

“A Theistic Hope!”

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Luke 24:1-35*

An atheist was walking through the woods.

“What majestic trees!”

“What powerful rivers!”

“What beautiful animals!”

He said to himself.

As he was walking alongside the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look. He saw a 7 foot grizzly charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was closing in on him.

He looked over his shoulder again, and the bear was even closer. He tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up but saw that the bear was right on top of him, reaching for him with his left paw and raising his right paw to strike him. At that instant the Atheist cried out, “Oh my God!”

Time stopped.

The bear froze.

The forest was still.

As a bright light shone upon the man, a voice came out of the sky. “You deny my existence for all these years, teach others I don’t exist and even credit creation to cosmic accident.” “Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer?”

The atheist looked directly into the light, “It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask You to treat me as a Christian now, but perhaps You could make the BEAR a Christian?”

“Very Well,” said the Voice.

The light went out. The sounds of the forest resumed. And the bear dropped his right paw, brought both paws together, bowed his head and spoke:

“Lord Bless this food, which I am about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen.”

My friends, it’s Easter morning! This is the most important day on the Christian calendar – from death to life! Resurrection! Hope! Meaning! Interpret this day as literally or spiritually as you like, but for one third of the world’s population, for one out of three, this day signifies Hope, meaning, purpose!

Indeed, a time to celebrate, to rejoice, to sing! And yet, our lives are nuanced. Questions arise. Times can be difficult. We each have our Maundy Thursdays of betrayal, and Good Fridays of

innocent suffering and death. Other concerns impinge their ways upon us. The secular world with all its offerings (and they are myriad, and many greatly beneficial), seems to eclipse our souls, our inner spiritual yearnings. In this culture of plentitude (compare human history), the sacred often takes a back seat. Yet, the spiritual stirrings do not go away.

The belief was, not that many years ago, that spirituality, religion, would go the way of the dodo bird – extinction. But, this theory has been proven wrong!

Religion is on the rise!

And of course, it isn't value free! There is healthy religion and unhealthy religion! There's the rub!! And among the voices endeavoring to articulate a rational worldview is a new crop of "radical" atheists. Several bestselling books by atheists have hit the marketplace of ideas in the recent past; from "the world's most prominent atheist", scientist Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion, to literary critic, and political theorist, Christopher Hitchens' God is not Great; How Religion Poisons Everything; to Sam Harris' The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation; to scientist Daniel Dennett's Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, and more, we are being challenged in our faith, in our worldview.

First, let the debate proceed!! We all have much to learn!!

My friends, the very reason I approach this subject of the new atheism, is to articulate, (albeit poorly) a brief recognition of what's out there, and a brief response – defense – of the Faith.

What better time than on this Sunday?! The day of Theistic Hope for our world, our universe!! Make no mistake about this ongoing debate. It is cerebral, but on a much deeper level, it is about culture, ethics, and society!!

I have read Dawkins and Hitchens books. I have read a plethora of articles on all these authors, both pro and con. What I want you to consider this morning is, "which world do you live in?"

Come on – bring your passing thoughts to consciousness. Do you believe in a purely material world, bereft of purpose and meaning – all progressing toward the garbage heap of tomorrow?

OR

Do you believe in a universe instilled with meaning and purpose by a God who transcends the material world? (You may sense where I am going with this) I, along with others believe either choice, or a variant there of – requires an act of faith, commitment – without empirical verification.

These atheists use (abuse?) science to beat up we poor ignorant religious masses. They posit only science can give us answers – answers sooner or later to all questions. Thank God for science! In fact, there are arguments that Christianity – through its valuing of rationality and order – greatly influenced and contributed to the rise of science.

We are not luddites!!

There is a major problem with these new atheists - they treat all religious/spiritual people as if we are all radical fundamentalists of some stripe. For instance Dawkins (a genius in science!), writes this about the God of the Old Testament:

“Arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

If this was God, I would join with Dawkins quest to eradicate such a belief! But, this is not the case!! There are many scientists who celebrate their discipline and their religious faith. I cannot argue in detail this morning. What I want to accomplish, is to share that our Christian Faith is compatible with science. One such scientist is Francis S. Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project. He works at the cutting edge of the study of DNA, the code of life. And he believes in God, and is a Christian.

