

ENGAGING
with...

Atheists

understanding their world
sharing good news

David Robertson

The logo features a stylized bird or wing shape above the text.
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Engaging with Atheists

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Published by:

The Good Book Company

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New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.co.nz



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ISBN: 9781909919099

Design by André Parker

Printed in the UK

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Engaging with...

Preface

Christians have a wonderful message to tell the world. As the angel said at the birth of Jesus, it is “good news of great joy, *for all people*” (Luke 2 v 10). But sometimes we have been slow to take that message of forgiveness and new life to others.

Sometimes it’s because we have become *distracted*. There are so many things that can push the need to tell others from it’s central place in our calling as individuals and churches. We get wrapped up in our own church issues, problems and politics. Or we get sidetracked by the very real needs of our broken and hurting world, and expend our energies dealing with the symptoms rather than the cause.

Sometimes it’s because we have lacked *conviction*. We look at people who seem relatively happy or settled in their own beliefs, and just don’t think Jesus is for them.

Or perhaps we have just forgotten just how good the good news is, and how serious the consequences for those who enter eternity unforgiven.

But sometimes it has been *fear* that has held us back from sharing the good news about Jesus. When we meet people whose culture, background or beliefs are so different from ours, we can draw back from speaking about our own faith because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing, unintentionally offending them, or getting into an unhelpful argument that leads nowhere.

This little series of books is designed to help with this last issue. We want to encourage Christian believers and whole churches to focus on our primary task of sharing the good news with the whole world. Each title aims to equip you with the understanding you need, so that you can build meaningful friendships with others from different backgrounds, and share the good news in a relevant and clear way.

It is our prayer that this book will help you do that with a neighbour, friend or work colleague who has no belief in God, or who has abandoned belief in God entirely. We pray that the result would be “great joy” as they understand that Jesus is good news for them.

Tim Thornborough
Series Editor

Introduction

This is a book about engaging with atheists. What does that mean? Perhaps it is easier to say what it does not mean.

This is not a war cry, showing how we can combat and argue with the new and aggressive group that I call “the New Fundamentalist Atheists”. Anyone who has engaged online, or face to face with them will know how pointless and usually fruitless that is.

Nor is it really for those of you who regularly meet with philosophy professors who are well-read, intellectual atheists in order to discuss the philosophical proofs for God, involving long strange words.

Nor is the purpose of this short book to provide you with a series of knock-out arguments that will enable you to walk off the debating battlefield victorious. Neither is it a “how to” manual which will result in all your friends, family and colleagues becoming Christians.

This is simply a book that hopes to encourage and equip you to engage in a winning and winsome way, with the increasing number of ordinary people you know and meet in modern Western culture who are influenced

by a worldview that either does not believe in God—*atheist*—or which believes that, if he does exist, it is impossible to know anything about God—*agnostic*.

I am not an expert. I am a middle-aged minister in a church in a small Scottish city. I have been engaged in ministry for 27 years in both the country and in the city. As a working pastor in ordinary local churches, I see the crying need for evangelism. We need more Christians. Church growth, church planting, church renewal and church reformation all require, as well as produce, new believers.

But how do people become believers? Through hearing the word of God. But how can people hear if they don't come to church, read Christian books or listen to Christian media? We need to go to them. In the past, our strategy for outreach has centred on big rallies, tent meetings, open-air preaching and door-to-door visiting—all of which still have their place. But the bottom line is that the gospel is best gossiped by believers who have a passion and commitment to telling the good news to those in desperate need of it, and who belong to a local church where the Bible is central to its ministry and life.

I have been seeking to encourage this kind of evangelism for a number of years, and have practised it myself. I am encouraged by the fruits of this work. Breaking up the ground and sowing the seed requires patience, love and hard work, but it does eventually result in reaping the harvest.

After writing *The Dawkins Letters*—a book that replies very specifically to the arguments laid out in Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*—many doors opened to

me. I could not walk through them all and so we set up the Solas Centre for Public Christianity, which engages with, and trains people to engage with, the atheistic/agnostic secular people of our day. We are absolutely convinced that church-based persuasive evangelism is the need of the hour and that it is possible. This small book will, I hope, help equip you to engage in those who believe there is no God.

We begin by looking at who the atheists are; in chapter two we look at beliefs and practices of atheists; chapter three looks at how we engage personally; chapter four is the longest and looks at how we apply the gospel to the beliefs and practices described in chapter two; chapter five offers some guidance on using the Bible in engaging with atheists; chapter six makes some suggestions as to how the local church can engage; and chapter seven offers some concluding thoughts.

I was speaking at a conference a couple of years ago and a man came up to thank me. He was very kind; “You and Tim Keller are my favourite speakers,” he said. “When I hear him, I thank the Lord that he is on our side. He is so brilliant. When I hear you, I think ‘I could do that!’”.

