

The Atheist and the Antitheist:
A Critical Analysis of the Rebellion Thesis

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(Without Footnotes)

It has been ten years since evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published his most popular book, a book that, ironically enough, had nothing to do with evolution or biology. With *The God Delusion* Dawkins cemented his status as the world's preeminent atheist. Unfortunately, this ambassador for atheism chose the methods of hard diplomacy as he mercilessly lampooned the alleged ignorance, irrationality, and intolerance of what he termed the "faith-heads" of religion.

Nor was Dawkins the only atheist to adopt this hard diplomacy. Several high profile new atheists have reflected a similar style, including Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens.

This withering view of religion generally, and Christianity in particular, is also widespread among the lay members of the skeptic/atheist community who dismiss Christianity as both

irrational and immoral. Belief in God is likened to belief in an imaginary friend – Santa Claus, leprechauns, invisible pink unicorns, or flying spaghetti monsters – and Christian doctrine is mocked as with this graphic from an atheist website:

“God sacrificed himself to himself to appease himself and therefore save humanity from himself. Makes sense.”

From the perspective of the academic theologian, this alleged summary of Christian doctrine is little more than a strawman caricature of the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, and atonement. But it reflects a widespread sentiment within the skeptic/atheist community that Christian doctrine is patently ridiculous.

There is much to lament and critique in this skeptic/atheist denunciation of the Christian “faithheads.” And countless Christian theologians and apologists have done so. Perhaps more notably, many atheists have done so as well, among them Michael Ruse, J.L. Schellenberg, Thomas Nagel, Ronald Dworkin, Jeffrey Jay Lowder, and Massimo Pigliucci who gained some notoriety in the last year with an incisive essay titled “Reflections on the Skeptic and Atheist Movements.” In that bold essay Pigliucci identifies widespread problems within the skeptic/atheist community including nastiness in decorum, a focus on celebrity culture, groupthink, and anti-intellectualism.

But my interest here is not on how atheists view *Christians*. Rather, it is on how Christians view *atheists*. And the sad truth is that Christians, on the whole, are no better than the new atheists. If atheists often caricature Christian beliefs, Christians are all too quick to return the favor as in *this* graphic from a *Christian* website:

“Atheism. The belief that there was nothing and nothing happened to nothing and then nothing magically exploded for no reason, creating everything and then a bunch of everything magically rearranged itself for no reason what so ever into self-replicating bits which then turned into dinosaurs. Makes perfect sense.”

But it isn't just caricature. Christian hostility toward atheists runs very deep. Consider the case of John Hagee, head pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, a church which boasts 20,000 in weekly attendance. As an author, Hagee's books have appeared on the New York Times Best Seller list. As a spokesperson for conservative evangelicals, he has been featured on channels like CNN as well as on his own television program on the Daystar Network. In short, Hagee is a leading representative of mainstream, conservative evangelicalism. Here is how he addresses atheism in a recent sermon:

Clip

That rather shocking display is a glimpse behind the veil of a widespread and deep Christian hostility and suspicion toward atheists. Given that Christians are called to turn the other cheek and love our enemy, what explains the fire-breathing anger of John Hagee and his enthusiastic congregants? Is it borne of offense and alienation brought about by new atheist rhetoric? Perhaps a fear and misunderstanding of those in a target outgroup? Or maybe a sense of threat and cultural marginalization resulting from the perception that America is increasingly secular and hostile to faith?

While each of those issues surely deserves its own treatment, in this talk I want to address another catalyst, one that is born of *theological* assumptions about the genesis and nature of

atheism itself. It's a perspective that I believe is widespread in the Christian community and it's a perspective that I also believe to be wholly unjustified and indeed prejudicial.

So what is it? I call it the Rebellion Thesis (henceforth RT), and for the purposes of our discussion I will define it as follows:

RT: "While atheists profess to believe that God does not exist, this disbelief is the result of an active and culpable suppression of an innate disposition to believe in God which is borne of a hatred of God and a desire to sin with impunity."

We can illumine the claim of RT with the following illustration. Imagine that you are in a dispute with Jones about the color of your boss's car. You say it is white while Jones insists that it is black. In order to settle the issue you both go out to the parking lot and look at the car. Sure enough, it is white, just as you said. "See?" you say. "It's *white*." But incredibly, Jones stubbornly shakes his head and retorts, "No, it isn't. It's *black*. Just like *I* said!"

