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Have a Little Faith? At NYU, The Debate Rages On

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

Pascal's wager met "American Idol" Tuesday night when a capacity crowd gathered at a New York University auditorium to vote on the resolution: "The World Would Be Better Off Without Religion."

The occasion was the final fall event hosted by Intelligence Squared, a debate series founded in 2006 to promote old-school Oxford-style debate on urgent public issues, with a digital-age twist. The audience votes on the proposition before the debate and after, using an electronic keypad attached to each chair, and one side is declared the winner.

Data compiled on the Intelligence Squared Web site suggests it might be easier to move earth than it is to move heaven. While most of the group's debates on policy questions like "Repeal Obamacare" or "Afghanistan Is a Lost Cause" tend to start with 30 percent of the audience undecided, a 2007 one on the resolution "America Is Too Damn Religious" ended pretty much where it began, with 70 percent for, 24 percent against and a mere 6 percent undecided.

Perhaps mindful of the stakes, the group rolled out some especially heavy intellectual artillery Tuesday night. Lining up on the atheist side were the prolific Oxford philosopher A.C. Grayling, the author of "Against All Gods" and "The Good Book: A Humanist Bible," and Matthew Chapman, a journalist and filmmaker who also happens to be Charles Darwin's great-great-grandson. Making the case for the believers were Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, whom Newsweek once named America's top pulpit rabbi, and Dinesh D'Souza, the conservative pundit and author of "What's So Great About Christianity" and "Life After Death: The Evidence."

John Donvan of "Nightline" was the moderator, though there was certainly little moderation in evidence as both sides campaigned hard for the mushy middle, mostly by arguing against type. The believers brandished statistics — religious people live longer (7 years for whites, a whopping 14 years for blacks); give away more money (including to secular causes); and have started far fewer of history's wars than is generally believed (only 7 percent, by one count).

"When a religious person does something wrong, people get particularly upset," Rabbi Wolpe said. "You're supposed to aspire to be better, and that is exactly right."

Meanwhile the doubters cited chapter and verse, the more appalling the better. "It's cheap to poke fun at the Bible because it's so easy," said Mr. Chapman, before quoting some particularly

salty passages from Deuteronomy with throaty conviction. Religion, he argued, brainwashes children, oppresses women and gay people, stymies science, distorts thinking, and deforms morality. “The harm it does is absolutely enormous,” he declared.

The “Tonight Show”-style stage set and reliance on audience participation added some fresh energy to a debate the philosopher Charlie Dunbar Broad once described as having “acquired the repulsiveness of half cold mutton in half-congealed gravy” (and that was all the way back in 1939).

Mr. D’Souza dismissed Mr. Chapman as “a wounded theist,” in childish rebellion against the mean Sunday school teachers of the world. (“Are you angry at God?” Mr. Donvan asked Mr. Chapman. “I’m angry at Dinesh,” he retorted.) Rabbi Wolpe piled on, calling Mr. Grayling “the victim of a very parochial education” and chiding him for taking lessons on Lot’s wife from a London cab driver — and getting the story wrong to boot.

Mr. Grayling, meanwhile, called Mr. D’Souza “the greatest rewriter of history I’ve ever encountered,” arguing that Christianity wasn’t the wellspring of Western civilization but rather “an Oriental religion that erupted into European culture and derailed it for 1,000 years.”

For all the verbal fireworks, most of the debating points were familiar. Is Stalin more accurately seen as a godless mega-murderer (Mr. D’Souza), or as a zealot who learned his intolerant ways in a Russian Orthodox seminary (Mr. Grayling)? Do Christian aid workers stick out their missions longer than their secular counterparts because they have more deeply rooted moral convictions (Mr. Wolpe), or because they have an “extra agenda” (Mr. Chapman)? Are religious folk more likely to be unfairly blamed for their evil deeds or excessively praised for their selfless ones?

To that last point, Rabbi Wolpe conducted a wildcat poll of his own. How many in the audience had heard of the Christian aid group World Vision, the largest aid organization in the world? A smattering of hands went up. How many had heard of the much smaller, and completely secular, Doctors Without Borders? Nearly every hand went up.

“We’re at a tremendous disadvantage because both our opponents have British accents,” Mr. D’Souza lamented near the end of the evening. As it turned out, the better accents also delivered the better arguments, at least as far as the self-selected audience was concerned. In the end, 59 percent of the audience voted for a world without religion, with the undecideds swinging clearly toward the atheists.

When the results were announced, Mr. Chapman pumped his fist and the audience erupted in applause. But if passions ran high on Tuesday, that may be nothing compared to what goes down next May, when Malcolm Gladwell and Buzz Bissinger face off on an even more hotly contested quasi-theological proposition: “Ban College Football.”