
Understanding the Times: How the West Was Lost

July 27, Anno Domini 2009

- 1 By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
- 3 For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
- 4 How shall we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill!
- 6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!

INTRODUCTION

In the twelfth chapter of 1 Chronicles we are given a tribe by tribe account of the men of Israel who gave their support to King David. And with the mention of each tribe there is also a brief description of their preparedness for war. Almost without exception this includes a statement about their weapons and/or their courage.

- Of JUDAH, for instance, it says they were men “bearing shield and spear” (v. 24)
- Of SIMEON, it says that they were “mighty men of valor for war” (v. 25)
- Of EPHRAIM, that they were “mighty men of valor, famous men in their father’ houses” (v. 30)
- Of ZEBULUN, that they were “seasoned troops, equipped for battle with all the weapons of war” (v. 33)
- Of NAPHTALI, that they were “armed with shield and spear” (v. 34)
- Of DAN, that they were “equipped for battle” (v. 35)
- Of ASHER, that they were “seasoned troops ready for battle” (v. 36)

- Of REUBEN, GAD, and the half tribe of MANASSEH, that they were “armed with all the weapons of war” (v. 37)

Things are different, however, when we come to the men of ISSACHAR. They are described as “men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (v. 32).

This is interesting. Their contribution to the defense of Israel was that they understood the times in which they were living and knew what counsel to give in such times.

Such men are always important because history is not static. It doesn’t stand still. If it did, then it would be easy to understand the times. But history moves forward. Things change. We go from one generation to another—from one *age* to another. Nations rise and fall. Economies expand or contract. Social dynamics change. Technology advances. Cultures develop (or devolve). Philosophies come and go. Ideas are in vogue for a season and then are out of fashion.

In order for a nation to survive in changing times, it needs to have a class of wise men who understand the times and know what to do. Israel had such men in the tribe of Issachar. And we read in the book of Esther that King Ahasuerus had his wise men who knew the times and to whom he turned for counsel (Esther 1:13). Daniel was such a wise man—a counselor to four kings: to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, the Babylonians; to Darius the Mede; and to Cyrus the Persian.

The modern church also has a need for such men. And I would submit to you that all of God’s people should seek to have an understanding of the times in which they live if they are going to live faithfully and sing the Lord’s song in a strange and foreign land.

There is a sense in which Christians in America are like ancient Israel in captivity in Babylon. We have not literally been exiled from our land, as Israel was; but we have certainly been exiled from the public square. And this has happened largely because of the triumph of ideas that are antithetical to the gospel. Nearly a hundred years ago, the great Christian leader J. Gresham Machen warned:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.¹



J. Gresham Machen
(1881-1937)

¹ J. Gresham Machen as quoted in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), p. xiii

And this, quite honestly, is where we find ourselves today. The whole collective thought of the nation is controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, make the Christian faith seem to be nothing more than a delusion, a silly superstition, fit for only for the feeble-minded.

Speak of sin and people look at you with a blank stare. Tell people of the glories of Jesus Christ, and they look at you as if you are speaking in an unintelligible language. Speak of objective truth—truth with a capital T, truth that is true for everyone in all times and all places—and they think you’re naïve. Deny the Darwinist version of evolution or affirm the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they look at you in amazement like you’re some knuckle-dragging Neanderthal who has just emerged from his cave. It’s not simply that they *disbelieve* what you believe, but that they *disdain* it. They hold what you believe in contempt, and they hold you in contempt for believing it. And the limits of their tolerance for any public expression of the Christian faith are shrinking.

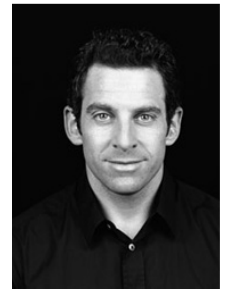
A few quotes from some prominent leaders may help to illustrate what I’m talking about.

Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, says, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (p. 31) He has also said that teaching religion to children is a form of child abuse.



Richard Dawkins
(b. 1941)

Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, likens religion to a form of mental illness which, he says, “allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*.”

