

# **THE SECRET ATHEIST**

**F. Aster Barnwell**

“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God,’ ” says Psalm 53:1. Contrary to the countless sermons on the folly of atheism that this statement has inspired, I do not believe that it is concerned with the self-declared atheist. Let’s understand the construction of the psalmist’s indictment. First of all, there is no objective category of human beings that satisfies the definition of “fool.” Simply put, a “fool” is not a category of people. He or she is a person—any person—who does something foolish. Someone can be a fool one minute and an ordinary person the next. What this verse from Psalm 53 is describing is an act that turns the person so acting into a fool. It is really saying, “Anyone who thinks in his or her heart that there is no God, is a fool.” Normally, when one plays the fool, there are consequences to pay.

Note that the declaration that ‘there is no God’ is made in the heart, which is to say, in secret. Why would one keep this belief that there is no God private? Because one who feels this way does not want others to know his or her true feelings. This person says one thing in public and does another in private, or in secret. He verbally acknowledges that he believes in God, but deep down, he believes otherwise. What purpose could this duplicity serve? Well, he believes there are advantages to be gained by making a false profession of belief in public. He might intend to gain favor with other believers. However, in the privacy of his heart, he laughs at the true believers.

## **A Psychology of Duplicity**

What is the psychology of such a one who leaves others with the impression that he believes in God, but in private scoffs at the idea? It’s a psychology that says, “I’m not bound by the behaviors that are required of those who truly believe in God.” It’s also a psychology that says, “There’s one set of rules for them and another set for me.” In other words, he believes that he is exempt from complying with all the requirements which true believers feel they ought to fulfill.

By standing openly with believers, such a person behaves like someone who enters into a contract knowing full well that he has no intention of fulfilling its requirements. He will

renege on a contract with any counter-party whom he believes does not have the power to force compliance from his part, because, for him, a contract is simply a way of getting something that he wants. By making a public show of belief in God while choosing in secret not to behave in a way that belief in God requires, such a one has no concern for the consequences. In other words, he is behaving as if the God in whom he professes belief is powerless or non-existent. So, in effect, he's saying in his heart that there is no God!

Why burden oneself with obeying the precepts with which God-fearing people are expected to comply when there is no consequence or penalty for non-compliance? That's why such a person is called a fool. He's living a double life and is basing his strategy on the things he's experienced in his life so far. Perhaps, he has ignored so many precepts in the past without experiencing any adverse consequences. However, Christian scriptures say that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.<sup>1</sup> For the individual who is living a double life of a secret identity hidden away from public scrutiny, he will find one day that his secrets will get out. Because, one day, the heart will get too heavy under the burden of too many secrets. Or perhaps, he will get careless, and his duplicity will be discovered. Such are the unfathomable ways of the heart, for as the 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal puts it, "The heart has reasons that the reason cannot know."<sup>2</sup>

## **Beyond Believing or Disbelieving in God**

I believe that the Christian community has for too long concerned itself with trying to convert self-declared atheists, people who, for one reason or another, do not feel sufficient justification exists to make an intellectual accommodation for a transcendent authority outside of themselves. Despite such a stance, if such individuals live their lives with caring and compassion for others, then whether they profess verbally to believe in God, or not, does not really matter. What matters is that, through their compassion, they're acknowledging the existence of other human beings. And this is more useful than acknowledging that God exists but acting in disregard for other human beings who walk the earth with them.

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<sup>1</sup> "...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (2 Peter 3:8 ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, translated by W. F. Trotter, Sec. IV, 277.

<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/pascal/pensees-contents.html>

What should really occupy the concern of Christians are the people who claim to believe in God but act as if no one else matters, especially when they exist outside one's immediate circle, or community, or nation. For belief in God to have any real meaning, it must impact on the way we live every facet of our life, and we should be able to infer from the way someone lives whether such a belief has resulted in some observable change to their existence. For in reality, if we can find people who claim to be atheists acting more compassionately towards other fellow human beings than people who claim to believe in God, then it would be fair game to question what value an avowal of belief in God brings to our human community. Shouldn't a society claiming to believe in God be ahead of a society of unbelievers in terms of values that celebrate our oneness, such as kindness and compassion? Perhaps this is what the apostle James wants us to bear in mind: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:19 ESV)

So who would we rather have for a companion if we're marooned on a deserted island? Someone who claims to believe in God but is oblivious to our existence, or one who does not voice such a belief but acts in kindness and compassion towards all? Maybe, what really matters is how we behave towards each other rather than what we claim to believe. For as we know too well among our human species, it's possible for the tongue to say one thing and the heart to affirm its opposite. And as we know, it's what our hearts affirm that speaks to the truth of who we really are.

There's a saying in the legal community that goes somewhat like this: Any layman who acts in a court of law as his own legal representative has a fool for a client. This is the same idea here: Those who think they can forever evade the consequences of their actions by disguising their true intent with a false statement of belief about God, have a fool as a counselor, albeit one who resides in their own hearts.

**F. Aster Barnwell**

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**Contact: [aster@AsterBarnwell.com](mailto:aster@AsterBarnwell.com)**