

How to
Jesus'
answer to
disciple's
an atheist
handbook

Roope Berg

How to answer to an atheist

Jesus' disciple's handbook

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"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, with humility and fear, having a good conscience. Thus, while you are spoken against as evildoers, they may be disappointed who curse your good way of life in Christ.

1 Pet. 3:15

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Col. 4:6

Test all things, and hold firmly that which is good.

1 Thess. 5:21

INTRODUCTION

One thing has particularly caught attention in the debates about Christianity. Many disciples of Jesus, or so-called Christians, do not seem to know themselves or their doctrine very well. It is a pity, because a person loses easily, if he does not know his matter well.

Atheists usually present the matter in a way that is favourable to them. If a Christian does not know his own matter well, it can easily lead to error and the Christian may even end up defending or explaining a matter that should not have been defended or explained. And thus, the opponent gets an easy victory. At worst, false and misleading ideas continue to spread, misleading others as well. That is why it would be very important for Christians to know their own teachings better.

Unfortunately, lack of knowledge seems to have led many Christians to leave the debates altogether. It is a pity, after all, the Bible says that one should be ready to answer everyone who asks and know how to answer. But, of course, it is difficult to answer and know when very little is taught about what the Bible actually says.

This book goes through many of the problems that have come up in discussions and also the solutions to them. And there are certainly points that many people disagree about. That is not a problem. The main thing is that people would get to know about other options than those that are usually presented, so that they can make their own choice with as much information as possible. It would be great if this helped to understand things related to Christianity better. Then it will also be easier to answer when a related question comes up.

Roope Berg

ATHEISTS

Species

As Paul says, speaker should always know how to answer each one (Col. 4:6). For that it is good to know the person you are answering to, what is his background and the way he thinks. Maybe it is not always possible to know how other person thinks, but it is good to first try to understand correctly what he is actually saying and what is his goal.

And atheists can be divided into two species by what is their goal. There are so called militant atheists, whose goal is not actually to debate or think but instead attack. And there are also thinking atheists, that at least seem to try to debate and understand matters correctly in honest way. In the name of impartiality, there can be seen similar split also in the group of Christians.

The style of militant atheist is often more aggressive and insulting. Not only they try to show Christianity in a bad light, but their style is usually also more disrespecting. That should not be a problem, people should have right for being disrespectful. Maybe more important is to notice, debate is not usually their goal. Instead, they are more about pushing their own propaganda. They usually don't really care about answers, even if it would revoke their claim. Much patience is required when one meets a such atheist in their natural habitat. In that situation it may help to think that the answers are more for the observers than for the atheist.

Thinking atheist is usually a person who just tells that he doesn't have enough reason to believe. Normally he is not aggressively against Christianity or Christians, and their goal is not necessary to insult or even that Christianity would lose. This kind of atheist just does not know or understand enough and therefore is asking questions. And asking questions is not wrong or bad. They often have wrong ideas of Christianity that they think makes Christianity look wrong, which is why they don't accept Christianity. And unfortu-

nately, often those wrong ideas come from so called Christians who have teachings that can't be defended properly with the Bible.

Both atheist species can have good points, issues that are actually true. Christians should think them seriously. It is always good to listen the question patiently and understand the matter correctly, before answering. Too often it seems Christians don't want to even listen the question, because they are afraid it leads to a bad result. Worry about getting lost is understandable. And it is usually also uncomfortable to get criticized or admit own errors. However, sometimes it may be that the error is real. In that case it would be good to think, is it really a problem for Christianity and Bible, or is it just some unbiblical idea that is wrong and not even necessary for Christians. Atheism may be annoying for a Christian, but it can also be purifying and help to get rid of ideas that don't really belong into Christianity. In any case, it is recommendable that a Christian always trusts God and remains in truth.

It seems that one of the main reasons why people are nowadays rejecting Christianity comes from that questions are not answered properly. Even among Christians themselves people appear to fear asking questions and speaking about matters, for that people would not reject God. And it is unfortunate, because then wrong teachings or ideas can rise and lead people astray. It is extremely important that Christians are ready for difficult questions with patience and that they don't just lazily settle to claims of atheists but instead think things all the way without stopping as soon as the situation feels difficult. This is why Christians should read the Bible accurately and carefully and see what is actually said. Knowing Bible well and remaining in its words will help greatly in many questions.

History

It is interesting how the meaning of word atheism has changed. For example, in Finnish Facta encyclopaedia from year 1981 defined atheism this way:

"Atheism, a concept that denies the existence of God or gods and their personal influence on the world order. Atheistic religi-

osity is represented by traditional Hinayana Buddhism, which denies all divinity. Atheistic concepts were already presented by several of the early Greek philosophers... ...Communism has included in its goals the spread of an atheist worldview. Atheist, supporter of atheism, denier of God"

Nowadays many atheists say that they are not deniers of God. For them atheism means only lack of belief in God or gods. And if we use more modern Wikipedia definition, they would then be called "negative atheists" and those who deny the existence of gods are "positive atheists".

"Atheism can be defined in two ways. First, as a thesis that concerns whether or not there is a god or gods in reality. As an ontological, i.e. concept of existence, atheism is the statement "God does not exist". Atheism and its opposite, theism, are then the only possible positions: god exists or god does not exist.[6][2] In another definition, atheism is the conscious perception of some individual.[6] In this case, atheists can be divided into positive atheists, who believe that there are no gods, and negative atheists, who lack faith in the existence of God."

<https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ateismi> (4.9.2021)

The problem positive atheists have is that it is expected from them to prove their claim that gods don't exist. Negative atheists have easier position because they are saying only that they don't believe and therefore have not the same burden of proof. Curiously, they still often demand believers in God to prove God, although logically one could think that only those who know must do that.