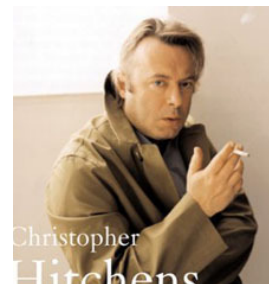


Sam Harris
(b. 1967)

Christopher Hitchens, author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* religion is “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.”

Such views are becoming more widely accepted every day. Their books have all been on the NY Times Best Sellers list. One of the things they each argue for quite vociferously is the exclusion of Christianity from public policy. I’m not quite sure what they are so concerned about, however, because what they advocate is virtually the *de facto* position of current political institutions...

Israel in her captivity sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon when she remembered Zion. So might we lament when we remember the



Christopher Hitchens
(b. 1949)

height from which we have fallen. The West was once predominately Christian; not that everyone was personally committed to Jesus Christ, but that most people had a Christian understanding of the world. This, however, is now far from being true. And so the question is: How did this come to pass? How did we in the West, which once embraced a basically Christian understanding of the world, come to the point where the faith is now not only denied as being true, but is seen to be, at best a silly superstition, and at worst a positive force for evil?

THE BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

Let's start with seeking to understand the basics of the biblical worldview.

The central fact of the biblical worldview is stated in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Here we're given, in one short sentence, a whole truckload of information.

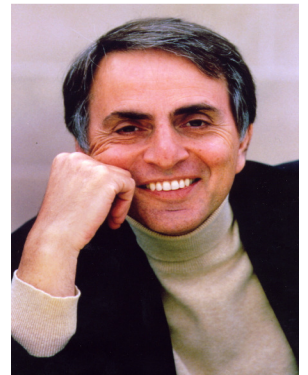
In the first place, we're told of a reality that transcends the physical and material universe. *This is the single most important fact we can know about our world*—that it does not exist in and of itself. It exists only because God wills it so.

Carl Sagan opened his famous Public Television series *Cosmos* with the words, "The Cosmos is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be." Sorry, Mr. Sagan, but that answer is incorrect. Standing over and above the cosmos is the God who made it—the God who existed before the beginning of time—the God who existed from all eternity—the God who possesses the power of existence in and of himself. It is not, "In the beginning was the cosmos..." but, "In the beginning God..."

Before the worlds were formed, before the sun, moon, and stars came into being, before even the basic *stuff* of which all these things are made—before matter and energy existed—there was God, and *only* God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, eternally existing in loving communion with each other.

There was God and nothing else.

We may illustrate it like this. In the following diagram let the box represent everything that exists.



