



Young People, Faith & Science

Countering secularism in education and at work

© Dr Arthur Jones

Introduction

This workshop explores the challenges that arise from the atheistic secularism that now dominates the public realm. The aim is to help young and old in education and at work to respond effectively to the secularist/atheist attack on Christianity and religion in general.

It is also about mission, providing tools for unembarrassed and non-cheesy engagement with secular friends and neighbours. There are imaginative ways of doing mission that equip you to “demolish every argument and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 *Corinthians* 10:5). ¹ Christians ought to be confident and excited about their faith.

To Christians, we are commending a two-pronged response to the secularist challenge:

- (1) **Educating secularists** – explaining, defending and commending the current legal position
- (2) **Expecting secularists to answer hard questions about *their* faith** – they have evaded this responsibility for too long. Plus good ways to do this.

(1) Educating Secularists

First we need some background and we will get that by looking at two recent events and considering what it means to be professional.

Michael Reiss

Dr Michael Reiss is professor of science education at London University and was the Royal Society’s Education Director. At a science festival in Liverpool in September 2008, Reiss commented that good science teaching is about respecting the students’ views and that science teachers should take seriously the concerns of students who do not accept the theory of evolution. ² Reiss is a theistic evolutionist and was not suggesting that creationism or intelligent design should be taught in schools, nor that evolution should be downplayed in any way. He was merely recommending that issues of science and religion should be properly discussed if students raise them in

class. This was hardly earth-shattering and was fully in line with what is almost universally regarded as good educational practice and did not contradict the Royal Society's policies. But Reiss happens to be a Christian and worse, an ordained Anglican minister. His lecture sparked an inexcusable torrent of abuse and misrepresentation. Two Nobel prize winners – Sir Harry Kroto and Sir Richard Roberts – and other senior Royal Society fellows demanded that the Royal Society sack Reiss. Several Royal Society fellows commented that a religious person was not in any case an inappropriate choice for the post. Richard Dawkins said: "A clergyman in charge of education for the country's leading scientific organisation - it's a Monty Python sketch."³, and Harry Kroto wrote:

"Of course "The origin of the universe and living organisms" is a perfectly respectable question for the science lesson, as long as someone with intellectual integrity is there to answer it. ... It really does not matter whether one believes a mystical entity created the universe 5,000 or 10,000 million years ago – both are equally irrational unsubstantiated claims of no fundamental validity. Unfortunately Reiss, who is, apparently, a very nice guy, was in the wrong job. He, together with all religious people – whether they like it or not, whether they accept it or not – fall at the first hurdle of the main requirement for honest scientific discussion because they accept unfound dogma as having fundamental significance ..."⁴

Reiss was sacked from his post at the Royal Society.

Caroline Petrie

Caroline Petrie is a Christian nurse who was suspended without pay on 17 December 2008 by North Somerset Primary Care Trust after she offered to pray for a patient.⁵ She was accused of failing to show proper commitment to equality and diversity. She was eventually re-instated in February 2009, the PCT recognising that she had been acting in the "best interests of her patients." Further the PCT accepted that nurses do not have to "set aside their faith" in the workplace and could "continue to offer high quality care to patients while remaining committed to their beliefs." The PCT also admitted that for some patients prayer is an "integral part of health care and the healing process."⁶ Nevertheless the PCT statement still cast doubt on her professional commitment as a nurse ("There are grounds for wondering whether the nurses's sincere faith convictions about the efficacy of intercessory prayer are more strongly held than her commitment to a pattern of practice consistent with her professional role."⁷)

What does it mean to be professional?

In almost every professional training today there is an explicit or implicit message: "In order to be professional and objective, you must not bring your religion or personal values into your public life." As regards teachers the demand is that as Christians we mustn't talk about God as if he exists, we must not pray with pupils, we must not say that there are objective moral norms, and we must not teach science as if natural things are designed."

Today that demand can seem so obvious, so reasonable, that many Christians accept it. But it is not actually (yet!) required by any law, and it is grossly discriminatory and

morally indefensible. We can see this by turning the tables: “In order to be similarly ‘neutral’, ‘objective’ and ‘professional’ what should an atheist or agnostic teacher do or not do?” The obvious answer is ‘nothing’ – the educational system is already practically atheist. In other words the existing system is actually neither neutral nor liberal. However, the answer in line with the logic of the question is that atheists and agnostics should also be required to *act against their beliefs*, for example, by behaving in school as if they were Christians (or Buddhists, Muslims ...)!

