

SUNDAY THEOSIS #4-57

Sacramental Living **By Michael Haldas**

Encounters with Atheism

The other day I was having lunch with a colleague when the subject of religion came up. My colleague declared she was an atheist and asked about my religious and spiritual outlook. I told her I am Christian and she gave me a sardonic smile and asked, "So, are you going to try and save me now?"

Before I explain my reply and the ensuing conversation, I must confess that this encounter caused me to think about something I had never considered before. Just as Christians come in many different flavors (one statistic states there are presently more than 41,000 Christian denominations), so do atheists. In a sense, there are many different "atheistic denominations" as well.

The reason I say this is because I have done business with this person for more than a decade so I know her character and respect her very much. She is bright, articulate, well-informed and intellec-

tually honest in her arguments. Like everyone I choose to work with, her business ethics are impeccable. I just vehemently disagree with her about God. In the course of our conversation, I learned that she came from a very religious mid-western family. By her own words, she grew up in an environment where she felt Christianity was something forced on her and that she wasn't allowed to question. Being intellectually minded, this felt very oppressive to her. Further, what seemed to be conveyed to her about Christianity was that it was all about rules and judgment.



I told her I wasn't going to try and "save her" nor could I, only God could and I had no idea how He was

working in her life. She looked at me quizzically and I explained that I am an Orthodox Christian, which means I believe in sacramental theology of the Christian East. I told her that Orthodox, and Eastern Christians in general, don't understand salvation as a one-time acceptance of Christ in our hearts, but rather as a life-long journey of becoming more and more Christ-like (i.e., theosis or deification) through living sacramentally. I also explained that part of our theology is to acknowledge that God is at work in everyone's hearts, even an atheist, in ways we may not understand, so our part is not to judge anyone, but rather be as Christ would be to them. She knew her Bible very well, so when I brought up Christ's great commission, she knew I meant Matthew 28:19-20, where He stated we were to go and make disciples of all nations. I told her disciple means "learner" not "convert." So I explained rather than try to convert her or save

her, my job so to speak, was simply to explain what I believe and why. I didn't change her mind, but we had a great conversation and continue to have similar respectful and edifying conversations to this day.



I contrast this experience with another encounter I had with another atheist. I was at a book signing with a few other authors several months ago and I was the only author of a religious book. One of the other authors came up to my table and picked up my book. He asked me what it was about and I said it was essentially about how we should live our faith every minute of every day. He put it back down and told me in a very condescending tone of voice that was great "if you believe that stuff." I said I do and he told me he didn't and found it to be all nonsense. He then tried to intellectually brow beat me with all of his tremendous knowledge of stories that pre-dated that Bible that show up in the Bible in different forms. He argued it was proof of both the Bible's lack of authenticity and the Christian faith in general. I could tell by other things he said that he assumed I was someone who had likely been raised in the church and inherited my faith without ever questioning it.

I listened to him patiently and then I explained I wasn't raised in the church, that I had explored all faiths, philosophies, mythologies and other schools of thought and came to my own conclusions as an adult. I do admit my ego got tweaked a bit, so I offered my own discourse to prove my own intellectual prowess. I finally asked him if he had a bad religious

experience and he told me no. He explained that he just saw through reason that Christianity was not true. I ended the conversation articulating essentially what I wrote in my chapter Myth and Truth. I pointed out to him there was no changing each other's minds. We both knew the same information but had drawn radically different conclusions. He looked at myths and stories that pre-dated the Bible as things that destroyed its credibility, and I looked at them as lesser versions of truth, or pointers to the fullness of truth as described in the Bible and in particular, the Gospel.

These experiences taught me just as my colleague had immediately bucketed me in her thought as the type of Christian she was used to encountering, I had done the same in my thought to atheists. My version of atheist was more like the second person I described – someone so enamored with their own knowledge and intellect that they think a person of faith is essentially intellectually inferior and thus has to rely on religion to compensate for a lack of intelligence. I was reminded of the truth I believe as an Eastern Christian, which is that our theology is always a theology of the person. This means we are always to do our best to get to know persons, their circumstances, and enter into relationship with them to truly understand them rather than



quickly judge them. In this context it simply meant, as they saying goes, I should not paint all atheists with the same brush. I should not have a knee-jerk reaction to someone telling me they are atheist any more than I want them to have similar knee-jerk reaction my colleague had to me telling her I was a Christian.

I am also reminded of another truth that is essential. If people know we are Christian, they won't judge us so much by what we say as much as by what we do. Those of us who choose Christ, to be His followers, and to live sacramentally, must remember that in any encounter, we are the Gospel to that person at that moment.

As author Carolyn Mahaney writes, "Our conduct has a direct influence on how people think about the Gospel. The world doesn't judge us by our theology; the world judges us by our behavior." If we are truly going to follow Christ's Great Commission and indeed make disciples or learners, even of atheists, we have to remember this.

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