

The Privilege of Being Listened To

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Because Saint Nicholas of Myra, celebrated on December 6, is remembered for generosity and gentleness, one event in his life surprises many people.

It happened at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which both he and the heretic Arius attended. The well-spoken Arius was confidently trying to convince the Council to accept his teaching that Jesus Christ is not truly the Son of God.

Nicholas listened until he could bear no more. He rose and struck Arius, believing that dangerous lies and distortions did not deserve the privilege of being listened to.

A number of articulate, popular atheists today write books and make public statements attempting to convince people that God does not exist. To believe in God, they say, is to subscribe to a false idea that has caused strife all over the world.

Because these writers particularly attack Christianity, we Christians should determine whether the quality of their scholarship and their actual knowledge of the faith they criticize entitles them to the privilege of being listened to.

In his book "The God Delusion" atheist Richard Dawkins writes that Adam and Eve, as a result of their sin, were "banished forever from the Garden of Eden" and "deprived of the gift of eternal life." This is nonsense; the reason for Christ's coming is to restore our eternal communion with God.

Regarding Christ Himself, Dawkins says that "Jesus was a loyal Jew. It was Paul who invented the idea of taking the Jewish God to the Gentiles." He quotes one John Hartung: "Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the [Gentiles]." Reading Matthew 28: 19-20, a passage universally known as the "Great Commission", is enough to show that Dawkins is in error here—and is apparently unfamiliar with some of Jesus' best-known words.

Much more could be said about Dawkins' theological misrepresentations, but any serious reader will also take issue with his claims about other writers. For example, he writes that Martin Luther King, though a Christian, "derived his philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience directly from Gandhi..." But in his famous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail", King himself, having been called an extremist, lists other inspirational "extremists": Jesus, Amos, Paul. Gandhi's name does not appear.

Of fellow scientist Stephen Jay Gould, who wrote that science has nothing to say about God's existence, Dawkins says, "I simply do not believe that Gould could possibly have meant much of what he wrote..." What writer, whatever Dawkins believes, writes what he doesn't mean?

Again displaying his own beliefs, Dawkins refers to the Taliban dynamiting Buddhas in Afghanistan and writes: "I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca [or other holy sites]..." Is it possible he's unfamiliar with—for just one prominent example—the Soviets' destruction of countless churches in the name of atheism?

Kontakion - Tone 3

You revealed yourself, O saint, in Myra as a priest,
For you fulfilled the Gospel of Christ
By giving up your soul for your people,
And saving the innocent from death.
Therefore you are blessed as one become wise in the grace of God.

Saint Paul encourages us to "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Testing the claims of today's popular atheists shows their lack of intellectual substance. That lack means they have forfeited the privilege of being listened to.