Far from being neutral, secularism has created an environment in which it is religious believers who are most at risk of facing disrespect and the rubbishing of their beliefs. Consequently, the risk of indoctrination in schools and society today is not from religion, but from secularism.⁸ For example, today almost 100% of unbelieving parents successfully pass on their unbelief to their children, but barely 50% of Christian parents succeed in passing on their Christian faith.⁹

With that background we can consider what the law actually allows and how our first response to secularism involves explaining, defending and commending the law (and exposing some real and potential inconsistencies)

Citizenship – Handling Controversial Issues in Schools¹⁰

The 1998 *Crick Report* on Citizenship led to compulsory Citizenship in the secondary school curriculum from September 2002. This in turn focused attention on the matter of how schools should handle controversial issues. In response there have been a number of key publications.¹⁰

The guidelines that have been issued all rightly emphasise that teachers are not allowed to promote partisan views, but are expected to give a balanced presentation of opposing positions. This does NOT mean that teachers have to promote relativism. Committed teachers are free to use their commitments as important teaching resources. They may use their commitments to model explicitly for students the shaping role that beliefs play in life. They can do this by openly talking about their beliefs, and by explaining and engaging with contrary beliefs in an open and respectful manner. Teachers should always be permitted to answer student questions, giving their own views if appropriate. Disagreements among teachers are an excellent opportunity for students to learn how adults can respectfully disagree. What teachers must not do is to set out to persuade pupils that their views on a controversial issue *are the only ones worthy of consideration*. The key professional guideline is that schools should be inclusive – that pupils from all backgrounds should feel at home and have their views taken seriously. Teachers must create a classroom environment in which students are free to express sincerely-held beliefs without fear of being dismissed or belittled.

As Christians we should have no problem with these guidelines. They are consistent with our Biblical aspirations for justice. In following them we are not implying that all positions are either equally true, or equally acceptable. Rather, as Christians, we are bearing witness that the God whom we worship as true calls upon those in authority to ensure that people are free to search for God without coercion or discrimination (cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-6). The guidelines are also to our advantage, because we now work in

situations in which it is *religious* believers who are the ones at risk of facing significant discrimination.

In fact secularists have grown so accustomed to their position being regarded as the default position, that they take it for granted that it is only other ('religious') positions that must be placed under the critical spotlight. Rather obviously that is not a position that should be acceptable in a pluralist society, but the argument of this workshop is that it also grossly misrepresents the reality of the situation.

The approach we commend is to treat secularism for what we believe it is – a set of other (or alternative) faith positions that should be scrutinized in the same way that we should scrutinize all worldviews.

Of course secularists are then faced with two notable challenges. The easier one (!) is that of treating people of religious faith justly and respectfully. The harder one is that of admitting that their own secularist commitment is also a controversial faith position.

Our fundamental premise is that the cultural divide is not, as secularists would have it, between religion and reason, but between *two controversial faith positions*.

With that background we can consider how to turn the tables on the atheist secularists.

(2) Expecting secularists to answer hard questions about *their* faith

The New Atheists

The best known of the 'new atheists', Richard Dawkins (b 1941), is often presented as the (now retired) Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. In reality he is the apostle of the new atheism and his best-known book is not a book of science, but of theology (or, rather, *anti-theology*) *The God Delusion*.¹¹ He represents a galaxy of media atheists, such as David Attenborough (famous media naturalist), Peter Atkins (professor of chemistry, Lincoln College, University of Oxford), Daniel Dennett (professor of philosophy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA), Sam Harris (philosophy graduate, neuroscience doctoral student), Christopher Hitchens (author, journalist, literary critic), Nicholas Humphrey (psychology, school professor at LSE), Steve Jones (professor of genetics, University College, London University), Colin Blakemore (professor of neuroscience, Oxford University), Steven Pinker (professor, Harvard University, language, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology), Lewis Wolpert (professor of biology, University College, London University), A.C. (Anthony) Gayling (professor of philosophy, Birkbeck College, London University), Martin Amis (novelist, essayist, short story writer), Polly Toynbee (journalist, writer, Guardian columnist), Ian McEwan (author, screenwriter), Colin Blakemore (professor of neuroscience, Oxford University), Sam Harris (philosophy graduate, neuroscience doctoral student), Christopher Hitchens (author, journalist, literary critic), and TV celebrity presenters such as Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand.