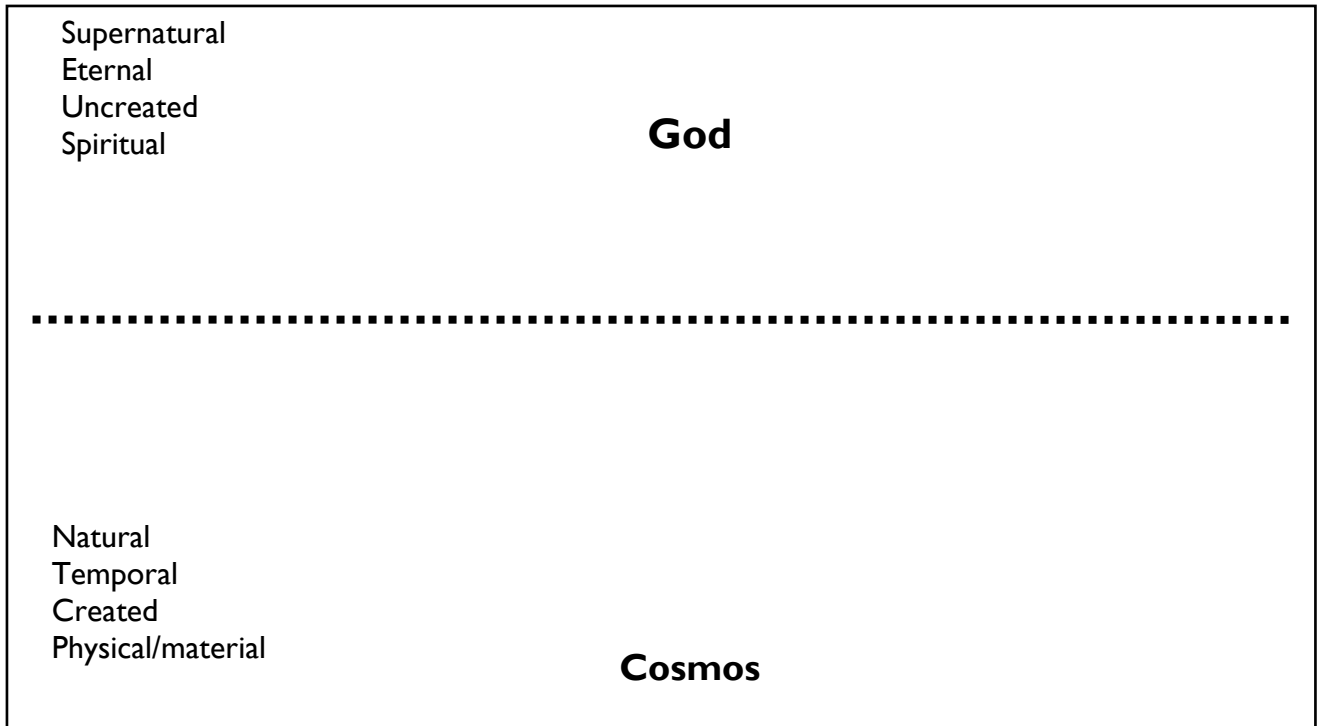
Carl Sagan (1934-1996)

God

There you have it. “In the beginning God...” The central fact that lies at the foundation of all knowledge. “In the beginning God...” The timeless, the eternal, the self-existent God, *and nothing else*. No sun. No moon. No stars. No earth. No matter. No energy. Nothing. Only God. For all eternity past.

And when it pleased him so to do (and for reasons fully known only to himself), he created the cosmos. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

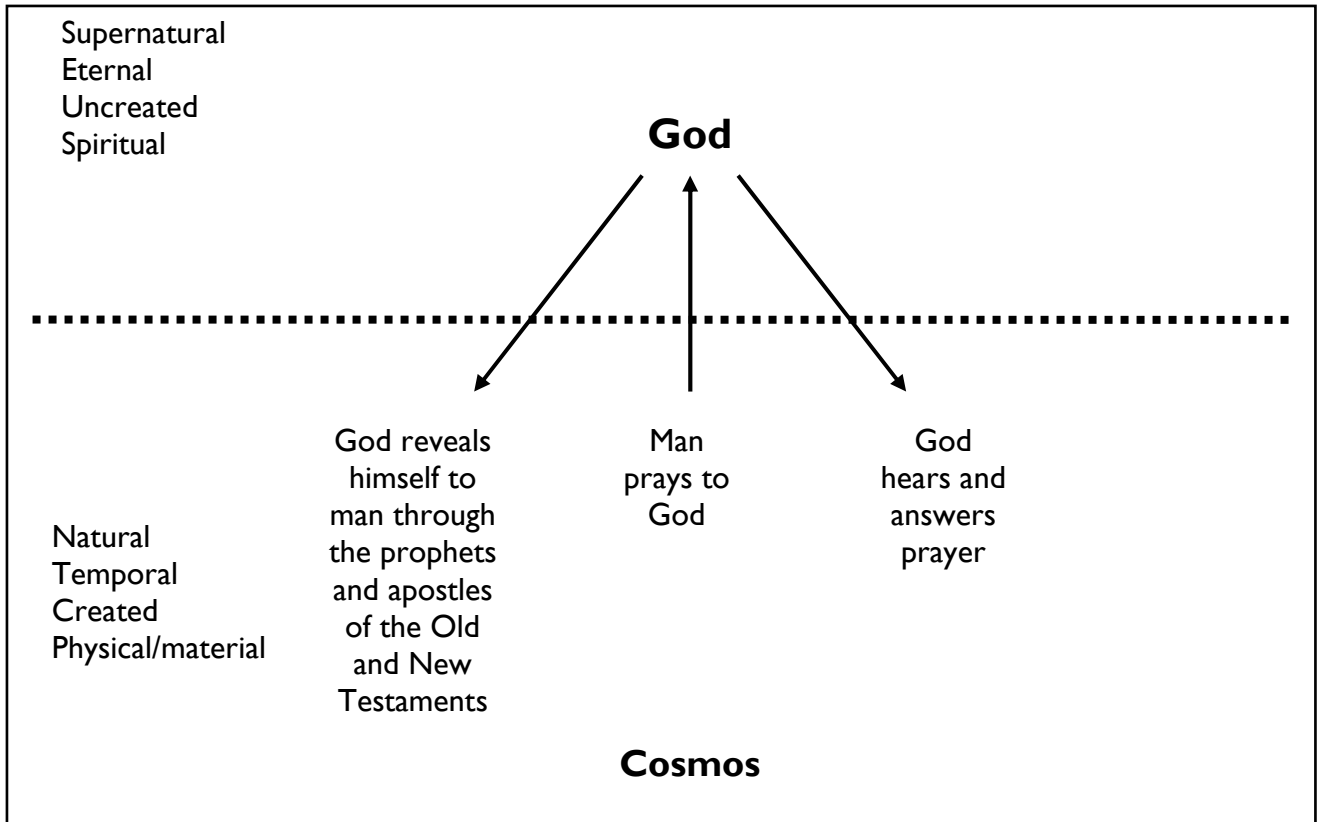
Now we have something new to taken into account, don't we? In addition to the uncreated and eternal God, we now have a temporal physical and material world which came into existence by God's command. We may illustrate it like this:



The dotted line represents the divide between the natural and the supernatural realm, the line of demarcation between the spiritual and material worlds, the line separating that which is created from that which is uncreated.

And because God is the Creator of the cosmos (the universe) he is said to *transcend* it, which simply means that he is above and beyond the universe. He is eternal and uncreated, whereas the cosmos has a beginning and derives its being from God. God is independent of the universe, but the universe is not independent of God. The universe depends upon God for its existence.

That being said, we must be quick to add that though God *transcends* the universe, he is not detached and uninvolved in what goes on in it. He interacts with the world he has made. The greatest interaction came, of course, when God created the universe in the beginning. But even after its creation, he remains actively involved, constantly upholding the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). But it is not just with respect to his creating and preserving the universe, but also in other respects as well that God interacts with the world. This is represented by the dotted line, to show that there is movement (interaction) between the supernatural and natural worlds, between God and the world he has made. We may fill out the illustration a little more fully like this:



There it is in a nutshell, the biblical worldview. In the beginning the Almighty and Eternal God created the heavens and the earth. There is interaction between God and man. There is movement back and forth. God has revealed himself to man. He has spoken to us through the prophets and apostles, and supremely through Jesus Christ.

In 1968 Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled, *The God Who is There* and four years later he wrote a follow-up, which he entitled, *He is There and He is Not Silent*. His point was, God not only exists, but he has spoken to us in the Scriptures. Man can know God because God has revealed himself to man in the Bible. Man can speak to God in prayer and God hears from heaven and answers.

In short (and this is a vitally important point), *the cosmos is **not** a closed system*. This is not news to us. We know this. We take it for granted.

This has been the dominant worldview for much of the history of Western Civilization. And this view of the world has served as the intellectual foundation of the West since the triumph of the Christian faith in the 4th century.

So the question is, how did we move from the predominance of the biblical worldview pictured here to where we are today, living in the midst of an aggressively secular society? Let's try to trace the steps.

THE RENAISSANCE

The seeds of the modern cultural revolt against God were sown during the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a cultural movement in Europe which began in the 14th century and lasted into the 17th. “Renaissance” is a French word meaning *rebirth*, and it refers to the revival of secular learning based on classical sources—the ancient texts of Greek and Roman writers, many of which were being newly rediscovered in Western Europe.

