

Have science, reason and humanism replaced faith?

Steven Pinker, Nick Spencer
& Justin Brierley



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**Steven Pinker, Nick Spencer
& Justin Brierley**



**Steve
Pinker
(SP)**



**Nick
Spencer
(NS)**



**Justin
Brierley
(JB)**

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JB: Welcome to The Big Conversation here on Unbelievable with me, Justin Brierley. The Big Conversation is a series of shows exploring faith, science, philosophy, and what it means to be human, in association with the Templeton Religion Trust.

Today, our conversation topic is the future of humanity. Has science, reason and humanism replaced faith?

Well, The Big Conversation partners I'm sitting down with today are Steven Pinker and Nick Spencer.

Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard University, whose work spans sociology, evolution, language and philosophy. His latest book, *'Enlightenment Now: The Case of Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress'*, makes the case that human progress has never been greater, and we need to guard against unscientific ways of thinking, including religion, to see it continue. Bill Gates has described *'Enlightenment Now'* as his new favourite book of all time.

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Nick Spencer is the research director at Theos and the author of *'The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has Shaped our Values'*. He believes that, while the story of progress may be true, modern thinkers often fail to realise how indebted Western values of equality, democracy and science are to Christianity.

Stephen and Nick, thank you very much for joining me on the programme today.

Stephen, 'Enlightenment Now'; you use a huge wealth of data to show that the world is in a better place essentially than it ever has been, yet looking at our news feeds, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we're in a worse place.

Why do you think generally people adopt a more pessimistic attitude than perhaps the data suggests?

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SP: Well, as long as bad things haven't fallen to zero, there will always be enough of them to fill the news. And since our intuitions about risk and danger and probability are driven by available images and narratives and anecdotes, as long as the news feed contains enough of them... Indeed, if the news becomes more thorough, covers more of the planet, we can fall under an illusion that things are getting worse simply because we're more aware of the events that take place, and we don't have a background of all of these things that are going well which never make the news.

You don't see a reporter in front of a High School, saying, here I am reporting live from a school that has not been shot up, or a country that's not at war, or a city that hasn't suffered a terrorist attack, or a village where the inhabitants have escaped from extreme poverty over the last ten years.

JB: And that's because often the advances are incremental rather than sudden?

SP: They're incremental and they often consist of bad things that don't happen, which by definition, are not news. People living in peace. People living in peace is just not news because it's not an event of any kind.

JB: And, obviously, in the book you make the case that science, reason, and humanism are largely responsible for this progress. To what extent, though, do you see Christianity, religion in general, as being a help or a hindrance in the progress?

SP: Well, it depends on whether you are referring to the beliefs or the institutions. The beliefs, I think, are a hindrance. I think that any kind of supernatural belief, as opposed to our best scientific understanding of

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reality, can't possibly help. If you believe that disease is the result of divine punishment or that curing it as a result of intercessory prayer, then that's clearly not going to make any progress towards global health. If you think that God would not let bad things happen to the plant, so we don't have to worry about manmade climate change; any kind of belief that is just literally not true, or at least not true to the best of our understanding.

Now, likewise, I think a belief in a valuation of souls, as opposed to lives, is not helpful because it implies that our time on earth is just an infinitesimal portion of our existence. That if you send someone off to heaven, you might be doing them a favour. If someone is perhaps seducing people into eternal damnation, and they're a public health menace, they ought to be neutralised for the greater good of all. So, I think there's a large set of supernatural beliefs that we're much better off abandoning.

But the institutions though; institutions evolve, including religious

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institutions, including some but not all Christian denominations. And if institutions – I think, largely, under the influence of Enlightenment values – back off from the literal supernatural beliefs, back off from the Iron Age morality in a lot of the Old Testament, such as capital punishment for homosexuals, and begin to align their goals with humanistic ones, then they can be a force for tremendous good, by mobilising communities, by encouraging altruism. But it depends very much of the extent to which each institution commits itself to humanistic values.

JB: I mean, obviously you're an atheist yourself, and at the end of the book you do quite strongly critique religion and cite, I think, quite approvingly, the fact that atheism or non-religion is on the rise compared to Christianity, in the USA for instance.

I mean, overall, do you think that less religion, more progress essentially is what we are looking at?

SP: I wouldn't put it that way. I'd say more humanism, more progress. But the absence of any particular belief is not a positive or a progressive force for anything. I think it is good not to be misled by false beliefs, but one also has to have positive values.

So, in the case of humanism, these would be human flourishing life, health, education, richness of experience, happiness for as many people as possible. Without that then atheism, by itself, is just nothing. It's just the absence of a particular belief.

JB: Nick, it's great to have you joining us on the programme today as well, and I'm really looking forward to how you engage with the particular viewpoint that Steven has. You've read the book, and by and large, do you

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agree with the fact of, if you like, moral, well, scientific progress, and moral progress I suppose at the same time?

NS: Yes, I do. And I have to begin by saying I'm not temperamentally disposed in that direction. I – having worked in social research for a while - I was aware of a number of the kind of the upward trends with regards health, life expectancy and so on and so forth. But one of the many strengths of the book is the fact that there are 70, 80 charts in there, there's 250 pages going through the obvious such as health and life expectancy, to eccentric but rather wonderful ones like the likelihood of being struck by lightning is less now than it was a hundred years ago.

So, given the fact I'm temperamentally I am not inclined towards a progress, I think Steven's done a brilliant job in making the case. And I think there are some chapters there that should almost be compulsory reading. I think the one on terrorism, for example, which you place the

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scale of the problem within a wider context is a very great example of, as it were, talking us down from the ledge of panic that we have got ourselves into.

