

Understanding the Times: *Is Anybody There?*

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INTRODUCTION & REVIEW

As noted in our last installment, in 1 Chronicles 12 the Bible makes a very interesting statement about the men of Issachar concerning their contribution to the defense of Israel under the reign of King David. It says that they were men who “understood the times” and “knew what Israel was to do”. And I also made the point that we ought to seek to understand the times in which we are living also if we ever hope to live faithfully before God. This is necessary now more than ever before because we live in an increasingly militant secular culture. There is an intense and sustained attack upon any and every public expression of the Christian faith, and especially upon any and every attempt by Christians to influence public policy.

Let me illustrate by giving you a small sample of some of the antichristian tirades published recently.

- *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* by Kevin Phillips.
- *The Baptizing of America: The Religious Right's Plans for the Rest of Us* by James Rudin.
- *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* by Damon Linker.
- *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* by Michelle Goldberg.
- *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* by Randall Balmer.
- *Piety & Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom* by Barry Lynn.
- *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right* by Mel White.
- *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* by Chris Hedges.

Last time I attempted to sketch how the West went from being a predominately *Christian* culture to a predominately *secular* one. Let me briefly retrace the route in three steps: from Christianity to Deism; from Deism to Skepticism; and from Skepticism to Naturalism.

Christianity—He is There and He is Not Silent

In 1968 the Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled, *The God Who is There*; and four years later he wrote a follow-up, *He is There and He is Not Silent*. In other words, God not only exists, but he has spoken to us by the prophets and apostles, and supremely in Jesus Christ.

“He is there and he is not silent.” This is a fitting way to describe the Christian faith against its major rivals in western history. God exists and he has spoken to us in Scripture. This was the dominant view for nearly 1500 years in the western world.

Deism—He is There

As I mentioned last time, with the advent of the so-called Enlightenment in the 18th century came the rise of Deism. Enlightenment thinkers sought to limit what man could legitimately be said to know to what he could discover by reason alone—apart from authority, apart from tradition, and especially apart from Scripture.

Deists argued that the existence of God was a rationally necessary idea: we have to suppose that there is some uncaused cause, some unmoved mover, some Supreme Being who got everything started in the beginning. But this doesn't mean that they thought in distinctively Christian ways about God or about the origin of the universe. The classic illustration of deism is that of a clock-maker who makes a clock and winds it up and then sets it on the shelf and watches it run by its own inherent powers, the springs and the gears doing what they were calibrated to do in order to keep time. Just so (it is said), God made the universe in the beginning, and now he sits back as an observer and watches it run according to the laws of nature which he calibrated in the beginning.

He's there...but that's all. He doesn't speak; he doesn't interact, he's not involved in the world.

I should say that most Deists believed in the immortality of the soul and that the Supreme Being holds people accountable for their actions and that there is a future state of rewards and punishments after death. Consequently, they believed they should lead a

moral and upright life. But again, none of these things were conceived of in a distinctively *Christian* way. The Supreme Being of Deism is not the God of the Bible. The Deistic origin of the world is not the doctrine of creation *a la* Genesis. And while their sense of ethical behavior in many ways mirrored a Christian view of morality, they did not think of the Bible as giving us a divinely revealed law. As in other things they turned to reason and not to the Bible for their foundation of morality.

I remind you of the title of Immanuel Kant's essay, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. This was the goal of the Deists—to limit their religious belief and practice to what they could discover about God by reason alone apart from authority, apart from tradition, and especially apart from the Bible.

Skepticism—We don't know if he's there

In the process of time, people became less and less confident in what reason alone could discover about God. There were so many thinkers saying so many different things about what reason could and could not discover, not only about God, but about everything else as well, that all hope of knowing God by reason was abandoned. All we can really know is what we can see. God may exist; there may be a spiritual realm; but we can't know for sure. All we can really know for sure is what we personally experience in this world. *Maybe* there is another world—some have taken a leap of faith to believe in another world (a spiritual realm)—but all we can really know is what takes place in this world. This is skepticism: not an outright denial of the transcendent realm, not a denial of God, but uncertainty about what's "out there."

If Christianity can be summarized by the statement, *He is there and he is not silent*, and deism can be characterized by the statement, *He is there*, skepticism can be summarized by the statement, *We don't know if he's there*.

Naturalism—He's Not There

In a very short time, however, skepticism gave way to naturalism, which confidently asserts that God is *not* there. Watch the progression:

- I. Christianity—*He is there and he is not silent*
- II. Deism—*He is there*
- III. Skepticism—*We don't know if he's there*
- IV. Naturalism—*He is not there*

Naturalism is the belief that all there is is nature. There is no *super*-nature, i.e., no supernatural or spiritual realm. Sometimes this is called naturalism, and sometimes it's called materialism—the idea that all there is is matter: no god, no soul, no spirit, just matter. Matter is the only reality.

As I mentioned last time, with the embrace of this assumption (that matter is all there is) comes the enormous task of seeking to explain the world without any reference to God and without any appeal to Scripture—to explain everything in the universe (its origin, its progress, and its end), and everything in human experience (including thought, feeling, mind, and will), in terms of physical laws. The sole reality is matter, and everything is simply a manifestation of matter in motion.

