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Lecture Series: The Doctrine of God
Lecture 3: “The Anti-Theistic Theories”

ANTI-THEISTIC THEORIES

Definition of Theism: Theism is the doctrine of a transcendent, personal God who is the creator, preserver, and governor of all things. Any doctrine which denies this is anti-theistic.

Denial of the Existence of God: The idea of God is practically universal in the human race. Yet, there are those who deny the existence of God as He is revealed in Scripture—a self-existent, self-conscious Person of infinite perfections, who works all things according to a pre-determined plan. This denial has assumed many forms in the course of history. (see: L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 22-26).

Atheism: Absolute Denial of the Existence of God. Atheism says the universe is all there is. No God exists anywhere, either in the universe or beyond it. The universe or cosmos is all there is or ever will be. It is self-sustaining. Some of the more famous atheists were Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Two types of atheists

The Practical Atheist. One who lives as though there were no God, and is thus simply a godless person (Psa. 10:4; Psa. 14:1; Eph. 2:12). Many of these men may be of a high moral character, though not interested in spiritual things. They are not men who base their disbelief in God’s existence on a philosophical basis. And they frequently give up their atheism in moments of crisis and danger. The saying applies to them: “There are no atheists in foxholes.”

The Theoretical Atheist. These men base their disbelief in God’s existence upon rational arguments and a philosophic basis.

Three types of theoretical atheists:

Dogmatic Atheism. These men deny categorically that a Divine Being exists.

Skeptical Atheism. This is another name for the Agnostic, who doubts that the human mind is capable of determining whether or not there is a God.

Critical Atheism. These men maintain that there is no valid proof of the existence of God.

Naturalism: A corollary to atheism. The philosophical world view that begins with the fundamental assumption that the forces of nature alone are adequate to explain everything that exists.

Definition of Naturalism. Naturalism is the belief that natural causes alone are sufficient to explain everything that exists. Naturalism holds that life arose from a chance collision of atoms, evolving eventually into human life as we know it today. The conflict of our day is Theism versus Naturalism. The most fundamental questions of life are reflected in this conflict of world views: Is ultimate reality God or the cosmos? Is there a supernatural realm, or is nature all that exists? Has God spoken and revealed his truth to us, or is truth something we have to find, even invent, for ourselves? Is there a purpose to our lives, or are we cosmic accidents emerging from the slime?

The implications of naturalism:

Moral relativism. If nature is all there is, then there is no transcendent source of moral truth, and we are left to construct morality on our own. In contrast, the Christian believes in a God who has spoken, who has revealed an absolute and unchanging standard of right and wrong, based ultimately on his own holy character.

Multiculturalism. As a consequence of relativism, the naturalist treats all cultures as morally equivalent, each merely reflecting its own history and experience. But Christians can never equate truth with the limited perspective of any group. Truth is God's perspective as revealed in Scripture. Cultural practices are right or wrong as they are judged by Scripture.

Pragmatism. Since naturalists deny any transcendent moral standards, they tend to take a pragmatic approach to life. Pragmatism says: Whatever works best is right. By contrast, the Christian judges actions not by what works but by what ought to be, based on the objective standard of God's Word.

Utopianism. Naturalists generally embrace the Enlightenment notion that human nature is essentially good, which leads to utopianism. Utopianism says: If only we create the right social and economic structures, we can usher in an age of harmony and prosperity. But Christians know that sin is real, that it has deeply twisted human nature, and that none of our efforts can create heaven on earth. Heaven is a hope that will be fulfilled only by divine intervention at the end of history. In the meantime, the human propensity to evil and disorder must be hemmed in by law and tradition.

This-world perspective. Naturalists consider only what happens in this world, this age, this life. But Christians see things from an eternal perspective. Everything we do now has eternal significance, because one day there will be a judgment, and then it will become evident that our choices in this life have consequences that last into eternity. (see: Charles Colson, *How Now shall We Live?* Chapter 3: "World Views in Conflict")

BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW vs. NATURALISTIC WORLD VIEW

God exists / God exists only in the minds of those who believe in him

Universe created by a transcendent God who loves us and has a purpose for us / Universe is the product of blind, purposeless forces

God has spoken and revealed his truth to us in the Bible / Truth is something we invent for ourselves

Moral commands of the Bible give us an objective basis for right and wrong / There is no ultimate objective basis for right and wrong; humans create their own standards

The dominant world-view today is Naturalism. This has created a culture in the West that is both **post-Christian** and **post-modernist**.

Post-Christian means that Americans, along with most other Western cultures, no longer rely on Judeo-Christian truths as the basis of their public philosophy or their moral consensus.

Postmodernism rejects any notion of a universal, overarching truth and reduces all ideas to social constructions shaped by class, gender, and ethnicity. As a result of this rejection of any universal truth, all viewpoints, all lifestyles, all beliefs and behaviors are regarded as equally valid. Morality is replaced by relativism.

Pre-modern world: In the pre-modern phase of Western civilization people believed in the supernatural. Individuals and the culture as a whole believed in God (or gods). Life in this world owed its existence and meaning to a spiritual realm beyond the senses.

Modernism: Began with the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Characterized by a trust in human reason and the rejection of the supernatural. Confident in their human abilities, their reason and scientific knowledge, the modernists had no need for God. Modernist theologians said “modern man” can no longer believe in miracles, the supernatural events described in the New Testament must be reinterpreted for the “modern age.”

Postmodernism: Many associate the postmodern shift with the counterculture of the 1960s. Characterized by a rejection of any absolute truth. For the postmodernist, truth, meaning and individual identity do not exist. Human life has no special significance, no more value than animal or plant life. Toynbee predicted that the postmodern age would be the final phase of Western history and one dominated by anxiety, irrationalism and helplessness (Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History, 1948). Toynbee acknowledged that sometimes a civilization rejuvenates itself by means of a religious awakening.

(For a complete discussion see: Gene E. Veith, Jr. Postmodern Times, 1994)

False Conceptions of God Which Involve a Denial of the True God

There are a number of false conceptions of God current in our day, which involve a denial of the theistic conception of God:

Deism: The belief in a supreme Being, whose only relationship to the world was that of Creator. Deism is like theism minus the miracles. It says God is transcendent over the universe but not supernaturally active in the world. It holds a naturalistic view of the world while insisting that there must be a creator or originator of the universe. It is represented by men like Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.

Theism: God created the world and acts in it.

Deism: God created the world and does not act in it

Atheism: There is no God.

Pantheism: This view equates God with the universe. All is God and God is All. For a pantheist there is no creator beyond the universe. Creator and creation are two different ways of viewing one reality. God is the universe (or, the All) and the Universe is God. There is ultimately only one reality, not many different ones. Whatever is, is god. God is an impersonal energy, force or consciousness. Pantheism is represented by certain forms of Hinduism, Zen Buddhism and Christian Science.

THEISM vs. PANTHEISM

Heavenly Father/Cosmic Force

Personal Being/Impersonal Power

Created all things/Is all things

Transcends all things/Permeates all things

Absolutely good (no evil)/Neither good nor evil

Polytheism: The view that there are many gods in the universe. Polytheism is the belief that there are many finite gods in the universe who influence it. They deny any infinite God beyond the world such as in theism. They hold, however, that the gods are active in the world in contrast to deism. The main representatives of this view are the ancient Greeks and the modern Mormons.

You can be consistently both a pantheist and a polytheist at the same time. Many finite gods in the world but the world is one entity. Hindus have 33 million gods, yet all believe in one infinite being—Brahman.