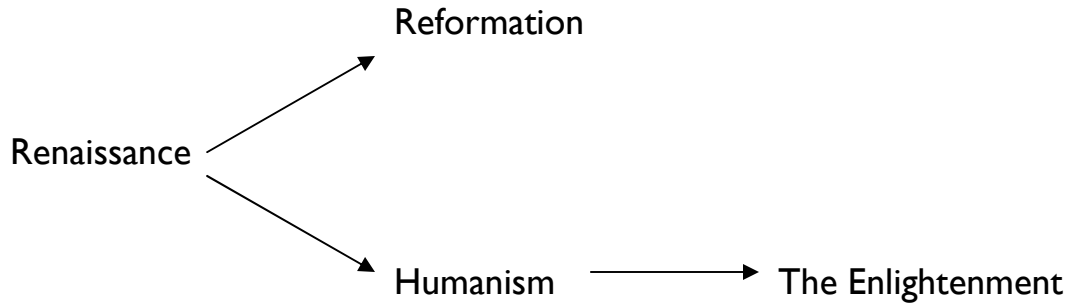
The motto of the Renaissance was *ad fontes*: “to the sources,” i.e., the original sources (the Greek texts of Plato and Aristotle, for instance) and not depending upon Latin translations (which in many cases were themselves based on Arabic translations of the original Greek). The Renaissance can be thought of as a renewed interest in the achievements of the Greeks and Romans brought about by a new availability of their texts. This is sometimes referred to as Renaissance humanism, a celebration of the cultural achievements of the Greeks and Romans.

And it should be noted that this came about at a time when the corruption of the church was reaching new heights, and when the governments of church and state were increasingly intertwined. The church often called upon civil authorities to enforce church judgments. The Pope at times was involved in the crowning of heads of state. The closer one came to the papal court the more pronounced the corruption seemed to be. The power hungry, pleasure seeking Popes of the period were hardly the successors of Peter and the vicars of Christ they claimed to be. The church was increasingly viewed as not only corrupt, but oppressive, and the rot was seen to go all the way to the core. The poet, Dante, for example—himself a devout man and a loyal son of the church—in his famous work entitled *The Divine Comedy*, places several of the Medieval Popes in the lowest recesses of hell. Nepotism, simony, homosexuality, the keeping of mistresses, bribery, political intrigue, assassination, you name it, prominent leaders in the church were involved in it. Not that there were not many faithful servants of God in the church—because there were (God always has his faithful remnant)—but the corruption was very widespread and most entrenched in the highest places. Even modern Roman Catholic historians speak of this.

The stage was set for a reaction against the authority of the church and a more secular approach to life.

The Renaissance made a positive contribution to the church also, because the motto *ad fontes* (“to the sources”) was also applied to the study of Scripture with an emphasis upon the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, and no longer depending upon the Latin Vulgate.

So we have two broad movements stemming from the Renaissance. The first, which took hold primarily in Southern Europe, was Renaissance humanism with its rejection of the authority of the church and of Scripture. The second, which primarily took hold in Northern Europe, was the Protestant Reformation.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The humanistic branch of the Renaissance culminated in the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century. The Enlightenment was a movement in philosophy that very self-consciously turned away from the church and especially away from the concept of divine revelation as a means of coming to a knowledge of the truth. Enlightenment thinkers sought to limit what could be said to be known to what was discoverable by human reason. They extolled the virtue of reason as the final arbiter of all truth.

As Christians, we acknowledge the role of reason in the discovery of truth. We understand that we have the ability to reason because we have been made in the image and likeness of God. Reason is not a bad thing. It's a gift of God; but like all his gifts, it is subject to abuse. And Enlightenment thinkers abused the gift of reason by suggesting that only those truths which could be discovered by reason should be accepted as true.

The most famous Enlightenment thinker was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his famous essay, *What is Enlightenment*, written in 1784, he said,

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is the incapacity to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another... [One should have] the determination and courage to use one's own intelligence without being guided by another.



Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)

In effect, he argued that a man should think autonomously. His thinking should be free from all external authority – that is, all authority outside the authority of his own

reason. *Reason is the thing*, you see—reason independent and free from all authority outside of itself. By authority, he meant the authority of previous thinkers and philosophers. It has always been the case that certain individuals have been accorded the status of “an authority.” Because of their towering intellect or their achievement or their discoveries, certain people have come to be recognized as authorities. And they are believed because of their status as an authority figure.

