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#86 Deconstructing faith and answering atheism

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Are altar calls too simplistic? I'm deconstructing help!... Can my atheist friend take the high ground on morality? Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world (and get the show e-book) · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Great to have you with me here on the show. I'm Justin Briely, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor. Another chance to sit down with New Testament scholar NT Wright and the program brought to you in partnership with SPCK & NT Wright Online.

Today, look at your questions on deconstructing faith and atheism as well. As I mentioned last week, we're going to be shortly launching our new YouTube channel featuring all of the shows from the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast, all in video and questions and everything really available in one space on YouTube. So look out for that.

Thank you, Poppa, who got in touch and left a review of the podcast saying "These shows are a must for all Christians, Professor Wright's thoughtful exposition of both history and Christianity have challenged my long held assumptions about God, Jesus and early Christianity. I like these popcups. Thank you, Poppa.

Giving us a five-star review. If you can do that as well, it helps other people to discover Tom's thought and theology. For now, time to get into today's program.

Don't forget you can get more from the show by subscribing over at AskNT Wright dot com. Welcome to today's edition of the show where we're taking some of your questions on deconstructing faith, rethinking faith. Has my perspective on faith been too simplistic and those sorts of things? We've had a number of cases in the UK and the USA, Tom, in

recent years of quite well-known Christian personalities have declared that they're "deconstructing" which has sort of come to mean something anywhere between completely losing one's faith, deconverting to radically rethinking it and shaking up some old categories.

I'm thinking particularly of a well-known personality, Joshua Harris, who a couple of years ago declared that he had ceased being Christian, having been quite a well-known figure in the evangelical Christian world. Having said all that, not expecting you to comment on any of these specifics, but we have got some specific questions from questioners. Maybe we'll start with one person asking, are we presenting things too simplistically sometimes? Chris Ann in Wisconsin says, "Tom, here in the US churches are gearing up for vacation Bible school season." Now, this was obviously sent in before the summer break, but Christian wants to say, "Many young kids attend summer camps where they smash water balloons, scream at the top of their voices, and are invited to ask Jesus to forgive them for their sins and be saved." Now, the last part is such a big deal in my church that the congregation already knows at what day and time this summer that "altical" will come so that we can be praying for it.

Now, I attended many of these camps as a child, and though I believed in Jesus, the "altical" inevitably made me cringe. In recent years, I come to recognize that the tension was pointing to something bigger, that the good news is so much more than a transaction between me and God. So here's my question.

Should we, as parents and Sunday school teachers, continue to explain salvation so simplistically to our children, as in, "Europe and God forgives you you're going to heaven"? Are we really leading many to salvation by pushing them to make a confession at a Bible camp? If it was dissonant to me as a five-year-old, I'm sure it is for other five-year-olds today. I want children to be saved but not by a formula. So this relates to things we said on other podcasts before as well, Tom, of course.

But I mean, what was your experience? You've said in the past that you, you, you know, went to Bible camp, script union camps, and so on. Would you say that there was a similar sort of "get you to the altar and make a decision" sort of moment that things were geared towards? Yes. In the script union of Bible camps, or they weren't called that, but that's what they were, that I attended all through my teens.

There was a sequence of talks. If you went for a 10-day camp, for instance, there would be short talks, very short and very carefully controlled by the people who are running it because young student helpers were all eager to share their faith and had to be told, "You've got seven minutes and we're going to be coming after you if you go any longer," etc. So it was well done, usually, but there was always a point about halfway through where there was a very special evening talk, which was if now is the moment when you want to commit your life to Christ or whatever, often with an allusion to Revelation 320,

behold, I stand at the door and knock.

Now I want to say, I know many people who, looking back now from my great age, who have been lifelong Christians who came to faith in such a context. I thank God for that. I do not want to knock it.

I'd be cutting off the branch that many of my friends are sitting on. I, as I've said before, grew up in a church going praying, believing Bible reading home, not an evangelical home, an ordinary middle Anglican home where these things were more or less taken for granted, and where it was just assumed that you would be finding your way into this world. And I had some very powerful experiences of the personal love of Jesus and the presence of Jesus long before I ever knew that there was such a thing as a Bible camp so that when I did go and I prayed all the prayers whenever anyone said, "We're going to pray this prayer," I would think, "Yes, I really want to pray that prayer." So I'd been through it many times and I'm not ashamed of having done that, but I totally agree that for many people, particularly coming out of context, as it were, here's somebody who's in a totally non-Christian world and suddenly off they go to a Bible camp.