Probably because of the burden of proof, in many discussions atheists today prefer to say that they are just people who lack faith in God and are not claiming that God doesn't exist. It is perhaps questionable whether there is any difference in practice. However, this change in the word atheism can cause confusion when older people may have a different definition of the word.

Atheism and agnosticism are views close to each other. And many atheists actually talk like they would be agnostics, of which the 1981 Facta encyclopaedia says:

"Agnostic, supporter of agnosticism. Agnosticism, a view according to which it is not possible to get any information about some things that are considered important (about God and his attributes, about "real" or metaphysical reality as opposed to perceived things)."

It may be that there have always been atheists, but in the last couple of hundred years it seems to have become more dominant or visible. Perhaps atheism has been pushed most strongly in the communist world, whereof Richard Wurmbrand wrote in his book "Why do I believe?" (1978):

"Even the communist world has its own Bible. It's called The Atheist's Handbook. It was published by the Moscow Academy of Sciences (a state-run political science publishing house) in 1961... ...The main purpose of the book is to show that God does not exist."

Nowadays, there doesn't seem to be a handbook for atheists, and atheism doesn't really have any doctrine to spread. But there are many websites and people who publicly attack Christianity in particular. Maybe that's why, many atheists could rather be called anti-Christian, because in practice it's largely an attack on Christianity.

But the definition of the word atheism is perhaps rather just an interesting detail. From a Christian's point of view, it is not useful to start arguing about what atheism or an atheist is if the debate is about Christianity. And in general, it's always a mistake and bad if one starts discussing a person instead of an essential issue. It easily leads the discussion astray and hinders the handling of the actual matter. It is better to focus on the topic and what has been claimed and on what basis.

However, the development of the word atheist shows that it would often be good to ask what the person himself means by the word before continuing. Many problems in conversation are caused by the fact that people have different definitions of the words used.

Dangerous tactics

Not everything people say is true. It is good to always try to check whether the things presented are true, and not automatically accept claims without good reasons. Also, Adam and Eve could have perhaps avoided troubles if they had stopped to think whether it is worth believing in God, or the father of lies they just met.

You are of your father, the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and doesn't stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks on his own; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.

John 8:44

Still, lying is not necessarily the most dangerous conversation tactic. Worse is when the opponent speaks the truth in such a way as to mislead. A bit like Tony Montana says in the movie Scarface, "I always tell the truth, even when I'm lying". Tony Montana often comes to mind when it comes to the arguments of atheists. One example of this is Noah's Ark. Atheists often tell a version of Noah's ark, which is easy to present as impossible or untrue. They may be right in their own story; the problem is that that story has not much to do with the Bible's narrative. Just because the atheist's version doesn't work doesn't mean the Bible is wrong.

Similar situations can also come up in the news. For example, the media may say, "Ivermectin is a horse medicine", and leave out what else it is. In this way, a false image is created by making people to think that it is the whole truth. In general, you should always be careful not to assume that the things presented are necessarily the whole truth. It's always good to think about whether something was left unsaid.

You should always pay attention to the narrative, how the matter is presented. Often things are presented in such a light that it supports narrator's intentions and twist the actual subject. The matter may be true, but only a part of the whole truth and presented advantageously for the narrator. You should pay special attention to this

kind of misleading and always think about whether this is the whole truth, whether the matter has been distorted somehow, or whether it is a matter of the person's own baseless interpretation. It is not a good to automatically accept opponent's suppositions and premises, without thinking is there enough good support for it.

The misdirection described above is the same or very similar to straw man argument. In it, for example, a false weaker version of Christianity is presented, which is then attacked. Christian should be careful not to defend a "straw man" but take care to defend his own actual cause. For this, it is very important to know yourself, the Bible and what you represent.

At this point, it's also good to say in defence of atheists, it's not always a matter of conscious action. It may simply be that the person just has incomplete or wrong information, which then leads to these situations. However, whether the matter is conscious or not, is not important in that a Christian should always be careful not to step on such mines in a conversation. And these do not only apply to religious discussions, but to all other situations as well. It is always necessary to be alert to the fact that the claims presented are not necessarily the whole truth, or the right thing.

Another similar argumentation error is a "red herring", i.e. a misleading hint. One alleged origin of the name of this fallacy in argumentation is how smoked herring was used to deceive hounds. In a conversation, this can mean that the other person makes an argument or point that leads away from the main point. One example of this could be that instead of answering the question, person starts a discussion about whether the questioner is qualified. There can be many ways to steer the conversation off topic. You should be careful not to let the matter go off on the wrong track. If it seems that the other person is trying to avoid the question, you can for example ask why the other person is not answering it. Or, if the other person completely ignores the answer and talks off topic, you can always ask if there was a problem with the answer, or why the other person ignores it.

In today's debate about religion and Christianity, atheism seems to be dominant. And anyway, at least in Western countries, atheism seems to be the dominant ideology. One reason for this seems to be that Christians, that is, Jesus' disciples, do not know their own matter well. Atheists have many websites to help them in the discussion, where attacks against Christianity are collected, but the greatest help for them is the ignorance of Christians in many matters. Of course, Christians also have their own websites, where there are ready-made answers. But in many cases, those answers seem to be a bit incomplete, which gives the opponent an advantage.

The saddest part of ignorance is that many wrong and false perceptions are unleashed when people don't know how to correct them. It can easily lead many to abandon Christianity and also prevents many from choosing Christianity. Everyone should be free to choose whether to believe the message, but it would be good if the choice were based on correct information, and not just one, often distorted, view on the matter.

This book examines many of the questions and answers related to Christianity that have come up in discussions. The book is not intended to make you a believer, and you don't even have to agree with the ideas. The goal is to provide an alternative to what otherwise seems to be quite one-sided thinking and hopefully help you understand things related to Christianity better.

