

Transcript 154

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. On occasion, we like to bring on a special guest to talk about the topic or issue or even like a worldview that's of particular interest to our audience or things that we get a lot of questions about. Joining me today is Doctor John Wise. He's the creator, producer, host of the Christian Atheist podcast. So John, welcome to the show today.

Doctor John Wise

Thanks for having me, Shea. I really appreciate it.

Shea Houdmann

So both the Christian atheist, that's a very thought provoking title in itself, and I've read a little bit of your testimony. So why don't you some introduce yourself to our audience and tell them about the ministry, the calling that God has in your life.

Doctor John Wise

Ok. One of the common comments that I get about our podcast is what kind of a, what kind of a moron are you? Are you an oxymoron? So the idea of the Christian atheist, I I meant to be provocative and precisely that sense because it is paradox. And I think that the the thing that I open every podcast with is welcome to the Christian Atheist where faith and reason fuse in the incarnation. And the incarnation is one of those things that we can't really understand. How does the infinite become finite and still maintain its infinitude? And so I tried to capture some of that in choosing that name, the Christian atheist. So to briefly summarize, I don't know how far you'd like to go, so if you'd like to ask questions more, I would be delighted to to go into whatever depth you choose to go into it.

Doctor John Wise

But I spent 25 years as an atheist. I had just begun my PhD work at the University of California, Irvine, and previous to that I had done four years of Bible College planning to become a minister. And I had studied philosophy with one of my professors at Bible College. And by the time I graduated from Bible College, I was well on my way to agnosticism. And so I didn't think my career choice of being a pastor was so good at that point because most most congregations would prefer their pastors to be more certain about the nature and belief in God. And so I started with a program in philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. And one day I was walking across campus in my first year and being an agnostic, I finally said to myself no there is no God. And from that point forward, for the next 25 years, I just considered myself an atheist and taught as an atheist as I got my degree. But as I say in the podcast, events were conspiring and God was working and over those 25 years there was a whole series of intellectual things developing through learning about philosophy and the like doing my dissertation work on Jean Paul Sartre, a famous 20th century atheistic existentialists, and finding things in SART and in Immanuel Kant and in Hegel and in Descartes and all of and Plato, and finding all of these things began to point me in a different direction from that in which I was going. And so the ground was beginning to be laid by God. As I look back now, it's very clear. It wasn't at the time. It was just, you know, me learning about philosophy then.

Doctor John Wise

But it became very clear in 2019 when one day I was sitting in church, that's a story all by itself, but I was sitting in church and the pastor was preaching on Joshua. And a lesson that I've been teaching for years from Socrates popped into my head and the lesson was this. If you want to know what someone truly believes, watch what they do. Don't listen to what they say. And I applied it to myself and suddenly, and I'm it wasn't a religious experience. And and as far as I'm concerned I've never had a religious experience at anytime in my life that would qualify as some sort of, you know, religious experience. So I've never had that. But at that moment, it was a realization, I'm not an atheist. I've never lived like an atheist. Because an atheist believes that there is no transcendence, and I've never lived like that at any point in my life. And I almost at that point stood up and stopped myself in church, stood up and thought to myself, I'm not an atheist. And it struck me then that something was sincerely wrong in my viewpoints.

Doctor John Wise

And the reason I had become an atheist, why I made that switch back in the early years of my graduate work was I was familiar with CS Lewis's work, and in particular the Magician's Nephew in which he presents the woods between the worlds. And agnosticism seems to me to be a woods between the worlds. It's a place where it's kind of sleepy and you make no decisions because you don't have any reason to jump into one pool or another. And I thought to myself, here I am an agnosticism. I spent the first 25 years of my life as a Christian. I began to have serious doubts about Christianity because it seemed to me I could never find the certainty I was looking for. And I felt as though as a Christian in Bible College in particular, I was trying to convince myself of the reality of God rather than really believing it.