So, in that regard, I think it's, I mean, I do think it is a wonderful book anyway, and I'm kind of entirely in lockstep with Steven on that.

JB: So you agree, in a sense, with the story of progress. What about the reasons obviously that Steven brings to bear though; science, reason, humanism as the defining things that are responsible?

NS: Well, this is where Steven and I would part company, in a sense. So, science, reason, humanism I am entirely pro. But, societies developed through what political scientists called the development of inclusive institutions. These are institutions that incorporate people and give them freedom, equality and a degree of stable self-interest, in order to develop.

Now, a lot of these came to fruition in the 18th century, largely because of what happened in England in 1688, which we might come on to. But my, I suppose, critique of it, is that the vast number of those inclusive institutions existed, certainly in theory, and very often in practice, long before the Enlightenment.

So let me give one really kind of eccentric example: In 1623, the English Parliament published the statute of monopolies. It's a completely insignificant historical event, except for the fact that it puts patents on a secure legal basis. If you have patents on a secure legal basis it makes it worth your while to invest money to develop things that you know you're going to get a return from. Property rights is another. Rule of law

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is a third. Some form of political accountability, even to the extent of democratic accountability; these are inclusive institutions. And almost all of them predate the 18th century. And even those that are of the cusp, say something like John Locke's articulation for political toleration and political equality; both of those could, I think, rightly come under the rubric of the Enlightenment. But, it's very telling that Locke justifies his letter concerning toleration and his essays on government on theological grounds.

JB: So, essentially, the Enlightenment and its focus on science and reason and political equality and everything else, in a sense didn't come out of a vacuum. It was preceded by important...

NS: Yes, I think that's precisely my point. So, I don't want to, as it were, downgrade the 18th century, because what happened there was very important. I think, actually, it was more due to the historical circumstances of what happened in England.

JB: And is your argument that it was specifically a Judaeo-Christian heritage that informed the way that the Enlightenment was able to take place?

NS: Primarily, not exclusively. So, I think, you know, Europe is Christian for a thousand years. You are going to get examples of horrendous crimes and wonderful virtues in that period. And it, Steven is right, that one of the legacies – and I say this as a Christian myself – one of the legacies of Christianity are things like the Inquisition or the Wars of Religion, although they were slightly more complex than simply one religion versus another.

But another legacy of Christianity is, one specific example, 1215 Magna

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Carta; the first proper articulation of the Rule of Law in Latin Christendom. It is not drafted by, but influenced massively by Stephen Langton, who's an Archbishop of Canterbury, who, whilst he was at the University of Paris a few years earlier, glosses on Deuteronomy, which talks about how the law has to be above the king.

So, this principle of the Rule of Law - which of course takes many, many centuries to fully bed down - is developed in a distinctively Christian culture. I don't want to claim all the positives for Christianity by any means, but there are plenty of, as it were, institutions – inclusive institutions – or at least ideas behind inclusive institutions, that are developed long before the Enlightenment.

JB: What to do say to that, Steven?

SP: I don't disagree with that. And I used the Enlightenment just as a

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convenient label for a set of ideas that are historically concentrated in the second half of the 18th century. But, as I noted, they certainly have precedence in the age of reason in the Scientific Revolution, which are conventionally located in the 17th century, and the era of classical liberalism conventionally located in the first half of the 19th. So these - as with any historical development, nothing comes out of the blue, out of nothing - and the Enlightenment is just where I think a lot of it was concentrated. But, absolutely, there were precedents.

I mean, it's hard to attribute things like the law of patents to Christianity, although it did, everything has to take place somewhere, and Europe was Christian, and so in that sense, it's birthplace was a Christian civilisation. But there's nothing in Christianity itself that justifies the Law of Patents.

NS: I think that's a very important point, that as a historian you would want to disambiguate things that originated in a Christian culture and those that originate for a Christian reason. And patents, I think, are an example of the former, but a very important example of the later, I think, is the Scientific Revolution itself.

Now, you know, the world had seen many scientific revolutions; you know, in Ancient Greece, in Ancient Rome, in China famously, in 9th century, 10th century Baghdad, 13th, 14th century Paris and Oxford. All of them are kind of nascent scientific revolutions that could have transformed the world and none of them did. Now, the one that happened in the 17th century emphatically did. And it's very telling that the reason it did was because it was justified on explicitly theological grounds. If you go back to someone like Francis Bacon, writing at the beginning of the 17th century, he justifies science - which of course is called natural theology - on specifically biblical

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grounds.

So, I think one of the push backs I would have is that the book doesn't quite sufficiently acknowledge that as a development in Christendom, which is not simply a cultural development, but is actually a theological development.

SP: Well, it's a - that was the water that everyone swam in. That was the air that they breathed. So everything had to be justified in terms of the belief systems that were common ground among the people of the era. And since it only happened once, we can't compare.

Look at the full range of civilisations that had scientific revolutions, at least ones that were persistent, verses ones that don't, to test the hypothesis that specifically Christian ideas were a prerequisite to the scientific revolution.

NS: To push back on that, I think you can, because you have the counter examples of China, which, famously, Joseph Needham spent a lifetime studying, why China, this amazingly technologically developed nation, or state for the sake of arguments, much more so than Europe, didn't translate that technological development into a full-scale scientific revolution. And he comes to the conclusion, and others following have agreed, that it was a lack of what Christians would call a doctrine of creation, and we needn't go into that now, that, as it were, didn't provide the soil for the scientific revolution to happen.

