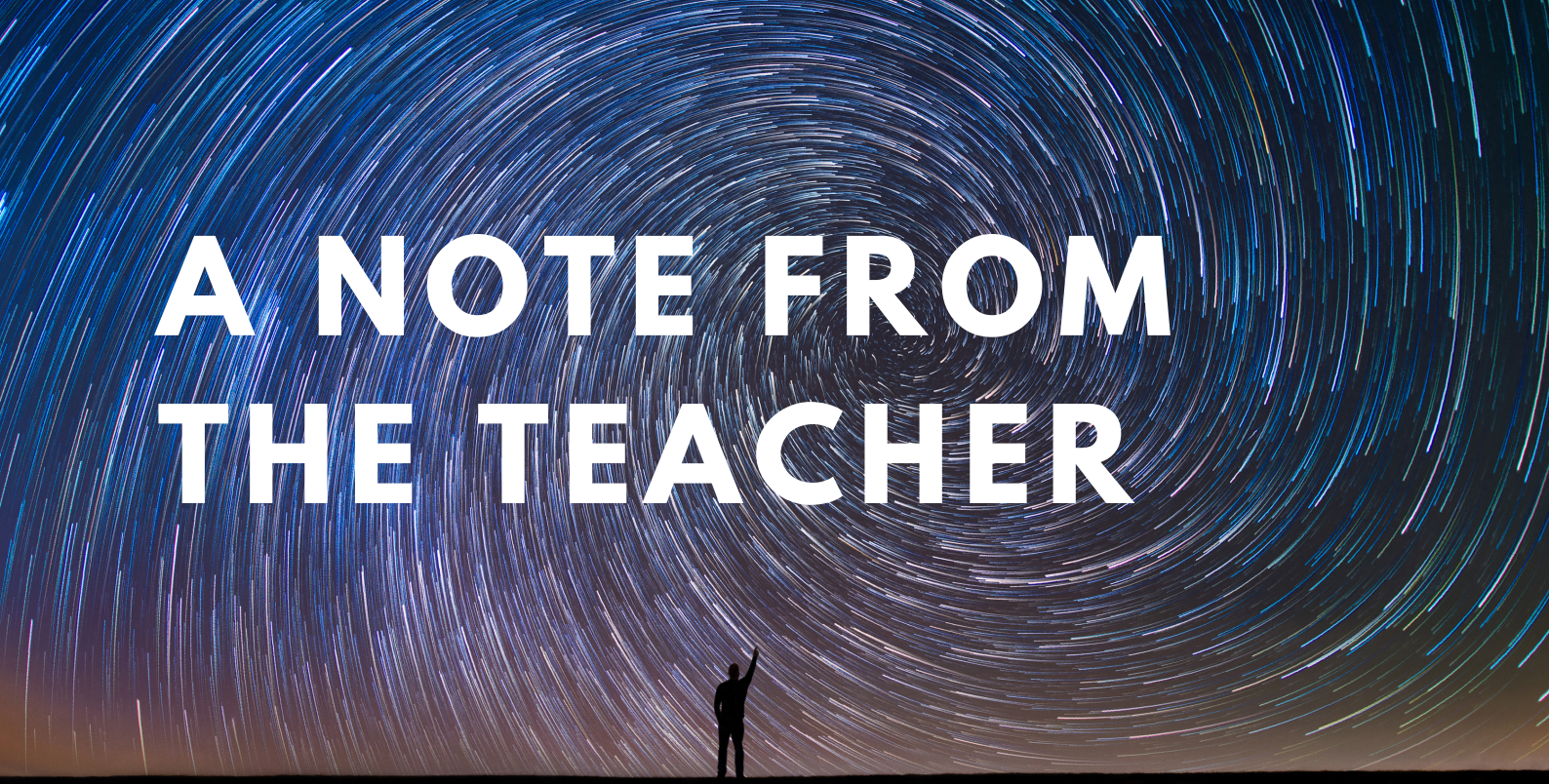# UNDERSTANDING ATHEISM

LED BY

PASTOR KYLE MEIER

The Peak

A NOTE FROM THE TEACHER

Hello everyone!

