Episode 109 Atheism on Trial with Mark Lanier

September 13, 2022

**Mark Lanier**

My name is Mark Lanier. I have one foot in the world of trials and courtrooms. I'm a lawyer. I have one foot in the world of faith. Not that I'm dissecting myself so clearly, but I spend half of my life it seems talking about matters of faith and a half of my life talking about matters of law.

**David Capes**

Mark, thank you for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

**Mark Lanier**

It is a joy David and you do such great work. I love your podcast, but I love all of your body of work. Thank you for taking this time to be with me today.

**David Capes**

Oh, well, we're going to talk about your book it's the newest book, but I know you've got another one coming out pretty soon. But the one we're going to talk about is called *Atheism on Trial, a Lawyer Examines the Case for Unbelief*, published by Intervarsity Press.

**Mark Lanier**

Yes. And and you turned me onto Intervarsity Press or turned them on to me many years ago with that first volume of *Christianity On Trial*. And I've had such a great relationship with them. This turns out to be book two of what's become a trilogy. And so first, we put Christianity on trial. Now we put atheism or unbelief on trial. And then the third volume due out at the end of this year is going to be religion on trial. And so, we'll look specifically at various world religions.

**David Capes**

Yeah. Well, that's going to be good. You and I have talked some about that along the way.

**Mark Lanier**

Well, you've been one of my proofreaders and one of my people prodding me to do a better job on a few things here and there. My professor in residence.

**David Capes**

Well, we stir the pot just a little bit when we need to. We're glad to do it, but it's a delightful book. It's receiving good reviews already. Let's clarify terms for people that aren't really clear when you say atheism, what do you mean?

**Mark Lanier**

When I say atheism, I mean it in the sense of the Greek theism means God or a study of God or a belief in God actually an ism of God. And then 'a' when you add it in the Greek language negates whatever follows it. So a little bit like 'im', does in the English language, it can take the possible and make it impossible or 'un' can take that which is announced and make it unannounced. So in the same way, a theism means a belief there is no God.

**David Capes**

What about agnosticism?

**Mark Lanier**

Well, that's the same 'a', but now it's in front of gnosis, which is a Greek word for knowing. And so, if an atheist doesn't believe there's a God, an agnostic is someone who says, 'I don't know, maybe there is maybe there isn't'. It's someone who straddles that line.

**David Capes**

Well, I would say 30 years ago, if you did a survey of Americans about 94%, would say they believe in God, only about 6% are atheists. Now, in the last few years, the pace has picked up tremendously, I think it's doubled, or maybe nearly tripled. 17%, I think is the number I heard last of people in America say that they are atheist. Now, sometimes they mean maybe agnostics. There's another group that’s growing called the nones N.O.N.E.S, people who are not religiously affiliated. What do you think's going on in our culture, and in our time, that we see such a rise of unbelief?

**Mark Lanier**

I think it's a variety of factors. Among those factors that I identify is the failure of Christians to be authentic, authentic in their walk, and authentic in the way they treat other people. I think Christians tend to fall easily into traps of making it about us and them, of trying to impose Christian morality upon the world. And in a sense, or at least the nation, confusing the kingdom of God with the kingdom of men. And thinking that the kingdom of God is is equal to things that are world political systems. I think that's a real danger, because I think it causes people to want to distance themselves from what they think is not an authentic faith. I think that's just one factor. I think another factor is Christians have been, with the best of intentions, have have misread so much of Scripture and read it out of context that it's made a lot of people think they have to make a choice between faith and science, as if they're opposite ends of a teeter totter. And people don't understand that the true Christian view is that science is real. It's legitimate. It is a tool that God gave us to combat the horrors of this fallen world. So, we can learn the science of fertilization, to use fertilizers to be able to grow more crops so we can feed more people and reduce hunger. There's the science of medicine, where we're able to treat disease more readily. And all of these consequences of sin, that burden society that destroy lives and families, we have tools to combat those. And those tools include science. And so, I think the failure of Christians to, to fairly assess scripture has set a lot of people thinking they have a choice between science or God. And they don't understand that, that God is the God of science.