Assuming that Jones is not delusional, you would likely conclude that his insistence that the car is black was a disingenuous refusal to admit that which he really does know: that any honest person looking at the evidence can just *see* that the car *is white*.

Similarly, according to RT, any reasonable and non-delusional person looking at the world can just *see* that God exists. Consequently, the refusal to concede God's existence, like the refusal to admit that the boss's car is white, would be born of a disingenuous refusal to acknowledge that which one really does know. Moreover, the reason one refuses to acknowledge God's existence is because one is *against* God.

In short, RT entails that all instances of atheism are instances of *anti*-theism, of sinful, incendiary rebellion against the creator and sustainer of the universe.

By contrast, the Christian believes that since God is maximally good and loving, all knowing and all powerful, it is both irrational and wicked to be against God. Thus, if the Christian adopts RT, she is thereby committed to viewing the atheist's unbelief as an irrational and wicked denial of her knowledge of God. If this is the starting point, it's no surprise that the Christian is thereby hostile toward, and suspicious of, atheists. After all, they are in open rebellion against all that is good and true.

So how should we analyze RT? In the time that remains I'm going to proceed in four steps. We will begin with a key question: do Christians in fact hold this bleak view of atheism? The answer is yes, *many do*. While I do not have survey data on percentages, it does seem to me that these sentiments are widely held, and in support of that claim I will list three high profile examples of Christians analyzing atheism in the terms of RT. I take it this will be sufficient to illustrate that RT is a common contemporary Christian interpretation of atheism. And that will be sufficient for our discussion.

From there we can turn to assessing the evidence for RT. That evidence comes in two forms: biblical texts that allegedly teach RT and empirical evidence that atheists behave in a manner conforming to RT. I will critique both lines of evidence before drawing my conclusions in the final section.

Part 1: Evidence that Christians hold RT

In his entry on "atheism" in the influential 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards includes a subsection titled "Hostility to Atheism" where he observes:

“One could fill many volumes with the abuse and calumny contained in the writings of Christian apologists, learned no less than popular. The tenor of these writings is not simply that atheism is mistaken but also that only a depraved person could adopt so hideous a position”

While one could consider countless historic instances of Christians analyzing atheism in this term, and in my book I list several, for the sake of time, I’ll limit my focus here to a few contemporary examples.

We can begin with the case of R.C. Sproul, a prolific Christian theologian and apologist who has written dozens of books and hosts the syndicated radio show *Renewing Your Mind*. In one of his books, Sproul describes the following interaction he had with a group of atheists:

I was invited to a university campus several years ago to speak to an atheists’ club. They asked me to present the intellectual case for the existence of God. I did, and as I went through the arguments for the existence of God, I kept things on an intellectual plane. All things were safe and comfortable until I got to the end of my lecture.

At that point I said, “I’m giving you arguments for the existence of God, but I feel like I’m carrying coals to Newcastle because I have to tell you that I do not have to prove to you that God exists, because I think you already know it.

Your problem is not that you do not know that God exists; your problem is that you despise the God whom you know exists. Your problem is not intellectual; it is moral—you hate God.”

In this passage we see Sproul declaring that arguments for God's existence are a moot point for atheists because they already know God exists. And their denial of this is nothing more than a sinful and rebellious refusal to submit to the knowledge they do have. In Sproul's view, people describe themselves as atheists not because they disbelieve in God but rather because they *hate* the God they *do* believe in.

Second, in 2011 Christian apologist and philosopher James Spiegel, a professor at Taylor University in Uplands, Indiana, published a book titled *The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief*. As the subtitle suggests, the entire book constitutes an analysis of atheism along the broad lines of RT. Spiegel writes: "Atheism is the suppression of truth by wickedness, the cognitive consequence of immorality. In short, it is sin that is the mother of unbelief."

Finally, at a pop-cultural level we can consider the depiction of atheism in the 2014 film *God's not Dead*. Produced on a meager budget of \$2 million, the movie went on to gross over \$60 million in box office receipts, mostly from conservative Christians. It has also spawned a sequel due out this April. *God's not Dead* tells the story of a young Christian named Josh Wheaton who goes off to university and has his faith challenged by an atheist philosophy professor. Dr. Radisson demands that all his students write "God is dead" on a piece of paper on the first day of class. When Josh refuses, Radisson demands that he prove God's existence in front of the class. Later on Radisson meets Josh in the hallway at which point he snarls: "There is a God, and I'm him." Later, we learn the real source of Radisson's atheism: when he was a child his mother died and Radisson has never *forgiven* God. He'd been an atheist ever since. As one Christian reviewer observed:

Atheists bad, Christians good. That's my four-word summary of *God's Not Dead*.