Welcome to Understanding Atheism. I know what you are thinking. Isn't it kind of weird for a Christian pastor to be teaching a course on atheism?! What's the deal? So, I want to set the record straight that this course is NOT designed to give you ammunition or talking points for your next debate with your atheist coworker. Instead, the goal is precisely what the title says...understanding. The purpose is to help people of faith better understand the worldview of those who do not ascribe to their faith...or any faith for that matter.

This conversation is personal for many of you too. There is a person you know and love behind the label of "atheist" or "agnostic." So, by better understanding their critiques and concerns with organized religion, we will not only be able to love them better, but hopefully...we can also correct the malpractices of our own faith.

Try not to get defensive. Try to learn. To listen. Try to see how you might practice your faith in a healthier and more respectful way.

Kyle Meier

THE LATEST NUMBERS

"NONE'S"

If you are wondering what is the urgency behind this class, it is because increasingly more and more people are opting for a strictly secularist worldview. Most church-goers have read the statistic by now that 24% of Americans describe their religious affiliation as "none."

24%
OF AMERICANS

The reason? Oftentimes, it is simply because they have not found **the way we think** or **the way we act** to be very compelling or meaningful. Which is precisely why we have structured each of these next two sessions accordingly.

1: HOW RELIGION THINKS

ANTI-SCIENCE

One of the biggest reasons why more and more individuals are being turned off to religion is because of the oftentimes combative relationship with the science community.

"I always felt like the church tried to make me choose: faith OR religion. The two could not coexist. In fact, to believe in science was seen as a lack of faith..."   -Zach

The classic example of this is **the evolution debate**. While the world around us has accepted evolution as scientific fact, many religious communities remain in opposition, because it threatens their belief in an almighty creator. Or more accurately, it threatens a literalist interpretation of their scriptures.
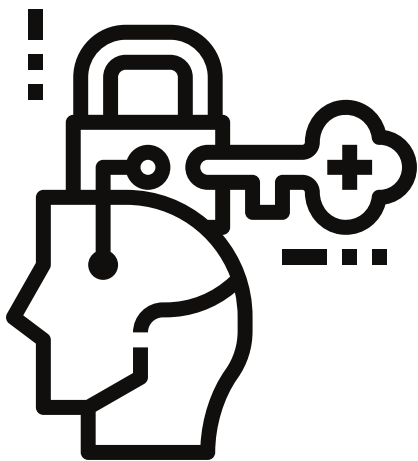
1: HOW RELIGION THINKS

PROOF?

Another concern that atheists have with the way we think are the so-called "proofs" for God's existence that we have offered. Many different theories have been argued over the last several centuries, and it is hard to know which is more to blame: the act of trying to prove God's existence itself or the fact that many of our arguments are not well thought out.

THEORY	DEFINITION	REBUTTAL
Unmoved Mover	Someone had to set things in motion...	Not necessarily Someone, just something (Big Bang)
Ontological Argument	Being able to imagine a god means God exists	Imagination doesn't constitute reality
Beauty	The beauty of creation suggests God exists	Beauty is subjective to the beholder
Personal Experience	My experiences tell me God exists	My experience tells me that God does not exist.

1: HOW RELIGION THINKS

INTELLECTUAL ARROGANCE

One other concern to mention is how many religious communities claim to be people of faith, but are **much more devoted to certainty**.

The atheist will be the first to tell you that there are things they do not understand beyond that which can be proven. Thus, in a way, they claim to be more comfortable with the unknown than many faith communities. Astronomers are ok confessing there are things out in space they don't yet know, while there is not much room for mystery in many churches today.

Thus, many secularists would say that religion is guilty of intellectual arrogance at best, and intellectual dishonesty at worst.

