

## CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS: SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM

By Andrew Wilson  
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Psalm 19:1-3, 8-11  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

I read this joke recently on a website maintained by the Atheist Foundation of Australia:

Lee Cook was taking a walk one day and happened upon a young girl who was playing with something in a cardboard box. When he got closer he could see that in the box was a litter of newborn kittens.

"What kind of kittens are those?" asked Lee.

"Why, they're Christian kittens," replied the little girl.

Lee walked on, pleased to see that the little girl had Jesus foremost in her heart. A week later, Lee was walking down the same street and saw the little girl again playing with the kittens.

"And how are your little Christian kittens doing today?" asked Lee.

"Oh, they aren't Christian kittens, they're Atheist kittens," replied the girl.

"But...but... I thought you said last week that they were Christian kittens," Lee sputtered.

"Oh, they were," she said. "But now their eyes are open."

Also featured on the web site was an article by the Atheist Foundation's president, David Nicholls on scientific atheism. Nicholls offers this helpful summary of atheistic philosophy:

Scientific Atheism is the acceptance that there is no credible scientific or factually reliable evidence for the existence of a god, gods or the supernatural.... Scientific Atheism works on the principle that the utilization of credible evidence in personal, political or national decisions be the main guide for societies.

- "The Critical Relevance of Scientific Atheism in the Modern World," by David Nicholls

Atheist crusaders like David Nicholls believe that religious people are blind to the truth. They see faith in God as a form of ignorance that gives rise to hypocrisy, intolerance and cruelty. Their goal is to open people's eyes and release them from the chains of superstition by convincing them that there's no rational basis for a belief in the supernatural. To accomplish this goal, they rely on arguments that are mainly rooted in science.

Some might say it's a mistake to categorize scientific Atheism as a religion. I'm not much interested in getting into that debate. I choose to think of Atheism as a sort of quasi-religion because of the zealous faith that most atheists place in science in general, and in Darwinism in particular. Moreover, some of the world's most influential atheists – thinkers like Carl Sagan and

Albert Einstein – often describe their worldview using religious language. But, in the end, it really doesn't matter if we stretch the definition of religion to accommodate Atheism. My concern today is to address atheist arguments against the existence of God.

Most atheists are materialists. They believe that everything that exists is contained in the universe. I say that *most* atheists are materialist because there are some atheists who are willing to entertain the possibility that other universes exist that are parallel to our own, but which we can know nothing about. But we'll get to that in a minute.

The basic assumption that drives modern Atheism is that our understanding of reality should be shaped by hard science. Atheists point out, quite rightly, that God's existence can't be proven scientifically in the way, for example, that the existence of electrons and protons can be proven scientifically. This lack of scientific evidence is what leads the atheist to the conclusion that a belief in God is irrational and illegitimate.

When I was a college student in the late 1970s it was harder to counter atheist arguments. Most of the intellectuals I knew were either agnostics or atheists who believed that science had pulled the rug out from underneath religion. I don't want to get lost in technical arguments, but it's important to understand some of the reasons why the case against God seemed so compelling to so many people in those days.

For centuries – since the days of Copernicus – scientists had been laying the foundation for the modern, secular world-view. The scientific method of inquiry had uncovered vast amounts of information about the universe, and much of it was extremely useful. Breathtaking scientific discoveries led to dazzling technological innovations. During the twentieth century religious skeptics like Bertrand Russell and Stephen Hawking led the attack against traditional religious faith. They argued that it was fatuous to believe that the universe had been created and was being sustained by a benevolent God. They insisted that the huge body of accumulated scientific theory pointed us in the opposite direction. Their basic message was: "We don't need to posit a Higher Power to understand the movements of planets and molecules. And we don't need God to explain the genesis of life. Science has shown itself to be a reliable guide to exploring the universe and its origins."

The single most important influence for atheists, when I was in college, was evolutionary theory. Virtually all biological scientists in those days identified themselves as evolutionists. Though they admitted that they were still piecing together the evidence in support of Darwin's various hypotheses, they embraced natural selection as a more-than-adequate explanation for the origins of life. Most of them rejected the idea that God had created life, or that he was the unseen, guiding force behind evolution. Instead, they fervently believed that life was the outcome of essentially random mechanisms operating over the course of many millions of years.