Dawkins is not the only one to have written an atheist tract. Of a large number of books, we can particularly mention Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*¹² and Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*.¹³ As Krish Kandiah has written, "if you want to write a best selling non fiction book at the moment it needs to be an angry atheistic

rant.”¹⁴ The new atheists have hit on an effective way of boosting their pension funds. There is serious money to be made by the gifted atheist evangelist.

The Myth of Neutrality

There is no place of neutrality in God’s world. There is no neutral science. Science is always embedded in a worldview. That worldview is the expression of a philosophical view of reality. The dominant philosophy today is ??

The media figures we have mentioned above describe themselves as atheists. That is actually decidedly unhelpful because atheism is rather like vegetarianism: it tells us what people *don’t* believe, but not what they *do* believe. Many atheists are actually **materialists**. A few are non-materialists who believe, *e.g.*, that teleology (purposeful design) is an inbuilt feature of the universe. If someone says they are an atheist, we need to interrogate them to discover what they actually believe is ultimate reality. What *kind* of secularist are they?

Rumbling materialism

The new atheist materialists believe that *physical nature* is all there is – that ultimately only matter and energy are real. There is no immaterial realm beyond physical detection; in other words there is no spirit, soul, angels or gods. There is no intelligence, design or purpose behind, or at work in the universe.

Whereas a Christian or Muslim is assumed to be (religiously) biased with all the opprobrium that carries in our society today, the secular materialist will claim the objectivity of modern science and portray an image of religious neutrality and sweet liberalism. In its hiddenness, the religion becomes all the more persuasive and seductive – and, we suggest, all the more dangerous.

Materialism and Materialism

Materialism has two common meanings which are very closely related:

- physical nature is all there is;
- enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

If the material world is all there is then the enjoyment of material things is the best that any one can hope for in this fleeting life.

Consumerism is a visible cultural/social expression of the hidden belief in philosophical materialism. This is absolutely crucial. Discerning and countering the impact of consumerism on our societies and churches will be ineffective unless we also unmask and subvert the influence of philosophical materialism.

Is there nothing credulous about materialism? Nothing dangerous?

Interrogating materialism

Two famous quotes from Richard Dawkins:

"We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes." ¹⁵

"The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference ... DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music." ¹⁶

Or as John Lennon famously put it ¹⁷:

"Above us only sky"

So here we have it: scientists who argue:

- that humans do not differ in any essential way from animals – from apes, snakes, fish or bacteria;
- that there is no free will;
- that we are wholly determined by our biology. We may think we are free, but 'really' we do what we are determined to do and can do no other.

Does materialism matter? Or, how dangerous is it?

Consider the following examples:

Dr Eric Pianka – "We're no better than bacteria"

Known as 'Dr Doom', Dr Pianka, a Professor of Zoology at the University of Texas, USA, is a committed, practising materialist. As a materialist, he believes that people have no more value than bacteria, or any other living organism. They are all equal in that they are all random, unplanned artefacts of the evolutionary process.

Dr Pianka was the 2006 Distinguished Texas Scientist. In his speech to the Texas Academy of Science on 3^d March 2006, *The Vanishing Book of Life on Earth*, he argued that there are too many people in the world and that we are having a very detrimental effect on the global ecology. ¹⁸ He believes that the human population needs to be reduced by 90%. War and famine may do it, but are too slow; something like an *Ebola* plague (*Ebola* is a flesh-dissolving virus) would be ideal. He was not, of course, suggesting that anyone should go out and spread *Ebola*, but the stark difference between Christian and materialist morality is clear. Worldviews matter.

What questions would you put to an atheist friend?

Materialists like Professor Pianka reason that all organisms begin as cells; that cells are only complex chemistry; and that any particular chemical complex is essentially the

same as any other. In other words, we have the Darwinian assumption that humans have no special value.

This is the critical worldview assumption at work in debates over cloning, stem cells and animal-human hybrids. We can't stop to explore those topics here, but any time you discuss those issues, make sure your worldview-sensing antennae are in action.