Kant was saying that true enlightenment consists in the exercise of one’s own reason so as to discover things for one’s self, and not merely receive the opinions of previous thinkers just because they happen to be recognized as authorities. Don’t believe it just because Plato said it; or just because Aristotle said it; or just because *Moses* said; or *Jesus* said it; or *Paul* said it. Things should not be regarded as being true unless you could at least theoretically come to know them by reason alone. At a minimum reason must be able to independently verify something before it is received as being true—this includes the teaching of Scripture. And since there are many things in Scripture which cannot be discovered by reason alone, nor independently verified by reason, one ought not to receive such things as true.

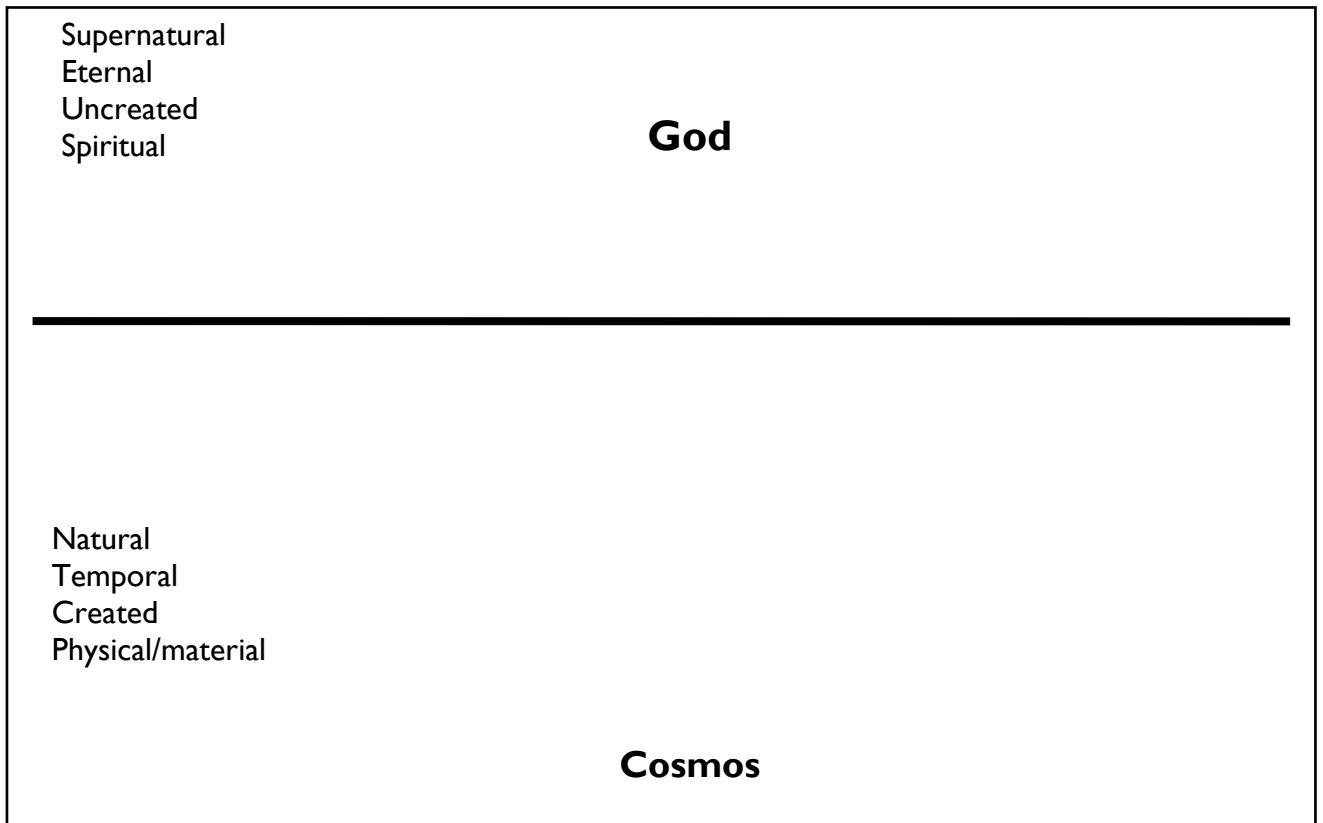
Enlightenment thinkers were not necessarily atheists. Kant himself was not an atheist. Many argued that reason compels belief in God. Some reasoned from effect to cause. The universe is an effect, the only adequate cause of which is a supernatural cause, i.e., God. Others reasoned from design. There must have been a supernatural designer in order to account for the evidence of design we see around us. Kant reasoned from moral experience that there must be a divine law-giver. But in the end, reason is the final arbiter of truth, and only those things which can in principle be discovered by reason ought to be received as true.