So, actually, I think there are counterfactuals that you can cross compare. And one of the distinctive factors is the Christian doctrine of creation that legitimised and encouraged the study of the natural world as a way of

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understanding and glorifying God.

SP: But, I mean, there's the same counterfactual that have to ask, why didn't – since that was imminent in Christianity from the start – why did it take a mere 1200 years if those ideas were there all along? So it's very hard for things that happened only once, I mean, you can try to come up with the counterfactuals. And, of course, every idea has numerous, you know, tendrils and roots and influences and tributaries.

So, it's certainly possible that Christianity was part - I mean, it was undoubtedly part of the context - whether it was causal, I think is harder to establish.

NS: Of course, causality in history is really tough. But I think the Scientific Revolution is a fascinating example of Christianity both being kind of a catalyst and also a foe. So, the catalyst was for, was as I've said, for the theological argument. But the reason it happened in, say 1600 or slightly later, as opposed to 1500, was because Europe had dragged itself into this massive epistemological crisis in the Reformation, where Catholics and Protestants, they undermined one another, and in the end, the arguments that had been thoroughly strong in 1500 were much weaker in 1600.

So, as it were, Christianity created the problem for which it also created the solution. History is a real mess like that.

JB: I mean, do you personally think that science, scientific progress has, if you like, validated a secular or even atheistic view of reality, as opposed to a religious one?

SP: Yes, it certainly, just in terms of literal factual beliefs like the age of the

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earth, the origin of humans, the nature of life, the size of the universe, has undermined the actual factual claims of Scripture. It has also presented a picture of the laws of nature that allow no place for any kind of goal, purpose, teleology or a concern with human affairs of the laws of the universe.

The origin of life, which used to be one of the great holdouts, that the idea that even if the physical world could be explained by purely mechanistic processes, life required some divine spark, was undermined first by Darwin and then by Watson and Crick.

And I think we're seeing that happen with the mind as well, the idea that there's an immaterial soul is becoming less and less tenable.

JB: You think that ultimately a naturalist explanation will give us everything we need in terms of explanations of who we are and where we came from?

SP: I mean, it will certainly crowd out supernatural explanations.

JB: What's your view on that, Nicky, I mean, if we're going into, sort of, deep waters. Just one comment I suppose before we move on?

NS: I suppose my one comment - obviously, self-evidently, I disagree with Steven in much of that, perhaps not all of it - my one comment would be a caution in this particular debate. I am reminded of a debate by two thinkers, even greater than those gathered around the table, and Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston were debating this subject just after the war. And they almost argue each other to a standstill, because Copleston argued that

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the universe had a creator and Bertrand Russell argued, no we can justify, we say it's been there forever.

And, of course, what happened was the 20 or so years later, the idea of a big bang and some kind of origins of the universe became accepted scientific norm. Now, in that instance, in that particular debate, that would have swung the pendulum away from Russell and towards Copleston. But, of course, you never know what's going to be around the corner. So, if you bank all of your kind of arguments on the latest scientific or indeed kind of historical wisdom, you've got to do so cautiously.

JB: Let's move on to talk about progress a bit because in a sense, scientific progress doesn't necessarily mean the same thing as moral progress. Some, I know, have accused you, Steven, of being too optimistic when it comes to our moral progress and that it is not the same thing as technological and scientific and...

SP: It's clearly not the same thing.

JB: But you think that actually, science and humanism and reason also engender a kind of a moral progress themselves?

SP: It's not just science and technology that propels moral progress, but moral progress has taken place in parallel with scientific progress, the two feeding each other; they're not the same thing.

But, yes, moral progress has taken place in the abolition of slavery, abolition of torture, of capital punishment for frivolous crimes, then capital punishment itself, subjugation of woman and racial minorities, in oppression of homosexuals, in autocracy, in frivolous wars, in pretty much

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any dimension that you'd want to call moral, you could.

And to the extent that you can even pose the question; have we made progress or not? Well, you've got to measure what it used to be like in the past compared to what it's like in the present to see if there's a difference and if it's gone in the right direction.

Not in everything, but in a vast majority of dimensions of human wellbeing, health, freedom, knowledge, access to culture, I think we have made more progress...

JB: Obviously, this is the core of the book, but in a sense, your worldview as an atheist, isn't that there is any overall meta-narrative or dialectic or grand purpose in the universe and yet, when I hear the word 'progress', I always think, well, there's some objective standard to which you are progressing. That suggests there is something external to us which we're measuring ourselves by.

So, how do you square that circle?

SP: Oh, the fact that the laws of the universe don't define any arc of progress, doesn't mean that human interests don't define an arc of progress. There's certain dimensions of human existence that we can say are inherently good. For one thing, there are prerequisites to us being here and having this conversation, like; we're alive, we're well fed enough to be alive and to have the wherewithal to have this conversation, that we're literate and educated enough to be able to exchange these ideas, that we're not constantly looking over our shoulder if someone's going to blow us up or machine gun us, that we aren't living in an authoritarian regime that'll throw us in jail if it doesn't like one of the opinions expressed. So,

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all of these prerequisites to rational discussion identify certain values as inherently worthy; like life and health and freedom and so on.

Once those are defined as goods, they give us a morality that is universal. It just comes with being alive and with not enshrining oneself as the only entity in the universe. It's like, if I value something for myself, and there's no basis for me to deny it to you and to everyone else. And then that gives us a metric as to whether progress has taken place.

JB: And this, for you, would be how, what humanism would essentially be contained within?

SP: Yes, that would be the characterisation.

JB: Of having that sense of progress, defined by the characteristics of what make for human flourishing?

