

## **An Anatomy of Unbelief: Intellectual Conceit, Overweening Pride, Alternative Religions, and Rebellion**

Some really oversized, dark characters appear in the narratives of the Bible: Pharaoh, Haman, Jezebel, the Herods -- to name just a few. There are others, to be sure. Why do these appear on the pages of Holy Scriptures? They certainly aren't role models for the faithful! They are there evidently to portray the fate awaiting those who challenge Israel and Israel's great God. They're unbelievers. But why unbelief? In view of the blessings promised to those who love and trust the God of the Bible, one would think everyone would receive Him gladly. Yet that's clearly not the case. The majority of people thru history, indeed most people in the Western world in modern times want nothing to do with the God of the Bible. This strange situation requires some analysis. In this paper, we explore the anatomy of unbelief.

Over the centuries, unbelievers often have taken pen in hand to critique belief, the psychology of belief, the [ir-] rationality of belief, etc. But very few attempts have been made to try to understand unbelief. The present discussion is offered as a tentative work in the hope that others may pick up the thread and add to the effort. But Scripture's perspective, which we would be remiss not also to present, is definitive.

### **Intellectual Conceit**

Many unbelievers are intellectuals--or perhaps the converse would be more accurate: most intellectuals are unbelievers. Intellectuals eschew anything that seems to smack of the supernatural. They instead exalt their reasoning abilities and the reasoning abilities of other recognized intellectuals. They trust the physical sciences (and perhaps also the social sciences) to explain existence. The intellectual, vainly supposing rational thought alone suffices to understand things, cannot accept revelation as a means of knowledge. Human reasoning, speculation, satisfies the intellectual's mind in all matters that can't be affirmed by direct observation. That's why, for the intellectual, evolution must explain origins. Evidences for evolution -- or the lack thereof -- are irrelevant. Creation is simply not an option.

Intellectuals today, including those who aspire to be an intellectual, whether they have the requisite capacities or not, have as a cardinal doctrine (if "doctrine" be permitted in discussing unbelief) an assertion or, better, a conviction that identifies them as an intellectual, viz, the denial of the existence of a God in heaven. We therefore got here only by evolutionary processes, for there's no other option regarding origins. The modern intellectual thing is to dismiss theistic belief as superstition, as archaic, as something primitive. We suspect that the underlying issue is not merely peer pressure, although that surely is to some extent involved, but the overweening pride of identifying as an intellectual. Since the Enlightenment ("Age of Reason"), Western society highly esteems learning, knowledge, and intellect, so to be included in the subset of individuals displaying those features must certainly aggrandize the ego. At the core of the intellectual's being, his or her ego and identity hinge on espousing anti-theism and evolutionism. To be intellectual is to be secular. (A second identity marker may be that only progressive politics are permitted, but that's another story.)

We further suspect that intellectuals, supposing themselves superior to the mass of common people, would not want to identify with ordinary folks as members of a corporate body. They would find it humbling to attend church, to submit to preaching, to abide traditional church teachings handed down for millennia.

The (ironic) unreasonableness of this conceit doesn't seem to matter to intellectuals. It is surely absurd to maintain that a transcendent God doesn't exist, because if He exists as a spirit He absolutely cannot be known by any physical creature unless He reveals Himself. It is certainly absurd to maintain that everything came into existence out of nothing--all by itself. (*What* big-banged, after all, and why?) It is absurd to ignore compelling counter-evidence to one's beliefs, and that is what the evolutionist daily must

do, pretending that consciousness, speech, creativity, design, morality and information (to list just a few of the problems a physicalist cannot resolve) all simply materialized on their own! And if reason fails to displace erroneous beliefs, what about the issue of authority? On whose authority do anti-theism and evolutionism rest? The declarations of Charles Darwin? Those of Stephen Hawking? Carl Sagan? The "consensus" of scientists today? It was the consensus of scientists not so long ago that cholera was due to miasma. Scientists, indeed all humans, even the best of us, are fallible; that's an empirical truth. Our ability to uncover true knowledge is severely limited to what we can observe and confirm. Anything else is speculation. How absurd to trust in the imaginative ideas and conjectures of humans! Or does truth not matter? Is it OK to live a life of guesses just so long as one's identity as an intellectual is maintained?

