

The Jesus Problem

The New Atheists: A Different Breed of Unbelievers

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Eds. Note: *Atheism Exposed* is a new column devoted to examining the godless religion of atheism. This new column is a preview of Dewayne Bryant's new book *Apostles of Atheism*.

The new atheists don't like Jesus. They deny His historicity, ridicule His teachings, and deride His ethics. Go back a few generations and it would be a different story. Until modern times, many people recognized Him as the Son of God. In the past two centuries, scholars taught that He was a moral teacher or a sage, while others saw him as a failed messiah or first century magic man. In the 21st century West, the new atheists see Him as a nuisance, better rid of than remembered.

The new atheists are a different breed of unbelievers. Their attacks on Christianity are both incendiary and relentless. Their charges against the Christian faith include everything from intellectual suicide to child abuse. It is only natural that one of their favorite targets is the man who claimed to be God. But the ethics of Jesus pose a problem for the militant atheist. In attacking Christianity, one must show that its ethics are inherently corrupt. Since Jesus taught consistently superior morals, criticizing the faith becomes much more difficult.

The problem is that Jesus doesn't comply with detractors who make charges against Christianity. Believers are often described as elitist. Jesus denounces this problem in His parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The Samaritan makes quite a strange hero given the fact that his people denied most of the Old Testament and had been involved in armed conflicts with their Jewish neighbors. The Jews despised the Samaritans so much that they would not set foot on Samaritan soil. No doubt surprising His audience, Jesus makes it clear that good ethics transcend racial identity when the hero saves the life of his Jewish neighbor. He instructs believers to see all human beings as neighbors, regardless of ethnic, political, or ideological differences.

Critics also claim that Christianity oppresses women. Misogyny isn't that uncommon in world religions, and first century Palestine was no different. Respectable Jewish men didn't talk to women in public. A common prayer offered was to thank God that they had not been made a

Gentile, a dog, or a woman. Jesus is different. Rather than treating the fairer sex as a second-class human being, He sets a remarkable precedent. He speaks to women in public (John 4) and even includes them as His followers (Matthew 27:55-56), both of which would have been almost scandalous.

Atheists like Richard Dawkins have stated in public lectures that Christianity is a violent religion. Citing historical examples like the crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, they cry crocodile tears over the destruction of life while avoiding the fact that the atheist regimes of Hitler and Stalin were responsible for millions of murders. They are quite careful to avoid passages like “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other one also” (Matthew 5:39). Jesus’ teaching is devoid of violence, and the New Testament echoes the Old in giving God alone the right to exact vengeance (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30).

Western culture praises historical figures like Susan B. Anthony and Rosa Parks who worked to overcome prejudice. So what do atheists do with the Son of God? Rather than take up the challenge, critics dismiss the Challenger. They either claim He never existed or say that He was nothing more than a legendary figure engineered by the early Church. Websites like www.JesusNeverExisted.com have plenty of information – or rather misinformation – for the interested reader. No reputable historian actually believes the early Church fabricated the person of Jesus, however. He is mentioned in a number of extrabiblical sources, such as the Roman authors Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger. Even the Jesus Seminar, arguably the most liberal collection of theologians ever assembled on planet Earth, agreed that Jesus really lived. One must question why the early believers would have gone to their graves for a fictional rabbi.

The new atheists unwittingly reveal a great deal about themselves in criticizing Jesus. None of the most popular critics knows very much about the Bible or about ancient history. After all, it’s a bit embarrassing to claim that Jesus never existed when even unbelieving scholars claim He did. They know equally little about the Faith itself, but appear to understand enough to see that Jesus has to be taken out of the picture if they are going to enjoy any success. Since Jesus is a moral teacher firmly entrenched in history, they definitely have a problem on their hands.