This anti-atheist movie would be more effective if it didn't portray every atheist as smug, angry, selfish, obnoxious, and unhappy. In contrast, nearly every Christian is kind, happy, generous . . . well, you get the idea.

Yes, we do. Despite the cartoonish portrayal of the film, it has garnered close to 13,000 reviews on Amazon.com averaging 4 ½ stars.

To sum up, I take it that these three high profile examples are sufficient to demonstrate that RT is widely held by Christians today.

And so we turn to the next question. What *justifies* the claim that every one of the hundreds of millions of atheists in the world today (and throughout history) were/are all sinfully suppressing their belief in God out of a hatred of God and a desire to sin with impunity?

Let us first turn to what is allegedly the most important evidence for RT, that which is found in the Bible.

Part 2: Biblical evidence for RT

In the mid twentieth century theologian Karl Barth famously declared that all Hindus are in rebellion against God. Missiologist Hendrik Kraemer was incredulous at this sweeping declaration, and so he asked Barth how many Hindus he'd met. The Swiss theologian replied, "None." "Then how do you know they're all in rebellion?" Kraemer asked. "A priori," Barth replied.

Barth's response to Kraemer parallels the response many Christians would give to the justification for RT. In short, they don't need to know any atheists to know that *all* atheists are in sinful rebellion against God. The reason is simple: *scripture teaches it*.

But *where* does scripture teach RT? Fortunately, the list of biblical passages that are invoked as direct support for the Thesis is mercifully short and consists of Psalm 14:1, Psalm 53:1 and Romans 1:18-20. Since Psalm 14:1 and 53:1 make the same claim, we will limit our discussion here on Psalm 14:1 before turning to Romans 1.

a. Psalm 14:1

Psalm 14:1a reads:

¹ The fool says in his heart,
 "There is no God."

This verse provides the basis for the bumper sticker which declares "April 1st is Atheist day. Psalm 14:1." Get it? Only *fools* would be atheists. It also lives on in a popular urban legend that describes an atheist going to court in search of an official holiday for atheists, only to have the judge reprimand him with the observation: "Atheists already have their own holiday. April 1st! Case closed!"

There is no doubt that Psalm 14:1 is commonly invoked in support of RT. But does it in fact support that claim? The short answer is no. In response, I'll consider two serious problems with that reading of the verse.

To begin with, it is hopelessly anachronistic to interpret Psalm 14:1 as referring to atheism. The ancient near east – the period in which the psalmist was writing – was a world of many gods,

innumerable divine beings who had a hand in human affairs. In short, the ancient near eastern world was one of polytheism, henotheism and monolatry, but not yet of strict monotheism and certainly not of atheism. The categorical denial of all divine beings was an intellectual stance unknown to the ancient Hebrews. Indeed, many scholars suggest that atheism as we currently understand it does not appear until the 17th century AD. Consequently, it is most surely not the focus of Psalm 14.

If we want to get a better sense of what the psalm *is* talking about, we should expand our focus beyond the first part of verse 1. So let's continue reading:

¹ *The fool says in his heart,*

“There is no God.”

They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;

there is no one who does good.

² The Lord looks down from heaven

on all mankind

to see if there are any who understand,

any who seek God.

³ All have turned away, all have become corrupt;

there is no one who does good,

not even one.

To sum up, the fool of Psalm 14:1 represents the entire human race. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul recognized that point and so he quotes Psalm 14:1-3 in Romans 3 precisely to support the claim of universal depravity. As such, the psalmist's target is certainly *not* individuals who

assent to the proposition “God does not exist”. Rather it is the person who fails to live in accord with the moral law God has revealed in nature and his word.