Paul Johnson studied the lives of renowned intellectuals ("Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky," Harper, 2007). He found that the ones he studied successfully managed abstractions, ideas and concepts, thus they were so influential in Western society. They lived by their own lights, rejecting tradition and received knowledge, seeking instead to refashion their world. But although professing to love humanity, they almost universally lacked people skills. He also found a pervasive disinterest in truth. It is tempting to extract from Johnson's observations the thought that intellectuals are unwilling or unable to cherish the intense personal relationship with Christ that's on offer in the Gospel, and that whether the Gospel is true in absolute sense is irrelevant to them, for they prefer inhabiting their own spheres of fanciful thought. Setting themselves up as god-like beings, intellectuals necessarily reject Christianity.

Obtaining understanding is an endeavor vastly more worthy than seeking to be an intellectual. "Understanding" means thinking deeply about a matter, correlating it when possible with prior knowledge or experiences, and perhaps changing one's ideas or behavior. What understanding comes from the Bible? That the eternally existing Creator seeks a personal, loving, never-ending relationship with His human creatures, and to make that possible He has already done all that's necessary including taking Himself the judgment our sins and rebellion deserve. And having entered into that relationship by believing in Christ, God's beloved Son, while we walk here in this life, God expects us to live a righteous life, according to His moral standards, which have been revealed in the Bible. Now, we ask, what's there to despise about this proposition? Why should intellectuals—indeed anyone—reject such a sweet gift? Is it the modern intellectual thing to be contemptuous of showing love to others, reflecting God's love for us?

We encounter an intellectual in Dostoyevsky's, *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov imagined himself an intellectual who was above the law until he realized that he had deceived himself. His lust was really for power, to dominate others; he was indifferent to the suffering of others. He had to see true humanity in Sonia, the prostitute, who suffered with those who suffer, who exhibited self-sacrificing love. What Raskolnikov thought he did for the good of society was really done for the good of himself. But it was Sonia who was really the superior person. She had willingly prostituted herself for the benefit of others. Sonia showed grace. Sonia knew she was unworthy. Let intellectuals learn from Dostoyevsky: Christ loves those who sin, fail, and rebel, but who know they are unworthy of Him and desire the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

The fundamental problem intellectuals have with Christianity deals with the cross. It was at the cross that God fully revealed Himself as the great lover of man, One who is both just and merciful, a God who is good and will not permit evil in His cosmos to go undefeated. The cross establishes Christ's right to rule. The cross brings to a focus all that God purposed in creating, it is what makes it possible for humans to enter into an eternal, intimate relationship with the living God. But intellectuals, in their conceit, scoff at the cross. They not only don't understand it, they aren't interested in the effort to do so. As Scripture says, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). To the chagrin of his admirers, Anthony Flew, British philosopher, and intellectual of the first order, abandoned his atheism when he realized that evolution couldn't explain existence. Sadly, he still couldn't bring himself to submit to the cross, and he died a deist.

## **Overweening Pride**

Undoubtedly, many people reject belief in God and His free offer of the Gospel for one main reason (discounting the ignoble possibility that they find the pleasures of sin more satisfying than meeting the demands of a holy God): it's pride. The pride we refer to here is not mere self-reliance, a sense of accomplishment, or rugged individualism. The pride we are concerned with is vain, arrogant self-love. It's self-esteem on steroids, self-aggrandizement -- an inflated view of "self."

Pride is devastating: sexism and racism are essentially issues of pride. It's universal within humanity. In Southeast Asia, people who live in cities have contempt for those who live in the rural areas, calling them "jungle monkeys." Even humble folk with no accomplishments to point to exhibit this exaggerated sense of pride. Disobedience is probably also rooted in pride.

Pride makes us want to be self-sufficient and autonomous, free agents, without restrictions on what we think or do, to be able to decide right and wrong on our own instead of humbly submitting to God's imperatives. Pride says, "I want it my way." Pride says that God is demanding; He chains us to His will and limits our freedom. Pride also makes us want to be independent of others, forgetting that very few of us could so much as scratch food out of the ground to eat if we had to; none of us are independent. We certainly are not independent of a good God who providentially sends rain, heals the body, and sustains life.

