

Feature Article: JAF3383

ANTITHEIST FAITH AND HISTORY

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 38, number 03 (2015). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

SYNOPSIS

Some atheists have become *antitheists* openly devoted to attacking religion in general and Christianity in particular. One line of attack they use is denouncing Christianity for its past. Instead of using history in its proper sense of investigating the past with an open mind, they turn it into polemics. They distort history by searching it for evidence that bolsters their prejudice and neglecting evidence that runs counter to their views. David Eller's chapter in the new atheist anthology *Christianity Is Not Great* (Prometheus, 2014) focuses on the Crusades and the "Inquisitions," with attention also to forced conversions, support of warfare, and the witch craze. Eller finds a core of violence in Christianity's attitude toward other religions, even implying, contrary to all evidence, that Christianity is to blame for the hostility between Christianity and Islam. He goes so far as to accuse Christians of obsessing about death by worshipping a dead man. This antitheism fails both to address any positive achievements of historical Christianity and to admit any of the horrors brought about by atheist regimes such as those of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot. This self-induced blindness ignores the truth that, excepting Judaism, Christianity is by far the most persecuted religion in the world, not only historically but also very much in the present.

You don't necessarily need faith just to be an *atheist*, but you do need faith to be an *antitheist*, an atheist who is militant against religion. Antitheists imagine that they are basing their view on evidence, but in fact they base it only on an axiom; that is, an entirely unsupported assumption. The argument goes like this: all entities are physical, but God is not a physical entity, so God does not exist. The unsupported axiom is that all entities are physical.

It is mean-spirited to mount attacks on Christianity at a time when Christians are suffering extreme persecution. Antitheist propaganda against Christianity in the West pales beside the actual torture, expulsion, kidnapping, and murder of Christians in other parts of the world, notably in Syria and Iraq but also in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa and Asia. This persecution is almost entirely ignored by secularist media. Haven't they noticed? Aren't they aware that Christians have been in Syria and Iraq long before Muslims— since the very beginning of Christianity? (In fact the term "Christian" was first used in Syria.) Or is there a belief that Christians are getting their belated comeuppance and deserve what they suffer? Though Christians are a minority even in the West, secularists do not grant them the tolerance they show to other minorities. The open attack represented in *Christianity Is Not Great*, the recently published book edited by John Loftus, and the chapter by Eller is at least more honest than the usual sneers and insults.¹ The book expresses and reiterates (without originality) the dominant secular, atheist mentality. Antitheist repression of Christian views has become standard in Canada, Britain, and many European countries, and it is on the rise even in the United States, where the freedom of expression of religion guaranteed by the Constitution is under constant attack.²

GOOD ENOUGH? BASED ON WHAT?

The strange antitheist assumption that the world will be the better for throwing off old views and beginning anew is not supported by history, by cultural anthropology, by Freudian or evolutionary psychology, or by any respected discipline. Instead, it is a child of the Romantic delusion, revived in the 1960s, that human nature is fundamentally good and will respond to utter freedom by constructing a beautiful, peaceful new world. People unaware of the dark, violent side of their own nature are inauthentic and capable of doing great harm, because they fall into Negative Projection, projecting the unacknowledged evils in themselves on their opponents. Christians are also prone to doing that, but so is every person of every religion, every nationality, every party, every ethnic group, every class, and every ideology, including atheism.

Many atheists really do believe in peace and tolerance and social concern and all the rest. But where did they get these values, which are scarcely worldwide or

universal? From some sort of unexplained “natural goodness of man”? Or bestowed upon them by some physical yet preternatural power, perhaps from outer space? Or from neo-Darwinian evolution (which actually denounces value judgments)? Or from Judeo-Christian tradition? If they are honest enough to admit that it’s the latter, they claim that they are justified in shearing off all the supernatural baggage of that tradition. But on what grounds do they deny the supernatural? On no grounds at all. Secular humanists are simply asserting the corollaries to their unsupported axiom. Antitheist efforts to denigrate Christianity hide the flaws of atheism while excoriating the flaws of Christianity. In reality, humans of all persuasions are terribly and deeply flawed. History hardly supports the view that abolishing religion will improve human nature.