SP: That sets the benchmarks for what progress would be, and it's not logically necessary that progress takes place and, of course, in many parts of the world, in many times in history, there's been regression. There's been a move backward.

So, but that allows us to pose the question intelligently and then to use the facts to answer it.

JB: Now, Nick, you co-wrote a book rather cheekily titled, 'The Case for Christian Humanism: Why Christians should believe in humanism, and humanists in Christianity'. So, you actually believe that humanism, at some level, is also rather like the Enlightenment, dependent on a Judaeo-

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Christian worldview?

NS: Well, humanism is a slippery term, of course. And I think as Steven would agree, it's not owned by atheists, it's not owned by any particular ideology, religious or otherwise. It is a commitment to the human. And then you can unpack what that means.

I would absolutely count myself as a Christian humanist and I would encourage when I go talking about this to audiences for them to do so, because the values resonant in humanism - and it's a little unclear how you define those exactly - resonate with a great deal of Christian thought and reflection.

I would argue - I know this is obviously where Steven and I would part company - that there is a securer basis for humanism within Christian thought than there is within atheist thought. So, for example, I would say that a commitment of humanism is an ineradicable human dignity and fundamental human equality. Now, you can understand that and you can trace, you can historically trace that, through European thought, certainly. And you can, as it were, justify it on theological grounds if you do that kind of thing.

I don't doubt that many, many of my atheist friends are committed to human dignity or human equality. I can't see, as it were, where the deep foundations for that are. I don't think reason, in and of itself, let alone science, acts as a sufficiently robust foundation for that commitment.

And I was struck that a couple of times in the book, you refer to human life as being sacred. And it strikes me as kind of an importing of a very kind of religious word to justify a non-religious worldview. So, it's not that I want

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to say that atheist humanists are not committed to human dignity at all, its just that I don't think their foundations are quite stable enough.

SP: Well, I think they're stable enough to result, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has not a shred of Christianity in it.

NS: Let me push back on that. The Universal Declaration was drafted by Charles Malik, who was a Lebanese Christian. And it's very telling that the word 'person' appears in the UN Declaration six times. That person is rooted in the personalism which was mainstreamed by Catholic social teaching in the 30s and 40s. So, UDHR, absolutely right, as Malik (?) said, and as you rightly quote, it deliberately doesn't draw on any metaphysical foundations because we want people to agree. But you can see the fingerprints of personalism in the drafting.

SP: Again, historically, you can see fingerprints of many things and Malik convened a council of multi-confessional intellectuals and more or less Hindus and Confucians and Muslims and indeed was pleasantly surprised that there was so much agreement. It, you know, I think there's a perfectly robust justification for humanism.

Atheism is not itself a belief system, it's the absence of one particular belief, namely, in supernatural entities. But aside from that, there isn't any such belief as atheism. But humanism is grounded in our universal humanity. The fact we're made of the same stuff, we're the same species, we all are sentient, we all have the capacity to experience pleasure and pain, we all have the capacity to reason. And that is a pretty rock-solid foundation for universal human rights and universal human dignity, whereas parochial beliefs such as that only by accepting Jesus Christ as our Saviour can we can

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be saved, that does open up a space for the persecution of people who don't accept Jesus because they're a public health menace, they're going to cause people to go to hell.

And, in fact, that's a counter to universalism if the path to salvation is accepting this particular parochial Messiah.

NS: Yeah, so, I mean, in one sense I've already said, and I entirely agree, that there are perils within the particularism of Christianity. And, you know, we have plenty of examples of history to show that. So, I certainly wouldn't argue against that.

I would push back on the idea that simply being rational or being made of the same stuff is enough to justify our humanism. I mean, you know, really Darwinian evolution is a pretty solid foundation - you and I would be, I'm sure, absolutely full paid-up Darwinians - I don't buy into the idea that Darwinism is entirely about competition, but there is nothing in it that dictates that I have any moral responsibility to those other than my kin or from whom I might get some reciprocal good.

SP: Yes. No, it's the wrong place to look for a sound grounding for morality.

NS: I don't think it's coincidental that so many kind of very, very public atheists today are also public Darwinians, who then try to distance themselves from the alleged ethical implications of Darwinism.

SP: Well, Darwinism is the wrong place to look for a grounding of morality. It comes from the interchangeability of perspectives and the universality of interests. Darwinism provides some of the facts that we have to

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acknowledge; facts about human nature, facts about the origin of life. But no, that's not what it's a theory of.

NS: But it'd be pretty hard to sweep away, you know, 300 million years of evolution. I guess that's the point. It might not be the place to look, but from an atheist materialist point of view, it's certainly the place we start.

SP: Well, it's the place that we start in asking the question of how we came to be. Why we have brains, why we have eyes, what life consists of. But it is not, and doesn't claim to be, a justification for morality.

NS: Well, it doesn't now. I think, again, that's important to emphasise. In the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th century, there were those who did explicitly try and ground morality and indeed polity on an evolution. And it's only through the disaster of social Darwinism and the disaster of eugenics, that we have pushed beyond that to realise, some of us at least, evolution – absolutely right as a factual explanation for all our material origins if you like – but we've seen what happens when we try and turn it into ethics and politics. I mean, it's a catastrophe.

SP: Yes, and of course, social Darwinism had very little to do with Darwin. It originated from Herbert Spencer ten years before 'The Origin of Species' was even published. So, it was kind of retroactively named social Darwinism.

