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Work Station

TWO

Gary B. Swanson

Of Atheists and Foxholes

Tradition has it that a Christian chaplain in the U.S. Army back in World War II originated the expression: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” The meaning of this aphorism is that when all human beings—at least in Western culture—face highly dangerous situations, even those who’d renounced God earlier in their lives recognize a latent faith in His existence. No matter how seemingly hardboiled or hardhearted, in times of utter desperation, people will turn to God as the ultimate hope. And this aphorism has enjoyed a form of durability for half a century.

But the Western mind has been undergoing a considerable change since World War II. Maybe you’ve noticed!

In the military—and, indeed, in many other subgroups in our culture—atheism itself has turned quite militant. Those who refuse to believe in God have become assertive in their disavowal of His existence.

Of course, atheism has been around for quite a while—especially among the segment of the population that considers itself the intelligentsia. Way back in the third century B.C., the Cyrenaic philosopher Theodorus the Atheist taught that the goal

of life was pretty much just to pursue happiness and avoid grief. Closer to our own time, philosophers like Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Bertrand Russell leveled their best thinking at religion itself—especially Christianity. Unquestionably, all have had their impact on today's worldview, but generally, Everyman has been too absorbed in mere survival to take the time to read much philosophy.

Today, however, popular culture has become an increasingly open market for ideas—including those that deny God. And Everyman is definitely “reading” popular culture. So now atheism is taking the offensive on many fronts. The entertainment world has become increasingly influential to the general public. Self-professed atheists are expressing unhesitant disbelief in God—people like Woody Allen, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Ian McKellen, Keanu Reeves, Bruce Willis. If none of these names rings a bell, you may be assured that they ring big bells in the public consciousness of our time. These are among the Hollywood *idols*—pun fully intended—that draw countless millions to the places of worship that theaters are today.

But this is no diatribe against theaters—or even the broader subject of movies. Film is only one of the texts in which atheism is asserting an increasing voice in the public discourse. It appears among countless other beliefs in music, literature, the visual arts—all the media in popular culture.

So in what way does Scripture address the denial of God's existence? Generally, it seems that the people of God in Scripture, in both Old and New Testament times, were confronted on every side by others who were at least theistic, whether they believed in another god or many other gods: Baal, Adrammelech, Moloch, Jupiter, Mercury, Diana. Were there no atheists in Scripture?

Interestingly, Ellen G. White suggests that atheism was among the theories that led to the building of the Tower of Babel:

“The dwellers on the plain of Shinar . . . denied the existence of God and attributed the Flood to the operation of natural causes. . . . One object before them in the erection of the tower was to secure their own safety in case of another deluge. By carrying the structure to a much greater height than was reached by the waters of the Flood, they thought to place themselves beyond all possibility of danger. And as they would be able to ascend to the region of the clouds, they hoped to ascertain the cause of the Flood. The whole undertaking was designed to exalt still further the pride of its projectors and to turn the minds of future generations away from God and lead them into idolatry.”¹

In point of fact, atheism itself is a form of idolatry: the worship of oneself. If I were to decide that God does not exist, I am essentially placing my own personal will in the place of God. In the cosmic reckoning, as they say, there just isn’t any middle ground on this—no third or fourth or fifth choices, despite the claims of pluralism. Everyone worships something or someone—even if it’s oneself.

The inception of sin in heaven, Lucifer’s very first exercise of it, demonstrates just how elemental this issue is. There were no other gods for Lucifer to transfer allegiance to. It wasn’t as if he found a place of faith down the street that suited his worship style better. It was God or himself—just that simple, just that profound: “I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14, NKJV). He had no interest in worshiping anyone or anything except himself. He exercised his God-given power of choice in favor of self.

And this power of choice is granted to all throughout human history. “God forces no one to be obedient; if He didn’t force [Lucifer] to be obedient in heaven or Adam and Eve to be obedient in Eden, why do it now, long after the consequences of disobedience have wreaked havoc on humanity?”² This allows for the freedom to choose a contrarian worldview and express it as

one wishes.

English-American author/journalist Christopher Hitchens, one of the more publically active, in-your-face contrarians of our day, has made a career of debating believers—both in person and in writing—over the issue of God’s existence. Among other well-known unbelievers such as Richard Dawkins and A. C. Grayling, for more than four decades Hitchens has aggressively attacked the position for God from a purely intellectual worldview.

Now in stage-four esophageal cancer, however, Hitchens is in his very own foxhole. And the media have descended upon the author of the bestseller *God Is Not Great* to see if his terminal illness has shaken his faith in atheism, to see if his condition has possibly brought about another expression common to Christian thought: the “deathbed confession.” At the time of this writing, it has not, and Hitchens considers his position courageous, even heroic.

“We don’t want to be annihilated,” he says. “We just think that the overall likelihood is that we join the molecular cycle when we die. We don’t wish it to be true, but we face it.”³

But Christians embrace another, much more positive, “overall likelihood.” To the very last breath we draw, God’s grace is open to us all. As long as there is life, there is hope—for Christopher Hitchens and for you and me.

REFERENCES

1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 119.
2. *Garments of Grace*, Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, Clifford R. Goldstein, ed., Second Quarter 2011, p. 120.
3. *The Week* (April 15, 2011), p. 10.