Richard Dawkins – Beating Basil Fawlty's Car

How many of you have enjoyed the comedy series *Fawlty Towers*? John Cleese plays the hotel manager Basil Fawlty brilliantly. In one episode Basil's car breaks down and after ordering it to start several times without response, Basil takes a tree branch and starts beating the car! We laugh, but when Richard Dawkins refers to this episode, he is serious. This is how Dawkins puts the point himself:

"When a computer malfunctions, we do not punish it. We track down the problem and fix it, usually by replacing a damaged component, either in hardware or software. ... Why do we not react in the same way to a defective man: a murderer, say, or a rapist? ... Isn't the murderer or the rapist just a machine with a defective component? Or a defective upbringing? Defective education? Defective genes? ... doesn't a truly scientific, mechanistic view of the nervous system make nonsense of the very idea of responsibility, whether diminished or not? Any crime, however heinous, is in principle to be blamed on antecedent conditions acting through the accused's physiology, heredity and environment. Don't judicial hearings to decide questions of blame or diminished responsibility make as little sense for a faulty man as for a Fawlty car? Why is it that we humans find it almost impossible to accept such conclusions? Why do we vent such visceral hatred on child murderers, or on thuggish vandals, when we should simply regard them as faulty units that need fixing or replacing?"¹⁹

Does that final comment ('fixing or replacing') sound as chilling to you as it does to us?

Dawkins is being completely logical here – if materialism is true then ideas of design, purpose and responsibility are untenable. Moral language makes no sense in the materialist universe. Moral statements (murder is wrong) are completely meaningless. In this sense moral language is identical to assertions about tooth fairies and leprechauns. They hook on to nothing. At the end of the day there are simply animals that are struggling to survive. Nature is blind and pitiless.

Darkness at Noon²⁰

Darkness at Noon is the most famous novel of the Hungarian-born British author, Arthur Koestler (1905-1983). First published in 1940, it tells the tale of Rubashov, an old guard Bolshevik who is first cast out and then imprisoned and tried for treason by the Soviet government he once helped to create. In one scene an interrogator – Ivanov – cheerfully admits to Rubashov that all they were doing was experimenting with human life:

"Every year several million people are killed quite pointlessly by epidemics and other natural catastrophes. And we should shrink from sacrificing a few hundred thousand for the most promising experiment in history? Nature is generous in her senseless experiments on mankind. Why should mankind not have the right to experiment on itself?"

It is a stark reminder that once God is removed from the picture there is no alternative to the conclusion that everything is permitted, even mass murder. Interestingly Koestler portrays Rubashov as struggling to express his revulsion, but he cannot find the words. He can't say that *it isn't right*, or that *it is evil*, in the world of atheistic materialism that vocabulary is no longer available.

No Country for Old Men ²¹

We would not encourage anyone to watch this film because of its gratuitous violence, but it does provide another illustration of the moral problem facing the materialist. The Oscar-winning film attempts a realistic portrayal of the despair of the drug culture and follows the bloody exploits of a mass murderer.

At the end of the film the mass murderer, Anton [Chigurh], has achieved his goal of tracking down money from a drug payment and he then senselessly goes to assassinate Carla [Jean Moss], the wife of a person who got in his way. He has already murdered her husband and he wants to kill her just because he told the husband he would kill her. In this eerie scene Anton is sitting in her house flipping a coin. Apparently he is willing to kill just about anyone who gets in his way even those not directly involved in stopping him. When confronted with this kind of situation he flips a coin to decide if he should murder the individual. In this scene Carla asks him why he does this and he strongly suggests it is because he is a "chance-built creature." Here is the dialogue.

Carla: You don't have to do this.
Anton: [smiles] People always say the same thing.
Carla: What do they say?
Anton: They say, "You don't have to do this."
Carla: You don't.
Anton: Okay.
[He flips a coin and covers it with his hand]
Anton: This is the best I can do. Call it.
Carla: I knowed you was crazy when I saw you sitting there. I knowed exactly what was in store for me.
Anton: Call it.
Carla: No. I ain't gonna call it.
Anton: Call it.
Carla: The coin don't have no say. It's just you.
Anton: Well, I got here the same way the coin did.

This is certainly a good demonstration of how an individual can be influenced by the vacuous, ethics-extracting, survival of the fittest mentality to the point where he becomes a vicious bloodthirsty animal.

So far we have looked at only film and theory. Does it influence people in the real world?