Kant’s application of these principles to religion can be summarized in the title of a book he wrote in 1793 entitled, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Think about that title because it’s very significant. It summarizes the whole movement of the Enlightenment with respect to religion: *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

As I have pointed out, Kant was not an atheist. He argued for the existence of God as the only way of explaining moral experience; but he was dismissive of revealed religion in general, and of Christianity in particular. There are too many doctrines in Christianity that cannot be discovered by reason alone: the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection of Christ, the second coming, the resurrection of the body, etc. One cannot arrive at a knowledge of these things by use of reason alone, therefore they will form no part of the religion of an enlightened man, a man of reason.

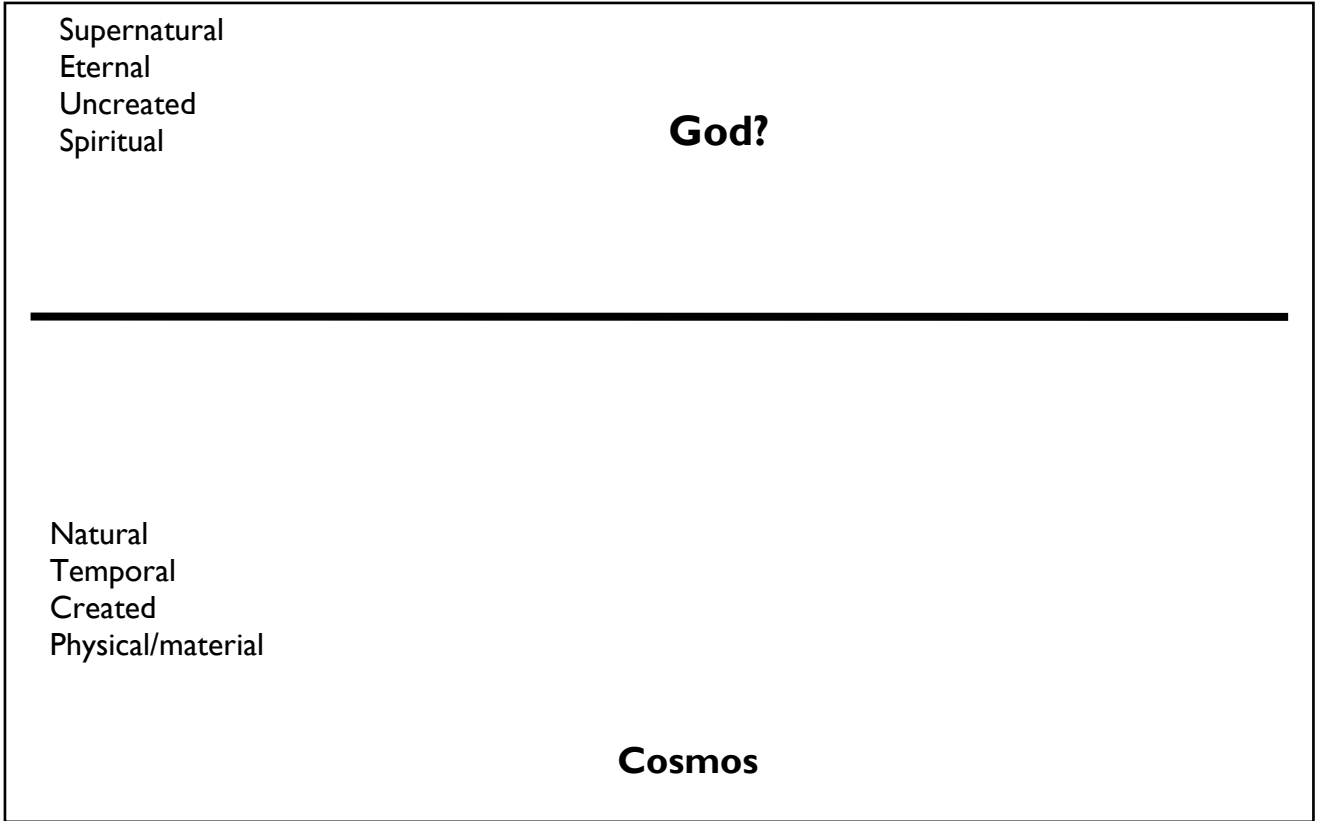
So if we accept the premise of Kant and of Enlightenment thinkers generally, what are we left with? God probably exist, but we are very limited in what we can know about him, because we have very little data that we can accept as providing legitimate information about him.

