

Intelligence Squared: Would the World Be Better Without Religion?

Adam Lee on November 17, 2011, 6:39 AM

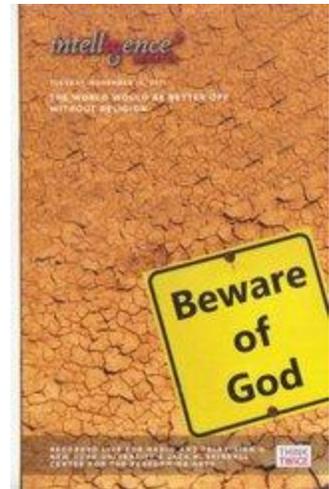
On Tuesday night, I attended a debate at NYU's Skirball Center that was part of the Intelligence Squared debate series, "Resolved: The World Would Be Better Off Without Religion". Supporting the atheist side were Matthew Chapman and A.C. Grayling, while Dinesh D'Souza and David Wolpe were arguing on behalf of religion.

You can read the NYT's recap [here](#), or watch the video. I was furiously scribbling notes throughout the debate, so these are my thoughts on how it went down. (My wife Elizabeth was the one who got me to go, and you can also read her thoughts on the evening.)

Of the four debaters, I actually think that Wolpe, the rabbi, came off best. He was the most polished speaker of the bunch (not surprising, since he has plenty of practice), and it was obvious that he'd done a lot of preparation: he reeled off facts and figures throughout the evening about religion and philanthropic work. Chapman and Grayling spoke reasonably well, but their talks seemed more off-the-cuff to me.

D'Souza, by contrast, spoke well but didn't come off very sympathetically. The audience actually booed him when he argued that it's perfectly fine for the Vatican to own so many priceless treasures of art and architecture, because it was the popes who commissioned them in the first place. (Thankfully, the atheists didn't overlook the obvious rejoinder, that the popes were the ones who did this because they had all the money.) He also made a tasteless and insulting remark alluding to abuse by religious figures in Matthew Chapman's past, implying that he was only calling himself an atheist because he was angry at God. And there was a palpably stunned silence when he claimed, near the end, that Christian colonization was a good thing for India because it was a way for Indians to escape the caste system.

As far as the atheist case went, I think Chapman and Grayling held their own, but they missed several good opportunities to land really devastating blows. They could have said more about the Catholic church preaching against condoms in AIDS-stricken regions, for example, or the mistreatment of women in Islamic theocracies, or evangelical witchcraft panics in developing countries. In response to Wolpe citing statistics about the connection between religious belief and charitable giving, they could have pointed out that even groups like Hamas build schools and hospitals, underscoring the point that religious volunteerism is at least partly fueled by tribalism,



rather than compassion per se. They also didn't discuss whether it's *social organization*, rather than religion per se, that encourages believers to give more or results in them living longer.

Similarly, in response to Chapman discussing the Dover trial and the threat of creationism and anti-intellectualism generally, D'Souza claimed that it's just a "1% minority of religious rednecks" who support such ideas. That was a really outrageous absurdity that the atheists could have hammered him over, but they let it slide. Similarly, when Wolpe argued that no one takes literally the Bible verses about, say, chopping off a woman's hand if she grabs a man's testicles, Grayling missed a chance to point out that what Wolpe was really advocating is *cherry-picking* - keeping the good parts of religious texts and discarding the bad ones - just as he himself argued earlier.

However, the atheists did land a few good punches. Both Chapman and Grayling brought up religious homophobia and mistreatment of women, which neither Wolpe nor D'Souza did anything to rebut. Grayling also made the clever move of bringing up Stalin early on in the debate, comparing Soviet communism and religion as similar in that they're both "totalizing ideologies" that brook no dissent. That was a nice trick to preempt and defuse the inevitable ploy of tarring all atheists with the communist brush, not that stopped D'Souza from trying it anyway.

In the end, the atheists "won", in that that a greater percentage of undecided audience members voted for their side than for their opponents. Given that this was secular New York, with a self-declared atheist majority even before the debate began, this probably doesn't prove much. Nevertheless, I'm glad this debate was held, even if it didn't break a lot of new ground. Even the idea that this *could* be debated would have been unthinkable not long ago, and its increasing prominence as a topic of public discourse shows that the New Atheism is having an effect. If our position is correct, as I of course believe it is, then we can only stand to benefit from making our case in public and putting religion's spokesmen on the defensive.