

Not Good News: The Problem With The New Atheism

Chapel Talk at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, 7-8

For the past couple of years, I, as many of you, have been intrigued by the revival of a militant form of atheism. People like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are not just wearing the shoes of the village atheist. They are pushing their assault against believers to a new level. In the name of science Genesis is not only dismissed in favor of Darwin, but it is now asserted that people of faith should be restrained by cultural pressures from promoting their world view; and, definitely, they should not be encouraged to teach ‘the faith’ to their children. (Incidentally, on that latter point, I hardly ever encountered a person in Russia who, after speaking about coming to faith, noted that there was always someone in their lives [a grandmother!] who remembered the old ways. “You know,” they would say, “there is another perspective on things than what you are getting in our schools.” Anyway, the bottom line is this: As far as the new atheism is concerned Christian faith is a menace.

Now, I know that most people have a fairly simple response to this challenge. Atheism offers no hope. When it comes in our direction we just let it go by! The idea that life is absurd and we are destined to disappear into a void of nothingness in an uncaring cosmos is not a happy thought. Better to go with the *Purpose Driven Life*. Most people want to believe there is some point to our lives even though they are not sure what it is!

But in the seminary we are expected to do more. We are called to provide plausible reasons for maintaining our most cherished faith.

I do not think we could go far wrong if we took a look again at one reason set forth in our text this morning. To get at it we have to go back to the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. There Paul is calling into question those who make the claim that Christianity must be correlated in style and content with what ancient society considered to be wisdom. Instead Paul claims that it is the testimony of scripture that God chose to reveal himself definitively to humankind in a different way.

You almost get a picture of God masking a cosmic chuckle as Paul quotes the Holy One speaking through his prophet.

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart (1 Cor 1:19).

God is not bound to play by our rules. He did not choose to show his power and glory through what passes for the intellectual fireworks of the age. Instead he chose to pour contempt on that game. He reveals himself through the weakness of his son dying on a cross. As Paul says,

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 22:2).

From the beginning of time this is how God determined to reveal himself (v.7). God's wisdom comes in a different package – not necessarily one which humans admire. Yes, I have to believe that somewhere behind all of his concealment this gives God a quiet sense of pleasure.

So it turns out that God's power and claim is set within a story that highlights weakness. Can this astonishing claim have sufficient power to put to rout some of the current pretensions to wisdom? Indeed I think there is something here that is worth a second look. Why? Because it offers something more to us than just settling for the daily grind of attempting to make a name for ourselves – a goal which death mocks as absurdity. Recently in *Commonweal*, Dennis O'Brien produced a quote from Wittgenstein that I had never noted, "Within Christianity it is as though God says to man; don't act a tragedy." O'Brien goes on to say that the sense of tragedy is not the gospel. This story of one dying in weakness on a cross as a sign of God's committed love for us is a story that ends in good news.

In fact, the idea that God uses weakness to show his hidden power pervades the total biblical narrative. Unlike the saga of the great nations of the ancient Near East, Israel's story does not focus on great military victories and the exploits of courageous men in battle. Rather God's guidance of his people more likely emerges in a woman past the age of being able to bear a child having a child; or the baby Moses being preserved in the papyrus leaves in Egypt – small events that are critical for final outcome. Just as inauspicious as the cross!

And so I think God is laughing today at Dawkins and his crowd. How pathetic are their attempts to dethrone him based on the pretensions of human wisdom? They have entirely missed where true wisdom is to be found. The word of our text today says, 'None of the rulers of this age understood this.' In a seminary of all places, it would be a shame if we missed it as well.

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