

Handling Internet Atheists: *An Essay Exploring Apologetic Methodology in Practice*

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Introduction:

I wrote the following response a number of years ago on an Internet message board where I regularly frequented. Three atheists began posting disparaging comments against religion in general and Christianity specifically. The main atheistic poster who became my antagonist, was named Rob, but two other nameless friends joined him in befuddling and aggravating the Christians who also participated on this message board.

It is sad to say that none of the believers effectively answered their religious objections, nor offered any answer to their questions, even though the atheists were asking the same, re-treaded questions that all unbelieving, God rejecters have always asked. I was troubled by the inability of the Christians to offer any meaningful apologetic for their faith, as well as challenge the foolish unbelief of the atheists. In order to offer up a needed response to these anti-theists, as well as help the Christians learn to argue persuasively for Christianity, I wrote the following post.

Rather than engaging in an endless and fruitless posting battle with the various complaints that our unbelieving acquaintances have put forth, I think it would be more profitable, at least for the believers who frequent this page, to exam their fallacious assertions in order to learn from them. As Christians, we are called to make a defense of the faith, (1 Peter 3:15ff). The idea of defense is that of a legal argument. Believers are to train themselves on two fronts: On one hand, we are to be heralds; ready to proclaim the gospel of what God has done to redeem humanity to himself in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we are to be expert prosecutors, cross-examining our opponents and exposing their errant worldviews.

Most Christians are trained well in the first front. Many young, enthusiastic believers seek to find ways to proclaim the gospel, either with gospel tracts or learned presentations. They want people to have the joy of salvation they have experienced, so they are eager to share their faith. Where they tend to be weak, however, is with the second front of expert prosecutor. Now, what do I mean by that? To put it bluntly: Christians are too nice sometimes! But, what do I mean by that? Am I suggesting we are to be an “in-your-face,” Bible thumping, fundamentalist preacher type, who deceives himself into thinking he won a debate by yelling his opponent into silence? No.

The apostle Peter is explicitly clear that we are to be ready to give an answer with reverence and gentleness. Humility, love, and respect should always be reflected in the character of the believer when debating non-Christians. In fact, non-believers use previous encounters with rude Christians as a means of mocking. Christians with poor behavior do more to hinder the gospel than to advance it. I would imagine that is why Rob, one of the atheist posters, misunderstood my quotation of Psalm 14:1 as personally attacking him. I was not attacking him as a person, but I was pointing out his foolishness in denying God (more about that in a moment).

At any rate, I would venture a guess that he and his unbelieving cohorts who have also posted here have run into haughty minded, idiot Christians who have been jerks. The attitude of such Christians only demonstrates they were not prepared to discuss their faith with anyone, let alone a challenging atheist.

What I mean when I say that Christians are too nice is this: *Christians need to be prepared to challenge their unbelieving proponents.* The typical, evangelical Christian has been fed this idea that he is never to challenge those he witnesses to. It is as if he has been told by pastors, or an evangelistic trainer, that telling an unbeliever he has knuckle-headed ideas and beliefs is somehow un-Christ-like. Somewhere during their Christian education, average believers have been taught that they are to defend their beliefs when challenged by non-Christians; but they, in turn, are never to challenge the beliefs of the non-Christian. This thinking has led to Christians being unprepared to meet the objections of the unbeliever, and has failed to train them to turn such objections back upon the unbeliever in order to show him the folly of his false worldview and inconsistent beliefs.

It needs to be understood that when the Christian, armed with his tracts, goes out to the college quad or down to the laundry mat and squares off with a non-Christian, there stand two individuals with two competing worldviews. The Christian goes through his gospel message of how Jesus died for sinners and tells the person he needs to repent; the other person thinks the Christian is goofy. The two may have an interesting exchange of ideas, but the non-Christian leaves the conversation no more persuaded of his need for Christ as he was before. Why is that? I believe it is because the unbeliever never had his personal beliefs challenged. Think about it, how can we as Christians tell a person they need to embrace Christ when we haven't shown them the folly of his or her personal beliefs?

We as Christians need to have in the fore-front of our minds, that when we call a person to repentance, we are not just calling them to give up smoking cigars, drinking beer, and their Metallica CDs. Christians erroneously think telling a person to repent involves giving up moral vices. Repentance, however, is much more than that. When we call people to repent, we are calling them to abandon their basic worldview – their philosophical outlook on life – and call them to submit to our Christ-centered worldview.

