

Adult Catechism Class for November 9, 2015

How to Defend the Catholic faith against Atheists and Non-believers and the New Age Movement

Part 1: Scripture Readings:

Psalms 14:1: The fool has said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that does good.

John 4:24: God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

Romans 1:20: For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

Part 2: What is Atheism?

Atheism is the error of those who deny the existence of God. Practical atheism consists in living as if God were not. Speculative or theoretical atheism consists in the assertion that there is no God. An atheist, on the one hand, believes that there is no God. Etymologically, the word means "not, or no God." In the atheist camp you can have a wide variety of reasons for their denial as well as differing levels of certainty. Some will deny emphatically that there is a God and claim to have "proof" of God's non-existence. Others will simply say they do not believe there is a God though they could not prove God does not exist. The common denominator is that they do not believe in God. **Agnosticism** is not a belief system as atheism is; rather, it is a theory of knowledge. Etymologically, it means, "not, or no knowledge." An agnostic is someone who believes human beings simply cannot know anything metaphysical or beyond the physical realm; therefore, they cannot know whether things like spirit, angels or God exist at all. Contrary to popular belief all agnostics are not atheists. There are theistic agnostics--fideists, for example--who believe in God but do not believe that their understanding of God is knowable by natural means.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Many . . . of our contemporaries either do not at all perceive, or explicitly reject, this intimate and vital bond of man to God. Atheism must therefore be regarded as one of the most serious problems of our time." The name "atheism" covers many very different phenomena. One common form is the practical materialism which restricts its needs and aspirations to space and time. Atheistic humanism falsely considers man to be "an end to himself, and the sole maker, with supreme control, of his own history."

Another form of contemporary atheism looks for the liberation of man through economic and social liberation. "It holds that religion, of its very nature, thwarts such emancipation by raising man's hopes in a future life, thus both deceiving him and discouraging him from working for a better form of life on earth." Since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion. The imputability of this offense can be significantly diminished in virtue of the intentions and the circumstances. "Believers can have more than a little to do with

the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion." Atheism is often based on a false conception of human autonomy, exaggerated to the point of refusing any dependence on God. Yet, "to acknowledge God is in no way to oppose the dignity of man, since such dignity is grounded and brought to perfection in God. . . ." "For the Church knows full well that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart."

Agnosticism assumes a number of forms. In certain cases the agnostic refrains from denying God; instead he postulates the existence of a transcendent being which is incapable of revealing itself, and about which nothing can be said. In other cases, the agnostic makes no judgment about God's existence, declaring it impossible to prove, or even to affirm or deny. Agnosticism can sometimes include a certain search for God, but it can equally express indifferentism, a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience. Agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism. Since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the first commandment.

Part 3: The Ways that God Reveals Himself to Human Beings, and Proving the Existence of God in the World

God reveals Himself through the *material universe*, by His creation. God also reveals Himself through the *Natural Moral Law*, the law written in our hearts (Christian conscience). Finally, God reveals Himself to us through *Public Revelation*, which includes *Sacred Scripture* and *Sacred Tradition*. It is true that because of original sin, man's intellect has been wounded and often causes him to go astray in his pursuit of truth. The effects of original sin also darkens the faculty of the soul, the *human will*. Often the will, because of its weakness, chooses a false or lesser good instead of the true good. If the will is attracted to evil, the intellect can distort the truth to make the evil seem more acceptable.

Our *imagination* is an unreliable guide to truth because we can often substitute our imagination in place of facts and sound reasoning, as the people who worshipped the gods of Greek mythology. Also, our *emotions* are extremely untrustworthy guides to the truth. Those who say "listen to your heart" instead of your head are simply wrong. We can also be seduced by *moral error*. Often our pride can blind us from the truth of our faith, and we don't seek the truth because it contradicts our immoral lifestyles. Accepting and obeying God requires radical changes to our lifestyle. Pride and immorality are the most common reasons why people reject God's existence.

In today's world, Christians unfortunately are rarely educated enough to distinguish false arguments from those that are true according to our Catholic beliefs. Many times, people will pile up irrelevant assertions to stall, confuse or mislead Christians from the truth. Again, many people in our world accept immoral practices because so-called educated people support these practices. For example many doctors support the practice of abortion, even though they are not knowledgeable about the moral principles against it. If our intellect goes astray in identifying what is truly good, the will chooses lesser or even false goods.