Doctor John Wise

And so at that day in, in my graduate studies, I said to myself, stop being a coward. There either is or is not a God. That's the nature of binary logic. Make a choice. And I said, OK, I choose, there is no God and from that point forward, there was no looking back. Although there were times I had deep regrets about that because my family was Christian. My wife was Christian and I knew I was hurting them and so I felt that deeply. As I told Christians who have talked with me since then, there was something like a switch that had turned in my mind, and even though in later years 2015, 2016, 2017 when I came to realize that the rational case for theism was actually stronger than the case for atheism, I still couldn't make this switch. And I couldn't understand why part of me wanted to, part of me didn't, but I just came to believe that there was no path back for me.

Doctor John Wise

So to cut the story short, quickly, in 2019 my wife, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2013 and put into a nursing home in 2015 died early in the year. And I was looking around thinking this is going to be my life. So I started thinking to myself I would really like to be married again and I looked around at the the world of people and I thought to myself, you know, the only type of woman that appeals to me is a woman who has all of the beliefs that Christians have. And that, of course, was troubling because I knew as a former Christian, I couldn't marry a Christian because if I were to do that, I would destroy them. Because you're not to be unequally yoked. And yet through the death of my wife and the death of a woman that I met in church named Jenny. Who had seven children, raised them all.

And when she came to church, her husband was in the process of dying of cancer. And I helped one time to drive him to one of his cancer treatments. And after that we sort of texted back and forth because we had in common these things about our spouse. And so we became kind of good texting friends back and forth. Her husband died in 2017, and we just continued to text back and forth. And you know, it's a good friendship. She understood me well. But I started to think to myself, OK, I'm going to start dating. And so I dated a college professor from someone close to us, and boy that fell through quickly because there's no way I could be married to that person because of their belief system. And every time I would look around and think, well, why don't I ask this person? And the answer always came back she's not Jenny. And so time moved forward and Jenny and I took our kids. We didn't see each other much. I tried to help out for her with some problems she had at home, things like that, car problems. But we didn't really see one another at all, except once in a while in church. And we we took our kids to the local pool. Overlook pool. And she was telling me some of her troubles and out of the blue, she said I I just I don't know what to do here. I feel like I'm stuck in Jello and can't move. And on the spur of the moment, I said to her well then you should marry me. And she said, you know what, John, if you were a Christian, I would pack up the car tomorrow and marry you. And that stopped me because two reasons. One, she was everything I'd wanted ever in my life, and two, I knew that I'd opened a can of worms here because I suddenly recognized that the feelings that I'd had were being reciprocated. And that terrified me because it meant I was going to destroy her if I pursued this.

Doctor John Wise

Well, a week later we were scheduled, my my daughter and I, were scheduled to go on a camping trip and I went to New York with my daughter and I met up with my niece Bronwyn, and we began to talk about who I was and who I'd been all my life. And Bronwyn and her husband, Bill, very salt of the earth Christians, loved them. Adored them. Always have, but I didn't share their faith. Talk to me again and said wait a second, who in the world are you? Who have you been all of your life? What is it that you've done? Have you ever acted like an agnostic or an atheist, or have you always held on to the truths. And I of course just said, well, yeah, of course I did because those are the things that I were brought up in, they seem to work well. And they seem to be the sort of structure of the world in which we live. And she said, that sounds an awful lot like something a Christian might say. Yeah. I said so there's no way back for me, though, that'll never happen.

Doctor John Wise

But during that week, God was working seriously on my heart and my head. And about a week after we returned from New York, I made the switch. And it was odd because it was like an and if you know CS Lewis's Surprised by Joy. It was kind of a moment like that, where things fall. Things opened up. And there was a moment where I could again make the decision. And what stood before me was not two intellectual positions, because for me, the intellectual thing had already been settled long ago. Having reviewed the evidence, what stood before me were two value decisions. One in which the world made sense and in which value was eternal and real. And one in which value was merely epiphenomenon. And it became clear to me which one I should choose, and that was the turning point. Not immediately, but slowly. And first I came back to theism obviously. This the idea that there is a God is not only rational, but it's the rational rational position that I want to hold. And then, because my wife had been Christian all before that, it collapsed back into Christianity.