Consider Psalm 2 for a moment. This is a messianic Psalm that speaks of God's messiah coming in judgment against the nations who foolishly fight against God. After highlighting the authority and power of the messiah, the Psalmist writes in 2:10ff, "Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way." The Psalmist is calling these rebellious kings of the earth to abandon their rebellious worldview and to submit themselves to the LORD. Repentance involves way more than telling a guy to give up drinking, smoking, cussing and believe upon a set of facts pertaining to Jesus Christ. We are telling him to dismantle all previous ways of thinking and living, and submit himself to a new way of thinking and living. That, as you all know, is a big change, and one of the reasons unbelievers refuse to do it. On the divine side of salvation, only God almighty can open spiritually blinded eyes to the truth of the Gospel. To him, the salvation of souls is dependant; not our masterful skills in debating.

However, the key we must use in bringing an unbeliever to the point of reconsidering his outlook on life, or his worldview, is found within our role as prosecutor. We are to put hard questions to the unbeliever and challenge the inconsistencies with in his worldview. We do that, of course, with gentleness and reverence, but it must be done nonetheless.

When the Christian flips to the offensive, and places the non-Christian on the defensive, two things will emerge. First, the Christian will quickly realize how agitated the non-Christian becomes when placed in the defensive position. The person probably never defended his beliefs before this time, so he really hasn't thought through how to respond. Second, the Christian will come to realize how inconsistent the non-Christian is with his supposed core values and the actual way he lives.

For instance, take the example of the person who claims there is no absolute moral truth. On the one hand, this individual argues that no person knows what the truth really is, so in his opinion, Christians have no authority to be telling people to believe Jesus is the only way to salvation, and that people must obey the moral rules found in the Bible. Yet on the other hand, he will be outraged when he hears about an atrocious act performed against a child. Well, if there is no absolute moral truth, as this person believes, then why is he getting upset at what someone else does to a child?

What may be morally reprehensible for this person may not be so for the one committing the atrocity against the child. If morals are relative, with no connection to any authority, and are left up to the individual to decide, then harming children may fit squarely in a person's moral system. Do you catch the inconsistency? Here is a guy who makes these claims that morals are relative and not absolute, but gets mad at someone else for doing something he finds morally repugnant! The core values of his worldview do not equate with his actual living in the real world. Indeed, these are the two key problems you will encounter when challenging unbelievers: unpreparedness to defend their beliefs and incoherence between different aspects of their thinking. These two problems need to be exploited by the Christian evangelist. Defenders of the faith should never tire of pointing these inconsistencies out, for they will prove to be a formable means of showing the folly of an unbeliever's belief system.

With these foundational remarks in mind, let us critique some of the inconsistencies and fallacious argumentation presented by our unbelieving acquaintances. Let us begin by examining some problematic tactics.

First, is the typical **"swarm your opponent" tactic**. I have seen this done by Muslim apologists on other lists. The tactic is simple: The agitating unbeliever runs across a Christian posting board and posts a few smart aleck comments to stir the dander of the Christians. They respond with their comments to the unbeliever's original post. The next time the Christians check back onto the board, however, they discover that the unbeliever must have gone down to his coffee shop/bookstore hangout and told 2 or 3 of his atheist buddies about this Christian message board and convinced them to post as well. It is assumed that swarming the Christians with several posts rehashing the same, lame questions unbelievers have asked over the centuries will somehow make Christianity appear foolish and establish the unbeliever's position.

I have encountered Christians who do the same on non-Christian posting boards and email lists, but we must keep one thing in mind: *Volumes of email containing moronic questions do not establish your position as true*. Just because your opponent is unable to answer all of the questions you swarmed him within a short amount of time, does not mean that you are right and he is wrong. You must provide concise questions containing substantive information; and even then, you may still be wrong.

Next is the classic **"woe is me, I am being persecuted" tactic**. This is found in one of the atheist's accusation that I hate him because I quoted Psalm 14:1. Nothing is further from the truth. I have sympathy and love for this fellow and his unbelieving friends, because I know they abide under God's just wrath. That aside, this tactic is not only used by unbelievers, but also by pseudo-Christian cults like

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. The tactic is a "red herring", because it is meant to draw attention from the original problem I had with his position; in this case, the unbeliever's foolishness of disallowing compelling evidence for the existence of God, and re-focuses the attention to win the sympathies from others by claiming the Christian is an intolerant meanie because he thinks my beliefs are foolish. The fact of the matter is I never said anything about him personally; I only repeated what the Bible states: unbelief is foolish.