Eller’s chapter is a polemic. The validity of a polemic depends on what it includes, what it leaves out, what mistakes it makes, and what questions it asks or fails to ask. One important question this polemic fails to ask is whether religion is unique or a subspecies of ideology. If it is the latter, as it surely is, then the onus of violence is to be laid at the door of secular as well as religious ideologies. The secular, atheist ideologues of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, Maoist China, and Pol Pot’s Cambodia have tortured, enslaved, and killed more people in one century than all the religions from the beginning of civilization. And it’s not just in the past. The most repressive nation in the world today, North Korea, is an officially atheist country and enforces its antitheism mercilessly.

The advance of atheism over the last hundred years has not brought less misery to the world but more pain and suffering. The essence of totalitarianism is to repress anything that challenges the unique, supreme power of the ruler, and Christianity has often spoken truth to such powers: modern Poland is a notable example. Atheists like to prescind from these facts and to see themselves as liberal “free-thinkers.” They argue that Hitler and Stalin were not evil because they were atheists but rather were evil people who just happened to be atheists, as opposed to all the good and constructive atheists. Yet they refuse to allow Christians to use the same defense that Torquemada and Rasputin were evil people who just happened to be Christian, as opposed to all the good and constructive Christians.

Antitheists claim that all religions are evil. But they single out Christianity as the worst religion of all, possibly because most atheists live in Christian (or post-Christian) societies and are reacting against it.

Antitheists exploit and distort history for their propaganda purposes: the root meaning of the word “history” is “investigation,” not propaganda. The first paragraph of David Eller’s chapter prepares us for his saturation bombing of Christianity: “Christianity is exceptional among the major religions for beginning with a killing and

for keeping killing central to the faith ever since. No other religion, for instance, dangles a dead man from the necks of believers” (p. 87). This deliberate turning of Christian belief on its head is perverse. Christ rejected violence; His earliest followers certainly did not kill Him and did not assault those who did. Christianity does not celebrate the killing of Christ but instead His sacrifice for the good of humanity and His conquest of death in His resurrection. Eller just doesn’t understand the religion he is attacking.

LOVERS OR FIGHTERS?

But there is one aspect of Christianity that really is open to special criticism. It is peculiarly open to the consequences of its claim to be an ideology that has love and peace as its central doctrine. “God,” says John’s first epistle, “is love.” Since Christians often act without love, Christianity may be faulted gravely for hypocrisy. Almost everyone is hypocritical in some ways, but Christians affirm such high standards that they are unusually prone to the charge. Some Christians exhibit the greatest goodness in the world, but others exhibit the worst failures.

So let’s evaluate the evidence for hypocrisy. If it is true, as Eller says (88), that the Christian predilection for violence is long and continues to be strong, that would be *prima facie* evidence for hypocrisy. He admits that the early Christians were nonviolent even under great provocation, but he says that this was less a virtue than the result of Christians being too weak to dare to fight. He does not understand what is meant by martyrdom, which simply meant bearing witness to Christ no matter what the circumstances. Under the misapprehension that martyrdom necessarily implies death, he claims that Christians sought to become victims. In fact, Christian doctrine held that one must *not* seek death but rather avoid it unless forced to choose between death and apostasy.

Eller notes that since the 300s when the Romans legalized and established Christianity and Christians entered into positions of power, they “stopped being persecuted [and] began persecuting” (89). Though this is glib, there is truth in it. We need enough power to defend ourselves, but as we obtain power over others, power can become entitlement, and the danger of corruption increases. By 400, the Christian church melded with the Christian secular power, with the inevitable result that some people adopted Christianity for gain. Christians have long acknowledged that this “Peace of the Church” when the emperors recognized Christianity was a mixed blessing.

Soon after the “Peace,” when Christians began to support the imperial agenda and thus accepted the idea of justified violence by Christian soldiers, many thinkers—notably Saint Augustine (354–430)—distinguished between just wars and unjust wars.

The basic criteria for a just war were: (1) it had to be declared by a legitimate authority; (2) it had to be defensive; (3) it had to be for the purpose of advancing good; (4) it had to be waged by limited means: noncombatants were not to be harmed; and (5) the victors must restore justice by not demanding any more than the restoration of the original situation. In practice, these principles were usually ignored, abused, or perverted, but at least the ideal was there. Those who ridicule the ideal ignore some basic truths: almost all wars occurring in non-Christian lands from the most ancient times to the present have been unlimited and accompanied by massacres, rapes, enslavement, and wholesale destruction. The efforts of modern societies to outlaw slavery were led by Christians, and measures to limit war (e.g., the Geneva Convention) were all based on the Christian principles of "just war." The very idea of "declaring war" involved a statement of the alleged moral reasons for the hostilities. The idea has lost its strength over the last seventy years, with frightening results, as in Vietnam and Iraq.