Furthermore, narcissistic pride concerns itself with status, with reputation, with image. Pride induces us to prefer human wisdom, human ideas, to God's revelation. The ideas we come up with satisfy our pride, whereas submitting to revelation requires humility. It's pride that prevents us from receiving a free gift; we prefer to think we receive good things on the basis of merit. Pride also prevents us from acknowledging that we're sinners. Many people find that offensive, yet as the standard is God's holiness, we all come hopelessly short. It's more gratifying to feel virtuous than to agree with Scripture that we've all failed morally in one way or another. Proud people also think themselves worthy. Scripture, however, says none of us is worthy; only the Son is worthy. Pride is intense egotism. Paul Vitz, in his book "Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship," sees unbelievers as so thrilled with themselves and the abilities they suppose they have that, he argues, they willfully exclude God from their thinking.

Pride refuses to submit to another. Proud people prefer their own views, their own values, their own explanations and understanding of things rather than accept another's words -- even if that other is our Creator, the transcendent God of the cosmos. Billions of years exalts human pride, which may be one reason people hold to it so tightly. Science too exalts human pride, as does philosophy, for these are human endeavors, and not something to be humbly received. Refusal to submit to God's Word is thus a pride issue. The explanation of unbelief for many is pride.

Scripture condemns pride: "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" and "pride goes before a fall." To know why, we need to understand God, as He has revealed Himself to us. The Son of God, "being in very nature God...humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8, NIV). It is God's nature to be humble. Satan, in contrast, is a detestably proud being (Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19). Man was made in God's image. So just as a mirror reflects the image of the person in front of it, we're to reflect God's beautiful character, and just as a skilled sculptor shapes marble into the exact likeness of his subject, we were made to show forth the character of God. This means we must be humble, as God is humble. Otherwise, we impugn God. Pride offends God. It keeps us from enjoying Him and the blessings He seeks to bestow. Sadly, sin distorts the image, it corrupts our nature, and it alienates us from God. Thus we absolutely must have the forgiveness and the restoration that Christ made available for us at the cross. To reject what we so desperately need and what God, at such profound self-sacrifice, has already graciously provided tells God we're not interested in Him or in being in His presence. We're too stuck on ourselves.

## Alternative Religions

The world we inhabit today is complicated. Our forebears have made it so, but our generation certainly hasn't been slack in contributing to its complexity. A plethora of religious notions are on offer today, other than Christianity. Our readers surely don't need to have us list them. We would include in this category things we idolize, such as wealth and power. Some have even made an idol of science: scientism, the notion that science and science alone answers all of life's deepest questions. In papers on this website we have identified pantheism as the chief religious alternative to Christianity in the West today. Pantheists are anti-theists who hold to evolution as the explanation of origins. They unconsciously and unwittingly worship a deity that is within the cosmos, *in* the creation, rather than the transcendent God of the Bible who made the creation.

Common to pantheism and all religions other than Christianity is this fundamental fault: they lack authority. Only Christianity is based on revelation; it's authoritative because the revelation is sourced in God. No other religion can make such a bold claim. The others are all man-made, human inventions. It is sad that people with such sharp analytical skills as we have today cannot see this inherent fallacy in what is worshiped. Simple use of logic should cause us to ask, before I believe this, on what authority does its truthfulness rest? If the authority is another human, or nothing greater than the speculations of man, that's not good enough!

In the Bible, God mocks alternative religions. At the time of the prophet Isaiah, for example, the Nation of Israel had degenerated into idolatry. And God said to them, "the ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel doesn't know [Me]" (Isaiah 1:3). God's demand for loyalty is logical. He made us to be His representatives on earth. He has a specific will and purpose for us. He made us to be conformed to His perfect nature, to be in a unique, loving relationship to Him. So holding to another religion, believing in other ideologies, committing to and loving anything within creation other than God essentially repudiates His creation purposes for us. Moreover, God has revealed Himself to us, both in nature and in the Scriptures. This increases our responsibility to Him. He expects us to respond to His revelation with faith, based on what we see of God in that revelation. As we know Him, love Him and obey Him, based on what we see of Him in His Word, we affirm His sovereignty and His goodness, and we thus align ourselves against all evil. Creation is a platform, a stage on which a cosmic drama is being played out and, like it or not, we are the actors performing. We are the subjects of this epic question: Will created beings, that is, man, choose God on the basis of what he sees of God, or will he reject Him? Faith in His Word means seeing God as He reveals Himself in the Bible and responding to it with love for Him, which is really only a returning of God's love for us, a love that was fully demonstrated at the cross. Refusal to believe God's Word, then, calls God a liar, unworthy of our affections, and it turns us into usurpers of God's sovereignty -- not a particularly wise choice in that His Word also warns of a future day of judgment.