Third, is what I would like to call the "**the dodge ball**" tactic. One of the atheists in his post made the bold assertion that DNA proves evolution is true. I simply followed up by asking him how? In other words, prove your assertion. To his credit, the atheist dropped the DNA argument and admitted he is unlearned in the workings of DNA. However, his evasion is a dodge ball tactic; he dodged the question and moved on to something else. I am not an expert in DNA either. However, I know enough from general high school science to realize that complex proteins containing vast amounts of stored genetic information just don't ooze up out of nowhere. (Or that the so-called common genetics that supposedly spawned all biological life is a belief accepted by the faith of the evolutionist). By giving up the debate, and moving on to something else, the unbeliever is dodging the core question: the issue of how we understand the origins of DNA. This just goes to show you, if you make a bold assertion about the truthfulness of something, against something else, then it is important to have some inkling of what you are asserting, before you assert it.

Fourth, is the "**feigned expert**" tactic. This is clearly seen with the challenge against Noah's ark. A couple of the atheist posters complain that the record of Noah's flood and the ark is "insane" because there are no supporting facts to meet their objections. My question to them would be: have you two read all the technical information that demonstrates the reliability and truthfulness of the Genesis account of Noah's flood? More than likely, they have not. On many occasions, unbelievers feign the expert, but in actuality, they probably haven't read a shred of the vast amounts of literature that supports the historicity of Noah's global flood. All of the unbelieving objections are easily answered, and I would add, with sound reason.

The **feigned expert tactic** is also found in another atheistic post, in which the writer goes on and on about the Bible contradicting itself. Has this so-called expert really studied the Bible? I can safely say, no, he (or she) has not. That is not to say the unbeliever has not read it; rather, he has read it, but not for the purpose of understanding it and learning about the God it reveals. It is read for the purpose of finding so-called errors. I should point out that answering "problem" passages for an unbeliever, particularly a hostile unbeliever, is often times a fool's errand. The unsuspecting Christian gets lured into a debate over Bible difficulties, and soon learns that no answer he supplies for the unbeliever will satisfy him. The unbeliever ignores the answer and moves on to the next difficulty. It becomes apparent that the unbeliever isn't interested in learning the truth, but only to justify his disdain for God and the Bible.

We saw some fallacious tactics in argument, but now, let us examine some inconsistencies, and other general fallacies.

The pretended neutrality fallacy. This is the primary fallacy faced by all Christians when encountering unbelievers. The unbeliever claims he is an unbiased investigator with the matter of God. He hasn't allowed his mind to be poisoned by the "opium of religion," I think were some of the words by the atheistic opponents. Well, if an unbeliever, or anybody for that matter, tells you he is unbiased and neutral in his thinking, he has seriously deluded himself. There is not a neutral, unbiased person on the planet. All men everywhere have a system of presupposed beliefs in their mind by which they evaluate

knowledge and information. All men have a starting point for the way they think and believe. Atheists want the Christian to believe they are neutral in their thinking about God; they just haven't found any proof for God's existence. But the truth of the matter is they were committed to a system of unbelief before they even began evaluating proofs for God's existence.

When you study the history of atheism, the major atheistic philosophers who shaped the thinking of modern unbelief came from problematic personal lives. They either experienced tragedies in their lives, or perhaps got the bitters because their strict parents made them go to church. Whatever the case, something happened to them as a person, and these life experiences were an excuse for them to rebel against God. Later, when they encountered other similar people, or read some atheistic philosophy, they find an "authority" for their unbelief and hatred toward God. Any discussion they have with Christians will be filtered through this grid of unbelief, so when the Christian points out something that verifies the truth of the Bible, the unbeliever dismisses it, because it doesn't filter through his pre-established set of beliefs. It doesn't compute in his atheistic worldview.

An example of this is how an unbeliever and a Bible believing Christian look at the Grand Canyon. The unbeliever looks at the Grand Canyon and says, "Wow, a whole lot of time and a little bit of water made this!" He says that, because his evolutionary worldview teaches him that the earth was shaped by the elements during vast amounts of time. The Christian, on the other hand, looks at the Grand Canyon and states, "Wow, a whole lot of water, and a little bit of time made this!" Why? Because the Christian's belief system is founded upon the Bible, that records an historical narrative of a global flood. Honest evaluation will consider the geology of the Grand Canyon to determine which belief system explains the evidence. I can confidently state that the evidence supports my Bible.

