



*As atheism waxes and wanes worldwide – mostly waxes, lately – what should Christians do?*

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As numbers go, atheists have much to celebrate. The number of Britons signing up for de-baptism certificates is now over 100,000. One Gallup poll shows a doubling of Americans claiming no religion, a category including but not limited to atheists, over the last two decades. Estonia, the Czech Republic and Sweden have high concentrations of atheists. In Canada the last major census showed those citizens claiming “no religious affiliation” growing by 44.2 percent. There are now over 100 organizations that promote atheism globally, especially on university campuses.

Atheism is also making a splash publicly. The star here is, of course, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion* (2006), a former Oxford professor and celebrated science writer. Dawkins is often joined on the campaign trail by other celebrity atheists Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and the controversial Christopher Hitchens, author of *God is Not Great*, now battling cancer. These “four horsemen of the atheist apocalypse” represent a dogmatic and strident new atheism. It is a “take no prisoners” and “no holds barred” approach.

The stridency is evident in several ways. First, atheists have started a campaign to advertise their ideology on buses. This is the brainchild of British comedian Ariane Sherine, funded in part by Dawkins. Buses in the United Kingdom bore signs that read: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” American atheists used this slogan: “Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness’ sake.” The Italian atheists chose this message: “The bad news is that God does not exist. The good news is that you don’t need him.”

A more disturbing signal of atheist hubris lies in the notorious “blasphemy challenge” campaign started in 2006 by the Rational Response Squad. It involves inviting atheists to post a video on YouTube that blasphemes the Holy Spirit. The Squad gives this instruction: “You may damn yourself to Hell however you would like, but somewhere in your video you must say this phrase: ‘I deny the Holy

Spirit.’” They even add this ironic note: “This is a one-way road you’re taking here.” Video responses are full of swearing, curses and mockery.

Granted, atheists are also having internal struggles. Paul Kurtz was recently ousted by other atheists from his own Center for Inquiry and its related organizations, including the Council for Secular Humanism. As well, Richard Dawkins’ reputation has suffered enormously because of nasty internal squabbles over a forum shutdown in his charitable foundation. Dawkins also just launched legal action against Josh Timonen, his long-time assistant, who ran the foundation website and store. Timonen calls the lawsuit “completely ridiculous” and claims that it represents “the ultimate betrayal.”

Christians who seek to engage atheism face crucial intellectual and spiritual issues. First, the success of the new atheism is daunting. Given this, Christian apologetics (from the Greek word for defence) has become more important than ever. Thankfully, there are great scholars who meet atheism head on – including Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne.

Second, Christians must keep to the high paths of tolerance, wisdom and love as atheists increasingly do the opposite. As a tangent, their nasty internal squabbles are proof of the truth of the Christian view of humanity’s sin. Of course, Christians need to remember that we have our own internal squabbles – and that atheists have often been on the receiving end of intolerance through history.

Third, Christians have to avoid overstating their case or minimizing problems in Scripture, theology and lifestyle. Apologetics runs the risk of over-emphasis on rationality. After all, we walk by faith, not by sight. Our ultimate grounding involves trust in Christ, not human wisdom or reason.

Here the fideistic (faith-related) emphasis in Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Lev Shestov (1866-1938) and Karl Barth (1886-1968) is important. Pascal carried a note with him everywhere that read: “Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars.” Shestov wrote: “To find God one must tear oneself away from the seductions of reason, with all its physical and moral constraints, and go to another source of truth. In Scripture this source bears the enigmatic name *faith*, which is that dimension of thought where truth abandons itself fearlessly and joyously to the entire disposition of the Creator.”

Carl Becker, the famous historian of ideas, describes the rise of atheism this way: “It has taken eight centuries to replace the conception of existence as divinely composed and purposeful drama by the conception of existence as a blindly running flux of disintegrating energy.” While atheists celebrate this change, even in today’s climate of opinion it reads like a distressing course, streaked with darkness and decay. The Christian is under obligation to bring some light and life. It is a wonderful opportunity.