And by *that* criterion, we’re *all* fools.

b. Romans 1:18-20

Now let’s turn to our second example, Romans 1:18-20. Paul writes:

“¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

In October 2015 popular Christian apologist Greg Koukl, head of Stand to Reason ministry, released a short video in which he addresses a question based on Romans 1: “Are Atheists Just Suppressing the Truth in Unrighteousness?” In short, Koukl is asking, is the Rebellion Thesis true? Koukl insists that it is and he offers the following explanation:

“What Paul says is that the evidence of God is clear to everyone having been seen through what has been made. So you look around the world: natural revelation, general revelation and you realize something is going on that’s greater than us and the thing that’s going on is God’s activity evident to everyone. But, the writer says ... men characteristically suppress the truth in unrighteousness. That is, they hold down what is trying to erupt up in an obvious way. It’s like trying to hold a beach ball under water. [...] You’ve got to work at keeping it down and

the evidence of God is so obvious in the world, *that* the world exists, and *the way* the world exists [...] that a person has to be denying the obvious, aggressively pushing down the evidence, to turn his head the other way, in order to deny the existence of God.”

So Koukl describes an atheist as akin to a person struggling to hold a beach ball under water. While that illustration complements my analogy of Jones insisting that the white car really is black, it goes further by illumining the alleged internal struggle of the person who is attempting to persuade themselves of atheism, despite the overwhelming evidence of God that stands before them.

At first blush, Romans 1:18-20 seems to offer a far more promising justification for RT. But does it in fact succeed?

Note first that Romans 1:18-20 does not *explicitly* teach RT. The text is not addressing atheists *per se*. Rather, as with Psalm 14, we find here a general sweeping indictment of the human race that fails to act on the knowledge available to it. The text simply does not *say* that *every* instance of a person accepting the proposition “God does not exist” is the result of an active and culpable suppression of a natural knowledge which is borne of hatred of God and a desire to sin.

That said, might one *infer* support for RT in Paul’s words? After all, verse 20 does state that “God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, ... so that people are without excuse.” Wouldn’t that include atheists? Consequently, one *could* argue that an atheist *is* culpable for denying evidence of God which is clearly seen.

However, note that if we read the text in this way, it is not only atheists who are morally culpable for denying the overwhelming evidence of God’s existence, power and divine nature. The same indictment extends to *every* person who fails to accept these claims, and to do so with the

requisite conviction the evidence requires. When we consider the implications of this view we will have a powerful *reductio ad absurdum* against the RT reading of Romans 1.

Think again of the car illustration. Jones is culpable if he outright denies that the car is white. But he is also culpable if he begrudgingly hedges his bets. Imagine, for example, that Jones replies like this: “Okay, I *think* the car is white. But I have my doubts. I’m just not *sure*.” While Jones is not denying that the car is white, he is nonetheless failing to affirm that it is white in the unequivocal way that the evidence *requires*. And thus, he is still culpable of bad faith. In short, *the extent to which Jones fails to offer a ringing endorsement of the whiteness of the car is precisely the extent to which he is morally culpable for denying that which is obvious to every honest observer.*

And that includes the Christian who ever finds him or herself doubting God’s existence, his power, or his nature. If the atheist is guilty for sinfully denying the overwhelming testimony to God’s existence or nature, then the Christian who doubts is *equally guilty*.

And this is a consequence with titanic implications. The fact is that millions of Christians struggle with their faith. They find their level of conviction in God’s existence, power or nature waxing and waning over time. Imagine if every diminution in the strength of one’s conviction in God’s existence and nature were interpreted as the result of a sinful, rebellious will.

To appreciate just how outrageous that would be, consider the case of Bob and Maria Jyono. They were faithful Catholics for years. Then they discovered that their daughter had been repeatedly raped in their own house over a period of *seven years* by the family priest, Father Oliver O’Grady. Do you think that Bob and Maria experienced some diminution in their level of conviction as regards God’s existence, power, and/or nature?

Of course they did.

Can you imagine analyzing that diminution in the terms provided by Greg Koukl? Can you imagine concluding that as they struggle with their belief in God's existence, power, and/or nature, Bob and Maria are really engaged in a disingenuous suppression of overwhelming divine revelation akin to holding a beach ball under water? Perhaps you *can* imagine this. But if, like me, you *can't*, if that analysis appears implausible, outrageous, and indeed *offensive*, then you have a defeater to the interpretation of Romans 1:18-20 in the rigid terms defined by RT.

And that brings me back to a reading of the passage as part of a general indictment of humanity which forms part of the sweep of Paul's argument in Romans 1-3 without insisting that it apply to the details of *every* putative instance of doubt or disbelief, whether that of the Christian or the atheist.