Second is **the tension within one's epistemological perspective**. Or, put another way, a tension within how an unbeliever justifies knowledge. Note, for instance, how one of the atheists mocks the Christian's belief in eternal heaven when he writes, "...I'd much rather believe that I'll be going to eternal bliss rather than nothingness when I die. Unfortunately things we wish to be true are not necessarily true." In other words, what he is stating is that belief in eternal bliss (heaven) is really wishful thinking, because what will really happen after we die is nothingness. Really? Where exactly did he get his information about so-called "nothingness?"

The unbeliever will mock the Christian for believing in eternal bliss; yet he has absolute no proof for his belief in nothingness. This is a serious inconsistency in the thinking of an unbeliever. He claims Christians are foolishly embracing unproven beliefs; yet the fact of the matter is he too is embracing unproven beliefs. If any unbeliever is going to try and convince us that nothingness exists after death, then he is going to have to be able to prove it. At least I have a source of authority for my belief in eternal bliss, and my source has proven to be faithful time and time again.

Next is **the "historic ignorance" fallacy**. Unbelievers, especially atheists, delight in pointing out the horrible things in history that have been done in the name of religion. They go on and on about the cruelty of the crusades, the tortures of the inquisition, and the persecution of witches in Salem, MA. All of these wicked deeds somehow disprove God's existence, though it is rather vague how it does. Be that as it may, these same atheists tend to have a blind spot in their history with regards to the horrific acts done in the name of atheism. Joseph Stalin (left wing socialistic atheism), Adolf Hitler (right wing socialistic atheism) and Pol Pot (left wing socialistic atheism), have killed more people in the name of their atheistic causes in the 20th century, than all the religious wars and atrocities in the 2000 years of

the Christian church! There is absolutely no comparison. When it comes to murder and torture, atheism leaves religion in the dust!

One of the unbelievers closes off his post by stating, “My beliefs are centered on equality.” Are you kidding? Atheism centered on equality? The individual atheist may believe his personal beliefs are centered on equality, but that is not the case for historic atheism, especially in the 20th century. Everywhere atheism rears its ugly head, people are enslaved and impoverished. That was the case for the former Soviet Union and Albania, and remains the case for North Korea and China.

Last, but not least, is the **“ignorance of theology” fallacy**. This is seen with the classic question of, “If God is so good, why is there evil in the world?” It is assumed that because the Christian claims God is good, but bad things happen in the world, then this concludes for the atheist that God cannot exist. It is viewed as a contradiction for the atheist. A few things need to be pointed out.

First, the atheist falsely assumes that a good God must only give good things to sinful, treasonous creatures. God owes no one any good. His goodness is an essential part of his attributes. If God never manifest his goodness to humanity, then that would not make him any less a good God. That is like saying, if a bird didn’t fly, it would cease being a bird. A bird remains a bird, even if it didn’t fly.

Second, the atheist presupposes that there is no sin. The Christian, however, believes the evil exists in the world because the Bible reveals that man is a sinner. Man’s sin is the cause of the ills and problems that dominate the world. Evil is not caused by God’s lack of goodness or power, as the atheists assume.

Third, the Bible teaches that evil has a purpose. God uses evil to bring him. The perfect illustration of this is found in Joseph’s words with his brother’s who had sold him in to slavery, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Gen. 50:20). As Christians, we may not understand the purpose of evil things, but I can trust in God’s sovereign decree that, “all things worked together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28).

My point to what I state is to show that an atheist is ignorant of the theology behind the supposed “problem of evil.” Sadly, most Christians are as well, to the detriment of their faith. For the Christian, evil has a place in God’s sovereign purposes; its presence in the world neither disproves God’s goodness, nor his power to deal with it. In fact, I would argue that God deals with evil rather effectively by turning what was meant as a slam against him, to being something that glorifies his name and blesses his people. The atheist cannot begin to even give a credible answer for evil in the world. His complaint against evil is truly frivolous, for in a worldview of unbelief, it is meaningless to begin with.

Much more could be said in our dialog with these anti-theists. When we really examine unbelief, and the anti-theists arguments against belief, it comes apparent that their position has serious flaws. It is imperative for us as defenders of the faith to be by all means reverent in dialog, but relentless in exposing their fallacies and inconsistencies. We must show them the bankruptcy of their philosophical belief system. This holds true for any unbeliever we as ambassadors for Jesus Christ come in contact with; either hostile unbelievers like many atheists, or those unbelievers who may be “friendly” to the faith.