I took it as a great complement. I hope that after you have read this book, you will be able to say “I could do that”, and that the Lord would take our weak and feeble efforts to serve him and use them for his glory in bringing many people to himself.

Understanding Atheists

Chapter One

Who are the atheists?

The visitor from Jackson, Tennessee, was beside himself: “I’m so excited, I met me a real life *a-thee-ist*. I ain’t never met a real life atheist before.” The note of delight and surprise was evident as two cultures clashed—the religious southern USA and godless Scotland.

It was pointed out to our visitor that 14% of the US—some 50 million people—now self-identify as atheists and that that number is increasing. Nonetheless, any budding US President would commit political suicide if they announced that they were an atheist.

Even in the United Kingdom, where politicians famously “don’t do God”, most atheists in the public arena are not proclaiming their atheism from the rooftops.

For some atheism is still a negative term. Which of course it is. *A-Theos* is just simply the Greek for “No God(s)”. One of the reasons that atheism has a negative press is that

there is still in some minds, the idea of godlessness being associated with all manner of evils—from communism to sexual immorality. But that idea is fading fast. Indeed the new atheists are desperate to show both that they have a robust morality, and that the reverse is true—it is really religion in all its forms that is immoral and evil.

Atheism—the real numbers

Statistics about religion and belief are notoriously difficult to both collect and interpret. Those who might label themselves as “atheists” remain relatively small, compared with the number who would say they have “no religion”. Even those who do not think of themselves as being part of any religion will own up to having beliefs in other things than a personal god.

So in the United Kingdom, although around 50% of people would say they do not believe in God, many of them might also say that they *do* believe in guardian angels and many more will believe in some form of “spirituality”. Similar levels of non-belief are found in France, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands.

At the other end of the scale, many of the former officially atheist countries of the Eastern European communist bloc remarkably show a very high level of belief in God—over 90% in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, while the Southern European Catholic countries come in between.

In other parts of the world, belief in God remains the normal human position. Even in Communist China the number of theists is growing rapidly. Some argue that atheism has passed its sell-by date and predict a resur-

gence of religion, even in post-modern, post-secular Europe. Others believe that any religious resurgence is only the last dying throes of a backward humanity, as we progress towards a Scandinavian level of atheist nirvana.

This book does not attempt to deal with these sociological and demographic prophecies. The fact is that every reader will know and meet with many people who do not believe in God. Those of us who are Bible-believing Christians are then faced with a dilemma. How do we communicate the good news about the Son of God to those who do not even believe there is a God? How do we tell them what God has said when they do not believe there is a God to say anything?

Much of our religious language is incomprehensible to them. And we personally are an anomaly to them—believers in an age of unbelief; nice people who inexplicably follow a nasty religion; modern, intelligent people who still believe in fairies.

Let's begin by asking: who are the atheists? It is not as simple as it sounds. Atheists split into as many different denominations as Christians! The danger with labelling is that we push people into groups and forget that each human being is an individual made in the image of God, with a complex variety of reasons for being the way they are and thinking the way they think. Therefore the following labels are not intended as absolutes, but rather, as helpful guidelines to understanding.

1. Functional atheists

Many if not most people may not be *theoretical* atheists, but they are **functional** atheists. That is, they may

say they believe in God or in some “higher power”, but practically they live *as if* there were no God. They may use the language of belief, but their belief makes not one iota of difference to their daily lives.

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the Dutch Protestant lawyer, spoke of people living “*esti Deus non daretur*”—as if God did not exist. That is where most of Western culture is today. It is not just that governments are secular—they are opposed to the involvement of religion in public life—but that our whole culture is either antagonistic to, or apathetic about, the very concept of God.

Thus media, film, art, music, politics, history, commerce, industry and science are carried on as though there were no God. I would argue that, in a world without God, people are confused and disorientated and therefore immerse themselves in hedonism (the pleasures of the moment), power struggles and materialism. Modern shopping malls are our cathedrals; mammon has replaced God as the reason for our existence.

2. New Fundamentalist Atheists

When Richard Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion*, he did so not to convert theists, but rather, to give a populist intellectual justification for atheist belief, and encourage the vast number of functional atheists to come out of the closet and self-identify as atheists. He wanted them to move from a pragmatic functional atheism (we will live as if there were no God) to an explicit belief in atheism (there really is no God).

Why do we call this “new”? The old hard-core Western liberal atheism of people like Bertrand Russell, Antony

Flew, Sigmund Freud, and Jean-Paul Sartre had been so successful that it resulted in the pompous and premature pronouncement in the 1960s that “God is dead”.