Doctor John Wise

But there were even questions moving forward from there. But that's my that's my testimony. Jenny and I married in August of 2019. And decided immediately that we wanted to dedicate the rest of our lives to proclaiming the message of Christ in one way or another. And so we launched the Christian Atheists, our podcast in 2019, the end of 2019, and another podcast called Simple Gifts meant to educate Christians on the basic things of the Western world that we have lost because our educational system has basically thrown them into the gutter. And so we tried to bring them back. And I have over 400 episodes of that, just presenting things that Christians should know. Things that we should be aware of. And not just Christians, but non Christians too, who should be aware of what our culture is made of. And all of those things, in my view, point to Jesus. All of them. In one way or another. And so that's what we did. We have almost 100 episodes of the Christian Atheists now, comes out every week, and we're continuing to build the ministry. We have like 8 almost 900 on YouTube, 900 subscribers. Hoping to build that of course. And it seems as though God is blessing us. And helping us move forward. We just put out our first book and if, if any of you are interested in my testimony, the real story behind all of this is well documented in here. But you can also listen to it very clearly on the Christian Atheist podcast in the 1st 10 episodes of the podcast The Christian Atheist.

Shea Houdmann

So John, thank you for sharing that. I always love hearing the story of journeys like yours, where I mean being someone who's a not on your level, but a fairly deep thinker myself and I've had to think through these things intellectually and not that the intellectual part is the deciding factor. But for me it's a major factor that I could not be a Christian if I did not find it to be intellectually tenable but find it to be coherent. If I did not find the arguments for theism to be stronger than arguments for atheism, and the arguments for Christianity being the one true faith versus all the others. So intellectual arguments play a huge role for me, but at the same time, also fully cognizant what the Bible says is that without faith it is impossible to please God. And we must even believe that God exists, even the very first step is a step of faith ultimately.

Shea Houdmann

You said something earlier, kind of hit on it twice that and now this could be an entire episode or series episodes itself, but maybe just what is the one theistic argument that, as you were on your journey from atheism back to atheism, that maybe was the most convincing for you? The one that really made you thinking, you know what I'm finding that the arguments for theism are stronger than the arguments for atheism.

Doctor John Wise

OK, so I actually have an episode on like the arguments for the existence of God. And I don't find any of the sort of traditional arguments for the existence of God to be I I mean useful, maybe, but not all that powerful and certainly would never turn an atheist over. What convinced me was the nature of value in the world because either value is real. And it's something objective. Something that we can grasp and something that carries on beyond the human psyche. It's not just something we create in the mind, whether as individuals or as a culture. It's something objective and real that we find in the universe. That seems to be self-evident to me. And if it is self-evident where in the world does that come from?

Because if we're living in a materialistic world in which everything is that, just material, reality, then all of this thing that we call love and value and beauty don't exist. They're simply epiphenomenon that evolved with consciousness, and that, to me is utterly repulsive. I don't want to live in a world like that. If I'm forced to choose between 2 visions, one that says that that's exactly the nature of value and the other that says no, value is real. It's actually bounded and founded in the nature of a transcendent God. I choose that one. And I think that human psychology, human life and the human psyche, I mean, I'm just grounded in that as a fundamental human reality. And that I actually took probably most powerfully from studying the work of Jean Paul Sartre, who ended up, you know, was an atheist all his life. But I learned so much from studying being in nothingness, about the nature of human consciousness, and the acknowledgments that even Sartre himself made that this points to a transcendent God. It's like OK. And I put that together with all the other things, and I often get the question, you know, what was it that that turned you around? It wasn't one thing, it's the whole picture. And I do think belief in God is the only way to put together a coherent, a truly coherent, rational picture of human experience in the world. I have. I don't if I addressed your question or not, but.

Shea Houdmann

You did like and I wasn't. I was once all. I love the ontological argument of the Cosmo. I was looking like what, what was it for you and just you the value principle that ultimately atheism, there's nothing of value in the world if you follow that mindset to its logical conclusion. Now, having listened to a few of your episodes of your podcast. I haven't read your book yet. I'll definitely want to do that. We'll include links to both your podcasts and where people can purchase your book in the show notes and the description on YouTube, and also at podcast.gotquestions.org when this episode goes live, but one of the things you focus on is and maybe I'll phrase it as a question. So John, what is wrong with the world?

