Talking to Christian Fundamentalists

by Herb Silverman

How should we talk to Christian fundamentalists whose worldview is so different from ours and who don't accept evidence for ours? While we can't reason people out of a belief they didn't come to through reason, I've found that we still might be able to find points of agreement.

For instance, I might start with the commonality of "Love your neighbor," and describe varieties of the Golden Rule that predate Jesus, including Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism. Something else we could probably agree on is that all faiths (except theirs) are wrong.

I also say that every educated person should read the Bible because it's an important part of our culture. I also mention that everybody needs to read more than just one book, no matter how much we value a particular book, and I then offer some secular books worth reading.

If I'm asked for biblical quotes I like, I mention Matthew 7:16: "By your fruits you shall know them." I also like John 8:32: "The truth will set you free," which it did for me when I became an atheist. If they tell me they support blasphemy laws, I say I might, too, if the offended deity personally files charges.

It helps in discussions with Christian fundamentalists to treat them with kindness and respect. We should assume that they believe what they say, even if it sounds to us like nonsense. When I hear personal attacks, I ignore them and stick with the issues.

Usually the best I can hope for in talking to committed Christian fundamentalists is that some of their stereotypes about atheists will change and they will think I'm a nice guy with a sense of humor (even though I'm going to Hell). I point out that there are good and bad atheists as well as good and bad Christians, and that I think we should judge people on what they do, rather than on what they say they believe.

Since I came to atheism through a sensible evidence-based path, I don't try to convert others to my position. I just hope they will think about the beliefs with which they were raised, and whether those beliefs still make sense to them. This is especially useful if I'm in a public debate with a Christian fundamentalist, providing some in the audience an opportunity to hear about atheism from an atheist, rather than just from their minister.

I understand why it's important to Christian fundamentalists that they try to convert me: Eternal life is at stake. And for many of them, that's more important than life itself. I find such a view odd at best. A Christian fundamentalist worldview can also be dangerous if conversion to it is forced on others, as has happened frequently in the past and still happens today.

The Bible was written thousands of years ago by misogynistic men. What does the Bible say about women and their bodies? The punishment for a man who raped a virgin woman was that the man should pay her father 50 shekels, and that she must marry her rapist because she has become damaged goods to her father (Deut. 22:28).

In Genesis 9, Lot was praised for offering his virgin daughters to a band of marauding men. If a woman's husband dies without providing her with a son, she must marry her husband's brother (Deut. 25:5). Countless women were once put to death because of Exodus 22:18: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Men were allowed many wives and sex slaves (concubines), but if a wife was found not to be a virgin, she would be stoned to death (Deut. 22:20-21). And King Solomon's brain was not his most prolific organ. According to 1 Kings 11.3, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Some Christian fundamentalists ignore several of these ridiculous passages or find creative interpretations for what God really meant. Some say that the Hebrew Bible (their Old Testament) is superseded by the Christian Bible (their New Testament). However, Jesus said that not one jot or tittle shall change from the old law (Matthew 5:18). There are also passages in the Christian Bible about women not having authority over a man, that the man is head of the household, and that women are created for man (Ephesians 5:22–24).

Many of my Jewish ancestors suffered from passages like Mathew 27:25: The blood of Jesus will be on all Jews and on their children." And John 8:44: "The Devil is father of the Jews." The Christian Bible does not oppose slavery, just that slaves should obey their masters (1 Timothy and Ephesians 6). The Bible also doesn't say not to abuse children, not to abuse your wife, or not to torture and kill in God's name.

Christian fundamentalists may try to live according to their interpretation of the Bible, but they have so far been unsuccessful in making it the law of our land. Unfortunately, they have been somewhat successful promoting their political agenda in public schools through school boards, city councils, and state legislatures, often trying to eliminate the teaching of evolution or teaching it along with "intelligent design." They have tried to pass biblically-based laws against LGBTQ rights. In some places they try to deny women contraceptives and abortions.

Preventing women from having the right to abortion seems to have become the top issue for Christian fundamentalists today. What does the Bible say about abortion? Absolutely nothing! Jesus never mentioned abortion. The closest the Bible comes to bringing up abortion is that the husband deserves recompense if another man harms his wife's fetus during a fight. Exodus 21:22-25 says: "When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him. And he shall pay as the judges determine."

Christian fundamentalists should accept that the most prolific abortionist is their god. Based on current evidence, if you factor in fertilized eggs that fail to implant along with pregnancies that end in miscarriages, around 70% to 75% of all conceptions end in pregnancy loss.