After 395, when the emperor Theodosius ordered the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, other rulers effected the mass conversion of their subjects: examples are King Clovis (481–511) with the Franks, Charlemagne (711–814) with the Saxons, and Prince Vladimir with the Russians (989). Force was often used or threatened. Today we are used to the idea of a "separation of church and state," but such a concept was unknown before the 1700s. It was universally assumed that rulers were both temporally and spiritually the heads of their people, even the personifications of the people, so that the monarchs of England and France could be called just "England" and "France." It was simply unthinkable that the ruler and the ruled should have different ideologies.

As to the Crusades, the politically correct party line is that they were a Bad Thing, the first sign of European hegemony, colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation of Third World countries. Eller himself does not advance this anachronistic nonsense, but he does present the Crusades as one of his prime examples of Christian wickedness. He admits that Islam conquered the Middle East and North Africa from the Roman Empire (91), but he does not make it clear that these conquests were almost exclusively of lands populated by Christians. In fact, eighty percent of originally Christian lands and four out of the five centers of ancient Christianity (Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and eventually Constantinople) were conquered by Muslims (only Rome survived). This is important because a current myth is that those areas were originally Muslim and Christians were the intruders! This falsehood encourages the current lack of outrage at the persecution of Christians by the new "Islamic Caliphate." Nor does Eller note that, for the first four centuries of Islamic ascendancy, there were almost no violent Christian uprisings against their Muslim masters.

The Crusades began when in 1095 Pope Urban II preached them.³ The motives of the Crusaders were certainly mixed, and many hypocritically sought power and wealth under the guise of religion. Yet the prime motivation was defense of the Holy Places such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Modern Christians, though venerating the Holy Land and making pilgrimages there, have much weaker emotional attachments to it than medieval Christians, whose zeal for it is best compared with the Muslim attachment to Mecca and Medina. During the early Middle Ages, Muslim rulers of Jerusalem had allowed Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land, not least because such “tourists” spent money there. When warring Muslim factions in the 1080s and 1090s closed the holy sites in Jerusalem to Christian pilgrims, and when at the same time the Christian Byzantine emperor was asking for military support against the Muslim Seljuk Turks who were invading his territory, the pope proclaimed the First Crusade as a defensive measure according to Just War. And those were the reasons that most Crusaders followed his call with enthusiasm. Still, Christian historians have long admitted that many of the Crusades were corrupted, diverted from their goals, and turned against Jews and dissenting Christians.

Another prime example of Christian wickedness that Eller cites is “the Inquisition.” Eller admits that inquisitions were originally simple inquests, or what we would call investigations. They could be used for a variety of purposes, for example legal or financial ones; they were originally not religious inquiries. However, beginning in the eleventh century and as part of an effort to reform the church, bishops conducted inquiries into the honesty and education of local clergy. This was expanded into a search for doctrinal error, and when in 1233 the popes began their own investigations, the papal inquisition was established. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV even approved the use of torture in some cases. After a decline in the 1300s and 1400s, the papal inquisition was revived in 1542. The Spanish Inquisition was founded in 1462 and was directed not against heretics or witches but against Jews who had converted to Christianity but then relapsed. The purposes of the investigators were to reform society, and many inquisitors were both honest and judicious. Inquisitors in France, for example, overturned many condemnations sent up to them by local communities. Nonetheless many investigators abused their powers, and even honest and sincere inquisitors often used torture or threat of torture. This was obviously against the principles of Christianity, whatever the intentions of individual inquisitors.

Eller avers (103) that “neither the official Crusades nor the Inquisition exhausted or quenched the Christian appetite for destruction.” In support of this claim, he points out the age-long struggle against Islam, beginning with the defeat of Muslim armies near Poitiers in France in 732 and including the resistance to the Muslims in the Balkans and the Iberian Peninsula. This raises a genuine question: should Christians not have resisted the Muslims, thereby permitting them to conquer all Christian peoples? Is any

resort by Christians to violence, even in defense of home and family, hypocritical? Should Christians have allowed themselves to be enslaved and otherwise persecuted, no matter what the immediate or long-term consequences? Perhaps, if the kingdom of God really is not of this world, the point can be argued legitimately, but that is a problem for Christians to ponder, not one that atheists would deem important.