By the way, maybe you heard about the orangutan at the LA Zoo that was recently seen reading two books – the Bible and Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. The zoo-keeper was shocked, of course. He asked the ape: "Why are you reading those books?"

"Well," the orangutan said, "I'm trying to figure out if I'm my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother." (But I've strayed from the point...)

Atheism was also alive and well among the social scientists in the 1970s. Two important studies from that period bear that out. One conducted by the American Psychiatric Association found that only 43 percent of American psychiatrists in those days believed in God, as compared with 95 percent of Americans. Another study conducted by the American Psychological Association was even more striking. It found that only 1.1 percent of psychologists were believers.

Not surprisingly, it was easy in the 60s and 70s to detect a powerful anti-religious bias in psychoanalytic theory and practice. Following the lead of Sigmund Freud, many psychiatrists and psychologists looked at religious faith as a neurosis and an impediment to self-fulfillment. Then, as now, many people rejected God, left the church, and found new meaning in psychoanalysis. The language of faith was replaced with the language of psychology. Sunday worship was replaced with weekly sessions with a therapist.

The world has changed a great deal since I went to college. In the jargon of philosophy, we've completed the transition from the modern to the postmodern world. In the jargon of everyday life, many of us no longer believe that human reason is adequate for the task of making sense of the world. We've become suspicious of institutions and groups that wield authority, or that claim to have the answers to life's difficult questions. We're less likely to listen to people just because they're famous or they hold advanced degrees. We're questioning platitudes that people used to accept unthinkingly.

One of the platitudes that many scientists now question is the notion that science provides a firm foundation for Atheism. There are a number of reasons for this change. Let's briefly explore a few of them.

In the 1970s physicists had a lot of fresh, new information available to about the universe. They knew, for example, that the universe is expanding. They knew there was a great deal of evidence in support of the Big Bang theory. And they knew the values of some of the mysterious forces that govern the universe – values that hold constant, and that shape the universe as we know it. Examples include gravity, the difference in mass between a proton and a neutron, and the so-called 'strong force' that binds the components of an atomic nucleus.

In those exciting days, physicists started to think about why the universe turned out as it did, and how it would have turned out if some of the fundamental values such as gravity or the 'strong force' been different. Their calculations turned up some mind-blowing results. What they found is that when you make even the tiniest changes in any one of six fundamental forces you end up with a universe that is radically altered.

Tweak the force of gravity just a hair, for example, so that it's slightly stronger in relation to electromagnetism, and you end up with stars that are billions of times less massive, and that burn themselves out a million times faster. It is inconceivable that any kind of life might emerge under this scenario because all the stars will be too hot.

Or tweak the 'strong force', so that it's just 5 percent weaker, and you end up with a universe without any stars at all. That would mean a cold, empty universe with no oxygen, no water – nothing but hydrogen.

These calculations captured the imagination of astrophysicist from Cambridge named Brandon Carter. What they indicate, Carter suggested, is that we live in a Goldilocks sort of universe, where all of the fundamental values are just right. It's as though the universe had been designed for the express purpose of nurturing life on planets just like ours. In 1973 Carter coined the term "the anthropic principle" to express this idea. *Anthropos* is Greek for man. The anthropic principle really amounted to the observation that physical laws governing the universe were fine-tuned from the very start to make it possible for human life to emerge.

Some of you are probably thinking: "Well what's so mind-blowing about that? It stands to reason that God would create a universe that's hospitable towards life." The reason it's mind-blowing is because, for most of modern history, skeptics have assumed science would never turn up any evidence for the existence of God. But there it is! It's as though God has left his fingerprints in star in the sky, and in every molecule in our bodies. As the Psalm says:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*  
- Psalm 19:1

Of course the anthropic principle shocked and offended many in the scientific establishment. Scientific atheists have long pointed out that the fact that we live in a Goldilocks universe doesn't prove that God exists, and of course they're right about that.