Genocide in South West Africa

Many people do not know that the first genocide of the 20th century occurred in German South-West Africa (present day Namibia).²² On January 12, 1904, the Herero tribe under its leader Samuel Maharero rebelled against German colonial rule. They were aggrieved that a great deal of their tribal lands had been stolen by German settlers. Strikingly the Herero soldiers obeyed the terms and conditions of the Geneva Convention.²³ German missionaries, women and children were not harmed. In August of the same year the German General Lotha von Trotha (1848-1920) defeated the Herero army at the battle of Waterburg. Callously von Trotha drove the Hereros into the desert of Omahake where many of the Herero combatants died of thirst. The German soldiers were ordered to poison all the water-holes in the region.

General von Trotha issued an "annihilation order" that was later to become infamous.

"I, the great general of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero people... All Hereros must leave this land... Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children; I will drive them back to their people or have them fired upon. This is my decision for the Herero people."

The German army was instructed to take no prisoners and to do nothing for the remaining women and children. Many of them were either shot or abandoned in the desert. The Herero population, which in 1904 had numbered about 80,000 people, had been reduced to fewer than 20,000 one year later.

In a series of newspaper articles General von Trotha defended his brutal treatment of the Herero people by appealing to the Darwinian worldview. He stated that this was a 'racial war' waged against a people 'in decline'. He asserted that in this struggle, the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest proved to be a more realistic guide than international law. Further to this the German Empire defended its military conduct on the world stage by arguing that the Herero could not be protected under the terms of the Geneva Convention because they were not true humans, but "sub-humans".

It goes without saying that the Geneva Convention presupposes a biblical view of a person. All people are created in the image of God and soldiers must respect this human dignity. Darwinism radically rejects this Christian mindset.

The Columbine Killers

Eric David Harris (1981-1999) was one of the two boys (the other was Dylan Klebold) who shot 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School, Colorado, USA on 20th April 1999.

He wrote the following in one of his notebooks:

“just because your mommy and daddy tell you blood and violence is bad, you think it’s a f—g law of nature? wrong, only science and math are true, everything else, and I mean every f—g thing else is man made.” ²⁴

The connection should be clear by now. Eric Harris was living out the materialist worldview. He understood its complete moral bankruptcy. If materialism is true then everything else that seems to matter is a fiction. It is a tooth fairy. We may wish to believe it (being good and kind) but in reality it is a fairy tale. Maybe ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are just names we give to whatever causes sensations of pain or pleasure? But whatever the materialist explanation, the logic is clear: if only maths and science are true then anything goes! This includes deliberate, cold-blooded murder.

Where – how – did Eric learn all this? No teacher or media commentator *deliberately* taught it to him. But they taught it nevertheless. What we must see is that education and the media are never neutral. When you evict the Christian worldview and values, you are not left with neutrality. You cannot avoid importing another worldview and its values. Whether by intention or unawares, a secular, materialist worldview and values have come to dominate education and the media. How many more will absorb the materialism and conclude that truth and morality are just some people’s subjective opinions that they can choose to accept or reject? If we blame people for absorbing that worldview and acting according to its values, should we not blame far more those who have actively promoted that worldview? And aren’t those who know the truth, but have failed to witness to the truth the most guilty of all?

Serial Killer, Jeffrey Dahmer

Then there was **Jeffrey Dahmer** (1960-1994), an American serial killer who murdered and dismembered 17 young men and boys, in some cases eating parts of their body. This is what his father, Lionel reported in a 2004 interview:

“He felt that he was up – up from the slime, as he put it. You know, molecules to amoebas to Larry type of a thing, evolution. That there was nothing, no direction by a god. No one to be accountable to. No one to answer to at all.” ²⁵

And if you still think that cannibalism is something that happened only ‘way back then’ or ‘way over there’ then remember the ‘German cannibal’, **Armin Meiwes** (b. 1961), who, in Rotenburg in 2001, killed and ate a man he met through a website. A disturbing case of consensual cannibalism. ²⁶

In Finland we have had two school massacres in the space of a year. ²⁷ On 07 November 2007 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen killed eight people at Jokela High School. On 23 September 2008, 22-year-old Matti Saari killed ten people at Kauhajoki College in an apparent carbon copy action. Both gunmen shot themselves and died in hospital. On his internet blog, Auvinen had appealed to Dawin and Nietzsche to justify his actions:

“humanity is overrated.”

“its time to put natural selection and survival of the fittest back on the tracks.”

"I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection."

"I am the law, judge and executioner. There is no higher authority than me."