Through the use of human reason alone, man can know that God exists. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: Our holy mother, the Church, holds and teaches that God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason. The best methods to explain God to an atheist are to discuss *The Need for a First Cause* and *The Need for an Intelligent Designer*.

Everything in the material world is explained by a previous cause. Nothing can cause its own existence. Every material object is the end product of a long chain of causes. Why does matter exist at all, where does it come from? The only answer is that some power outside the material universe created matter to begin with. This power is outside the material universe, thus it must be *spirit* to create something out of nothing. God always existed. He alone is the first cause, the uncaused cause on which all other causes depend. Everything else depends on the First Cause, but the First Cause does not depend on anything. It simply is and always was. The *Big Bang* had to be set off by our creator!

When we see an extremely complicated system that has been perfectly constructed for a clear purpose, common sense tells us that an intelligent being is responsible. If we examine the material world, we find countless examples of complex, purposeful systems that require an intelligent designer. In living organisms, we could look at the brain, the ears, the eyes, the digestive system. Each complex step in these organisms could only proceed because a previous complex step occurred perfectly. Given the awesome size and complexity of the universe, it is easy to see that this Intelligent Designer must be God.

Atheists deny that miracles exist. A miracle is an event or act that is beyond the ability of any natural power, thus it is supernatural. Many of these miracles are still visible to the public (incorrupt saints and Eucharistic marvels). Proving the spirituality of the human soul can prove the existence of the spiritual and proves the need for direct creation of the soul out of nothing, since a spiritual substance has no parts. When human beings study the visible world, they can create immaterial realities in their minds called *ideas*. For example, the ideas of justice, of truth, of love are all immaterial realities in our mind. It is impossible for something material to create something that is immaterial. Thus, the faculty capable of forming spiritual ideas must itself be spiritual, coming from the soul.

Atheists often say that God does not exist because there is evil and suffering in the world. However, if according to these Atheists, evil disproves God's existence, then the existence of good in the world must prove that God exists. Where does the good come from, if not from God? Man's abuse of free will has brought suffering and evil into this world. It is not God's fault that we have misused the gifts given to us by Him.

Part 4: How Modern Atheism formed in our world, and the Forms of Atheism

Deism: Deism is a stripped-down version of Christianity. It was a religion without doctrines, without churches, without public revelation. Deism views God as a "Divine Watchmaker". After creating the universe, God ceased to care for it. Deists believe in a remote, uninvolved, and unknowable God, God is viewed as distant, indifferent to human affairs, and totally

incomprehensible. To them, God is the “Divine Scientist” who made the universe and then moved on to another scientific project.

Idealism: This is a radical separation between the mind and the external world. It is a radical split between a person’s mind and his body. The world outside of us can’t be known with any certainty. Idealists exalt the human mind to the point of idolatry. They think human thoughts deal with ideas, not material objects. Ideas are treated as if they existed apart from the person who thinks of them. External reality is determined by our minds. The external world is whatever we think it is, and we make God what we want Him to be.

Pantheism: Pantheists believe that God and the universe are the same. God is not distinct from the world, God is the world. God is merely the natural forces that sustain and shape the universe. As Christians, we believe that God is distinct from His creation and stands outside of it. Pantheism can lead to atheism: if God is identical to the world, then He has no will, no authority, no commandments. He teaches nothing and demands nothing.

Fideism: Fedeists hold that we cannot know anything about God and spiritual realities through reason. Thus we must rely on blind faith. It sets faith in opposition to reason. According to an encyclical written by Pope John Paull II, faith and reason are both gifts from God and should never be pitted against each other. Faith enables reason to accept what it cannot fully understand. Reason enables us to understand our faith better and defend it against error.

Empiricism: Empiricists emphasize the role of the senses in acquiring knowledge and are skeptical of reason. They are more concerned with acquiring practical information rather than pursuing ultimate truths. They have an exalted and purely secular view of the state and ignore God in their lives.

The Enlightenment: This was an intellectual movement in 18th century Europe. This movement practiced an anti-Christian sentiment that became atheistic, a pagan, hedonistic morality through the concept of a secular state. The followers of this movement despised the Church, and all traditional authorities. They believed that only science was necessary for unending human progress and that people should be free of all restraints. Human reason to them was the only source of all truth.