But some atheists have confronted those who see the Goldilocks universe as evidence for God with objections that can only be described as desperate. One objection is that, while the Goldilocks universe is certainly an improbable outcome, the existence of a God who could create such a universe is even more improbable. Therefore, it's irrational to say that the Goldilocks universe is evidence for God's existence.

What the atheist is saying, if you had trouble tracking with that argument, is something like this: "The existence of God is so highly unlikely that it doesn't matter what kind of evidence you show me suggesting the possibility of intelligent design. I'm *always* going to reject God and believe instead in dumb luck."

Another platitude that many scientists now question is the idea that life evolved as the result of natural selection. As any student of biology knows, Darwin predicted that his theory would be substantiated by the fossil record. What is less well known is that the fossil record doesn't accord very well with the patterns that Darwin would have predicted. The renowned Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould has noted recently that there is what he calls "an astonishing conservation" in the basic evolutionary "pathways" taken by many organisms. Or, to put it more bluntly, the orderly patterns that Darwin said would result from the random process called natural selection have not emerged.

There's a further problem with natural selection. Darwin hypothesized that new species would emerge gradually over extremely long periods of time, but the evidence doesn't bear that out. The fossil record of species development indicates that there have been periods of stability punctuated by periods of rapid and inexplicable change. This pattern, which Gould calls "punctuated equilibrium," can't be explained by Darwin's theories.

It shouldn't surprise us that atheists cling to the theory of natural selection, even as it frays and threatens to blow apart. Natural selection answers the question: "What is the genesis of life on earth?" without bringing God into the picture. Moreover, for atheists, the theory lends credibility to the idea that random, mindless processes can give rise to order, beauty and intelligence. If they gave up on natural selection, atheists would have an extremely difficult time explaining the origins of life on earth and of the universe itself. That's why natural selection remains a core belief for scientific atheists, even though many experts in the field of evolutionary biology have already abandoned it.

A third platitude that is now widely questioned in our society is the idea that religious faith leads to emotional instability or poor health. More and more medical professionals now recognize the vital role that religious faith plays in physical and mental health. Moreover, numerous studies conducted over the past few decades indicate that religious faith is actually a key component of emotional and physical health.

For example, a major study conducted in Washington County, Maryland in 1972 found that the risk of heart disease for men who attended church frequently was just 60 percent of that for men who attended church infrequently. The same study found that, among women, the risk of dying from heart disease, emphysema and suicide was twice as high among infrequent church attenders as among frequent attenders. Such research contradicts the idea promoted first by Freud, and later by thousands of unbelieving psychologists and psychiatrists, that religious faith is abnormal.

The Bible tells us that God's Law revives the soul and gives joy to the heart (Psalm 19:7-8). We know from experience that worship and service to the Lord do the same thing for us. But the scientific studies are important because they tend to validate the idea that we've been created by God to live in his light and by his Spirit. They provide solid evidence for skeptics of the spiritual underpinnings of health.

Scientific atheism doesn't have the same appeal in our society that it once had. Not long ago, science was the main obstacle to faith for many people. Today, science is actually helping some to regain their faith. Those who demand proof of God's existence are never going to get it; they'll always be disappointed in their quest. But those who seek the Lord in humility and reach out to him in faith and are open to his Spirit eventually find him. That's the promise of the New Testament.

Atheism is giving way to a new openness to spirituality. Many people who aren't Christians are listening once again to the messages spoken to us by the stars above. They're taking seriously the idea that the universe is governed by a Higher Power. And they're turning inward to learn more about that Mysterious Presence that inhabits their conscience.

What will we do, as a church, and as individuals, to help these people? Will we reach out and share with them the life-giving message of the Gospel? Will we trust the Holy Spirit to pierce their hearts and draw them to Christ?

Paul's words to the Corinthians are amazingly relevant for our generation:

Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since...the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe... For the foolishness of God is wiser than [human] wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than [human] strength.

- 1 Corinthians 1:20-21, 25

A new era has begun. And a new opportunity for has opened up for the Church. In humility, and with the wisdom that only God can give, let's share our experience of Christ with those who have grown tired of the empty promises of atheism.