The almost universal response has been to condemn these tragedies as the cowardly work of single, sick, irrational individuals. But what if it is true that only physical nature exists? What if it is not possible to speak about purpose, goodness and wickedness? What if evil is an illusion? What if, at the end of the day, we are simply animals that are struggling to survive? What if Nature really is utterly indifferent to our concerns? Who is irrational then? Very plausibly these are people who not only absorbed the materialism in the curricula and the media, but actually believed it and acted accordingly. Surprisingly it is the new atheists who appear not to believe their own message.

Atheists find it very difficult to accept – to believe – what it would *really* mean to be in a godless world.

Dawkins' concluding words in the first edition (1976) of his *The Selfish Gene* were as follows:

"We have at least the mental equipment to foster our long-term selfish interests rather than merely our short-term selfish interests. We can see the long-term benefits of participating in a 'conspiracy of doves', and we can sit down together and discuss ways of making the conspiracy work. We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism – something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We alone on earth can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators." ²⁸

This is an extraordinary claim. Here we have both the hard, scientific, determinist Richard Dawkins ("We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines"), and in tension with it, the soft, mystical, even magical Richard Dawkins who still believes in a tooth fairy ("we have the power to turn against our creators"). On the basis of his materialism, how can Dawkins – just a complicated chemical machine – rebel against his materialistic conditioning? And even if he could, how ever could he know that he had been successful? Or even know that he was 'rebellious'? And if materialism is the truth, then why should we rebel? Why should we care?

Try as they may, these atheists cannot bring themselves to face a truly godless world. What Dawkins is articulating is the legacy of Christianity: that humans are separate from the natural world, called to rule the world and choose their destiny. But he is doing so without the Christian warrant, and without the Christian realism that humans are incorrigibly flawed. ²⁹

The new atheists are really half-hearted atheists. They insist on wearing Christian clothes and won't face the naked cold of a truly godless world. Theirs is a sentimental atheism, a hodge-podge of Christian leftovers.³⁰ Their materialist worldview is parasitic on a Christian worldview. They borrow crucial concepts of personhood, rationality and morality that do not belong in a materialist universe. They burgle the Christian house, steal its treasures and then launch an attack on the Christian worldview that can gain them entry only if those stolen gems are real. The trouble (for the atheist) is that once inside a Christian world, they are powerless. As Christians we must not (to use a cricketer's metaphor) go defensively onto the back foot as if they have real power, but go onto the front foot and call their bluff. If their worldview is true, then what do we teach the children? The trouble is that children will absorb the implicit worldview anyway, and a few will live and act as if it is true.

How can the atheist disprove God's existence by asserting that evil exists when atheism does not permit a belief in evil? While atheists may live morally upright lives, their atheism does not provide any basis for the justification of moral beliefs, or any reason to condemn immoral actions, however heinous.

How Do We Respond

Jesus told stories (parables) and he asked provocative questions. We can follow the master

- telling stories that unmask and challenge secular faiths.
- asking subversive questions that expose and undermine hidden secular assumptions.

Story-telling is a great place to begin. Tell your friends and colleagues about Eric Harris and Jeffrey Dahmer. Point out graciously that both men had been indoctrinated into a materialist worldview. Do they really want to believe in a worldview that leads to moral melt-down? If we only believe in 'what can be proven by science' how will soldiers behave in the raw horror of war? Will we follow in the footsteps of General von Lothar and in the name of science kill innocent women and children? Or will we follow in the footsteps of the Herero tribe who in 1904 refused to kill innocent non-combatants? Such stories both challenge idolatry and reveal a God of love and mercy.

We can also ask subversive questions about 'reason'. Often atheists claim to be 'rational'. They are on the side of evidence and science. Graciously and tenderly challenge this presumption.

How can 'reason' - their beloved reason - exist in a universe that is purely physical? In a godless universe rationality is just a few electrons colliding. A chemical reaction.

If Richard Dawkins is correct, then reason is illusory because chemical (robot) machines do not have the freedom to be rational. Rationality presupposes that we can choose between two sides of the argument. We must be free to choose the position that is supported logically (rationally!) by the evidence. But in a deterministic universe this freedom must be illusory and so too is rationality. We choose our conclusions because this 'choice' has been programmed by our selfish genes. We believe what we believe because that is how we are hard wired to respond by natural selection. And if

that is so why should anyone believe anything we say? Given the new atheists' worldview why should anyone listen to them?