So another explanation of unbelief, or another aspect of it, is people are worshiping a substitute for the One who alone is worthy of worship. They have chosen some alternative from the list of options, and they prefer that choice to the one religion that boldly claims to be true. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by Me," He is certainly stating that all those alternatives on the long list are false religions. In Romans 1 Paul likewise placed all the religions of the world into just two camps, two sectors: biblical Christianity, which worships the Creator God who gave us the Scriptures, and all others, which in one way or another locate their deity in creation or have no specific deity but consist of imaginary beliefs. Distractions, substitutes, deceptions, whatever we call them, they are counterfeit, human ideas that compete with God for our allegiance.

We were created and given life, not merely threescore and ten, but for eternity. The universal human longing for immortality derives from God's creation intent. Death entered as a judgment on sin, but it's only a temporary separation. At some point in the future we'll all be resurrected from the dead and given

new bodies fit for eternity. It is God's desire for us to be in His ineffable and holy presence forever. And that can only result by responding in faith to what God in Christ has done for us at the cross. The alternative is a horrible destiny, being cast forever from God's presence. The wise reader will ask, In what (or whom) am I trusting for my eternal destiny? Christ, who loves me and gave His life for me? Or an idea some fallible person somewhere thought up.

## **Rebellion**

Two great revelations have been given to all humans throughout history. Two spiritual facts that cannot otherwise be known, but that everyone does indeed know: (1) God exists, and (2) God has set standards by which we are to live. According to Romans 1:19-23, all humans have an innate (inborn) knowledge of their Creator. These truths are built into us, perhaps as part of what the Bible calls the image of God. Conscience bears witness to them (Romans 2:12-16). Whether we call it "natural law" or some other term, all have these revelations. There is also natural revelation, evident to all, that God exists: as we contemplate the structure and function of the cosmos, the awareness of it having come from the hand of an infinitely wise and skilled Creator should be evident to all. (Science's great program to explain in a purely materialistic manner everything that exists, including its belief in evolutionary mechanisms, has stolen from many of us nature's compelling witness to God's existence.) What these innate truths mean necessarily is, unbelief is rebellion. Thus Scripture's perspective on unbelief is it's rebellion. "Hear, O heavens and give ear, O earth! For the Lord hath spoken: 'I have nourished and brought up children, but they have rebelled against Me.'" So whoever asserts that God does not exist is self-deceived; of course that person knows, it's that he's in rebellion against God. Thus Nietzsche correctly said, "all atheists are unwilling believers." Rebellion against God manifests itself in all areas of life, including science, morality, government, law, education, and societal and personal relationships. Our rebellion at the outset of history (Genesis chapter 3) resulted in our acquiring a sin nature. We all have it, handed down from the disobedient first man. "The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:2). The evils we so readily find in the world are simply the outworking of this sin nature and our rebellion.

The enmity against God is bitter and pervasive. Even when Christ was physically present on earth working great sign miracles, people still refused to follow Him, so deep and intense was their hatred. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and those who despised Him then sought to kill Lazarus to do away with the evidence. Rebellion against God is totally irrational. Theism is rational because God is infinite reason, and His thoughts are communicated to us effectively and truthfully in His unique Word. We ignore or neglect it at our peril.

So it's no surprise that there are lots of -isms to believe in. People have to fill the emptiness with something, so they grasp at fantasies. Of these, pantheism is particularly pernicious because it satisfies the need with a false set of presuppositions while encouraging the individual in his rebellion and hatred. Pride is a component of the rebellion, but not the whole of it. And it's not merely an intellectual issue (although it is that), at its core it's a spiritual one. Because of our innate knowledge of the invisible God, unbelief is defiance. It's sealing our minds shut against God. The easiest person to deceive is ourselves. We fool ourselves into thinking we're innocent, or that there's no supernatural aspect to existence. We fool ourselves into thinking the visible, physical world is all there is. And when our conscience screams that we're guilty of breaking laws (*God's* laws, whose else?), we fool ourselves into thinking that conscience is merely socially contrived. All this foolishness is the outworking of our rebellion.