And sometimes even if they're from a Christian world off they go to Bible camp. And it often comes in the middle of teenage angst and hormones raging this way and that and personal transitions going on of one sort or another. And it's a very confusing time.

And it's one of the reasons why when I've worked with students in university level, I often think that actually that's in some ways a better time when they're on the threshold of adult life. If they haven't come to faith before, then here you are, what you're going to do with your life, where are you going, here are some decisions which you as a young adult may need to think hard about and here's how it might work. That in some ways is a better time.

Teenagers and pre-teens are very vulnerable, especially when the adults doing the talks are people that they really like and trust. And that's both a good thing and a dangerous thing. So you hear me being ambiguous about it.

I think if people are praying and one of the things I remember very much when I became a leader in those camps is that the daily, actually twice daily prayer meetings and the prayers before and after those camps, those are the real things that count. You can't just bounce in, do a sequence of talks, hope it'll all work. It's got to be soaked in prayer for the individuals coming, for the people doing the talks, for the whole context, etc.

Prayer is the thing that's really going to matter. And God will honor that even if then our muddled evangelistic programs may flail around and say some of the wrong things here and there. Thank God for that.

God doesn't wait till we get it all right before God can go to work through the gospel. But

there are so many things I would say about that. The only other thing here, and I'll try and keep this short, is that for me, the thing that really counted as I look back was that the actual life which I could see being lived by the people who are doing those talks just shone out that they were people that I respected and trusted.

And that's the crucial thing. And I suppose, you know, if ultimately, yes, we are presenting our young people with a sort of prepackaged, here's the gospel in five minutes and this is the moment at which you make some decision. Perhaps there are better ways than that of explaining it and helping people.

But ultimately, there's nothing wrong in a sense, I hear you saying Tom, with there being a moment of decision. Now, we want to make sure people understand the fullness of what that decision involves. It's not just a ticket to heaven, it's embracing of a new way of living in the world and all that that entails.

But a decision isn't necessarily a bad thing. No, no quite. But there are decisions and decisions and actually making big decisions when you look at it cross culturally is quite a sort of dare I say, sort of middle class thing to do.

I'm going to decide we're going to build a company and do this and that and the other. There are lots of people in British culture, never mind the rest of the world, who don't get to make those sorts of decisions for all sorts of socio-cultural reasons. And we have to be careful how we use the word decision because it isn't actually a very biblical theme.

Remember, there was that time when somebody from decision magazine came to interviews, he asked Lewis to try to get him to talk about the decision he had made. And Lewis actually said it wasn't my decision. God closed in on me and he said, I was decided upon.

I wanted to get out of it, but God didn't let me do that. And the wretched interviewer says, sound like you made a very real decision there, Mr Lewis. And we're going to put you into our categories, whether you like it or not.

So we do have to be aware of that, that God moves in many mysterious ways. And our task is to be there, to be prayerful, to be wise, to set things up. But sometimes to get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit do the rest of the work.

And that's not an abnegation of responsibility because we have to follow up, et cetera as well. But the prayerful letting God do the business with somebody is really critical. Well, I mentioned we would use the word deconstructed as well in this episode.

And Jeremiah in Chico, California uses that term in his question. He says, I was raised in a conservative, non-denominational evangelical church, but began deconstructing during early adulthood. At this point, I've deconstructed on penal substitution, newtonement theory, angry God theology, eternal conscious torment, complimentarianism, and the

hyper literal interpretation of revelation.

However, I still hold to the core ideas of the original evangelical movement, that is, a high view of scripture, an emphasis on faithful cultural engagement. I've also found myself drawn to the practice of liturgy and desiring the structure, affiliation, and identity of a denomination. Do you have any thoughts on where someone like me might find a theological home? It's very interesting to me, first of all, Tom, that Jeremiah uses the word deconstruction, which has become a sort of buzzword, as I say, for what I see happen all the time, and it has happened for many generations before, where people simply, as they grow in their faith, come to realize that the particular container or point of view that I was given growing up, I have to move beyond.

I don't find that those categories helpful anymore, and so on. I could equally use the word evolution as much as a deconstruction for some of these things. It's something I've gone through.

I don't believe all the things in exactly the same way I believed them when I was 15 and became a Christian. What's your thoughts on both this journey that Jeremy has been on and where he might look to try and helpfully ground the direction his faith has taken us? Yes. Yes.