Christians were responsible for the witch craze, during which it was widely and falsely believed that there was a vast satanic conspiracy aimed at destroying Christian society.⁴ The craze began at the very end of the Middle Ages and persisted through the Renaissance and down even into the “enlightened” 1700s. The idea that millions of women were killed as witches is a polemical exaggeration; in reality, the number of executions in the three hundred years of the craze from 1450 to 1750 was about sixty thousand, and men made up about a third of the victims. Most executions occurred at the local level; and when the cases were appealed to higher authorities such as the French *Parlement* (supreme court) or the inquisitions, many condemnations were dismissed. Thus the inquisitions actually acted as a brake on the witch craze.

The strongest historical case against Christianity is the religious wars in Europe during the 1500s and 1600s. Here Protestants and Catholics fought battles against one another, tortured one another, and executed one another. Disgust with these outrages was one of the main reasons for the growth of intellectual criticism of Christianity from the 1700s onward. A pale but recognizable hint of these hostilities remains in the Protestant tendency to denigrate Catholics and the Catholic tendency to denigrate Protestants.

CHRISTIAN ACTIVISM

Eller can't leave well enough alone. As his chapter draws to a close, he says that “peoples around the world...feel the bite of Christian love. Many still feel it today, although other religions have developed a capacity to bite back” (106). The author concludes with the plea to Christians to spare him “from such justice and love” (107). This is an indefensible distortion of history, since the fact is that Muslim persecution of Christians has enormously exceeded Christian persecution of Muslims. On the other hand, the history of Christian anti-Judaism is shameful. Over the past century, Christian leaders have apologized for, and attempted to remedy, their failures. Such self-criticism is unknown among antitheists, who refuse to accept culpability or even responsibility for the tens of millions of people tormented and killed by atheist regimes. But even atheists are smart enough to prefer a visit to Rome to a trip to Pyongyang.⁵

What the atheists also leave out is the role of the church in agriculture, education, medicine, law, and the philosophy that underlay the scientific revolution, itself carried

out almost exclusively by Christians. It was Christians, with Christian motives, who brought about the end of the slave trade and eventually slavery itself, whereas slavery was still legal in non-Christian societies until well into the twentieth century (and is still practiced by Muslim terrorists). It is as naïve and even perverse to reduce Christianity to a “Bad Thing” as it is to present it as a “Good Thing.” Christians live and lived in the real world, in which no one—really no one—is free from guilt. Atheists stand accused of at least as much self-righteousness as Christians. Still, Christians need to recognize their own faults and correct them. Too many Christians have forgotten that God is love. Love, gratitude, and joy, even when flawed, are infinitely better than resentment.⁶

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NOTES

- 1 David Eller, “Love Your Enemy, Kill Your Enemy: Crusades, Inquisitions, and Centuries of Christian Violence,” in John W. Loftus, ed., *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails* (New York: Prometheus, 2014), 87–107. Eller is the author of a number of atheist books including *Natural Atheism* (American Atheist Press, 2004) and *Atheism Advanced* (American Atheist Press, 2008).
- 2 Greg Lukianoff, *Freedom from Speech* (New York: Encounter, 2014); Lukianoff, *Unlearning Liberty* (New York: Encounter, 2012); Adam Bellow, *New Threats to Freedom* (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2010); Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silverglate, *The Shadow University* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Moshe Averick, *Nonsense of a High Order* (Chicago: Tradition and Reason, 2010).
- 3 Jonathan Riley-Smith, *An Atlas of the Crusades* (New York: Facts on File, 1990); Rodney Stark, *God’s Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
- 4 “Witchcraft,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2002 edition.
- 5 In Eller’s chapter, some errors of simple fact occur: the Holy Roman Empire did not exist in the eleventh century; Constantinople was not renamed Byzantium by the Eastern Roman Empire, and it was not renamed Istanbul before the 1930s. In other words, it was Constantinople from the time of Constantine himself to the time of the modern Turkish republic.
- 6 1 Corinthians 13 especially, but throughout the Bible the word “love” occupies eight columns of the concordance compared with two columns for hate, and five for anger.