Let's look at just a couple of examples of how rebellion manifests: (1) God ordained marriage at the time of creation. It's part of His created order, uniquely symbolizing the intimate yet asymmetric, loving personal relationship that is His eternal purpose for man. In our rebellion, we trivialize marriage by making divorce so available," and by celebrating adultery and extra-marital sexual relations. We view

marriage as an economic arrangement, or as merely a procreative arrangement. We take delight in people of the same sex marrying. In short, we don't want things as God ordained them. We want to craft a whole new order according to our own lights. (2) The evolutionary theory of origins is rank rebellion against God. The observations scientists make are valid, but the interpretations thereof are readily distorted by our innate depravity, our sin nature —especially when it involves a matter that deals with God. So science writers tell us that physics explains everything, even our thoughts and actions; all there is to existence is the random bouncing around of atoms. Naturalistic evolution wasn't "discovered," it was cleverly invented with the purpose of excluding God from our thinking while scientists pretend to be doing religiously neutral scientific investigation. What partly sustains the widespread belief in evolution is the overwhelming arrogance of its proponents, the smug confidence that that which is impossible to know is known certainly (as if ordinary mortals can know the unknowable past!). What mainly sustains it is our inherent and deliberate intent to ignore God, to exclude Him from our lives, to defy Him.

In *To Explain the World* (Harper, 2015), Steven Weinberg writes, "It was essential for the discovery of science that religious ideas be divorced from the study of nature." What he means by this is, the (religious) presupposition that the universe has purpose or meaning opposes or thwarts science. In his view, science must be not neutral, nor even atheistic, but *anti*-theistic. He wants science to be used as a weapon against Christianity. Why this animosity??? Because of rebellion. The animus makes no sense if Weinberg (or others of the "new atheists") simply believes there's no God. After all, what does it matter? Why get so indignant? His agitation over the supposed non-existence of someone is absurd. The real issue isn't the non-existence of God, it's hatred of the God he knows exists! He's at war with Christianity--he doesn't want to be in God's presence nor for anyone else ever to be in God's presence.

The program being enacted today in the West by people like Weinberg (although not necessarily as strident) is to supply everything we all crave, such as peace, security, prosperity, entertainment, information, sports and other activities, etc., in such abundance that we never know what we're missing. What's that? What could be missing? The presence of God in our lives, now and forever.

It's also true that many people don't want God in their lives because they fear He'll interfere, and that they don't want. This too is an aspect of rebellion. But God's Spirit breaks into our world and into our lives with the Gospel. The Gospel is a love message from the God of love seeking others to love. It's also a message of truth. Intellectuals (and others) today deny the existence of absolutes, but denials notwithstanding, they're there and the Gospel is one of them. It's absolutely true because it comes from God who cannot lie. It's also a beautiful message; it has to be because God is beautiful in every conceivable way. It's a message that enables us to break out of ourselves and the tiny spheres we inhabit and enter into something ultimate, something epic, something of infinite value, something that gives us worth and dignity. The rebellion comes to an end when we humbly say thank you to God for the grace, forgiveness and mercy He extends to us in the Gospel.

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**Unbelief** is madness. To deny that which is unseen and unseeable is illogical. To ignore (or worse, to mock) the Scriptures is foolishness. The evidence for God's existence is overwhelming, but it's suppressed because of sin. God can hold us accountable precisely because of the revelation He's provided by which we can know Him. We're without excuse.

We have seen that unbelief has at its core self-love ("I and none but I"), the will to be autonomous like God, and it necessarily involves self-deception. In our conceit we suppose we can determine what's good and what's not, what's right and what's not, as if we were gods, and we wind up saying everything is relative or committing genocide. We're not independent sovereigns, only God is; just try to stop eating! We don't and can't think clearly because of our inherent sin nature. So we seize upon alternatives in order

to evade God, to hide from Him. We make up all kinds of -isms in order to confirm the lies we tell ourselves. We live therefore in a make-believe world, twisting reality, twisting thinking, filling our lives with diversions so we don't have to think about Him. But God is there. (And we all with varying consistency live knowing He's there.) We rebel, but we can't really be happy in our rebellion, because why else do we need all the distractions with which we fill our lives?

The world really is stark raving mad! Going to one's death without fear of God is not courageous, it's insanity. We should all be trembling knowing we could at any moment die and be confronted by a white-hot holy God. The fact of death places the issue squarely in front of us. What will we do with the Gospel? We need Christ more than we need anything else. We were made to love and be loved. Everything else is ancillary. Only when we realize that can we shed the madness, truly come alive, and begin to think God's thoughts.