To sum up, we are simply not warranted in concluding based on this sweeping argument in Romans 1-3 that *every* instance of a failure to affirm God's existence, power, and/or nature with maximal conviction is thereby sinful. If we cannot use this passage to impugn all theistic doubters, neither can we use it to impugn all atheistic doubters.

Part 3: Empirical evidence for RT

While scripture provides the primary support for RT, Christians also appeal to empirical evidence to justify the claim. The basic method here proceeds as follows. One begins by identifying a putative instance of antitheism. Then one infers that this particular instance supports the general conclusion that all atheists are antitheists in accord with the expectation of RT.

While I devote a chapter to discussing and rebutting empirical arguments like this in *Is the Atheist My Neighbor?*, here I will limit my analysis to two decisive problems with this method: (1) the problem of cherry-picking and (2) the problem of underdetermination.

First, we can begin with the problem of cherry-picking. The problem here is that the defender of RT is selectively engaging the evidence, counting putative instances of antitheism whilst discounting putative instances of non-antitheistic atheism. In other words, the defender of RT is counting instances that support her thesis while discounting instances that do not.

And there are *many* cases that do not as with atheists who present no hostility toward God or theists, who believe theism and Christianity are intellectually respectable, who even state their *wish* that theism would be true, but nonetheless find themselves unpersuaded by the evidence or otherwise unable to believe. Just this past week I engaged in a debate on the British radio show Unbelievable (podcasted and available online) with atheist philosopher Michael Ruse. In the debate, I defended atheism and Ruse defended Christian theism. I have always found Ruse to be very pleasant and amiable. He maintains affection for his Christian upbringing and considers Christianity to be an intellectually serious view of the world. And he shows no evident hostility toward God.

By counting the hits (e.g. Richard Dawkins) and discounting the misses (e.g. Michael Ruse) the defender of RT is engaged in a bald exercise of confirmation bias, no better than the xenophobe who justifies the claim that *all* Muslims are terrorists by proffering a selected list of Muslim terrorists.

Next, we can turn to the problem of underdetermination. This term refers to cases where evidence is compatible with different interpretations and thus does not provide explicit support

for one interpretation. And that's the problem: many putative instances of antitheism which might otherwise provide evidence for RT could be explained in ways that do not support RT.

Consider, for example, Smith who describes himself as an atheist and then adds in the manner of a popular Christian RT meme, "God doesn't exist, *and I hate him.*" Would this paradoxical utterance, this apparent expression of *anti-theism*, support RT?

It certainly *could*, for if atheists are in fact all in rebellion against God then we would reasonably expect them to express hostility of this kind toward God. But we must ask: are there other possible explanations for Smith's apparent hostility toward God?

And the answer is, *yes, of course*. For example, Smith's hostility could be explained in terms of transference. Imagine, for a moment, that Smith's father was an abusive pastor, and that when he expresses putative anti-theistic sentiments, these are sentiments redirected from his abusive father to the God his father worships. In short, Smith's antagonism may in fact be against his *father* rather than against God. If we don't know the genesis of an atheist's apparent antagonism, we are simply not warranted in concluding that it manifests a pure instance of anti-theism which is supportive of RT.

Consider this real world example. Author Barbara Ehrenreich comes from a long line of atheists dating back to the nineteenth century. In her spiritual memoir *Living with a Wild God*, Ehrenreich recounts how her ancestor Mamie McLaughlin first became an atheist, thereby laying the foundation for a family tradition:

"When her father was dying she had sent for a priest, only to get word back many hours later that the priest would come for no less than twenty-five dollars. Perhaps the priest

could be forgiven for dodging the long ride by horse or mule But Mamie did not forgive him.”

From that day forward Mamie counted herself an atheist with a significant degree of antipathy which could be interpreted as broadly supportive of RT. But if those sentiments originated as a reaction to a money grubbing priest derelict in his pastoral duties, then we are hardly justified in concluding that Mamie’s hostility does, in fact, provide any support for RT. And the challenge in every putative case of RT is to discern the source of the hostility.

One final point. Imagine yourself as an agnostic or tentative atheist in the pew when Pastor John Hagee harangues atheists in his sermon, or in the audience when Sproul barks out that you hate God. How many atheists have become entrenched into positions of hostility precisely because of Christians aggressively analyzing their unbelief by way of RT?