And it must also be said that the disaster that you spoke of, it's actually historically not accurate to say that Nazism, for example, was influenced by Darwin. Robert Richards just published a book, '*Was Hitler a Darwinian?*', where he combed through Hitler's intellectual influences and found that

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actually Hitler despised Darwin, for a number of reasons.

NS: Again, we just need to pull apart Hitler, who I think, his intellectual influences were pretty poor and his own thinking processes were pretty thin. With Nazism which, disgusting as it was, had influences, one of which, only one of which, I think, was Darwinian. There was nationalism, there was paganism and there was complicity by German Christians, but one of which was Darwinism.

JB: The overall picture I'm getting here though is that for you, Nick, scientific progress, it also needs to be married with some kind of an ethical view of how we use that science. We can't simply say, great, we've got science.

NS: I'm sure Steven would agree entirely.

SP: Oh, absolutely, I mean, they're just different categories.

JB: But the moral progress is not in any sense inevitable, I think Nick is saying, that we've gone off the rails in the 20th century in a big way, why would we assume it's necessarily going to continue in that fashion?

SP: We don't. The claim that there has been progress is not the claim that progress is inevitable. In fact, the point of enlightenment now is that progress is a gift of Enlightenment ideals, to the extent that they're implemented; progress can happen. To the extent that counter enlightenment ideals push back; they won't.

NS: I'm going to, as it were, put in a shout out, because my 13 year old daughter would say for Steven on this, he's very, very clear right from the

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beginning that this book shouldn't be read as an excuse for moral laziness or where we've achieved so much we can rest back on our laurels. It's actually a clarion call and - correct me if I read it wrong - it's a clarion call to pursue moral progress on the basis that we've done very well, as opposed to pursue moral progress on the basis we're facing a crisis. And I think that's a very helpful corrective.

JB: Why don't we go to a specific; so, one of the graphs in your book is about slavery and essentially emancipation and the way in which slavery today, you know, if you're going back a few hundred years, it's almost non-existent in the way that it was legally sanctioned in previous centuries.

And for you, obviously, that is a marker of moral progress. I think everyone around this table agrees with that. We might have different opinions though, as to whether science, humanism and reason are responsible or whether there has been some kind of a religious impulse as well in seeing that progress happen.

I mean, for you, in what sense is the science, the reason, and the humanism the responsible factor for the abolition of slavery?

SP: Well, certainly humanism is. Science helped much later in establishing that all humans are members of a single species; closely related, trivial differences among them. And so ancient beliefs that the races were separate creations or the Africans were inherently fit for servitude were shown to be scientifically completely indefensible.

But it was mainly humanistic arguments that began the abolition movement.

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JB: Was this a secular humanism? Because, as Nick has said, humanism has had many flavours over...

SP: It has, I mean, I'm not an expert in the history of the abolitionist movement. My understanding is that the first fully articulate argument against slavery came from Jean Bodin in the 17th century, and it was on secular grounds. Then Locke and Montesquieu both made arguments that were again primarily secular, although both of them, like everyone at the time, had religious influences. There were particular religious denominations that carried the movement forward; Quakers being the most prominent, but also American Methodists.

But on the other Christianity and Judaism coexisted with slavery perfectly well for millennia. The bible has no problem with slavery. It says you can't beat your slave to death, but you can beat your slave. And you're allowed to have a slave. Christianity for all of those centuries didn't seem to have any problem with it. And, of course, the slaveholders themselves were mostly devout Christians.

So, in crediting the Quakers for the abolition movement, and they absolutely deserve credit, we can't call that 'religion' because it was one particular denomination in a sea of religious denominations that were all over the map.

JB: And, as far as you're concerned, whatever they did do was more in concert with the humanism rather than the religious tenets necessarily?

SP: Yes, and it's, I mean, it's really not a terribly abstruse argument.

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Africans are human beings, they can suffer. The institution of slavery causes tremendous suffering, violates any set of principles that we ourselves would be willing to submit to, such as that one person can own another. It isn't hard to come up with arguments against slavery that don't involve invoking a deity or a messiah.

JB: What's your response on this, because frequently the slavery issue is raised as well, you know, the bible doesn't seem to speak out against it throughout the scripture and so on. Yet, at the same time, there were, of course, abolitionists, strong abolitionists in the Christian movement and so on. Nick, where do you come down on this?

NS: As is always the case, history is messy. So, the abolitionist movement, was staffed by evangelicals who argued from Scripture. They, however, were almost certainly turned towards the abolitionist cause from the more humanitarian culture in which they live in the back half of the 18th century.

The Quakers, as Steven rightly says, deserve the greater respect for this because they are articulating arguments against slavery from the early 1700s. You have the 18th century being the period of Enlightenment and being the century where the number of slaves transported vastly exceeded any other century. There's a paradox there.

Going back to the very good point about slavery and early Christianity; yes, on the one hand, you certainly get a willingness to countenance the institution of slavery in the early church. So 2nd, 3rd, 4th century. On the other hand, you have concerted manumission campaigns, you have very careful arguments against slavery – although not on the grounds that we understand them that have been unpacked by Carl Harper recently to do

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with sex – and then you have someone like, a Church Father like Gregory of Nyssa, in the end of the 4th century who stands up and effectively says, slavery is not permissible. That’s a quite extraordinary thing to do that early and it’s not accidental that slavery is unwound in the so-called Dark Ages, and the following 500 years or so. It’s a very slow process - and in retrospect, you can say, as Christians, we should have been much more attentive to it - but it was, nonetheless, the fact that before the slave trade began, actually before Europeans encountered other “races”, there was no slavery, as the ancient world had known it in Christendom.