And so we have something that looks like this:



The dotted line, indicating the distinction between God and the world (and which also indicated the possibility of interaction between God and the world) is replaced by a solid black line, indicating an impenetrable barrier. Gone is God's self-revelation in Scripture. Gone is any confidence in a God who hears and answers prayer. God probably exists. His existence seems to be a rationally necessary idea to explain the existence of the cosmos, but there is no way to gain much information about him, since reason is the sole authority. This view is usually referred to as "Deism."

Deism, however, was quickly followed by skepticism, which is the idea that God perhaps exists and perhaps doesn't; we don't really know because it's outside the ability of reason to determine one way or the other. Note: not only do we *not* know, we *cannot* know. Skeptics didn't deny the theoretical possibility of God's existence, but as a practical matter (they said) we must operate as if he does not exist, because the supernatural realm, if it exists, is unknowable. Some have taken a leap of faith and believed it to exist, but reasonable men, enlightened men, will be very cautious about this. For all practical purposes we must operate as if he does not exist.



Or, more simply, we have this:

Cosmos

And so you see how far we have come. The starting point for a Christian understanding of things is, “In the beginning God...” The starting point for the modern secular understanding of the world is, “In the beginning matter and energy...” Or as Sagan put it, “The cosmos is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be.”

And with the embrace of this assumption comes the enormous task of trying to explain the world without any reference to God, without any appeal to Scripture—to try to give a natural explanation for everything, hence the big bang theory and the theory of evolution.

You will never understand why the theory of evolution is so firmly believed until you understand the premise upon which it is based. Let us be very clear about this. It is not based upon any scientific evidence. It is based upon the philosophical speculation that all there is matter and energy. The theory of evolution, despite the absurdity on the face of it, despite the lack of a single transitional form in the fossil record, despite the inability of scientists to replicate the process in the laboratory, despite having to assume that life arose from non-life by spontaneous generation—despite all of this, the theory of evolution persists as a credible theory in the secular world because it’s the only theory consistent with the underlying premise that all there is is matter and energy. Rule out God at the beginning, and how else are you going to explain things?

This is the world in which we live today. The intellectual world, that is. These are the assumptions which are so widely held that whenever you are talking about something

in the public square—whether it’s morality or law, or education, or the role of the sexes, or human behavior, or psychology, or crime and punishment, or economic theory—whatever it is, unless you give an explanation of it that is consistent with the assumption that all there is is matter and energy, your view is automatically dismissed. An explanation that even hints at a transcendent realm that gives norms for our behavior gets hooted off the stage.

Unless we understand just how pervasive this evolutionary perspective is, and how it affects every area of thought and life, we cannot hope to understand the times in which we live. And if we do not understand the times, we will not know what to do. We will not be prepared to give a credible presentation of the gospel, and the church of Jesus Christ will continue its slide into cultural irrelevance.

Let us strive to be like the men of Issachar, who had an understanding of the times and what Israel should do.