

God's Worst Enemies

The damage that atheists inflict on our religion is miniscule compared to the damage that God's own people inflict on it. Why can't we see that?

"You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written" (Rom 3:23-24).



Over the last several decades atheists have mounted a spirited campaign to delegitimize all religion. In numerous books, articles, speeches, web sites, and other media, they have mounted withering attacks on religion—especially Christianity—as the primary source of all of mankind's problems. In their view, religion by its very nature breeds hatred, conflict, psychosis, and ignorance.

Atheists hate God and are proud to say so. But for all their venom, atheists are not God's worst enemies. That label is reserved for another class of people: God's own followers.

More evidence for this paradox came to light last week with the revelation by the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office of thousands of cases of sexual abuse of children involving hundreds of Catholic priests. This is not a one-off scandal, but a deeply embedded pattern of behavior that implicates the entire organization at the highest levels. Whatever the Catholic Church teaches about God, peace, love, and social justice has been rendered not credible

by the conduct of a vast network of church leaders whose duplicity has now been laid bare for all the world to see.

Christianity can withstand the assaults of skeptics who seek to undermine its legitimacy. What it cannot survive is the hypocrisy of its own followers. Sanctimonious fraud among those who profess to be its champions renders Christianity utterly impotent as an influence for good in the surrounding culture.

This is not a problem just for Roman Catholicism. Liberal Protestantism long ago surrendered any semblance of spiritual and moral excellence in the name of "inclusion." Consequently, the mainline denominations are dying at an alarming rate. If your church allows you to think and behave no differently than the world, why bother with the church?

Conservative evangelicalism is struggling with its own self-inflicted image problem. Scandals involving sex, money, and bitter infighting are all too common, and the secular press is more than happy to make sure everyone hears about them.

Paul's argument in the early chapters of Romans is that the Jews, for all their posturing about being "the people of God," had their own struggles with sin. Their Gentile neighbors could see it, even if they couldn't. And mark it well, *our neighbors can see our hypocrisy, too*, and are judging our religion by what they see. Satan needs no other tools to destroy God's work. We're doing it for him.

That's why Jesus and the New Testament writers are so persistent in describing the life of faith as, first and foremost, the product of *a pure heart* (Matt. 5:8; Lk. 6:45; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 1:22; etc.). Of all the sins we can commit, the sin of hypocrisy is by far the most destructive to the religion we claim to follow (see Jesus' withering criticism of the Pharisees, Matt. 23).

When we sign up for following Christ, we'd better understand that this is not a PR game to be managed. We're volunteering to fight in a war of cosmic proportions against a shrewd enemy, and the greatest battle will be waged in our own hearts. Fight to win!

— David King