Some generalizations – what one or more new atheists believe:

All faith is credulity (i.e. blind faith). Belief without sufficient evidence, i.e. Faith, needs to disappear.

Ultimately faith is the source of all human misery; Religious communities are essentially irrational and immoral.

All truth is expressible in scientific language (no place for metaphor or other symbolism)

The God they don't believe in is lawgiver, designer, creator. They are sure that issues of Meaning and Morality are natural – which most religions believe, including Catholicism. But nature is different for them than for traditional formulations, it is nature as science understands it. What cannot be grasped scientifically is false. There is some interest in impersonal gods, but not much. Science, as Freud said of himself is their God. God is not a person. Some positive things are said about impersonal deities, e.g. nature, Nirvana, the deities of Asian religions. But they disagree about this idea.

Session 2

Atheism is harder than it looks.

“For where your treasure is, there shall your heart also be.” Jesus (Luke 12:34.)

“We see now through a glass, darkly, but then we shall see face to face.” St. Paul

(I Cor 13:11).

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you.” St.

Augustine, *Confessions*.

“The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.” “It can be said reverently, provided it proceeds from a reverent mind, that *nature is God* . . .” both from John Calvin, *Institutes*.

1. The mysterious, symbolic nature of our knowledge of God.
 - a. Vatican I: Humans have a natural knowledge of God. (Note wording.)
 - b. What is a supernatural being, anyway? The transcendence of God – the issue of Superman (etc.)
 - c. The limitations of our knowledge of God and the need for partial truths.
 - d. Therefore, difficulties with literalism, and a need for humility that our symbols are good ones.
 - e. Still: we have such good and common analogies as goodness, love, truth, beauty, etc. God is our name for the source and power of these.

2. What is atheism?
 - a. A rejection of belief in other people's beliefs and symbols. Thus the Romans thought Christians were atheists. This is easy atheism.
 - b. A belief that there are no universal values (since there is no Creator and evolution does not explain them). A tough position: our need for such values is an indication that life is absurd. Existentialism.
 - c. The New Atheists believe that science will find enough sources of meaning, morality, and the like that we won't need or have beliefs and that an outdated worldview is all that supports religion. They reject the worldview of pre-scientific cultures, with their invisible beings, divine messengers, sacred texts and the like. When the culture that supports such things disappears we will see "the end of faith." This is, and is likely to remain, an alternate belief system.

3. The conversation of humankind about Meaning and Morality.
 - a. In literature, philosophy, religion and the like human beings seek to understand their world as a place for humans to live. This human conversation includes our religions and our moralities and is separate from, but not independent of science.
 - b. "The Human thing to do"

Paul Tillich: *Dynamic of Faith*. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of "Religion."* Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution and Christian Faith: Reflections of an Evolutionary Biologist*.

Session 3

What Lessons We Can Learn from The New Atheism?

"The glory of God is the human being fully alive." St. Irenaeus

And then, in the same whisper, he said, "Remember, God, the soul of Elya Grumer . . . He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet – through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding - - he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know. "

Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

Just scratching the surface.

Three ways in which science, and related historical developments, change our world.

1. **One Way, public, material and true:** Changes in our understanding of the world itself. The world runs on its own regularities. In these terms it seems to be a closed system. Certain pictures of God are no longer necessary. Serious challenges arise for many religious practices, some kinds of prayers, and expectations of miracles. Much of the world view of Biblical times: Heaven above, hell below, etc. is gone, along with the old man in the sky, the interventionist God who changes things around at will, the authority of the past, etc. There is already a wide gap between traditional religions and the modern world.
2. **One Way, political, moral, and practical:** Changes in our understanding of the human world. The need for human cooperation, for mutual respect, equality and toleration of differences wherever possible. The need for appeals to public reasonability in politics and social justice.
3. **One Way, personal and familiar to us from philosophy and theology:** Our sense of what a reasonable human being is:
 - a. science requires a detached, narrowly rational evaluation of the world and a tightly controlled way to evaluate evidence (and create experiments) to arrive at a truth unaffected by chance or by human error.
 - b. But this excludes the many ways in which ordinary human judgments and rationality arise out of our whole being: our conscience, intuitions, histories, character, our commitments, community-based premises and the like.
 - c. Most human life includes both ways of being in the world. And most of us know this. For the New Atheists the world would be a better place if we relied entirely on the first of these, which is the only strictly scientific way of proceeding. For them History, Community, Conscience, and the like are unreliable and lead to all the sorts of bad thinking. These include the atheistic movements associated with Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao, but they want to label them as religion.

Some religious people reject elements of these changes in ways that drive others – even other Christians -- crazy. Fear of change is a standard religious response, as well as fear of science. The ill temper of the New Atheists is directed at them, but also at anyone who disagrees with the New Atheists themselves.

Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*