JB: What do you say to that, Steven, because, at one level, I think your view is, well, if science can show us that we’re all essentially biologically the same, that should inform the way we treat each other. I get from Nick saying, actually, we kind of have to change the way we see each other at some kind of spiritual level almost, or social, cultural level before we necessarily say well, yes, we should treat others the same in that way.

SP: Well, I’m not so sure about what the spiritual level is. But certainly we have to go beyond the scientific demonstration that we all belong to a single species, and add that part of belonging to a single species is being sentient. We have brains that allow us to suffer and to flourish. All of us have those brains. And that is the right that we are respecting when we enshrine universal human rights.

NS: I think that’s an important point, but I want just to pull apart that idea of the scientific demonstration of all belonging to the same species or all having the same origin. I don’t disagree with that, of course, but famously, Darwin wrestled with it because when he published in 1859, he didn’t know that was the case. He was determined that it would be. Darwin vilified,

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loathed slavery, and came from a quasi-abolitionist stock, but his science, then, didn't dictate one way or the other. It was his moral framework that carried him.

JB: And that was, as far as you're concerned, more influenced by a Christian worldview?

NS: Well, this is a classic with Darwin; he did lose his faith. He lost it somewhere between returning from the Beagle and Anna's death in 1851. But there's correspondence between himself and Emma - who was very upset that he loses his faith - in which he basically says, I still hold to a Christian worldview, I just don't hold the tenets. He's a complicated man.

SP: And Darwin is also influenced, I don't think this was in 1859, but certainly when he wrote, 'The Expression of the Emotions in Animals and Man', he gathered data on what we would now call human universals; from travellers, missionaries, explorers, traders, of facial expressions and customs in people all over the world, and wrote that since we have the same emotional reactions to life's events, we showed them on the face the same way, whether we are Africans or Indians or Australians, that was a kind of empirical underpinning to the conviction that he probably had beforehand, that we all belong to a single species.

NS: I think that's critical thing, you see, the conviction, the moral or the spiritual conviction often comes first, and it certainly came first with Darwin. And, according to that, the evidence gathering and the theorising, leads him to confirm or deny certain things. But, it's not so much empirically led, as empirically informed.

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JB: We're going to finish with one final question which I'll ask to both of you in turn. We've really been asking today has need for God essentially been eliminated by science, reason and humanism? So, your final answer to that, Steven?

SP: I would say, yes. Both logically; that there are not compelling reasons to believe in God. And empirically; that as societies become wealthier and better educated, belief in God declines.

NS: Not entirely surprising I'd say no. And I like Augustine's quote, 'Our hearts are restless, until they rest in you'. And I think that's why, irrespective what happens to institutional religions around the world or in Western countries, there is this restless yearning for the transcendent deeply interwoven into Homo sapiens.

JB: Steven and Nick, thank you so much for joining me on the programme today.

Pinker vs Spencer shows why atheist- Christian debates still matter

Andy Walton



The contemporary world pulls us in opposite directions every day. The politician you support, the worldview you subscribe to, even the theologian you read... In almost every important category of life the demand to pledge your allegiance to one side or the other is almost irresistible.

This dualism isn't new of course. But the pressure to nail your colours to the mast has been intensified in the age of social media. Liberal vs conservative, Brexit vs Remain, even more absurdly, Yanny vs Laurel.

Into this mix comes a more fundamental debate. Is the world getting progressively better? Or is that an illusion? An article of faith?

Pitted against each other in this discussion are prominent commentators and academics. The sceptics of progress include traditional conservatives like Sir Roger Scruton and voices who may better be described as post-liberal, such as John Gray. The undoubted champion of the view that the

world is getting better is Steven Pinker.

As a figurehead, his credentials are undeniable. A Harvard academic, he has spent a career researching language and evolutionary psychology. In his recent popular works, he has become the leading advocate of progressivism. In 2011's *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Pinker argued that violence is declining and listed the reasons for why. This was followed up in 2018 by *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, which makes the case for the values of the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries being behind the increase in safety, peace and happiness the world currently enjoys.

Pinker's prodigious use of data to bolster his arguments makes it hard to refute some aspects of his work. He carefully marshals graph after graph to support his thesis – that in almost every aspect of our lives, things continue to improve because of the scientific and philosophical revolution we now call the Enlightenment.

A calm yet, robust discussion of this kind, across difference, is needed more than ever

One of Pinker's key arguments is that faith is not a force for good. He states simply, "appealing to supernatural forces, appealing to doctrines that only people [who] are born into a particular religion share or that they can't be persuaded of, does go against progress." While acknowledging that religious institutions themselves can be forces for good, Pinker's view seems to be that faith and progress are antithetical to one another.

His argument is exceedingly popular. Bill Gates hyperbolically described

Enlightenment Now as his “new favourite book of all time”, while billionaire investor Warren Buffett joined the chorus of approval.

The criticism has also been vociferous. Some have pointed out that Pinker’s arguments are at odds with what many Enlightenment thinkers actually believed. John Gray took a flamethrower to Pinker’s thesis in the *New Statesman*. “Judged as a contribution to thought, *Enlightenment Now* is embarrassingly feeble”, Gray wrote, “with its primitive scientism and manga-style history of ideas, the book is a parody of Enlightenment thinking at its crudest.”

Once again, we find ourselves with a duality, seemingly forced to choose. Are we with Pinker and Gates in the vanguard of progress? Or should we double down on our faith and ignore anything that Pinker can teach us?

Fortunately, the second episode of *The Big Conversation* from *Unbelievable?* offered an altogether more appealing response from Christians.

