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So What Does an Atheist Do With the Bible? — Ideology Meets Etiquette

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Author Christopher Hitchens, striving for the uncontested title as the World's Most Strident Atheist, suggests that our culture is experiencing "something like a change in the zeitgeist" — and that that change means a new openness to atheism. His book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, is a direct assault upon belief in God. The assault extends to the Bible. As religion writer Rachel Zoll explains, Hitchens and his fellow atheists dismiss the Bible as "fairy tales posing as divine scripture." Many do not mince words.

That doesn't go over well with Carlin Romano, a professor and literary critic who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Romano suggests that atheists should learn some lessons in etiquette. Indeed, he argues that atheists could learn from the polite evasions of literary critics like himself, who couch dismissive messages in kinder prose:

The simple answer, then, to how atheists should respond to sacred texts is: politely, if possible, employing all the wry ambiguity book critics use when awkwardly trapped with the author or admirer of a book about which they have reservations. "It's really quite amazing," one might say, or, "You know, I was just reading it the other day — it's as good as ever."

To respond otherwise is rude, he believes, and the newly assertive atheists have shown their share of rudeness. But Romano does understand that atheists have to respond to the Bible in some manner:

For almost everyone involved in the believer/atheist debate, atheism consists in denying the existence of God, then philosophically evaluating the consequences in the spirit (if not according to the exact program) of a contemporary Nietzsche or Grand Inquisitor. Yet, to a literary critic's eye, many of these books ignore, for the most part, a crucial question: What should the atheist's position be on "sacred texts"?

As any postmodernist worth a salary would quickly understand, Romano describes this as "another 'death of the author' problem."

As he sees the issue, the problem is that the texts remain even when God is dismissed. "Unlike the situation with God," Romano asserts, "atheists can't deny the existence of sacred texts, at least as texts. There is indisputably something on hand to deal with."

That does pose a problem. God may be declared dead or non-existent, but the Bible remains very clearly existent by the atheist's bed in the hotel room. Just open the drawer and it is there. Then the atheist author goes to his book signing party at the bookstore and nearby shelves are filled with Bibles for sale. What's the atheist to do?

Most seem to reject it outright, often with vitriol. After reviewing arguments and selected quotations from aggressive atheists, Romano suggests that throwing stones at books believers consider to be sacred is not a good public strategy.

Here is how Romano asserts his call for a new etiquette:

In advanced, progressive, tolerant societies, we also don't go up to strangers and tell them that they're ugly, that their children are repulsive, that their clothes don't match, that they need a bath, that the leisure activity they're engaged in is stupid and a waste of time. In the same way, atheists should not, unprovoked, go on and on about how sacred texts lack God's imprimatur. And believers should not blithely go after atheists. If this sounds like the credo of an American – an odd creature of history who might be an atheist or believer – the plea is guilty. One can, of course, line up the bolstering high-culture quotations on this side too, against the belligerent atheists. Schopenhauer's proviso that politeness is "a tacit agreement that people's miserable defects, whether moral or intellectual, shall on either side be ignored and not made the subject of reproach." Even Eric Hoffer's lovely line that "rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength."

And so, just as you would not tell parents that their children are repulsive, atheists should not tell the public what they really believe about the Bible.

Politeness does have its limits, however. Romano argues that when believers "start to use sacred writings to oppress," the atheists must go on the attack.

As he argues:

Polite respect ends when believers insist on sacred texts as God's authorization of those believers to regulate, suppress, or punish the behavior of nonbelievers. In such situations, the atheist's politeness goes out the window because the believer has thrown his politeness out the window first. Is there anything as impolite – a gentle word, to be sure – as forcing one's moral rules on another because they supposedly come from a divine being whose existence the other doesn't accept?

Strange as it may seem, I think I like Christopher Hitchens' approach better. Hitchens at least understands what is at stake. This really isn't about etiquette. Christians are to be kind and gracious, but the offense of the Gospel remains. It is not considered polite to tell persons that they are sinners destined for hell. Etiquette would demand that Christians abandon the claim that Jesus is the only Savior and that the Gospel is the only message that saves. Such claims are, in our modern context, considered insufferably rude.

In this sense, Hitchens understands what he rejects. It is clear that he has actually *read* the Bible, or at least much of it. He does not believe in God, therefore he does not believe that the Bible is divinely inspired. He sees the Bible as a hopelessly repressive book — a book to be opposed, not politely and dishonestly referred to as "sacred" just because Christians believe it to be so.

At least we understand each other. Both Hitchens and believing Christians understand the limits of etiquette. The Bible demands obedience and belief, not insincere compliments.