**David Capes**

Yeah, it's not either-or. Right. It's a both-and kind of thing. One of the things you talk about in the book, here is the burden of proof. One of the early chapters, describe for us what proof is in your world, when you say you have one world, in the legal side, what is proof. What does that mean

**Mark Lanier**

in the legal arena, we use all different kinds of proof. There are different measures of proof, depending upon what you want to prove, if you want to prove that two plus two equals four, you can do that mathematically. If you want to prove that John ran the red light, you'll have to do that through testimony, perhaps you might have some cameras or things like that, that observed in, but you've got to go outside, if you want to prove that John, committed murder, then you're going to need a motive and you're going to need witnesses, you rarely are going to have an eyewitness, but you might have some DNA evidence, you might have lots of different things. So, the burden of proof, in most complicated matters is not as simple as logic or mathematical proof. It is much more the greater weight of that evidence that's deemed credible. So, you assess the evidence. Is this credible? Is this believable? And then you look at what's more likely than not. So, I have to prove in some cases, for example, that a husband loves his wife. Now, how do you prove that? You can't? I guess you can put him under oath. Do you love your wife? But that in itself is pretty weak, you need to go beyond that. But there's never going to be a level of proof. That is laboratory proof, or that is science proof? Or that's philosophical logic proof on does someone love their spouse? And that's important, because too many people use the wrong measures of proof in trying to prove whether or not there's a God, they get tricked into, well let's look at this from a logical perspective. Can you prove it? Well, logic in the sense of a mathematical equation? Of course, not that we're not asking a mathematical answer. Logic in the sense of propositional theory, and how you develop that? Not really, in the same sense. And so, proof is something that's much greater than most people think it is. And it's a much more wide-ranging subject than most people think.

**David Capes**

So, in a realistic sense, could you take the question of agnosticism, atheism into a court? I mean, you've done that in the book. But could you have a jury that would listen to these things and come out with the kind of responses that you think at the very end?

**Mark Lanier**

Absolutely! For example, typically, in a courtroom, what I do is I tell the jury, think of a scale, not the kind that's a digital scale, but a scale that's got two opposite trays at the end of an arm. And you can put one set of arguments on one side of the scale, and the other on the other side of the scale, and then measure them out, see what's more likely than not. Look at the criteria of this world, to try to determine what the truth of the world is not simply the truth of the physics in the world. Why do we know there are black holes? Why do we know there are subatomic particles, not just the proof of the physical aspects, but the proof of the non-physical aspects, you know, love, honor, dignity, justice, fairness, these types of things need to be measured as well. And the arguments for these things need to be put into the scales as well. And when you do, frankly, I find atheism fails radically in that arena of proof.

**David Capes**

What's the biggest failure of atheism to explain the world from your point of view? We're going to be listening to some lawn mowers outside. That happens right?

**Mark Lanier**

Yeah, We'll think of that as background music that has not been copyrighted. Yeah, one of the biggest failures in the realm of proof, to me is atheism cannot set up a value system that's objective. You know, if atheism is true, and all we are is cosmic stardust, I challenge any atheists to prove to me that all human life should be valued. So, we live in a global time where, for example, we're told that we should value everyone regardless of gender, everyone equally, we should regard everyone equally regardless of sexual orientation, we should regard everyone of equal value, regardless of nationality, regardless of skin color, regardless of IQ. Now, we're told that, but if atheism is true, and there is no God, then there is absolutely no basis for believing that some person is not genetically different than another, that one race is not genetically different. That if sexual orientation is truly a matter of genetics, that one genetical makeup is not truly better than the other. And so, in a world of limited resources, we should be allocating those limited resources to the people who are genetically superior, who will better breed in the future, and better give us a chance at evolving into something greater than we are today. Now, every argument I've just made, is the argument that Hitler used in World War Two, and the years leading up to it built upon the philosophy of Nietzsche. But it's this idea that there are genetic differences between people. And so if there's no God to say, everybody is created equally and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, then why should there be equal rights? When people are not equal? That argument is where atheism fails. And if we the more and more and more we buy into the atheistic agenda, it is just a matter of a generation till we see the degradation of human value, because you have no basis for arguing that you should not cull the herd, that's the phrase we use when you shoot genetic defective deer? You know, there's no reason not to cull the human herd.

**David Capes**

So, it's the values issue for you that you think to be the most unreliable from the standpoint of that? Well, I think it's The Brothers Karamazov. There's a line 'When there is no God, all things are permitted'.

**Mark Lanier**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And it's not simply found in good Russian literature, it's found everywhere. You know, it's just a fact. There's a well-known atheist who wrote an article in *The Guardian*, I believe it was a British publication. And I think I referenced it in the book. But he said, you know, we like to pretend that there is subjective morality, we atheists. But wink, wink, nod, nod. We know there's not. But you can't go telling everybody that because the solution to it is nihilism. Or it's, you know, feast for yourself, otherwise, it's the fittest that should be surviving.