Nick Spencer from Theos, a British Christian think tank, took on Pinker in a fascinating discussion. Rather than hitting back at Pinker straight away, Spencer acknowledged the careful scholarship and arguments Pinker was making. He sought to find common ground.

Their differences soon became clear however and, in a way quite unlike I’ve seen from Pinker’s interlocutors before, Spencer quietly and politely dismantled most of Pinker’s statements.

Full disclosure – I’m a fan of Nick’s work, and he helped co-write a project

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I worked on for Theos a few years ago. But this isn't simply my partisan conclusion. The way in which Spencer shot back with factual rebuttals seemed to surprise Pinker.

Spencer's knowledge of the intellectual history of the Western world is clearly superior to Pinker, and it showed. When Pinker pointed to the Universal Declaration Of Human Rights as an achievement of non-religious, humanist morality and had "not a shred of Christianity in it", Spencer immediately fired back that the UDHR was, in fact, authored by a Lebanese Christian, Charles Malik, and that it was heavily influenced by Catholic Social Thought.

Spencer went further, though, and challenged Pinker's assertion that faith is a block to scientific progress – outlining how the scientists at the helm of the Enlightenment were theists, often Christians. "One of the distinctive factors," Spencer argued, "is the Christian doctrine of creation that legitimised and encouraged the study of the natural world as a way of understanding and glorifying God." "That was the water everyone swam in, the air they breathed," Pinker retorted. It didn't sound convincing.

The reason this show was important is that it avoided the trap that so many of us are prone to falling into in contemporary debate. Spencer didn't feel the need to vilify Pinker. Instead he gently probed and called out the incorrect assumptions fairly and gently when he saw them. For his part, Pinker was cordial and urbane and reiterated his arguments well. It was a grown-up discussion.

Pinker's supporters may well have seen a different 'victor' in the discussion than I did. I'm metaphysically invested in his arguments being wrong. As a

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Christian, it's important I'm honest with myself about that. As one cynical wag in the Youtube comments stated, "Wow the person in the talk whose beliefs aligned with my presuppositions sure walked away with this one".

But I don't want my 'side' to win, just for the sake of victory and I don't want the other side to 'lose'. The reason *The Big Conversation* (and its parent programme, *Unbelievable?*) are so important is that we live in fissiparous times. With conspiracy theorists and crackpots encroaching on the mainstream in increasing numbers, a calm yet, robust discussion of this kind, across difference, is needed more than ever. This spirit of inquiry, wrestling and seeking truth is, after all, what the Enlightenment was about and, for me, what having a faith is all about too.

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Atheist Fairytales: Exposing secularism's major myths

Nick Spencer



One of my intellectual heroes was a racist, which is something of an embarrassment to me and others who hold him in high esteem. It is hard to deny that he held views that are both wrong and revolting, such as when he “reasoned” that: “So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour...The blacks are very vain but in the Negro’s way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.”

The man in question was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), by common consent the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment, a period in which reason, democracy and the rise of modern science began to permanently shape the Western world. The term ‘enlightened’ came to be synonymous with the pursuit of knowledge and the abandonment of superstitious thinking.

Kant was the standard-bearer for this new human-focused age, yet his epithets could adorn any website run by a new atheist provocateur today. He proclaimed: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” and challenged people to “Dare to Know!” In the light of which, the whole racism thing is a bit ironic, really.

I begin with Kant partly because he is the only Enlightenment figure that Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, whom I recently debated (see below video), references with any frequency in his new book, *Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism, and progress* (Allen Lane). And partly because he illustrates precisely what this article is about: our inability to live without myths.

Indeed it turns out that whether you’re an Enlightenment philosopher, a modern ‘new’ atheist, or even a religious believer, you are just as likely to believe in myths and even fairytales as anyone else.

Flaws in the Enlightenment

There is no denying Kant’s brilliance or his impressive, indeed inspiring, arguments for human autonomy, equality and dignity. And there is no denying his racism. It is not good enough to argue that he was simply parroting popular ignorant views, as he spent a lifetime critiquing popular and ignorant views.

The same point can be made of other luminaries, such as the Scottish philosopher David Hume and the icon of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire, who both made similar judgements about the inferiority of Black people. Such views may have been the norm at the time, but so

was Christianity. Yet none of these thinkers - Hume, Kant or Voltaire - regurgitated that.

There are a number of simple (but erroneous) responses to this kind of Enlightenment racism.

One goes something like: this just shows how bigoted some of these great intellectuals really were. Another says: this just goes to show how fake the whole Enlightenment phenomenon was. Yet another says: this simply illustrates what happens when you reject Christian morality and turn to human reason.

None of these responses will do. However much it was accompanied by some powerful (and often pertinent) anti-Christian polemic, the Enlightenment marked a significant intellectual step forward. It really did let some light in. However, like all significant and serious historical phenomena, it was a complex, contradictory and ambiguous movement. Its most dazzling thinkers justified both human equality and racism on 'rational' grounds. Its leading political powers worked to liberate some people, while simultaneously turning the slave trade into a global market that destroyed millions of lives

Steven Pinker's fairytale

When it comes to the Enlightenment, Steven Pinker, whose discipline of cognitive psychology teaches him the dangers of unconscious bias, stumbles. He turns a complex, contradictory and ambiguous movement into a myth that serves his own atheist worldview.

Atheist Fairytales: Exposing secularism's major myths

Nick Spencer



I enjoyed debating Pinker on The Big Conversation and benefited from reading *Enlightenment Now*, which makes a persuasive, quantitative case for the world generally becoming a better place due to modern technology and moral progress. However, we parted company on where this progress comes from.

