

Why I'm Not an Angry Evangelical Atheist

In response to an article I sent to him, written by a skeptical biblical scholar, a pastor replied, “I think he’s more of an evangelical atheist than you.” I appreciated that he felt that way.

Unfortunately, the image many people have of non-believers comes from the most agitated atheists. The most aggressive, angry and anti-religious voices seem to get the most press coverage, resulting in all non-believers getting branded with a bad name. Can we blame the faithful for getting the impression that the faithless are rather tactless and unkind?

I’ve never felt “called” to be an “atheist evangelist.” I don’t feel the need to convert anyone to my viewpoint or use all the mocking and memes out there to prove what a great apologist for atheism I can be.

Ten or fifteen years ago I was reading books by the so-called “new atheists” including Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. While appreciating many of their logical positions, their arguments left me wondering: Why be so caustic and contentious? Are you aware how arrogant you appear? Who’s listening? Is anyone changing anyone’s mind in these matters?

Maybe it’s anathema to question these modern heroes of heresy, but I don’t mind becoming a heretic among heretics.

I often asked myself while reading the “aa” writers (agitated/angry atheists): Do they have any relationships with people of faith or do they simply not care? How does all their intellectual bombast go over when they’re talking with a loved one who believes? Are they only interested in sinking ships rather than suggesting alternate courses?

Some say they aren’t attacking believers, only religious beliefs. Yet, ask a person of faith how they feel about these aggressive attacks. Why wouldn’t they take it personally since these are deeply personal matters? And, I have to ask why these differences of opinion have to be skirmishes at all?

One blog editor wrote, “I think there will be fewer ‘angry atheists’ when there is less to be angry about.” Maybe. Though some seem intent to be bitter and grumpy, and

besides, won't we always find things to be angry about? The choice is, what do we do with our anger, whittle it into a weapon or get more creative?

Like many who have left faith, I went through a period of disappointment tinged with anger, but I refused to let that define me or determine my journey forward.

These tensions are illustrated by a story from the naturalist John Burroughs. In his New York boyhood he witnessed regular disputes between his father and a neighbor who argued over beliefs in the Burroughs' kitchen. The (Methodist) neighbor was the "aggressor," whittling a stick while whittling away at old farmer Burroughs, an old school Baptist. The neighbor was "more ready and smooth of tongue" with his arguments, but as John saw it, his father held "the greater depth of religious feeling."

"Each looked upon the religious belief of the other with the utmost contempt." The elder Burroughs "would not have been caught in [a Methodist church] on any account whatever."

Looking back with the wisdom of years, Burroughs completes his description of these kitchen-table whittlings with this: "The disputants of course never succeeded in changing each other's views, but only in causing them to be held more tenaciously." In fact, he says that both old men "died in the faith they had early professed."

How sad when people are so set in their ways they never seem to give an inch, learn or grow.

This story comes from *The Light of Day* (1900) which was John Burroughs' own venture into the struggles and tensions between reason and religion, science, philosophy, naturalism and faith. The tone and manner in which he reflects on his family's faith is admirable, sensitive. "How impossible for me to read the Bible as father or [the neighbor] did, or to feel any interest in the questions which were so vital to them; not because I have hardened my heart against these things, but mainly because I was born forty years later than they were, with different tastes and habits of mind."

What Burroughs touches on here is a major issue I have with those "aa"s who are so intent on converting (or de-converting) people of faith, so focused on forcing their arguments on "deluded" and "irrational" believers, so desperate to "win," that they miss the humanity, the deep meaning so many find in faith. Why is that so threatening?

If a non-theist has family, friends or co-workers who have faith (who doesn't?), is the mission to be an atheist evangelist? How is that any different than the old-fashioned evangelism? Unless we have a dramatic "game of thrones"-type clash of worldviews with combatants in a contest for superiority and domination, what purpose does any non-fictional evangelistic agenda serve?

I understand the need for "apologists" (defenders)—at least I understand their need to convince. I did that once upon a time. But I no longer have the need to argue my way into someone's head or heart. "Do unto others" seems a reasonable guideline for atheists too. This is one reason I don't go too deep in debate with intransigent atheists either (after all, with my "chaplain's heart" and "natural mind" I consistently seek common ground with little time for seizing the high ground).

What purpose does it serve, these endless debates and arguments where people take sides and no side wins? We don't see mass conversions to belief or non-belief. I've watched and listened to debates. I greatly prefer to view discussions and dialogues—honest conversations without having to put another person down.

I can appreciate some of what Hitchens or Dawkins toss out, though often with smirks on their faces. Yet, that's how it seems to me: tossing stones at others while smirking with an air of superiority. This only convinces people that non-believers are elitist asses.

As one clergyperson asked me when we first met, "Do you think religious people are delusional?" He referred to *The God Delusion* by Dawkins. I responded by saying we all have our delusions, but no, I don't think all people of faith are, on the whole, "delusional."

Like so many in the religious community, many non-religious seem to be caught in the same loop of talking to themselves. I fall into that sometimes, primarily engaging online with people who generally think like I do about some things. There's nothing inherently wrong with "hanging out" with others who share similar stories. It's probably good to simply be aware of the bubble or echo-chamber, realizing that people "outside" aren't included or being engaged. That's how I felt among friends and colleagues when discussing theology. It became a fun ping-pong game, but nothing ever really changed, except perhaps gaining a few new jokes.