Materialism: Materialists believe that the only reality is the material universe. They deny God and all other spiritual realities, including free will. This is the underlying philosophy of communism. They believe that spiritual knowledge is simply imaginary.

Rationalism: Rationalists believe that the only truths we can know with certainty are the truths gained through reason. They deny God and anything supernatural. They misuse the truth-finding power of reason to deny the ultimate truth of God.

Scientism: The Church has always taught that there can never be a conflict between the truth of science and the science of faith, since all truth comes from God. But Scientism say that the

only certain truths are obtained from the scientific method. They refuse to accept anything that cannot be observed or measured. However in the Catholic belief, science can only study the natural world and can never disprove the existence of God.

Evolutionism: There is only one Evolutionary theory that is incompatible with Christianity. That is the theory that the human race evolved from dead matter through purely random processes. This evolutionary theory states that nonliving matter randomly came together to form the first simple living cell. This began the evolutionary life-chain, of which man is the latest product. Yet, with all of the technology available in the world, we have not been able to create any living organism out of nonliving matter.

Part 5: What is the New Age Movement?

In the 1960's, many people in the Western World became attracted to Eastern religious ideas. In many ways this New Age Movement is a form of Gnosticism, a heresy of the early church. In recent studies it is found that one fourth of Christians in Europe believe in reincarnation because of the influence of New Age ideas.

Gnosticism: Gnostics attach themselves to other religions, and blur the distinctions between their beliefs and the religion they attached themselves to. They reinterpret words and beliefs to give them a Gnostic meaning. The Gnostics believe in a Divine Being that is totally unknowable and unapproachable by ordinary people. There are junior gods which act as a bridge between Divine Being and material world. The Demiurge created the material world. Gnostics claim to have secret knowledge that enable them to have contact with the Divine Being. Evil is the result of our involvement with material things. Jesus is a junior god but did not assume a real material body. Gnostics disdained the body, and consider the spiritual soul as only good part of the person. They offer liberation from the body through Gnostic beliefs and practices. They claim that Jesus gave secret oral doctrines to His disciples that were meant to be passed on privately to the "enlightened" few. Salvation depended on acquiring this special knowledge.

Hindu Pantheism: This is the foundation of New Age beliefs. This is a belief that everything is One (Brahman) and the One is God. The world is an illusion. The goal of life is to discover the oneness and divinity of all things, we must realize that we are God. Being absorbed into the One is called Nirvana, a universal energy or force. This takes thousands of reincarnations to happen. But we can get special enlightenment through Avatars (beings who have attained Nirvana but can make contact to this world to speed up our reincarnation process). Yogis or Gurus have this knowledge and can teach it to us through meditation and yoga.

Reincarnation: This is the belief that a person's soul comes back to inhabit another body. It is subject to the law of karma, the law of merit and demerit, of gain and loss. If you do what is right, you gain positive karma. The more positive karma you have, the closer you will end up to Nirvana. Some believe Gurus can help them enter Nirvana immediately.

Human Potential Movement: Abraham Maslow is the father of this movement. He saw that humans had the potential to grow in wholeness, goodness, and values. He taught that human beings can be superhuman and God-like. Transpersonal Psychology promised a quick method for attaining divinity: Eastern Meditation.

Followers of the New Age Movement often talk about experiences with Angelic Apparitions or Near Death Experiences. While these experiences can be factual, we have to be cautious whether the outcome of these experiences are true to the Catholic faith. They can also be deceptions, products of overactive imaginations (from drugs like LSD) or from evil spirits.

Part 6: How to Refute New Age Beliefs

As Christians we believe that God is all powerful, all knowing, all present, unchanging, eternal, spirit, and one. God is uncaused, He is the cause of all created things, both material and spiritual. God does not have limitations like the pantheistic New Age gods do. The New Age gods are constantly changing with the material world and demonstrate imperfection, God never changes and is always perfect. Pantheistic gods are limited to the space of the material world, therefore are not all-present. God is outside of space and time. New Agers believe in a spiritual One that is not a person. Yet this is illogical since spiritual substances cannot be impersonal. To be a spirit is to have reason and will. Spirits do not have parts, they are naturally indivisible and indestructible, thus the idea of a soul dissolving into the One is impossible. Reincarnation goes against reason since a human is a union of body and soul. The soul gives identity to the body. Our soul makes it possible to be aware of our identity. Animals do not display human intelligence, thus to say we can be reincarnated into animals is false.