It is popular today to regard religious believers as bigots. They are the 'irrational believers' who must face the music. On the contrary it is materialism that has the really hard questions to answer. If materialism is true then it is a position of despair in which none of my beliefs can be affirmed as true, or anyone else's denied as false. We would have no good reason to believe anything at all, even that 'we' exist.

Christian truth can be presented, without embarrassment, in the public realm. But in a time when materialists have grown accustomed to their position being regarded as neutral and (religiously) unbiased, we must also expose and critique the implications of a godless world. In the words of the apostle Paul with which we began:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.

(2 Corinthians 10:5)

© Arthur Jones, November 2009

ARTHUR JONES BSc, MEd, PhD, CBiol, MIBiol is Senior Tutor at WYSOCS (see page 12 below) and Co-Director (with Mark Roques) of the *Reality Bites* programme. He is the Chair of the Association of Christian Teachers (<http://www.christian-teachers.org.uk/>) and Course Leader for the Stapleford Centre postgraduate distance-learning course *Faith in Schools* (<http://www.e-stapleford.co.uk/>). A teaching career spanning more than 30 years included ten years in India and Nepal, and the headship of a pioneering Christian school in Bristol. His doctorate in biology was for an historical, philosophical and scientific analysis of models of origins, which examined the central role of metaphysical commitments in science. He is the author of *Science in Faith: A Christian Perspective on Teaching Science* and *No Home & Alone: A School Programme on Homelessness*.

References

[All Web links were last checked on 19 February 2009]

1 Also 1 Peter 3:15 "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

2 Michael Reiss, Science lessons should tackle creationism and intelligent design, *Guardian* science blog, 11 September 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/sep/11/michael.reiss.creationism>) Reiss has held these views for many years – see Leslie S. Jones & Michael J. Reiss (eds), *Teaching About Scientific Origins: taking account of creationism*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007

- 3 Robin McKie, Creationism call divides Royal Society, *Observer*, 14 September 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/sep/14/religion>)
- 4 Harry Kroto, Blinded by a divine light, *Guardian*, Sunday 28 September 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/sep/28/religion>) It would be hard to find a better example of anti-religious bigotry for senior school students to critique!
- 5 BBC, Nurse suspended for prayæ offer, BBC News, 01 February 2009 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7863699.stm>)
- 6 Ruth Gledhill, Victory for suspended Christian nurse, *Times*, 07 February 2009 (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5675452.ece>)
- 7 North Somerset Primary Care Trust, Revised Statement Re Caroline Petrie, posted 03 February 2009 (http://www.northsomerset.nhs.uk/Publications/Press_releases/071%20Revised%20Caroline%20Petrie%20Statement.pdf)
- 8 Terence Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God: the struggle for the mind* London: SPCK, 2005. Cf. C. John Sommerville, *The Decline of the Secular University*, OUP, 2006; Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* Princeton UP, 2005; James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: religion and public education in a multicultural America*, New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1999; Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: rethinking a national dilemma*, University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- 9 See the research of Dr David Voas, reported at: http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/the_edge/issue19/churches.aspx
- 10 Arthur Jones & Mark Roques, *Developing a Strategic Response to Secular Hostility*, 2008 (available from jyotijon@globalnet.co.uk)
- 11 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, 2006
- 12 Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Alfred Knopf, 2006
- 13 Christopher Hitchens, *god is Not Great: how religion poisons everything*, Twelve Publishing, 2007
- 14 Krish Kandiah, <http://krishk.wordpress.com/2007/08/31/evangelical-reality-god-is-not-great-letter-to-a-christian-nation-god-delusion/>, posted 31/08/2007. Krish is an Executive Director of the *Evangelical Alliance*.
- 15 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1989, 2nd edn, page v.
- 16 Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: a Darwinian view of life*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995, page 133
- 17 Here are the opening lines of John Lennon's *Imagine* (1971)

Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us

Above us only sky

For the lyrics see: <http://www.lyrics007.com/print.php?id=TWpjd01qQXo>. This is not a “powerful plea for world peace” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_\(album\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_(album))), but seductive atheist propaganda.