In Pinker's view, it is the Enlightenment, pure and simple. Before 1750, humans lived in darkest ignorance and barbarism; afterwards, it was light and reason. Atheism's fairytale prince had mounted the steed of reason and

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science to slay the dragon of religious superstition and ignorance. But this is Enlightenment as myth rather than Enlightenment as history.

No one is denying that the world owes a debt to Kant, Hume and Voltaire – not to mention the many other intellectuals who marked that period. But to imagine that no good thing can be traced to anything but the Enlightenment is unsustainable.

I made that point to Pinker in our debate. We tussled over various facets of what the Enlightenment supposedly gave us, including modern science and human rights. I challenged him that each of these has their foundations much further back.

I pointed out that the scientific revolution was birthed by believers. Pinker retorted that their faith was incidental, since Christendom was “the water they swam in”. Yet for Newton, Bacon, Kepler, Copernicus, Robert Boyle and a host of other scientific innovators, it was their theological beliefs about God’s ordered creation that explicitly legitimised their study of the universe.

When it came to the question of moral progress, Pinker stated that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created with “not a shred of Christianity”. Yet the document was primarily drafted by Charles Malik, a Lebanese Christian. Its language draws heavily on Catholic social teaching about personhood that goes back to the universal precept that all humans are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27).

Indeed, I have argued in *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has shaped our values* (SPCK) that most of the institutions and values we hold

dear, such as human dignity, the rule of law, human rights, science and even, paradoxically, atheism and secularism, were made possible by our Christian history more than the Enlightenment.

The power of myth

Humans are myth-making creatures in the sense that we tell and believe stories that we think have deep significance.

Medieval European Christians used to believe in a figure known as Prester John. He was a legendary Christian ruler, whose kingdom was located somewhere – no one knew where – south-east of the Mediterranean. There was an element of truth in the story, insofar as European Christians were vaguely aware of the Church of the East, allegedly founded by St Thomas, but then cut off from the rest of Christendom by the rise of Islam in the seventh Century.

The story of Prester John was not really a historical account of the emergence and isolation of so-called Nestorian Christians, however. Rather, it was a myth about a rich kingdom, populated by marvellous creatures and ruled over by a powerful and heroic Christian monarch who would one day return to reunite Christendom in triumph. In its own way, the myth was not so different to the British story of King Arthur, who became a legend of power and promise many centuries later.

It seems that no matter where or when we live, or how rational or educated we are, we cling to such myths. Sometimes – like Prester John and King Arthur – they are local and easily grown out of. Sometimes, like the Enlightenment myth held by some atheists, they are universal and rather more serious.

3 Secular Myths

1. The myth of progress

Favoured by many modern people who find security in the belief (on a par with any religious faith claim) that things will inevitably get better. Not all secularists think this way, of course. John Gray, one of the best known atheists writing today savagely criticises the Enlightenment myth. And Steven Pinker, to his credit, is also aware that things can also go in reverse.

2. The myth of human rationality

Faith in human reason and self-interest has shaped far too much modern economics, driven by the belief that we humans always know what is best for us and are good at calculating how to go about achieving it. The banking crises of the early 21st century are salient reminders of our hubris.

3. The myth of fundamental human goodness

Especially favoured by those of an atheist humanist persuasion who are convinced that there is no God, ultimate purpose, or afterlife, yet are determined to maintain a commitment to fundamental human dignity and purpose at the same time. Yet when you look back at human history (or watch the daily news) it becomes hard not to believe that the whole story is a mess without purpose or redemption. To circumvent this fear, you need to convince yourself that the only reason we are in it in the first place is because something – ignorance, poverty, religion – is corrupting our basic human goodness. The idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with the human character is too worrying to contemplate.

The true myth

Myths are not necessarily bad, nor are they the same thing as legends – things that people believe happened but actually didn't. CS Lewis described Christ's death and resurrection as the "true myth" – a powerful idea expressed in many cultures and epochs, but made manifest in the Jesus of history. The question is not about whether we should have myths or not, but whether the myths we hold are more or less credible, and more or less humanising.

Christianity is based on a series of myths in this sense. Creation, Fall, incarnation, atonement and redemption are all myths – powerful stories based on some things that really happened within history (Jesus' life, death and resurrection) and some things that didn't, yet which contain important meaning (creation in six days, two people eating a forbidden fruit). These myths explain – in an existential rather than scientific sense – the way the world is; in other words, they help humans live truthfully and well within creation.

There is no single comparable atheist set of beliefs and myths. Some atheist worldviews are utopian, some are nihilist, some are utilitarian, some are humanistic. We do better to talk of many atheisms rather than atheism.

Having said that, a number of features keep coming up time and again, whether they be about essential human goodness and rationality, the inevitability of progress, the importance of the Enlightenment, or the wickedness (or at least stupidity) of religious belief. As with all myths, whether they are religious or atheistic, they are difficult, sometimes impossible, to disprove in any comprehensive or scientific way.

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Undisprovable maybe, but some myths flourish and some myths die, either because they fit lived reality or they don't. For my money, the Christian myths fit our understanding and experience of life a whole lot better than the atheist ones do.

What we do know is that believer and atheist alike still use myths to frame the world we live in. Personally, I find the Christian story serves as a remarkably coherent framework for our beliefs in intrinsic human value, the fact we can probe our ordered universe, and the ultimate hope that faith delivers for so many.

So maybe the question is: whose myth looks less like a fairytale?

Nick Spencer is research director at Theos.

Follow Nick [@theosnick](https://twitter.com/theosnick)

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