Yes. I mean, yes, the word deconstruction has filtered into more popular consciousness, having started as very much a French philosophical postmodern movement, with Theradar and people, where deconstruction is a way of reading texts, where we look underneath the text for what the real social dynamics are, even if that isn't what the book seems to be about. We're trying to probe into that and deconstruct it into its different subterranean impulses as it were.

Now it just means dismantling, if you like, and I would prefer that word really, dismantling some of the superstructure that I was given as a child, because I realize this doesn't quite make sense. In terms of where one goes to find a church which will help you do that, in America, that's tricky right now. People ask me, if you were suddenly transported to America, where would you go to church? The answer is, I don't really know, my own denomination, the Anglican or Episcopal Church, has been in turmoil in the States for the last 25, 30 years, and there are breakaway movements and they've run into problems now of various sorts.

I get emails from good friends who are Episcopal or Anglican who are struggling with how to be in their own denomination. But in terms of liturgy, I do believe in good liturgy as if you like a bridge between worlds. Now liturgy can go dry on you, it can go stale, it can become formal, but not to have liturgy is to shut yourself up to whoever's spirituality happens to be leading the worship that day.

I have found for myself that the old Anglican liturgy, even though there are some bits of

the language which don't quite go with, I think, where scripture is taking us, nevertheless they give me a larger form of words into which I can settle down and make myself at home. And to have a church which uses good liturgy wisely and well is actually a gift for life because if you go to church once or twice or three times a week, there's all the rest of the week, how are you going to structure your prayers? Do you have the spiritual energy every day to pray fully as you would want to pray? The old prayer book which I use day by day, and I know by heart, says here is a structure which will enable you to stand or sit or kneel in the presence of God day by day and few find things which you really know in your heart of heart, so what you want to say to God, from which you can develop your own patterns of personal prayer. So I want to say yes, please, other churches, do explore good liturgy.

It isn't anti-spiritual or unspiritual. That's a modernist folly to think that. Find ways of reconstructing our church life to give you the wise ancient and yet modern liturgy that will help you day by day for the rest of your life.

Yes, and Jeremiah, when you do find the perfect church, let us all know about it. We'd all like to join. One more question.

In a sense, we've gone from sort of that moment of confessing Christ to that evolution/deconstruction of faith to someone who's asking a question really on behalf of a friend. This is Kay in USA who says, "I was recently in an argument with a friend on the topic of morality. Now he has very recently left his faith and embraced atheism head on.

He criticizes my morals on everything from my Christian faith to eating meat. But my question is, what is morality anyway? And does it actually mean anything if you're not religious?" And perhaps my friend would be appreciated too as he is struggling with big questions. I mean, I suppose, yes, it's interesting to me, Tom, because I chose this question partly because when I have seen people who have altogether left the faith, very often it does come with some real resentment or bitterness towards the faith that they had people feel they were in some sort of very strict thing that sort of stopped them being free and so on.

And very often, a very critical of the religiosity of people and indeed, we would say that it was an immoral system in the first place. This person, I suppose, wants to know what do they do with a friend who's in that place, who's being now very critical of the faith they had and their own morality. And I suppose, asking that, it'd be a deeper question as well of kind of non-religious person even claim a moral framework.

I mean, where does this supposed morality come from, which I guess is a deeper philosophical sort of question on top of that? Well, of course, we are there plunged into the debates which have taken place in philosophy over the last 2,500 years since the ancient Greeks at least. And if I knew more about Chinese philosophy, probably debates going way, way back even further there, though that's not my field at all. But obviously,

ancient epicureanism, which is the grandparent of modern secularism, was precisely not religious because they didn't believe in the gods or they thought that if there were gods, they were a long way away and didn't care about us.

So epicureanism develops a morality out of kind of enlightened self-interest of how to find such calmness and such happiness, not riotous happiness because that always leaves a bad taste, but a kind of calm, detached happiness as best you can. And that's been the philosophy of many people in our world. The trouble is it doesn't work terribly well as ancient and modern epicureans have regularly found.

And so people have tried to probe other ways, et cetera, and the history of philosophy is all bound up with this. Part of the problem in the way we ask the question is the meaning of this blessed word religion itself, which has changed radically since the ancient world to the modern world. That's a whole history of how that word has shifted and what it means now in America and Britain and Europe and so on.

But obviously, those who have embraced different forms of Christianity or Judaism or the so-called great religions have a morality which goes with that. But because ultimately what you believe and how you behave are intertwined with one another, that's bound to be the case. And if you try and separate them, that's a recipe for some kind of personal schizophrenia.

