

Let's Abolish Religion!

How two British atheists convinced a crowd of New Yorkers that the world would be better off without faith at last night's *Slate*/Intelligence Squared U.S. debate.

By Elizabeth Weingarten | Posted Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2011, at 3:40 PM ET

According to Chapter 25 of Deuteronomy, if you're in a fight and your wife attempts to help you by grabbing your adversary's testicles, you should chop her hand off. That's just one piece of evidence that religion does not make us better people, joked Charles Darwin descendent Matthew Chapman at last night's *Slate*/Intelligence Squared U.S. debate. "I know it's kind of cheap to poke fun at the Bible because it's so easy," Chapman said to laughter during his opening remarks for the debate motion "The World Would Be Better Off Without Religion." "But there is a serious point here. Far from making us behave better, religion often complicates and distorts morality. By any reasonable standards, hacking bits off your wife is far worse than her squeezing your enemy's nuts."

The packed audience at NYU's Skirball Center agreed—or at least thought Chapman's side, the one against religion and for the motion, offered the better argument. Chapman, originally from England, and philosopher A.C. Grayling battled for the debate motion with dry British humor and digs at archaic religious texts. Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and president of King's College Dinesh D'Souza argued against the motion and for religion, by highlighting evidence of religious goodness, and appealing to the audience's less cynical side with stories of faith.

The audience voted electronically either for the motion, against it, or undecided, before the debate and afterward. In the end, Chapman and Grayling's side won because they attracted the most new supporters post-debate. Before the debate, 52 percent voted for the motion, 26 percent were against, and 22 percent were undecided. Afterwards, 59 percent voted for the motion, 31 percent against, and 10 percent undecided.

Chapman and Grayling argued that anything good religion does—encouraging ethical behavior, providing comfort and community, promoting charity—nonreligious groups do, too. But along with the good stuff, religion also consigns women to a second-class status, foments division and conflict, oppresses gay people, encourages credulity, and stunts scientific progress. Of course, not all religious people share the same insular perspectives, but most extremists do, Grayling argued. "The extremists are the most honest of the people who have a religious view because they commit themselves to what their tradition tells them, and they stay closest to the text," he said, explaining that moderate believers often "cherry-pick" the best parts of their religion, ignoring the rest. "Now, if that's real religion, that's honest religion, the world is very much better off without it."

Wolpe and D'Souza maintained that religion does a vast amount of unrecognized good in the world—unrecognized because media outlets won't run an article with the headline "Religious Man Feeds Hungry Man." Religious wrongdoings, on the other hand, are exaggerated and overhyped in the news. Wolpe rattled off study after study showing that religious people are more likely to volunteer and participate in civic life, and less likely to do drugs or get divorced. Apparently, believers are even healthier and live longer. Oh, and if you think religious fundamentalists are evil, they're nothing compared to the atheists. "The crimes of religion, even

of Bin Laden, are infinitesimal compared to the nightmare of atheist regimes,” said D’Souza, naming Khrushchev and Brezhnev, Chernenko, Ceaușescu, Kim Jong-il, Fidel Castro, and Pol Pot as a few examples. “[They] have killed far more people, in far shorter of a time, and are still doing it right now.” The world without religion, the men said, would be a bleak and impoverished place.

The question, Chapman said in his opening statement, is not whether religion does good in the world. “Of course it can and it has,” he conceded. “The question is: Can we come up with something better that does not depend on dangerous and childish faith and thousands of competing gods? Can we persuade people that it’s possible to live a good, peaceful and happy life guided only by human conscience and modern knowledge?”

And about that peaceful and happy life: Why, Grayling wondered, pointing to one of Wolpe’s cited studies, does it matter if religious people live longer lives? “If you’re religious, you live longer, that puzzles me,” he said. “I mean, isn’t heaven meant to be a nice place?”

D’Souza asserted that atheists often turn away from God because they feel wounded, not because they want evidence for transcendent belief. He claimed that Darwin, Chapman’s great-great-grandfather, only became an atheist after his daughter, Annie, died, not because he discovered evolution. Then, things got even more personal for Chapman.

“You, Matthew, in your article in **Slate** magazine talked about nuns or teachers who beat you on the ankles and people who stuck their hands down your pants,” D’Souza said, referring to Chapman’s account of his days at a religious school. “My point is, in many cases, we’re not dealing with facts. We’re dealing with wounded theism. Many times when we hear the word ‘atheism,’ we’re dealing with a person who is angry with God or angry maybe with the representative, the self-appointed representative of God.”

