

Can a Smart Person Believe in God?

Acts 17:1-33

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Sixth Sunday of Eastertide

Can a smart person believe in God? OF COURSE. Smart people also don't believe in God. Is it possible that people outsmart themselves or that they overinvest in IQ and have little or no spiritual sensibility or openness? **This sermon has a very particular interest: communicating religious truth claims to a culturally sophisticated tribe of smart people.**

Paul preaches a sermon to an audience of smart people in Athens. The sermon is an absolute rhetorical masterpiece. After the sermon, some scoffed, others wanted to talk some more, and a few believed. Not bad results. Here we have a model for preaching the gospel to smart people.

Paul didn't come to Athens with credentials as a bona fide philosopher. And in Athens, the home of Plato, Aristotle, and Xenon, this would be necessary. Athens was still the intellectual capital of the ancient world, and Paul came, gospel in hand, with no initial credibility. Paul has to create credibility by the power of his arguments. Weak arguments destroy credibility; at least prior to the advent of television talk shows. In Athens, Paul has to start where his audience is intellectually and emotionally or he will have no audience at all. Building credibility, winning the attention of an audience, is never axiomatic. This is a respect that must be earned.

Well, Paul begins with tongue in cheek bragging on his audience: "Very religious." Someone said that there were more idols in Athens than persons so these very smart people were actually very superstitious. Paul uses one idol as his visual prop: "The unknown god." This God, the one, that in spite of all your brilliance you don't know, this God is the maker of heaven and earth. He starts the body of his sermon with creation, and in my mind, this is the best place to start. After all, the Bible starts there: In beginning, God created heaven and earth. Somewhere there must be a secret academic rule: YOU MUST have opinions about CREATION. Pagans, Christians, Deists, atheists have argued creation across the centuries. The earliest Greek philosophers, such as Thales and Anaximenes, began the scientific mentality, and excluded the gods from creation. That was a good thing because the Greek gods were like Congress: whining, meddling, capricious, vengeful, and wreaking havoc on the nation. Plato followed and he restored the gods but said they never intervened. Next Aristotle offered his "unmoved mover" and claimed our world wasn't created at all, but was eternal. Game on. St. Augustine, in the 5th century: "At least we know that the [Genesis creation day] is different from the ordinary day." Aquinas: "Creation is an action of God that sets up a relationship between God and what is not God." But Richard Dawkins, in *The Blind Watchmaker*, says that living things, seem too beautifully 'designed' to have come into existence by chance, but "nevertheless did so." In any event, for the next 25 centuries, creation talk has continued endlessly as in Kenneth Burke's famous parlor scene where the people change but the argument never ends.

Paul contributes a basic theological claim: There is God. The theological affirmations tumble out: “God made the world and everything in it.” God doesn’t need us because God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. God is never far from each one of us. God calls all people to change their minds. God will judge the world in righteousness not by whether or not we were right about our opinions and doctrines. This judgment will be through a man raised from the dead. Paul’s argument suggests that an ever-present God doesn’t have to intervene. In God we live and move and have our being.

Paul proclaims **the grandeur of God’s creation**. Perhaps the church would be better served to stop arguing about how old creation is and start marveling at the grandness of creation. I stand amazed at our richly endowed creation. A Muslim physicist, citing the *Koran* for support, says, “The deeper we seek, the more is our wonder excited, the more is the dazzlement of our gaze.” There is a God who lovingly persuaded this world into being and holds it by the word of His power. “It should be a rather exhilarating thought that the moment of creation is now – that if, by some unthinkable accident, God’s attention slipped, we wouldn’t be here” (Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*).

Here’s the rub: People who don’t believe in God often feel they are our intellectual superiors. One of the gang known as the “New Atheists” claims they are “the brights, the bright people.” Our culture has uncritically embraced this stereotype: **Smart people are atheists; ignorant people believe in God.**

Since we are the victims of stereotyping, a psychological form of intellectualism, we need to subvert the stereotypes. After all, stereotypes possess an **insidious power to denigrate whole groups without legitimate cause**. Some of the philosophers called Paul this **spermologos** – “This babbler.” Never let a stereotype stand without a challenge. I grew up listening to preachers insist Darwin was the devil incarnate. Our pastor loved telling us we didn’t come from monkeys, although my mother said my behavior tempted her to believe in evolution. I once told her that Darwin’s idea of descent from monkeys actually elevated our status since our church sang a hymn describing us as worms and monkeys were a more complex species than worms. “For such a worm as I” appears in the original version of the hymn, “At the Cross.” This is a good way to be required to write an apology to the pastor and the music director.