Now, I very much understand that people who were brought up with a very tight, restrictive way of faithful religion, you must do this, you must believe that, you must do this, that and the other, whatever, not do this, that and the other. Then that comes a point when they, ah, come on, most of my friends don't believe this stuff. Why should I be in this straight jacket all the time? And they break out.

And then sometimes they find a new resolution out beyond that does happen and sometimes they don't. Some people, when they leave that constricting faith, they're very wistful about it. I know somebody who left the faith in his early 30s and was really wishing he could get back and didn't know how because he'd been living a kind of early teens faith through his 20s.

And suddenly he woke up in his 30s and why would I believe that stuff? Because it hadn't been growing and maturing with him. And I don't actually know where that person is now. I pray for them regularly.

But there are other people who, as you say, are very angry about it. And ironically, in the biblical studies professional guild, there are lots of people who grew up as angry fundamentalists or angry Catholics who have now angrily left their framework and used their biblical expertise to, to, to, to, polymerize against the faith in some form or other. And there are good examples of that.

Well known, I don't hardly need to name them. And again, I want to say what a shame that the early version they had was so restrictive that they felt they had to have that great outburst. I never had that restrictive framework.

Here was ordinary church going, nothing dramatic or over the top. I was free to grow within it and to explore scripture within it. And that's what I've done all my life.

So I want to say, don't, again, babies in bathwater or, or, you know, tea and tea pots or whatever. Don't, don't throw out the whole thing. Keep Jesus in the middle.

Ask yourself and ask Jesus. What does it look like for me to follow you today? Because that's what please God, I intend to do. Please give me your spirit to help me do that and to think through what's going on as I do it.

That may feel rather a narrow place to stand compared with all the superstructure which one used to have. But actually it was all about Jesus in the first place and if it wasn't, it wasn't worth anything. So ask the question with Jesus in the middle and stick with it until you start to get some answers.

And just with my apologies, sat on in regard to the sort of philosophical aspect of that question. What is morality anyway? Does it mean anything if you're not religious? Huge debate on that, of course. But I, I personally have always found people like seriously was helpful on that one, you know, who himself obviously, his conversion involved a recognition that he couldn't talk, you know, be angry about the justice in the universe if there wasn't someone to ground that justice.

And likewise, if you want a really deep dive into the sort of, you know, his own case against naturalism, then miracles is possibly a place to go with the question. Yes, Lewis's miracles is a great book. Even now, I mean, 50 years later, it's a remarkable book.

I read it again just recently, having read it only once before, early on in my faith is a sort of probably about the age of 18. And it struck me, you know, a good over 20 years later. This is just as good as the first day I read it.

And it's just as relevant to everything going on right now in these, you know, the philosophically. I think that's right. And miracles is where Lewis actually expounds the resurrection in a very vivid way.

And I remember that from reading it as an undergraduate. A friend told me I should read it and I'm John, glad I did. And I don't know that Lewis really expounds the resurrection anywhere else in quite the same way, but he sees because he knows about ancient storytelling, because that was his professional field, that what those stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the resurrection stories are doing is something unique in the history of story writing.

And they are faced with a reality which was unexpected, but so vivid and so world changing. And he he nails that he gets it right. Well, prayers for UK and your friend who you're continuing to dialogue with.

My advice would be even as Christians evolve in their understanding faith, I see atheists who evolve in theirs. And you may find that your friend has to go on a journey before they can come to a point of sort of starting to just that sort of interact in a way that perhaps is more fruitful. But it's been great to have all these questions.

Great to have your time and attention on them as well. Tom, thank you so much for for dealing with so many in the course of our recording today. God bless you.

Thank you. And we will see you again soon. I hope.

Yes, indeed. All the very best to you and to your viewers and listeners. Thanks for being with us on today's episode of the show.

Next time we've some bonus content of Tom in action on other stages and in other conversations around the world. And you can get more from the show of course at askntwright.com. Make sure you're signed up there to be entered to prize giveaways to get updates and all the bonus stuff as well. As I've mentioned, we're excited to be launching our NT right YouTube channel soon.

You'll just need to wait a few more weeks with some exciting new content that we're going to be launching with it. If you're able to support the show that helps us bring Tom's thought and theology to many more people, we'd love to send you the exclusive show book as a thank you as well. It's our ebook 12 answers to questions about the Bible life and faith.

Again, that's askntwright.com and click on give. Thanks for listening. See you next time.

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