When talking to Christian fundamentalists, I think it is okay to bring up some of these issues in a polite way. We can quote passages and ask how they interpret them. Many are not even aware of uncomfortable passages, and it gives them something to think about on their home turf (the Bible).

What should we think about the many religious colleges and universities in the United States? Many have decent academic programs. They usually offer obligatory courses in religion, which do not interfere with legitimate and rigorous academic subjects. When I was a Professor of Mathematics at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts in the early 1970s, I knew several faculty members at the College of Holy Cross, a Roman Catholic college one mile away. They were not particularly religious and had no religious restrictions on

what they could teach. What was most significant to me at the time was that **Daniel Berrigan**, a graduate of Holy Cross and a priest, gave the commencement address at Holy Cross in 1973. He and his brother, **Phil Berrigan**, also a priest, were active in the antiwar and antidraft movements during the Vietnam War. I participated in some marches with them and walked with quite a few Holy Cross students.

The Berrigan brothers were part of the Catonsville Nine, who in 1968 went to jail for burning draft files. They issued the following statement: "We confront the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian bodies, and the synagogues of America with their silence and cowardice in the face of our country's crimes. We are convinced that the religious bureaucracy in this country is racist, is an accomplice in this war, and is hostile to the poor."

In my home state of South Carolina, Furman University was founded in 1826 as a Baptist university, but has become more diverse, not requiring students or faculty to hold specific religious views. In 1992, Furman separated from the Southern Baptist Convention in order to exert more control over their institution. On the other hand, in Charleston, my home city, Charleston Southern University (formerly called Baptist College) is decidedly Christian, where it integrates faith with learning, and is in good standing with the Southern Baptist Convention. Its faculty are required to sign an oath of belief. In 2004, I debated a professor from that institution on the existence of God, though the debate was not allowed on their campus and took place at a nearby church. He later accepted my invitation to speak on my College of Charleston campus. The professor then invited me to speak to his class, but the invitation was rescinded because his administration refused to allow me on campus. So much for academic freedom.

We know that many religious universities do not teach subjects like evolution that conflict with their religious agenda. Even worse, some have political agendas, including the well-known Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Its former president, **Jerry Falwell Jr**., considered it immoral for evangelicals in 2020 to not support President **Donald Trump**, adding that he could do nothing to lose his support. Falwell was later forced to resign his presidency because of a sex scandal. He hadn't objected previously to Trump's sex scandals.

I'll close with some questions I get from Christian fundamentalists, along with my answers. Why do you hate God? I don't hate God any more than I hate the Tooth Fairy, and I didn't become an atheist because something bad happened to me. I became an atheist because I find no evidence for any gods.

What is the purpose of life? I don't need to believe in a god to find a purpose. There may not be a purpose of life, but we can find many purposes in life.

Why be moral? Personal responsibility is a good conservative principle. We should not give credit to a deity for our accomplishments or blame satanic forces when we behave badly. We should take personal responsibility for our actions. I try to live my life to its fullest — it's the only life I have, and I hope to make a positive difference because it's the right thing to do, not because of future rewards or punishment.

Why do you think science is more reliable than religion? Because we know how to distinguish good scientific ideas from bad ones. Scientists start out not knowing the answer and go wherever the evidence leads them. Science relies on experimenting, testing, and questioning assumptions critically until a consensus is reached, and even that is always open to revision in light of later evidence. This is why scientific truths are the same in Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel, and India — countries with very different religious beliefs.

Don't you worry that Heaven and Hell might be real and that you will be going to Hell? Here are questions I have for you about Heaven and Hell. Why is faith not only important, but perhaps the deciding factor about who winds up in Heaven or Hell? What moral purpose does eternal torture serve? If we have free will on Earth, will we have free will in Heaven? If so, might we sin and go from Heaven to Hell? If not, will we be heavenly robots? If God can make us sinless in Heaven, why didn't he create us sinless on Earth? Can you be blissfully happy in Heaven knowing that some of your loved ones are being tortured in Hell? And what do you do for an eternity in Heaven without getting bored? Wouldn't a loving God who wants us all to go to Heaven make it unambiguously clear how to get there?

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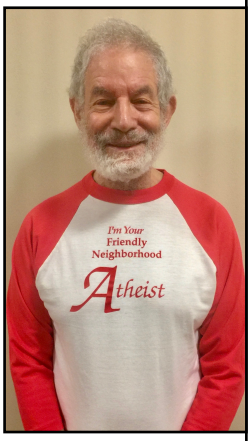

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were in-eligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through amazon.com.

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