

Christianity: A Knowledge Tradition

By Kathy McReynolds, Ph.D.

Science vs. Christianity

To say that there is enmity between the scientific community and Christianity—between the secular and the sacred, if you will—is to say nothing new. This conflict has gone on since the early days of the modern era. Recently, however, this battle between science and religion has taken a new turn, one which ought to concern us all, especially those of us who work with people with disabilities. There has been a rash of bestselling books by atheists which go far beyond a mere challenge to religion. These bestselling authors (commonly known as the New Atheists) charge that religion is a plague that needs to be eliminated. The titles of their most recent books alone reflect their vehemence against faith: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins; *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomena* by Daniel Dennett; *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens; *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* by Sam Harris. These authors have declared a new war on the Church—one which they fully intend to win.

The way these new atheists see it, science has made religion obsolete. In their view, science has done a much better job at explaining our world, human nature, and the origins of morality than religion ever did. Science, they also claim, is light years ahead of religion in proposing ways to create a good society— a society that is more “tolerant and free.” The new atheism claims to appeal to our intellect, to the better part of our nature. It claims to make a stand upon the *Truth*. This is the crux of the matter. Is atheism true? Atheists of course claim to have the bulk of evidence on their side—that evolutionary science has shown religion to be completely irrational, and to be a mere vestige of our primitive nature that we must simply “overcome.”

A variety of arguments against atheism have been put forward over the years. In a recent article for *Wired* magazine entitled “The Church of the Non-Believers,”¹ Gary Wolf points out that many religious fundamentalists take their stand upon biblical doctrine and refuse to budge. But Wolf seems to imply that this stand is not rational; hence, it is questionable evidence from the start. According to Wolf, other believers argue that nothing in science *prohibits* belief—that unsolved problems in science demonstrate that the existence of God might not be impossible.

The problem with this view, Wolf suggests, is that it implicitly accepts science as the arbiter of what is real and true. This gives atheists the upper hand. Wolf goes on to say that when secular investigations take the lead, biblical doctrines are undermined. There is not a field in modern scientific research—cosmology, anthropology, biology—in which competing Christian explanations have survived untouched. When it comes to defending biblical doctrines of origins, Wolf says that few defenders of the faith have been able to hold up under the attacks of the secularists.

In an honest attempt to resist the slide into atheism himself, Wolf has tried to search for some answers concerning the God of the Bible. What he discovered is a daunting diversity of belief. And then he makes

the following insightful comment, “It is all admirable and stimulating and lacks only the real help anybody in my position would need: *reasons to believe that specific religious ideas are true*” (emphasis mine).

What Gary Wolf is searching for is knowledge of the truth. He can’t help it. It is the image of God in him which drives him to do so. Dallas Willard, who wrote the foreword to J.P. Moreland’s book *The Kingdom Triangle*,² points out that knowledge is in crisis in our culture. Willard argues that knowledge is an indispensable function of human life. It enables us to act and direct and teach certain things. If we lack appropriate knowledge, we simply cannot engage in certain crucial human activities. One has knowledge of a particular subject when he or she can represent that subject as it is—when he or she can represent it according to reality.

Willard further points out that throughout most of Western history, the Church was thought to possess a unique body of knowledge which included specific teachings concerning God, the universe, human beings, and the nature of the blessed life. This body of knowledge was thought to come to the Church through general and divine revelation. “Enlightenment” and post-Enlightenment thought has robbed the Church of this precious and lofty body of knowledge and reduced it to mere firings of neurons in the brain, purely subjective and void of any truth. Willard also notes that in many ways this view of knowledge has crept into the Church. We are hard pressed to find many Christian leaders who understand Christian teachings to be a body of knowledge and not merely a profession of personal faith. Because the Church has relinquished its role as an institution that possesses a body of knowledge that reflects reality, the secular world has redefined knowledge in such a way as to make knowledge of God impossible. What the world gives us in return is a thin and brittle reality which is subject to the whims and discretions of the scientific community. In such a world, no one can truly know anything other than what the scientist tells us. In such a world, no one is safe, especially those with disabilities. For if knowledge of God is impossible, so is knowledge of our origins and purpose. In such a world, there can be no hope for a future. No one will feel the effects of this worldview more than those with disabilities.

Christianity’s Great Fortress: True Knowledge

It is time for the Church to take back what rightly belongs to her, that is, the truth that Christianity is a *knowledge tradition*. It reveals to us what is true and real about our world and ourselves. Christian doctrines are not merely creeds to which we believers through the ages have given a vote of approval. They reveal something true about the nature of reality. They are true for all people for all time whether they believe them or not. The essential doctrines of the Bible (which include natural law and general revelation) are the only means by which we can defend the cause of those with disabilities. The atheists and secularists who have stolen our truths—truths concerning *whose* we are, who we are, and why we are here, have taken them and, because they misunderstand them, are using them against the most vulnerable in society. This is being done at an unprecedented level today, especially in genetics and the neurosciences. Medical researchers have whittled down the definition of the human person to mere proper brain function and in the process they have dehumanized groups of people who have cognitive disabilities. It is time for the Church to take back what rightfully belongs to her.

In his timeless essay entitled “Learning in War-time,” C. S. Lewis makes a strong argument concerning the duty of those who are educated to protect those who are most vulnerable:

To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy (sound biblical theology) must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.³

I believe Lewis’ statement reflects one of the essential duties of the Christian life; that is, to speak for those who cannot always speak for themselves. We must defend the most vulnerable against the attacks

of the new atheists. To accomplish this, the Church must once again embrace essential Christian doctrine in order to show that it is the *saints*, and not the *scientists*, who are the possessors of a unique body of knowledge concerning God, human beings, and the nature of the blessed life. What is required for this task is good Christian thinking, and good Christian thinking is grounded in knowing what the Bible is about. The doctrines of *Creation, Sin, Redemption, Incarnation, Church, Judgment, and Eternity*, when taken together, provide a kind of grid through which we can understand life's most important issues. This, in turn, can yield the beginnings of a Christian understanding of disability with all the complexities it brings.