1: TAKEAWAYS

A) DEVELOP A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH SCIENCE

In an ideal world, these two communities could learn to coexist together. While science can tell you HOW creation came into being, religion can tell you WHY. And WHO was behind it. If the ultimate goal is truth, faith and science are playing for the same team.

B) CULTIVATE A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH MYSTERY

At some point, religious communities started being known for their certainty, rather than their faith. Remember what Hebrews 11 states, that faith is a confidence in things "hoped" for. Not things we are certain of.
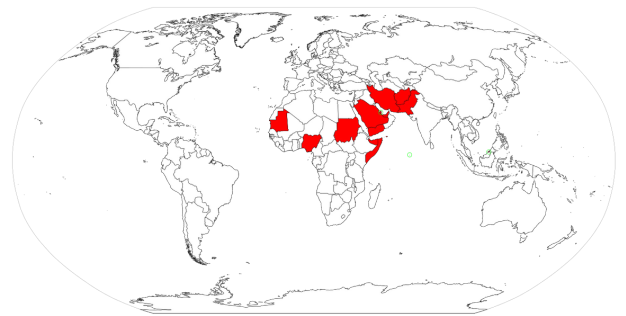
C) RESIST A BINARY WORLDVIEW

Another thing that is common in religious communities is a mutually exclusive worldview. One that works very hard to differentiate between that which is sacred vs secular. So much so that the world often experiences religion as being more divisive, rather than unifying. We become more concerned with the afterlife, rather than this one.

2: HOW RELIGION BEHAVES

REVERSE PERSECUTION

Somewhat ironically, the group that historically received persecution has become the **persecutor** when it comes to the atheist community.

Atheism is still punishable by death in 13 countries.

At best, our atheist neighbors have been treated like projects for conversion. At worst, they have been abused, intimidated, or even killed in attempts to silence their voices. In our fear and insecurity, we've treated atheists like an enemy, instead of a skeptical sibling.

2: HOW RELIGION BEHAVES

MORALITY OF FEAR

The message heard in many religious groups is that if you don't convert or subscribe to their belief system, there will be (literal) hell to pay.

"When I admitted to being an atheist to my youth group, they immediately used fear of hell as a way to win me back." -Sam

Not surprisingly, trying to scare people into heaven has not been an affective strategy. Increasingly, not only are persons turned off to that message, but they find that God hard to trust or even like.

2: HOW RELIGION BEHAVES

MORALITY IN OUR SCRIPTURES

Another concern worth noting is the morality found within the Bible can be confusing at times. One could make the argument that when it is read in a literalist fashion, the Bible seems to condone violence, slavery and other social evils that cannot be supported in any way.

To be clear, not all religious groups read or interpret their sacred texts in this way; however, not enough work has been done to help those outside of our faith understand the nuance of when to read their scriptures literally and when to read them literate-ly.

2: TAKEAWAYS

A) DO NO HARM

It shouldn't have to be stated, but regrettably it does. Religions should be just as concerned about the means of their apologetics and evangelism as they are the ends. Violence or harm is never justifiable. Especially if the end is simply assimilating persons into a particular belief system.

B) ASK YOURSELF IF YOUR FAITH IS LAW OR GRACE BASED?

A law-based faith is focused on rules, laws, and lists of the things you can vs cannot do. Behind this type of religion is an egocentric and legalistic god. Conversely, a grace-based religion speaks of a God that loves and pursues after us despite our mistakes. It is a God who desires connection over blind submission.

C) PRACTICE READING YOUR SCRIPTURES IN CONTEXT

Oftentimes, one of the unfortunate outcomes of reading and interpreting sacred scriptures literally is that you paint yourself into a corner. You handcuff yourself to a way of reading that requires you to remain faithful to a God you don't actually believe in. Don't be afraid to study and interpret your scriptures in context. This gives the reader permission to gain clarity on which passages are black and white, and which are up for further exploration.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you would like some additional resources (again, to understand...not debate), here are some additional authors and books to check out!