Let me try to illustrate the implications of this.

There is a series of questions which every thoughtful and self-reflective person will ask about the world, the answers to which form the basics of his worldview. The first question is, “In the beginning...*what?*” What was here before everything else? In other words, what is the ultimate reality? Philosophical naturalists or materialists say that the ultimate reality is matter.

	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism
In the beginning... <i>what?</i>	Matter

This is the brute fact which stands behind everything else. In the beginning was matter. Remember Carl Sagan’s famous statement. “The Cosmos is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be.” No god, no human soul, no spirit, just matter in motion. This is the ultimate and final reality, *the basic building block upon which the materialist worldview is built.*

The second question that must be asked is, “How do we account for things as they exist today?” The philosophical naturalist says, “By a process of evolution, both cosmological and biological.”

	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism
How do we account for things as they exist today?	Evolution
In the beginning...what?	Matter

The third question is, “*Why* did things develop like they did?” This is the question of purpose. What is the goal? What is the end? What is the purpose? What is the reason things have developed as they did? The philosophical naturalist says, “There is no reason. Things just happened the way they did by chance. Ultimately there is no rhyme or reason to it. Ultimately the existence of the universe is just an accident.

	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism
Why did things develop like they did?	Accident/Chance
How do we account for things as they exist today?	Evolution
In the beginning...what?	Matter

The next question is, “Are there any norms for human behavior?” *Transcendent* norms, that is? Are people *obliged* to live in a certain way? Is there any such thing as right and wrong? The naturalist or materialist says no. There are no transcendent norms for human behavior. How could there be if the ultimate reality is matter?

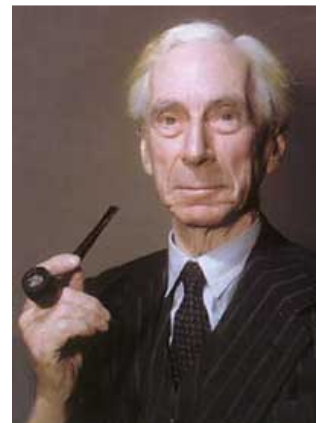
	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism
Norms for human behavior	None
Why did things develop like they did?	Accident/Chance
How do we account for things as they exist today?	Evolution
In the beginning...what?	Matter

The final question concerns how everything ends. What happens? What is our ultimate destination? The naturalist/materialist says it all ends in death. Death for the individual, and death for the universe.

	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism
In the end... <i>what</i>	Man ceases to exist at death; universe itself will also "die"
Norms for human behavior	None
Why did things develop like they did?	Accident/Chance
How do we account for things as they exist today?	Evolution
In the beginning... <i>what?</i>	Matter

Perhaps the best summary of this is to be found in Bertrand Russell's essay, *Why I am NOT a Christian*.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.¹



Bertrand Russell
1872-1970

Contrast this to the biblical answers to these questions:

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am NOT a Christian* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 107

	Naturalism/Materialism/Secularism	Christianity
In the end... <i>what</i>	Man ceases to exist at death; universe itself will also "die"	Soul survives death of the body and lives forever
Norms for human behavior	None	Divine Law
<i>Why</i> did things develop like they did?	Accident/Chance	Divine Purpose
<i>How</i> do we account for things as they exist today?	Evolution	Creation
In the beginning... <i>what?</i>	Matter	God

In the Christian worldview, of course, everything begins with God, *quite literally*. "In the beginning God..." (Gen. 1:1). God is the ultimate reality, the ultimate brute fact.

How do we account for things as they exist today? We account for them, not by an "accidental collocation of atoms," but by an act of divine creation. The heavens and the earth and everything in them were created by God.

This in turn invests everything with meaning and significance. Neither the cosmos itself, nor the individual human being exists by mere chance. Both exist with a divine purpose.

Are there transcendent norms for human behavior? Yes. God has given us a law to obey which is consistent with our nature and the purpose for which he created us.

Furthermore, in the Christian worldview, the soul of man survives the death of the body, and will exist forever.

From beginning to end the secular worldview and the Christian worldview stand diametrically opposed to each other. They are worlds apart in how they answer the basic questions of life, and consequently they come to very different conclusions about matters of public policy. A self-consciously secular culture will necessarily look very different from a self-consciously Christian culture. The battle in our day has been won by those who advocate a secular worldview. The fundamental shift has already taken place at the theoretical level. The skirmishes we are witnessing today over abortion, homosexual marriage, socialism, the size and role of government, and so on, are simply the effort to become more and more consistent with our nation's underlying secular philosophy.

Short term, these skirmishes will be won by the other side. Why such a pessimistic outlook? Because the terms of the debate are stacked against us. We are not

allowed to make an explicitly biblical or Christian case for our position. Any argument that makes reference to God, or is rooted in the teaching of Scripture, is for that very reason automatically dismissed. Only arguments that assume the philosophy of naturalism are deemed to have any credibility.

Short term, I say, these skirmishes will be won by the other side. But what about the long term? “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Ps. 2:4). Eventually the inherent folly of the evolutionary worldview will be exposed, and people in generations to come will look back at our age with the same bemused little smile with which we look upon the discredited philosophies of the past.