Another great naturalist, John Muir, took a steamer ship from San Francisco to Alaska in 1890. Muir was a man of faith, though far more interested in this world than any other. Onboard the steamer he had a lively conversation with an old Scandinavian sea captain who was “a stubborn skeptic” but also “the kindest soul on board.” The sailor told Muir that he had no time “for nonsense and mystery and other worlds.” Muir the pantheistic believer was impressed with the old captain, “the best-natured growler” he had ever met. Muir stirred his shipmate’s curiosity about glaciers, the naturalist joking that the captain should “repent and be reformed” to go see Alaska’s glaciers for himself.

Wouldn’t it be good to hear more encounters like this, among respectful people who can both learn and laugh with each other?

I receive regular emails from The White House. Today’s West Wing “Real News” (!) had this headline: “Walls Work,” followed by an apparent quote from *The National Review*: “Of all the Democrats’ arguments against a southern border wall, the shadiest is that it would not work … Love them or hate them, [a wall’s] effectiveness is indisputable.”

We might actually dispute that, but they have a point. Walls can be very effective—they can really work. The question is what kind of “work” are they for and are they realistic or necessary? As East Germans once said after the Berlin Wall came down, there is still a “wall in the head.” There effectively remained a wall in people’s minds.

When I was involved with an evangelical movement as a youth, we desperately prayed for people to be saved and go to heaven. Sometimes we were so concerned for our friends, family and strangers to “have a relationship with the Lord” that we cried. It was quite emotional.

No doubt many atheists will scoff and sneer at this, but I think we were genuine in our anxious concern that everyone know “the love of God.” We weren’t angry with people; we weren’t really interested in arguing people to Jesus; we didn’t waste our time debating finer points of theology or the Bible (well, sometimes). We felt that we loved others so much we wanted them to “see the light”—to love the One we loved and who loved us. The most important way to do that was to “be the only Bible some may ever read.” In other words, to walk the talk, live the life of love, which was the best way to bring anyone to faith.

Could the atheist evangelist learn from that? Is the motivation to show care, concern, compassion for others? Is there a personal, one-to-one, dimension to the “points” we have to make or is it an all-out war?

Let me be clear. I certainly see the need for rigorous dialogue and a firm call to Reason. I'm not interested in sugar-coating anything. I regularly challenge what I perceive as nonsense or religious privilege. My blogs, books and columns often have a cutting edge of critique and question. But what intrigues me is the potential for forming respectful relationships where people are actually communicating rather than “whittling their sticks” (into sharp spears) for battle.

If a person chooses to march onto battlefields as a Crusader for Christ or a Soldier for Secularism (even in the safety of an online forum), and that's how they intend to spend their time, march on. But they shouldn't expect to change many minds or be surprised when a phalanx of freethinkers doesn't fall in line for the futile stick fight.

I don't think I'll ever think of myself or identify myself as an atheist, mostly for the reasons I've mentioned, but also because it's a negative based on negatives with too many negative representatives. In my view, Freethought is a more positive, constructive, relational model that invites and includes non-believers as well as believers. Freethought welcomes agnostics like Robert Ingersoll (who counted believers among his friends), who can stand beside atheists like Ernestine Rose (an early defender of women's rights) and progressive people of faith like Lucretia Mott (a radical Quaker preacher and heretic), Gandhi or MLK.

The more I interact with freethinking humanists, believers, agnostics and atheists the greater the opportunities I see for building connections rather than breaking them down. The dismantling of walls, physical or psychological, can take time, but I'd much rather be involved in that cooperative effort than defending tired, old moss-covered walls that needlessly divide.

The aforementioned pastor, who doesn't experience me as an evangelical atheist, has gotten to know me through my clergy wife, my columns, *A Freethinker's Gospel* and speaking twice in his church. He's aware that a number of his parishioners aren't very “orthodox” when it comes to creeds and theology, and he knows that many of them also read what I write and appreciate my views.

Doesn't this suggest a sensible way forward, at least for any but the most militant? Why build walls to throw mud at them? Make a path, not a fence. Win a friend, not an argument.

When discussing Christianity, Burroughs offered this humanistic observation:

There must be "integrity of character and fealty to truth . . . Our final reliance is always upon the [person] and not upon his creed. We care little what he believes or disbelieves, so that he believe in sobriety [seriousness, sensibility], justice, charity . . . so that he speak the truth and shame the devil"

He goes on:

"Atheism itself, if sincere and honest, is more in keeping with the order of the world than a cowardly and lukewarm deism."

In balance, he concludes:

"When the true patriot speaks, everybody is patriotic; when the real Christian appears, everybody loves Christianity [We must show a person] that religion is not some far-away thing that he must get, but a vital truth which he lives whenever he does a worthy thing."

I would like to be judged by my character and the worthy things I do. Most of us want that, I think. So *let's have less evangelism and more evangel, a revival of goodness and graciousness. Let's have less argument and more conversation; less ridicule and disrespect and more sincere listening.* And let's try to open more doors, even in our own minds, to be invitational, welcoming and hospitable.

To borrow some ancient but apropos words: *for those with eyes to see and ears to hear*, the road ahead may not be comfortable or clear, but if the alternative is more dead ends and closed minds, why not choose an open path that's truly progressive?

We might even have enough wits to whittle something much better than pointed weapons.

**Chris Highland
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