

Atheists, Believers Debate: 'Secular Bible' Author Urges Choosing Own Morality

By Alex Murashko | Christian Post Reporter | Wed, Nov. 16 2011 03:28 PM EDT

Two prominent atheists argued Tuesday night against a Christian apologist and a rabbi that the world would be a better place without religion during the Intelligence Squared U.S. event at New York University.

British philosopher and professor A.C. Grayling, who is the author of *The Good Book: A Secular Bible* and more than 20 other books, teamed up with filmmaker Matthew Chapman, the great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin, to argue against religion.

David Wolpe, who is rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and author of *Why Faith Matters*, joined Dinesh D'Souza, president of the King's College in New York City and author of *What's So Great About Christianity*, to argue the case for religion.

The format for the debate included making the statement, "The world would be a better place without religion," a motion that the atheist panel attempted to support with their arguments. The faith-based panel presented their case for religion and against the motion.

The live audience of more than 800 people voted on the motion after the closing arguments.

Grayling summarized his anti-religion viewpoint in his ending statement during the debate by arguing that people should count on their best reason and human experience for guidelines.

"It seems very unkind to say this, but alas it's just basically true. The religious outlook on the world has its roots and origins in the beliefs and the superstitions of illiterate goat herders that lived up to 3,000 years ago," Grayling said.

The prominent British atheist said in order to have world peace, it is essential that people "do that hard work of choosing our morality, choosing our ethics, choosing about the principles of which we live," instead of borrowing or inheriting doctrines.

"But to think afresh, start again and look at this world as a place where reason and human experience have to be our best because they are in fact our only guides," he concluded.

After relating a story about the fact that people can survive without food and water a lot longer than they can without hope, Wolpe summed up his position favoring the world's need for religion by talking about its importance.

"There are people all over this world, who whether you think of them as simple minded or not, the hope of their lives, the purpose of their lives, the good that they do is dependent not on evolutionary pressures alone, but on the idea that God does not threaten them, [and] not that God is going to send them to hell, but that God created them in God's own image," Wolpe said.

Such human beings “would not live three minutes without that hope,” said the rabbi. “[A]nd if you vote for the motion then you are suggesting that the world would be better if that hope was taken away from them. It isn’t and you shouldn’t.”

D’Souza summarized his position by saying, “A world without religion would in fact be a meaner, harsher, grimmer world. Religion for all its flaws gives us a kinder and gentler world and that’s why it’s better to have a world with religion in it.”

Chapman, who is the co-founder of Science Debate, an organization seeking to get politicians to debate science policy issues, concluded by arguing that religion has caused the world a lot of social injustices and ills.

“Ninety percent of Americans believe in God, but we have by far the largest prison population on earth. Drug addiction is widespread. Gun violence is grotesque. Our education system is one that produces kids whose math and science skills are far lower than in secular countries while our rate of teen pregnancy are far higher. In a country so rich and Christian it’s amazing how many people live in abject poverty,” Chapman argued.

But science has helped the human population by helping to reduce infant mortality rates, finding cures for diseases and extending a person’s average life expectancy.

“All this progress, all this beautiful knowledge, all this alleviation of human suffering in 100 years,” Chapman asserted. “Religion has had thousands of years to prove its supernatural effectiveness. It hasn’t. We think it’s time to try a safer and more enlightened way.”

D’Souza told The Christian Post on Wednesday that he thought the debate went well despite the final vote from the audience showing that 59 percent of them favored the motion.

“I think we made our case. We knew we were going to be in the lion’s den. This is secular New York. There was a large contingent of NYU students. We knew we were in hostile territory,” D’Souza said. “We aren’t surprised that we were out-pollled.”

“Grayling relied heavily on the kind of quips that got easy applause from the crowd. He was appealing to the existing prejudices, which are that religion is basically bad because it imposes a stern morality on people and because it is a kind of delusion. He never made the case that it was that, but he assumed it was.”

The Christian apologist concluded, “The goal for me in these types of [debates] is to demonstrate that there is just as much reason on the side of the believer as there is on the side of the atheist. I think that we emphatically demonstrated that.”

The Rosenkranz Foundation initiated the Intelligence Squared U.S. Debate Series in 2006 and continues to provide major support. The Oxford-style debates from New York City are based on the debate program in London, Intelligence Squared.