Part 4: Where do we go from here?

Thus far I’ve aimed to establish that many Christians hold to RT. Next, I’ve sought to provide a critique of the biblical and empirical evidence proffered in support of RT. The result is that RT is unjustified, as it is supported neither by scripture nor by empirical evidence. So now as we wrap this discussion up, what lessons should we draw?

To begin with, it is worthwhile to highlight the link that RT draws between doubt and sin. As we have seen, according to RT, God’s existence, power and nature are readily evident to all such that anyone who doubts one of these claims is thereby sinfully denying God’s clear revelation.

The fact is that doubt is widely censured within the Christian community. According to a recent Barna survey, 10% of Christian millennials in the church observe that in their church “legitimate

doubt is prohibited”. But stigmatizing doubt is devastating to the health of a church. Indeed, it is akin to telling a clinically depressed person to “cheer up”. It does nothing more than exacerbate the problem, alienating people from the wider community as they are forced to take legitimate questions underground to avoid further stigmatization.

To put it another way, the *healthy* church is the church in which members are free to express and wrestle with honest doubts.

Over the years, many Christians have shared their private doubts with me, as if they were scandalous family secrets. In reply, I give them the following illustration. A twin otter bush plane crashed in the northern woods leaving the pilot and passenger half buried in the snow. They’ve radioed for help but it will be several hours before that help arrives. As they lie in the snow, the one man groans: “Every muscle in my body aches. I’m in so much pain.” The second man replies. “Not me. Heck, I can’t even *feel* my body.”

Of these two men, it is clearly the second one that is worse off. The man who can no longer feel his body has *already* succumbed to the ravages of frostbite and hypothermia. By contrast, the pains of the first man are the signs that he is still far better off. *His body is alive! It’s responding to its environment.*

Doubts are the same way: they provide the pains that show a faith which is still alive. As Frederick Buechner observed,

“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

But note, if we remove that stigma of doubt for Christians, we need to remove it for atheists as well. This doesn't mean that there are no morally culpable instances of unbelief. There may be people that will call white black even when they know better. But it does mean that merely identifying an instance of unbelief is not sufficient to identify an instance of moral culpability. In other words, atheism does not entail antitheism.

This leads me to my second point. Since RT is not supported by the evidence, biblical or empirical, I must conclude that it constitutes a prejudice against atheists no less than the judgment that all Muslims are terrorists constitutes a prejudice against Muslims. And prejudices are deserving of social censure and, on the part of those who hold them, *repentance*. On that score, Christians have a lot of work to do. So how should we proceed?

The answer is straightforward, if not simple: we need to rediscover the Christian virtue of hospitality, the extension of welcome to the outsider, the foreigner, the stranger. As an illustration of this simple yet profound discipline, let me tell you about the 2014 meeting between Catholic Pope Francis and Uruguayan President Jose Mujica.

At first blush, the two would seem to be very different and to have very little in common. After all, Francis is the Vicar of Christ, while Mujica, is an avowed atheist and communist.

But look closer. Mujica has been called the world's poorest president because of his decision to eschew the presidential palace of Uruguay in favor of his run down farm house where he lives with his three legged dog. Every day Mujica drives a thirty year old Volkswagen Beetle to work, as he strives to elevate the lot of the poor whilst laboring for a more just society. Oh yeah, and he donates 90% of his salary to charity. As for his status as the world's poorest president, Mujica replies as follows:

“I’ve been called ‘the world’s poorest president’, but I don’t feel poor. Poor people are those who only try to keep an expensive lifestyle, and always want more and more.”

So how’d that meeting go? Well, when Mujica and the Pope met at the Vatican, they embraced warmly and Mujica delightedly referred to the smiling pontiff as a “friendly neighbor.” And with that a lively and irenic one ½ hour discussion ensued. After the meeting the Holy See issued a retrospective statement declaring: “The Pope is very pleased for having met with a wise man.” Not a fool, mind you, a wise man.

The lesson for us all is one that must be learned time and again. If you want to understand people, if you want to know the outsider, the foreigner, the stranger, set aside your presuppositions and prejudices, and welcome them in as a brother or sister or friend: welcome the Christian, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the communist, the capitalist, the socialist, the secularist, the feminist, the nationalist, the environmentalist, and the atheist ... the atheist who is your neighbor.