**David Capes**

So go back to that particular thing. What do you do with people who come across, who are Christians that say, you know that, from time to time I do have real doubt. Is doubt, doubt not atheism? Doubt is not agnosticism. Doubt is not being a member of the ‘nones’. How do you put doubt into that? Because everybody at some time or another, struggles with the doubt?

**Mark Lanier**

Oh, sure. I mean, I don't think faith is a belief that has no doubt. I think faith is a recognition that I have enough confidence and hope and trust, that I'm willing to give myself over to this. You know, for me, that's what's more likely than not. Yeah. And that doesn't mean that I don't have to sit there and sometimes pull my hair out and say, God, if you're there, why is this happening? I think that that's very legitimate I think even the biblical characters do the same thing. And so that's not a lack of faith. That's faith in search of understanding. But faith is not "Gee, I have no doubts. Faith is, in spite of my doubts. I have enough confidence that I'm willing to invest my life in this I'm willing to say, Yes, this is, this is real. And so that's why I do liken it to scales you put all the arguments against and all the doubts, and you put all the arguments for and all the confidence and try to assess what's more likely than not. And that's where you need to put your faith.

**David Capes**

They do, yeah. I think it was CS Lewis that was asked one time, as a Christian, do you have any doubts? And he said, Yeah, I do from time to time. But even as an atheist, I had doubts about my atheism. So, doubt is not exclusive to any one particular, whether it's personal faith, or a person of no faith at all.

**Mark Lanier**

Yeah, we're, we're human minds that are constantly trying to assess reality and assess truth. Now, what I would caution people to is, we also tend to interpret and understand truth in light of how we'd like it to be. And so, I can remember the first time in my life where I really was trying to struggle with this question of the reality of God. And it was a time where I was a little bit shaken in it. And I started looking, and I realized that my walk with God had also grown a little cold. And I wasn't in that relationship with Him, that I needed to be. And those two can go hand in hand, there can be times of doubt, that are a product of your obstinance and your sin and your shortcoming in your walk. Don't get me wrong, there are also times of doubt, where you are so totally sold out for God and you are so deeply entrenched, and he seems to have let you down or he seems to have not done his end of the bargain, or he seems to have, you know, fill in the blank. There can be lots of different reasons for doubt. So, we have to carefully assess those. But ultimately, what that means is, we bring all of those to God, we don't flee from God, we let them drive us to God.

**David Capes**

We're talking about Mark Lanier's new book entitled *Atheism on Trial, a Lawyer Examines the Case for Unbelief*. So, when you wrote this book? Who did you have in mind, as the audience? Who was the ideal reader of your book?

**Mark Lanier**

Well, the first book in this trilogy, *Christianity on Trial* is, in a way, the foundational answer. Our son was getting his doctorate in philosophy and logic at Oxford, and I was meeting some of his friends that were unbelievers, some of his friends were believers. But I thought, you know, the unbelievers thought it's so almost preposterous that someone could be a thinker and a Christian, that I wrote the book *Christianity on Trial*, to, at least in my own mind, address then their concerns and their problems. And then that book was published. And as that book was published, I started thinking, you know, the logical extension of that is, well, okay, let's go into more depth on the issue of is there a God or not? And if so, who is this God? Because Christianity's got much more than just that, you know. Is scripture reliable? Is there a real resurrection? Was Jesus resurrected? Does God listen to prayer? Do we have free will? Those issues are a part of Christianity. But I wanted to go into a lot deeper waters on the idea of whether or not it is reasonable, rational to believe there is a God as opposed to the alternatives. And that's what book two is, it's for people who want to dig in deeper to this issue of is there a God, than I was able to dig into in a book that was more encompassing than just that point.

**David Capes**

Yeah. Well, you're going to be giving a lecture here at the Lanier Theological Library in October of 2022, entitled, *Atheism on Trial,* and we're excited for that, we'll have this podcast we hope up before that, so that people have a chance to, to, to hear it and be enthused about your lecture. I'm excited for it. And there will be a great panel discussion coming up the day before. And it'll be a great weekend.

**Mark Lanier**

Well, I'm excited because there's nothing I like better than talking about faith and talking about God, but a close second other than my family, a close second is talking about the law. And this is a merger of those two. And so, to be able to merge my faith with my practice is going to make for an enjoyable presentation from my perspective, and hopefully other people will be blessed and enjoy it as well.

**David Capes**

Mark Lanier, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

**Mark Lanier**

My pleasure. Thanks for the honor.

**David Capes**

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**Mark Lanier**

My adage is not original with me, but it's one that I really like. It's Be yourself. No one else can be. I think we need authenticity in this world.