January 9, 2015

Dear Friends,

There’s been a lot of talk about an Adventist pastor converting to atheism. Like the “man bites dog” story, a pastor losing his faith has a fascination to it. If even pastors don’t believe in God, is faith really just a fantasy? Ryan Bell and Teresa MacBain think so. They are wrong. And here’s why.

Let’s start the year strong in faith, calling out the logical and rhetorical flaws in the atheist assault on Christianity, and rededicated to the battle against evil.

May God bless you,

James

ATHEIST'S RHETORICAL RUSE

“[I wish I could be] one of those sheep and blindly follow and not know the truth . . . But I can’t do that. I know it’s a lie . . . I [used to believe] I was the one on the right track and [atheists] would burn in hell. I’m [now] happy to say . . . I’m going to burn with you.”—Teresa MacBain, former United Methodist Church pastor, and self-proclaimed atheist convert.1

Teresa’s conversion testimony might be confronting, but it is hardly unique. Non-believers make the fastest growing religious demographic in some Western nations, riding high on the wave of the
“new atheists”. So maybe it’s worth taking a brief look behind the
curtain at three of the new atheists’ common rhetorical ruses.

First—accentuate the negative, and avoid the positive.

Christianity is 2000 years old and has more than 2 billion adherents
today. With a history so rich and a following that large, there is, of
course, plenty of dirt to mine. But so what? Every single nation,
corporation, institution or organisation has a far from perfect record.
“There is none that is righteous, not one,” as Scripture says. That the
new atheists have discovered this to be true is hardly disproving
Scripture now, is it?

But all the focus on dirt can’t obscure that religion has actually done
some good. Indeed, some very good. For example, Christianity’s
profound and pervasive impact on the creation and promotion of
education, modern medicine, science, human rights and stable
governments is beyond credible dispute. It is no coincidence today
that nations pervasively influenced by Christianity are the refuge of
people the world over fleeing despots and authoritarians.

Perfect? No. Of some objective utility? Not to prominent new atheist
Sam Harris who stated proudly he would rather put an end to religion
than put an end to rape. If Harris had been in the crowd choosing
between Barabbas and Christ, one doesn’t have to speculate which
one he would want crucified.

Second—a very clever debating trick in the new atheist play book
is to take no responsibility for atheist institutions and actions.

Hence they take an idealised, abstract atheism and contrast it with an
unbalanced presentation of concrete Christianity with all its real-life
foibles. Not surprisingly, with these prejudiced parameters, it isn’t
hard to win an argument. But it’s surprising how many people don’t
see through it.

For example, the late Christopher Hitchens used a little intellectual
sleight of hand in his tome condemning all things God-like. Rather
than admit that Communism is the most obvious and pervasive
example of atheism in action, he classified Communism as a religion.
Now that is convenient, isn’t it? A movement based at its very heart
on the non-existence of God, a movement that ruthlessly repressed all
things religious, is magically turned by Hitchens into a religion.
Hence atheism bears no culpability for the bodies piled high in its
service. Points for gall; but not for intellectual honesty.

Third—but what of the third wave of arguments—that “obvious
lack of evidence?”

Where is the voice in the night and when will the water-walking
begin? Dear reader, when was the last time you heard a talking donkey or saw a shining, frilly angel? Surely, as former pastor Teresa concluded, this is all just fantasy stuff. Put it in a movie; tell it as fairytales to children, but for goodness gracious sakes, don’t actually believe this nonsense. There’s simply not one shred of evidence for God!

Evidence?

If we can wake up each day, look at the way our body is intricately designed, hold a child in our arms and experience the love; if we can look at the wonder of a bee and the grandeur of a mountain range; if we feel empathy and believe there is a right and a wrong; if our souls can be moved by music and our hearts touched by joy; if we can see and feel all of that and not perceive miracle upon miracle upon miracle, then we may believe there is no evidence at all.

After all, what kind of magical trick could satisfy the childish fickleness of the modern mind, if our very existence in this startlingly miraculous world doesn’t suffice?

Christ Himself came and raised the dead, but to the “faithless and perverse generation” that wasn’t enough—they wanted something a little more their style—as if the God of the universe must perform like a circus act in order to persuade us He exists.

All creation speaks of God, but, it turns out, only if we’re listening.