I never realized that folks from Virginia didn’t really consider themselves Southerners but Virginians until I made a presentation at Martinsville, Virginia. After the event, a high school principal asked me, “You are from the South. Where did you get your social consciousness?” “Good Lord, lady. You have a NASCAR race here in Martinsville. I got my social consciousness from reading the Bible. We do read in the South.” I took my payment for speaking in Martinsville-we-are-better-than-you, Virginia and booted scooted it back to Baton Rouge Louisiana mumbling to myself, “Social consciousness. Where did I get my social consciousness?”

At a party, someone was ranting about the absurdity of believing in God. A young woman quietly said, “I apologize for interrupting your fascinating diatribe, but you must

have God confused with someone else. I talked to God this morning and you must not know God like I do, because I assure you that God is not like that at all.”

Listen to me, the stereotype that Christians are not smart enough deserves multiple challenges. Emotionally satisfying. A lesson long overdue. Whenever someone attacks God, and you remain silent, I pray that you will hear me whisper in your ear, “Cat got your tongue?”

As Christians we should understand that science struggles with its own limitations. Atheists have faith in a series of highly lucky accidents created by Randomness. Francis Thompson said, “**An atheist is a man who believes himself an accident.**” When a scientist claims there is no God, she has entered the world of epistemology and philosophy and theology. And in these disciplines, the scientist doesn’t control the higher ground.

Besides all this, science is rhetorical. As Herb Simons taught me, “**Scientists are persuaders who adapt extra-factual, extra-logical messages to particular audiences in particular situations so as to secure preferred outcomes.**” Atheism, as Bill McClendon reminds us, is a theology. Science has staked a claim to god-status, but science is not Almighty God. And ever since science sold its soul to advertising soap, toothpaste, razor blades, anti-aging cream, and anything on which they could stamp, “scientifically proven,” they have been rhetoricians. The sponsors, my friend, will mark “scientifically proven,” on anything along with public acknowledgement that the product may produce side effects like loss of hair, kidney damage, heart problems, high blood pressure, and death. If “three out of four doctors agree”, check with that fourth doctor. Be skeptical. If you doubt science on global warming, doubt science on God.

The church needs to recover confidence in her ability to think with the best thinkers in the world. We don’t have to be the smartest people in the world, but Jesus insisted that we love God with all our minds. You are already smart enough, brave enough, and faithful enough to mount a bolder defense of Christian faith than the one that now dominates the theological landscape.

In this game, there’s no credit for talking about God with our religious cohorts. We are paid to talk about God, but we drive our families crazy. Our children say things like, “Can we not talk about the Synoptic Problem over breakfast? It’s Saturday.” But outside the religious ghetto, there is an entire world of critical talk. Harvard’s Richard Lewontin, evolutionary biologist, says, “we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.” Against that, I appeal for God making earth God’s footstool and Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of the throne of God and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, leading us into all truth. Talking to one another about God is an inter-squad game. Talking to non-believers? Game on!

The options here are endless. You can believe that our world has existed eternally. You can believe that our world was created randomly. You can believe that it was created by an evil power. You can believe it was created randomly out of pre-existent matter. You can believe God created the world and left it to its natural motion and laws. You can believe it was created out of nothing by God in 6 literal earth days. You can believe God intervenes or that God never intervenes, or that maybe God has intervened only a few times or that God might nudge events in the natural world through imperceptible changes at the quantum level. You can exclude God or include God. You can believe that God created the world over billions of years and that evolution is the best explanation of those creative processes. You can believe in the primary doctrines of Christian faith, beginning with creation: **OUR WORLD HAS BEEN CREATED BY A GOOD, LOVING, and WISE GOD.** Ultimately you have to decide if you believe in God, in God's love, care, and full provision for our wholeness. So, here's what I believe: God used words to create the world. In other words, God persuaded matter to inhabit perfect forms and this loving God still works to persuade us toward perfection.

Has God called some of us to minister to this growing segment of our culture too smart to believe in God? Should we engage at an intellectual level smart people with really deeply held convictions against believing? This is one mission that will provide us an almost unlimited supply of tough-minded, hard-to-convince prospects, and we will have the field to ourselves.

Listen to me you are faithful and smart believers. You have all the spiritual and intellectual resources you need. Never be intimidated by an inadequate philosophy of science promoted by atheists. Instead, with courage, humility, and honesty let us offer our own witness to our smart, but searching, even groping, culture. Amen and amen.