Dorothy Sayers once said that the reason we do not take heaven and hell seriously is that we do not take this world seriously. We must take seriously the nature of these attacks by the new atheists and we must respond by taking back what was entrusted to us; that is, the truth about God and his purposes for creation and humanity. We must take seriously the fact that we indeed have been robbed by secular scientists who claim that they have the exclusive right to say what is true and what is not. Augustine equated true knowledge with theological knowledge. He also compared knowledge with vision. If we use this metaphor and apply it to the new atheists, we can show that they themselves suffer from a disability: *partial vision*—they acknowledge *true* things, but reject the *Truth* itself. Augustine makes the point that true things derive from the Truth itself.

Hence, for Augustine, Truth does exist and human beings can know something about it. He distinguishes between Truth and true things:

1. True things are particular instances of Truth, just as things that are equal are particular instances of Equality.
2. Truth remains immutable, even though true things change. For example, to say that I am talking right now is a true statement; but in 10 minutes, I might not be talking. But Truth still remains the same.
3. Truth is eternal, while true things perish. Just as Equality does not perish when two equal sticks are destroyed, so Truth does not cease when true things perish.

In Book II of *Soliloquies*, Augustine argues that because it is a contradiction to deny the eternity of Truth, Truth is logically indestructible. For example, if the world will never pass away, it is true that the world will never pass away. If the world will someday perish, then that is true. But Truth itself will abide even though every created thing should perish. However, the question might still be asked, "What if Truth itself should perish?" Augustine's answer is, "Will it not be true the Truth has perished?" Thus, the very denial of Truth's eternity turns out to be an affirmation of its indestructibility.

According to Augustine, our minds do not judge Truth; rather Truth judges our reason. If Truth were inferior to our minds, we would judge it instead of using it as a standard of judgment. We often judge a person's mind when we say that this mind is not as keen as it might be, but we do not stand in judgment of what is eternal or what is Truth. If Truth and our minds were equal, Truth would not be eternal and unchanging, since our minds are finite, mutable, and subject to error. But it has already been established that Truth is eternal.

Truth, therefore, must be more excellent than human reason. Truth must exist somewhere; that is, there must be some basis for truth, but it cannot be anything perishable. It was shown how Truth remains even when true things perish. Truth, therefore, does not exist in *mortal* things. But it must exist somewhere. There are *immortal* things. Since only God is immortal, he must be the ground of truth. Thus, Augustine says, "For where I found truth, there I found my God, who is the Truth itself."⁴

Christians, therefore, take their stand on the Truth itself which encompasses and acknowledges the validity of all true things. The new atheists take their stand on true things alone which can lead to scientific knowledge, and they look no further than this. They are satisfied with this "partial vision" because

to acknowledge the Truth itself is to admit that there is a higher authority. And this they do not want to do. The consequences of this “disability” have been enormous. Consider the many new technologies today which are used specifically for the destruction of human life (nuclear bombs, roadside bombs, certain genetic technologies). This is *pathology* of reason which is completely severed from God.

Augustine also distinguished between higher and lower reason. The object of lower reason is the temporary world. Its method is investigation, its end is action, and its result is science. The object of higher reason is the eternal world where God dwells. Its method is contemplation, its end is happiness, and its result is Godly wisdom. This notion of higher reason by which the soul is illumined by divine light has been rejected by scientists today, but for no good reason. The fact of the matter is that scientists could not carry on their own work without the assumption that truth itself can be known. But they refuse to acknowledge this fact to everyone’s peril. As Pope Benedict XVI so eloquently states, “Reason capable only of recognizing its own self and that which is empirically certain paralyzes and destroys itself.”⁵ The Pope goes on to discuss the task that lays ahead of us if we are ever going to make a difference for the good in our culture:

We Christians are summoned today, not to limit reason and oppose it, but to resist its reduction to the rationality of production. We must struggle on behalf of the capacity to perceive the good . . . For that is the true fight on behalf of man and against inhumanity. Only reason that is open to God, only reason that does not banish morality into the realm of the subjective or degrade it to the level of calculations can resist the misuse of the concept of God and sick forms of religion and bestow healing.⁶

This indeed is a high calling, and one to which we must labor and strive. What we must do is commit ourselves to seeking God’s truth in its totality. It is not enough to become a Christian and stop striving. The Christian faith is a seeking faith. It is a faith that keeps us on the upward path of becoming increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. God shapes us into the image of his dear Son by his Word, his Spirit, and his Community. All truth is God’s truth and he takes all of our experiences, either good or bad, and uses them for his purpose. We need only be willing to hear his voice and follow his lead.

Notes

1. Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers,” *Wired*, November 1, 2006, <https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/>
2. J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit’s Power* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007).
3. C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time” in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949).
4. For this brief discussion on Augustine’s epistemology, I am indebted to Ronald H. Nash and to his incredible insight in his work, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge* (Lima: Academic Renewal Press, 2003).
5. Pope Benedict XVI, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Ignatius Press, 2006), 111.
6. *Ibid.*, 112

About the Author

Dr. Kathy McReynolds is the former Director of Academic Studies for Joni and Friends. Kathy has a B.A. in Christian Education from Biola University, a M.A. in Systematic Theology from Talbot School of Theology and a Ph.D. in Ethics from the University of Southern California. She has taught in the Biblical Studies Department at Biola University and served on ethics committees for hospitals and universities. Kathy has received numerous prestigious awards, including the Leading Health Care Professional of the World by the International Biographical Center in 2009.