18 Eric R. Pianka, *The Vanishing Book of Life on Earth*, <http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~varanus/Vanishing.Book.text.pdf> See also the Wikipedia article on the controversy over Pianka's remarks, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mims-Pianka_controversy

19 Richard Dawkins, “Let's all stop beating Basil's car”, *The Edge Annual Question 2006*, ‘What is your dangerous idea’, www.edge.org/q2006/q06_9.html#dawkins

20 Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, London: Vintage Books, 2005 (Jonathan Cape, 1940) The quote is from *The Second Hearing*, page 131.

21 *No Country for Old Men* is a 2005 novel by American author Cormac McCarthy that was turned into a film by Joel and Ethan Coen, starring Tommy Lee Jones (as Sheriff Ed Tom Bell), Josh Brolin (as Vietnam veteran Llewelyn Moss), Javier Bardem (as Anton Chigurh) and Kelly Macdonald (as Carla Jean Moss). See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Country_for_Old_Men_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Country_for_Old_Men_(film))

22 On the Herero genocide see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herero_and_Namaqua_Genocide

23 The *First Geneva Convention*, on the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war, was adopted in 1864. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Conventions

24 Eric Harris, www.verumserum.com/?p=415

25 Lionel Dahmer, 17 June 2004 interview on *Larry King Live*, CNN, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/040617/lkl.00.html>

26 BBC News report on Armin Meiwes <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3286721.stm>

27 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jokela_school_shooting and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kauhajoki_school_shooting

28 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd edn, OUP, 1989, pages 200-201.

29 The contradiction is thoroughly dissected by John Gray (Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics) in *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002). See also Exposing the Myth of Secularism, *New Statesman*, 03 January 2003, <http://www.theologyweb.com/campus/archive/index.php/t-2843.html>

30 See Douglas Wilson, *Letter from a Christian Citizen*, Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2007. His debate with Christopher Hitchens, *Is Christianity Good for the World?* (Canon Press, 2008) contains a similar exposé.

Bibliography

On Worldviews

- Julian Hardyman, *Maximum Life: all for the glory of God* (IVP, 2009, 2nd edn, ISBN: 978-1-84474-378-0; 1st edn: *Glory Days: living the whole of your life for Jesus*, IVP, 2006) [Introductory – if you know nothing about worldviews]
- Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the biblical story* (SPCK, 2006, ISBN: 978-0-281-05740-5)
- Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen, *Living at the Cross Roads: an introduction to Christian worldview* (SPCK, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-28105-886-0)
- J. Mark Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview: learning to think, live and speak in this world* (Crossway, 2007, ISBN: 978-1-58134-934-4)

On the New Atheists

- David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its scientific pretensions* (Crown Forum, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-307-39626-6)
- Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind* (HarperOne, 2007, ISBN: 978-0-06-133529-7)
- Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists: The dangerous rise of the secular fundamentalist* (Continuum, 2008, ISBN: 978-1-84706-289-5)
- Christopher Hitchens & Douglas Wilson, *Is Christianity Good for the World?: a debate* (Canon Press, 2008, ISBN: 978-1-59128-053-8)
- John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?* (Lion, 2007, ISBN: 978-07459-5303-8)
- Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins* (Lion, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-7459-5330-4)
- Douglas Wilson, *Letter from a Christian Citizen: a response to Letter to a Christian Nation by Sam Harris* (American Vision, 2007, ISBN: 978-0-915815-75-3)

© Dr Arthur Jones, November 2009

Arthur Jones: T: 01457 764331, E: vyotijon@globalnet.co.uk
Reality Bites: www.realitybites.org.uk and www.markroques.com

Mark Roques has some excellent humorous and subversive podcasts on his website. They include pops at Augustine scientism, consumerism and emotivism in an accessible and amusing way. Catch them at <http://www.markroques.com/pod.html> and also at <http://www.realitybites.org.uk/podcasts.php>

ARTHUR JONES BSc, MEd, PhD, CBiol, MSB is Chair of the Association of Christian Teachers (<http://www.christian-teachers.org.uk/>) and Course Leader for the Stapleford Centre postgraduate distance-learning course *Faith in Schools* (<http://www.e-stapleford.co.uk/>). A teaching career spanning more than 30 years included ten years in India and Nepal, and the headship of a pioneering Christian school in Bristol. His biology doctorate was an historical, philosophical and scientific analysis of models of origins, which examined the central role of metaphysical commitments in science. He is the author of *Science in Faith: a Christian perspective on teaching science* and *No Home & Alone: a school programme on homelessness*.