Doctor John Wise

If you've listened, I mean, I'm not sure how far you got into it, but this is actually a question when we were going back and forth you asked me what should we talk about and what came to mind, was GK Chesterton, was once, I think by an editor sent the question what's wrong with the world? What's wrong with this world? And Chesterton put into a letter that he sent immediately back to it 2 words. I am, and I thought that's pretty clever. And I do love GK Chesterton. Well, I'm actually in the process of reading his everlasting man right now on to our simple gifts podcast. So if anybody's interested in, in listening go to, go to a simple gifts podcast and listen to it. It is an amazing piece, extremely influential and CS Lewis. So for me I agree with GK Chesterton, right? I am what's wrong with the world. We all are because we are all sinful creatures

Doctor John Wise

And yet, I mean for me as a philosopher, this was actually one of the questions that drove me into the study of philosophy. And I think I actually found the answer in Graduate School, and it's almost as simple as GK Chesterton's. What's wrong with the world is Gailord Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. A philosopher that nobody reads anymore. Almost no one understands when they do read him. And has faded into the annals of history, almost never to be heard from other than by some of his most famous followers, the Marxists. But Hegel's Fundamental contribution to the Western world was to take the transcendent, that is that which is outside the world. The religious notion of a God who stands above and outside creation and brings the world into being and to immanentize that. That is to bring it all down to Earth and say no,

everything is just the process of becoming. There's nothing outside of the process and in fact, God is the process. His, his famous book Phenomenology of Spirit is exactly that. It's that attempt to reduce all things in our world to an explanation that is simply within the world. And so the destruction of transcendence is, I think, what's wrong with the Western world. It has invaded our, forced our academic institutions and utterly destroyed them, and it's now invading the church. And we see it in our culture all around us in wokism, right, because if indeed there is no transcendent boundary placed into the world, into the universe, into the cosmos by a transcendent God, then there are no real boundaries and we can choose whatever we want. So if I want to be a woman tomorrow, I can choose to be a woman, and that is, of course, utterly ridiculous. But that's the logical outplay of the Hegelian philosophy that began and was promulgated, and slowly but surely has infiltrated our culture and our world from back in the 1830s when Hegel died. So that's a, you know, I told you you'd have to rope me in when I start wandering off so.

Shea Houdmann

Not at all. I mean, I I enjoy conversations like this because make me think as well. And again, we're we're not going to touch on so much. But really what I wanted to do in this podcast and introduce our listeners to you. So listeners any of you who enjoy philosophy and enjoy a good philosophical conversation, I'd strongly encourage you to subscribe to the Christian atheist podcasts. Doctor John is an excellent communicator, deep thinker and also someone who's dedicated to pointing people towards Christ as the answer, and that's what I appreciate most about it. So John, you said something very briefly and maybe this can finish up our conversation. You said that the Hegelian mindset, the lack of transcendence is infiltrating the church and in your observation what are some of the ways you see that happening?

Doctor John Wise

OK, another one of my favorite podcasters is James Lindsay and he talks about this. In fact, as far as I know, he's the only other person who has gotten on the train. And he he got on it after I did. But I think he's probably even doing a better job than I am in presenting this to galian stuff, so his new discourse podcast I would strongly recommend if you're interested in the philosophical foundations of that. The way in which Hegel I think is infiltrating the church. One of the things we saw in the in the Southern Baptist Convention is that it started moving towards accepting some of these woke ideologies. And and also another thing that seems to bother me, I'm I'm still a university professor, and so I teach at the University of Arizona global campus. And inevitably, in every class I have students who come in proclaim that they're Christians and no reason for me not to believe it. They they seem to be perfectly decent people and and Christians and believe in God, and they express that and that's exciting for me because I

