

Commending the Faith

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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This past Saturday, I attended [John Stackhouse](#)'s lectures on faith, reason, and the new atheism down at the Vancouver Island Conference Centre. Evidently, there is still some interest in this topic as the event sold out—even in hyper-secular Nanaimo! Around twenty people from our church attended which was fantastic to see! I was in and out of the sessions throughout the day due to carting kids to hockey, friends' houses, etc, but a couple of things struck me about his presentations:

1. Rather than offering a blow-by-blow refutation of the arguments of folks like Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris or a “here’s how to answer atheists” checklist (which some may have been expecting), Stackhouse began with some pretty basic anthropology and epistemology. He dealt with issues such as the limitations of human knowledge, how knowledge and faith are related, and how both are necessary for all human knowing and behaving, and how the view set forth by the new atheists—that knowledge is for smart, rational people, and faith is for the superstitious and ignorant—is a simplistic and, well, untrue. Faith is a condition for all knowledge and knowledge is necessary for faith. The prying apart of faith and knowledge as two completely unrelated things is among the less helpful of the new atheist offerings.
2. Stackhouse also talked a bit about what he called the “hierarchy of disciplines” moving from the physical to the metaphysical. Natural sciences (physics, biology, chemistry) are at the bottom, then come the social sciences (sociology, psychology, etc), then the humanities (philosophy, history, literature), and then, at the top, we find theology/religion/worldview. Of course this isn’t meant to be an evaluative hierarchy—as if the disciplines at the bottom are less important than those at the top—but I thought it nicely illustrated the comprehensive scope of human understanding, and how each level of the

hierarchy needs to be appreciated. If folks like Richard Dawkins are often guilty of contenting themselves with explanations at the bottom level (as if all of life can be explained by evolutionary theory), Christians are often guilty of the opposite. We decide upon a religion/philosophy of life, and then ignore both the insights and challenges that might come from the levels “below.” The result, in both cases, is an impoverished worldview that doesn’t take enough into account.

3. Finally, Stackhouse asked us to consider how the worldview set forth by the new atheists deal with the classical philosophical categories of “the good,” the “the true,” and “the beautiful.” Can the worldview of the new atheists sufficiently account for our conceptions that goodness and beauty are more than adaptive fictions? Even more interestingly, can they account for the normative force of truth that they rely on in the very process of making their arguments (i.e., why should we care what is “true” in a world where survival value is the final standard? If believing lies is adaptive, so much the better!). If our view of the world—our philosophy of life—cannot account for how we experience the good, the true, and the beautiful and the importance we place on these categories, then it might be worth rethinking.

Given my history researching this topic and my time spent in Stackhouse’s classes at Regent, the *content* of the presentations was familiar enough. What was interesting to observe, at least for me, was the *strategy* adopted by Stackhouse on Saturday. Anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with the nature of debate and written responses to the new atheists over the last few years will know that there are no shortage of writers and lecturers eager to pick apart this or that argument set forth in their books, whether it is historical, scientific, or philosophical in nature. What Stackhouse did, I think, was better. Or at least more enjoyable. He gave us an honest assessment of who we are and what we can know and how we come to know it, whether we are Christians, atheists, or anything else. He also gave us a reminder of what we care about as human beings and asked us to consider what kinds of worldviews might be up to the task of explaining and addressing these.

All in all, a very good approach to apologetics, I think. Rather than attacking the deficiencies of the new atheists' arguments or defending Christianity from this or that critique, Stackhouse actually *commended* the faith—in the best sense of the word—as that which meets us at the point of our deepest human need.

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