The trouble is that by the 21st century it is clear that God, or at least belief in God, is very much alive and not just in the Islamic world. Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University, was horrified that so many of his students were theists, and at what he perceived as the increasing “threat” from Islam and the continuation of Christianity, even in the bastions of Western liberal enlightenment thought. After I wrote a response to *The God Delusion—The Dawkins Letters*—I was amused to receive a letter from a couple of his top students who told me that they were Christians, “but don’t tell the boss!”.

So the “new” atheism was born. Dawkins, together with his fellow self-styled “four horsemen of the atheist apocalypse”—Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens—set out to “take on” and deliver the death blow to what they hoped were the last dying throes of religion. Less deferential towards the religious, the new atheists were happy to use mockery, ridicule and contempt as their weapons in the fight. At times it seemed they were driven more by emotion than intellect. Their motto seems to be “There is no God and I hate him”!

They give apocalyptic warnings about the end of the world being caused by the virus of religion, which needs to be eradicated. They hold conferences, rallies and never-ending debates on social media. My postbag is full of hate mail from people who get outraged at the slightest questioning of their prophets and beliefs. Some of the

scariest groups are the American New Fundamentalist Atheists, who seem to be aping the worst of their religious fundamentalist counterparts. Arrogant, aggressive and intolerant, they use the internet widely to develop their own particular brand of “hate speech”, all done in the name of “tolerance” and “clear-thinking”. You will find that there is often a deep, emotional anger and bitterness in the NFAs—sometimes caused by bad experiences of religious abuse from the past.

Why do I call them fundamentalists? It is not just a rhetorical jibe (that would not be very Christian of me, would it?), but rather, because it is an accurate description. They have fundamental beliefs, which they are as emotionally committed to as any religious fundamentalist. Even to question these beliefs is to invite scorn, mockery and ridicule on a scale that is quite shocking to many Christians. And to many atheists also. It’s why there has been a recent trend to a “nicer, softer” atheism, exemplified by writers such as Alain de Botton and the people behind the Atheist Church movement.

3. Agnostic Atheists

The New Fundamentalist Atheists are perhaps best described as *anti-theists* rather than a-theists. The vast majority of atheists are not like them, although it is still good for you to be prepared when they come your way. Most of the atheists you will meet are in reality *a-gnostics* (Greek for “no-knowledge”). It seems reasonable and humble to admit that we do not know; that we cannot know. The softer position says “I do not know because there is not sufficient information. I can’t prove there is

no God and you can't prove there is. Provide me with the information and of course I would believe."

This position is best summed up by Bertrand Russell's statement that if he met God and was asked why he did not believe, he would declare: "Because you did not provide enough evidence". Perhaps apathy is the predominant thought here. Many of your friends who fall into this general category do not lie on their beds at night pondering the meaning of life and suffering from existential angst. They are far more concerned about the game they have just watched, the bills they need to pay, and their next visit to the doctor. Normal life for them simply does not involve God in any way, shape or form.

4. Christian Atheists

Christian atheists? Is this the old joke of the man in the Belfast street, who, on pronouncing himself an atheist, was asked: "Yes but are you a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?" This is an important category for us to think about because it recognises that religion is often cultural and tribal. I have regularly come across people who attend church but don't believe in God—ironically there are even some who make their living out of Christianity who don't believe in God.

But when we speak of Christian atheism, we are not talking about cultural Christianity or hypocrisy; we are reflecting on the observation that as regards all gods except Jesus Christ we are atheists. From the beginning, Christians, because they did not have temples, sacrifices and priests, *were accused of being atheists*—something which the early Christian leader Justin Martyr readily admitted:

And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity.

First Apology

Christians must be careful not to fall into the trap of, on the one hand, just applauding “faith” and “religion” in general, or on the other hand, coming across as the arrogant purveyors of one particular myth. The bottom line is that the Bible says a whole lot more against idolatry and the worship of *false* gods, than it does against atheism. Worshipping the wrong gods, or the right God in the wrong way, is just as reprehensible as refusing to worship God at all.

Reflection

- Think of some of the people you know—friends, neighbours, colleagues, perhaps even people at your church. What kind of atheism do you think they are practising?
- What influences in their lives do you think led them to this position?
- How might you have a gentle, friendly, non-confrontational conversation with them that explores the roots of their understanding? What questions might you ask them?
- Think about the influences that have shaped your own belief in God—family, life experiences, thought processes, etc. How might your atheist friends explain and understand your Christian faith?

Do try to understand why people become atheists.

Don't assume you do understand what they think and how they got there.

Do recognise that atheists come in many different shapes and sizes and cannot all be lumped together.

Don't place labels on people and forget their basic humanity.

Do ask if you live your life in such a way that your belief in God is self-evident.

Don't assume that everyone who lives differently is more ignorant or more “evil” than you.