I I can now get on board with my students who are Christians. But almost all of them are following the woke ideology. They're on board with, with abortion. And so these ideologies that have slowly crept in and are be and are undermining the Christian structure of the West that has brought us to this point where we've actually almost defeated poverty in the world. All of that structure that we've built on the on the Christian understanding of the world and is slowly being undermined is also being undermined in the church. And I ask myself, how are we failing to teach these students that it is God who gets to make the call as to what is right and what is wrong? It's not something that is relative. And if you disagree with it, it doesn't change God's position. And so that worries me deeply, because, I mean almost Shea, almost every Christian student that I have is on board with all of these this these, this leftist agenda that is

undermining our culture. And it's terrifying. I do my best in my classrooms to push back a little, but I've been I've got, I've gotten in trouble with my administration, right? Don't turn our classroom into a Sunday school. And of course, I never tried to do that. But I I can't help but speak the truth as I see it in my classroom. And so I fear for my job. But even more, I fear that we're losing the battle for the culture and for the values of the Christian world. And I don't know, I mean, I'm I'm not, I'm not deeply involved in trying to trace out how the end times unfold, but this certainly seems reminiscent of a lot of the things that are going on in the end times before things start to come to an end. And I don't know, but I think it's our job up to the very end to push back, to point people, to Christ. And that is the only way that we come back from this. To turn back to Transcendence, to the real God of the universe. Who gets to make those calls? Not human beings.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely. I could not agree more, even in Got Questions has been around for 21 years now and even in that time I've seen a massive shift in the the questions, I mean, not even this, not the questions themselves, but in the way people are asking them. And then the way people who will respond. Like even just recently someone asked a question for which the Bible has an absolute direct answer. I give them an answer and I ohh it's great to hear what the Bible say, but like they ask so what do you think about it? It's like I think you're misunderstanding the purpose of our ministry here, not to give our opinion. And ultimately, my opinion on this issue is based on what the Bible teaches. And so it's just like the whole everyone's opinion is equally valid. How Christianity can be a have it your way. I love the stories about Jesus. I love the idea that he died for me to pay for my sins but should that really impact the culture around me. And those sort of things. How could it not, I mean? How could you want to compartmentalize your life so that Christianity is has such a limited factor in how you live your life and how you respond to the world around you. It's it's shocking. It's distressing. Exactly what you were saying is that how can you possibly hold to what you just said and then hold all these beliefs? And to them, it's entirely it, I would say it makes sense, but they don't even see why it doesn't make sense even worse, why it can't possibly make sense.

Doctor John Wise

Right. So let me make one point on that one, because this points back to my my claim about Hegel. One of the fundamental transformations that Hegel lot was to undermine the logical structure of the Western world, the Aristotelian logic that has the law of excluded middle. That is, it's either true or it's false. And Hegel says no, it can be both true and false. In other words, contradiction is not logically impossible on Hegelian logic. And this is the way of thinking that we see all around us. Just like you just presented it. It's like you, wait a second I just told you what the Bible says. You understand that I believe that the Bible is telling the truth, THE truth, the transcendent truth. And then you ask me but what's my idea about it? Here's the truth. This is what I believe is the truth. There's your answer and you don't get to choose what it is, and neither do I. We simply have to accept what God said. Accept the reality of the world that he built for us. And part of that reality, I get in trouble for this all the time, is that there are men and there are women. And you can't blur the distinction between the two. It doesn't mean there aren't some weird things that sometimes happen in in nature, but the distinction is there and we don't get to decide what it is. It's not a matter of, oh, I can choose in in the face of the evidence. No, the evidence is clear. The reality is clear. The truth is clear. All you have to do is conform yourself to it. So that worries me.

Shea Houdmann

Worries me too. Believe me that. So, John, thank you for coming on the podcast today. And again, if you're looking for a podcast to listen to, including videos on YouTube to watch, that'll make you think, that will make you think about what you're observing the world and maybe and help you to understand better what you're observing in the world and why it's happening that way, could not more strongly recommend the Christian atheists with Doctor John Wise. So John, thank you again for joining me today and we'll include links where you can learn more about his ministry, his podcast, his book. So you can find all that more that will be available when this podcast goes live.

Doctor John Wise

Yes, thank you. Shea, I really enjoyed it.

Shea Houdmann

It's been the Got Questions podcast with Doctor John Wise of the Christian atheist. Got questions? The Bibles has answers and we'll help you find them.