

Are Atheists Easier to Discuss Christianity With than Christians?

I know this is a powerful question. It can strike to the roots of the pride we take in being Christians. But just because a topic may be painful does not mean it isn't true. I find this to be especially true when pride is involved in the hurt. But before I go on, I feel I need to be precise in what I am talking about. First of all, I mean a true exchange of ideas, Not a mere monologue. Not a session of trying to yell over the other. Not a contest to see who can come up with the most creative forms of name-calling.

In the Bible Belt I live in, it is not hard to get a Christian to talk about the Faith. Indeed, it may be so much so that non-Christians may be afraid to talk at all out of fear of real or perceived attacks on their own belief system. I have found that talks with non-Christians are possible if one is patient and understanding enough to build up some trust with them first, to let them know one is "safe" to talk to. Of course, our "instant gratification" culture we live in makes this difficult, but it's not impossible.

Secondly, while I usually am quite specific in the meanings of key words I use (which is why I am in the habit of capitalizing such words), for this paper I will expand "Atheist" to include Paganism, Spiritualism, Deism, Pantheism and almost every other theological idea that is not Christianity. The only non-Christian philosophy that I will not include here would be Agnosticism. Agnosticism is not a belief, therefore it is impossible to have a meaningful discussion with one who is indifferent to the whole topic in the first place. When dealing with an Agnostic, the first thing one must do is make them non-Agnostic in some way, even if only for the duration of the discussion.

So, now that we know what I mean by "discussion," and with whom I am having said discussion with, why would I suggest that it's easier to have one with Atheists? What common ground do we have to even have the discussion?

Well, we all have some common ground. We all live in the same universe; we all have the same basic needs and the same emotions. The fact that we can communicate at all proves we have at least some cultural similarities as well. But it is actually the differences between the Christian and the Atheist that make discussion so easy with the Atheists (if one can get a discussion at all). At some point our beliefs separate from each other and this point is usually rather obvious. We can discuss this point of separation factually and rationally. There are facts to consider, observations to be made and conclusions can be reached concerning this point of separation. Both parties have a chance to "lay it all out" with no preconceived notions blinding one to what the other says. Talking with Christians, however, is quite different.

Because of our similarities, our points of separation are not so obvious. Indeed, when I talk to most devout Christians, it's extremely rare that I disagree with what they say. Instead, it is what is left out that I disagree with. Preconceived notions blind one to new ideas, and I admit I am guilty of this as well. I like to use the following analogy: My interlocutor (the one I am discussing things with) is trying to tell me that one can take a train from New York City to Washington D.C.. In return, I am trying to tell him yes one can, but one must first stop in Philadelphia along the way. But my interlocutor is so focused on getting from NYC to the Capital that they actually and aggressively deny that the train runs through Philadelphia.

But, no doubt, one can also ask if I really have a point or if I'm just being a jerk and trying to

distract my interlocutor from his own thought process. This is a valid question, but it does not have a simple yes or no answer. If I'm going to D.C. to give a presentation and everything I need is in my suitcase, then such a detail is indeed insignificant. But if I leave NYC with only the slide show while the demonstration model is in a sister office in Philadelphia, then this detail makes all the difference in the world. And I think that, if we are to err on this matter, that it should be in having a little too much concern over the details instead of too little. Why? Because of something that every Christian I know, regardless of Faith, thinks is vitally important.

Some take this thing as a matter of unspoken fact. Some seem to want to remind you of it every time you see them. Still others never think of it on their own yet won't think twice about agreeing to it. It is the idea that we need to have a relationship with God. In fact, not just a relationship, but a personal one. But what does a relationship, especially a personal one, mean?

Suppose one told their spouse, "I believe you have the means to support me and I trust you won't cheat on me, therefore I don't need to know anything more about you." Certainly, these two beliefs are important in this type of relationship. It is not a question of whether or not they are necessary; it is if they are the *only* things necessary. Does the gentle reader really want to have a spouse say that to them? Yet, how many people who agree that this is a poor foundation for a marriage have no problem saying, "I know Jesus died for my sins (therefore, He has the means to support me), and as long as I call Him 'my lord and savior,' I will go to heaven (therefore, He won't cheat on me)"? Is it right for us to expect more out of a spouse than for Jesus to expect out of us?

Being in a close, personal relationship does not mean we can ignore the details. Rather, it makes details even more important. Certainly, some details are bigger than others, but the smaller details are what makes a relationship a relationship in the first place. Any acquaintance may know where one works, but it's a friend that knows what one thinks of this job and it's family that knows what struggles one had to overcome to land this job. I know this is an over-simplified example (some acquaintances are rather nosy and some family simply don't care), but I hope the point has been made. It's not the big things that define how strong a relationship is; it's the small things.

Acedia is the intellectual form of Sloth, and Sloth is popularly accepted by Christians of all Faiths to be a deadly sin. Christianity calls us to examine ourselves, and that includes our Faith. Do we blindly believe what we believe because someone we trust said so (albeit, this is how all Faith must start), or have we really taken the time to understand what this Faith means? Any Atheist can quote from the Bible; it takes a Christian to know what that quote means.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 20 May 2021