“Matthew Chapman, are you angry with God?” asked debate moderator John Donvan, a correspondent at ABC News.

“How can you be angry with somebody that doesn’t exist?” Chapman fired back. “I’m angry with Dinesh because he’s making these preposterous statements about my—”

“Well, I didn’t put my hand down your pants,” interrupted D’Souza.

“—Great-great-grandfather,” finished Chapman. “His atheism didn’t come solely from the fact that his daughter died. It was a very slow process of seeing how the theory of evolution was in conflict with the Bible.”

The “for” side invoked the Bible several times during the evening, inspiring Wolpe to say, at one point, “It’s so interesting that the side that’s quoting the Bible is that side, and the side that has actually provided evidence of any kind is this side.” The other side, Wolpe said, seemed to miss the point of the debate. “We’re asking not would the world be better off if you rewrote the Bible, but would the world be better off without the influence that religion has on religious people.”

If you believe people are fundamentally good and don’t need behavioral guidance, you’ve never visited a playground, Wolpe said to laughter. “My experience is when a new kid comes to the playground, the other kids don’t go, ‘Oh, look, a new child. Let us embrace him and share our toys.’”

Wolpe took offense at Chapman’s argument that religion encourages credulity—breeding generations of unquestioning, naive believers. The idea that atheists denounce religion because they’re intelligent and religious people believe because of some psychological deficit, “not only slights the idea that religious people are capable of thought, but also tries to railroad into this

belief that you should condemn it without actually looking at all the statistics, the ideas, the history that we cited.”

And why, he said, would he be there that evening if religious people were unthinking, credulous automatons?

Wolpe earned more points when he criticized one of Grayling’s Tom Friedman-esque anecdotes about a London cabdriver. (Grayling was apparently trying to prove that Judaism wasn’t responsible for Western morality, but didn’t have a chance to finish his story.) Grayling asked the cabdriver if he had read the Old Testament. He hadn’t, but recalled a bit of it. Grayling then asked if he remembered the story about God destroying Sodom because he hated its homosexual residents. He continued on with the story of Sodom until Wolpe cut in.

“Sodom was not destroyed because of homosexuality,” he retorted. “Read the book of Ezekiel. It was destroyed because of the cruelty of the people of Sodom, their immorality. And with all due respect, I think that to cite London cabdrivers, pithy though they may be, as the demonstration that Judaism didn’t actually create the morality of the West, may be a little thin.”

Even if Judaism *did* construct the moral code of the West, those ethics haven’t stuck, Chapman said. “If religion made people behave better, markers of social dysfunction, drug addiction, ignorance, teen pregnancies, violent crime would be much lower in highly religious societies,” Chapman said. “In fact, the opposite is true.” Ninety percent of Americans say they believe in God, he claimed. “But we have by far the largest prison population on earth. Drug addiction is widespread. Gun violence is grotesque. Our education system produces kids whose math and science skills are far lower than in secular countries while our rate of teen pregnancy is far higher. And in a country so rich and Christian, it’s amazing how many people live in abject poverty.”

Science, on the other hand, has cured the sick, reduced infant mortality, and increased life expectancies. “All this progress, all this beautiful knowledge, all this alleviation of human suffering in 100 years,” said Chapman. “Religion has had thousands of years to prove its supernatural effectiveness. It hasn’t.”

At the end of the debate, neither side seemed to have a clear advantage over the other—which was reflected in the “for” side’s narrow win. Both D’Souza and Chapman agreed on reason for the debate outcome: “It’s New York!” laughed D’Souza. “[Wolpe and I] talked before and said if we can hold our own in New York City, we’ll be doing pretty well. But hey, this was a bit of a hostile crowd!”

Chapman, too, told me they won because of the liberal crowd. “I think the other side would’ve won in more primitive areas,” he said. “We had a more forward-looking, progressive argument.”

Moderator John Donvan dismissed the idea of a biased audience. He believes they’re open-minded, and that they listen closely to the quality of each argument. Still, he was somewhat surprised by the results. “I thought Wolpe and D’Souza’s arguments had more blood, sweat and sinew in them,” he said. “They were arguing that it would be a bleaker world [without religion], and to some degree, I did feel like I was hearing about a bleaker world from the side that won.”