Dr. Collins chose atheism as a youth. As he studied science and other disciplines he became a theist! He asks, “...In the modern era of cosmology, evolution, and the human genome, is there still the possibility of a richly satisfying harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldviews? I answer with a resounding yes!” (p.6)

One does not need to choose atheism to be a scientist, or an intelligent person; nor does one need to reject evolution, nor accept Intelligent Design as science, to be a Christian! Dr Collins shared how in his teens he “...had occasional moments of the experience of longing for something outside myself, often associated with the beauty of nature or a particularly profound musical experience.” (p. 15) Haven’t you experienced such a longing - a sense of transcendence, of something more? Haven’t you been taken up in moments of beauty, awe, and inspiration? (Chemical misfirings, or something more?)

I’m reminded of the two disciples of Jesus, following his execution. They had hoped. They had dared to hope that their lives could have meaning. That life could be different. But all that ended with Jesus on the cross. “Death is death. No more; no less!” So they turned and left, walking away from hope. At one point, as Jesus (not recognized) is walking with them, one of them declares the desire of the ages, “But we had hoped...”

Four words that will kill your spirit!
Four words that will dismantle a culture!

We must hope!! We need A Theistic Hope!!

We will develop multiple stories and images to explicate this need – this God given desire, but you must hope! You must believe in purpose, meaningful existence! As the gospel story unfolds, the risen Christ leaves them, but they have been changed – hoped restored.

- Their hearts burned within them!
- They turned around and went back to their place of hope!

Dr. Collins journey led him to a theistic hope! “I had started this journey of intellectual exploration to confirm my atheism. That now lay in ruins as the argument from the Moral Law (and many other issues) forced me to admit the plausibility of the God hypothesis... Faith in God now seemed more rational than disbelief.” (p. 30)

Oh my friends, I cannot do justice to this complicated, immensely important subject – but I want you and your children to hear that Science and Religion need not be at odds!

There are great intellects within science who see no warfare. Nor do most feel they need to denigrate whatever is not covered under the empirical sciences.

- I am amazed that these Western atheists take so little thought about their own ethical standards, from whence they came? The Judeo-Christian culture that they so abuse and belittle!
- Religion is “child abuse.” That’s what they declare! Their very moral categorizations speak to their being raised in a particular culture, taught by Judeo-Christian standards of conduct. Their very vocabulary is “tainted” with this “evil religion” as they call it.

I’m not able to share another former atheist, turned theologian, who first studied chemistry at Oxford, nor theologian John Haught’s cogent responses to these new atheists – except he sees them as lightweights compared to the likes of Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx and Freud!

These new atheists declare so blithely, the meaninglessness of it all, without God. They are deluded to believe a social/cultural system would thrive under such nihilism, such emptiness. For as atheist Sautre mused, “Atheism is a cruel and long –range affair.

Haught declares; “The new soft core atheists assume that, by dint of Darwinism (this is not a denial of evolution), we can just drop God like Santa Claus without having to witness the complete collapse of Western culture – including our sense of what is rational and moral. At least the hardcore atheists (of the past) understood that if we are truly sincere in our atheism, the whole web of meanings and values that have clustered around the idea of God in the Western culture has to go down the drain along with its organizing center.” (Christian Century Feb. 26, 2008, p. 26)

My friends, we need a theistic hope!! It is of prime importance for you, your children, their children – the future!!

Recall Luke’s rendition of the Easter Story.

Speaking religiously, spiritually; “Did not our hearts burn...?”

With apologies to Shakespeare, “There are more things in heaven and earth Dawkins, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

On this Easter morning, take these words from a revered, esteemed scientist/Christian – consider them, share them, discuss them;

“The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory. His creation is majestic, awesome, intricate, and beautiful – and it cannot be at war with itself. Only we imperfect humans can start such battles. And only we can end them.” (p. 211)

This ongoing discussion matters! Caring within you – A Theistic Hope!

As Christians, that hope is defined in the living Christ!

Christ is Risen!

He is Risen indeed!

Amen.