

Dinesh D'Souza: What's So Great About Christianity

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Dinesh D'Souza, a member of the Catholic League's board of advisors, is the author of the recently published book, What's So Great About Christianity. Bill Donohue spoke to him by phone about his new book. Here is an excerpt of their conversation:

Bill: You talk about the resurgence of atheism at the same time that you note the global triumph of Christianity. How do you account for this kind of bipolar response?

Dinesh: We have two trends that on the surface seem to be contradictory. One is the rise of atheism, and there's certainly a rising militancy of atheism, and on the other hand, the sort of triumph of religion, and specifically Christianity, worldwide. Many people think that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, but in reality it's Christianity. Islam is growing mainly through reproduction or through Muslims having large families. Christianity is growing both through reproduction and through conversion.

I see the militancy of the new atheism as a sort of a backlash against the realization that religion isn't going away and there's a sort of almost explicit atheist campaign now to say, "Okay, we can't do much about the current generation, let's go after the minds of the younger generation through the schools and through the universities. So we lost this round but maybe we can do better in the future."

Bill: To one extent, 9-11 triggers in one's mind what is going on with the radicalization of Islam, yet so much of militant atheism comes down to thrashing the Catholic Church on matters having nothing to do with Islam and terrorism, but sexuality.

Could you comment on that?

Dinesh: Yes, I think that on first glance, it seems strange that people in the West who are liberal or secular in their values would see Christianity as a bigger threat than Islam. The reason this is odd is because Christianity has a lot to do with forming the central institutions and values of the West, including values secular people cherish. In fact, one of the themes of my book is to show how institutions like democracy, even science, certainly human rights, the concept of just war, the idea of compassion, which has become such a powerful value in our culture—these ideas are rooted in Christianity.

Bill: Ahmadinejad was at Columbia University recently and he was cheered by a certain segment of the student population. The only time they booed him was when he said that they didn't have any homosexuals in Iran. So the sexuality aspect of this really seems to be more troublesome to some people than the threat of terror.

Dinesh: Well, here you're putting your finger on something very critical and that is that Islam is viewed as a threat, you may say over there, but Christianity is viewed as a threat right here. In other words, Islam may want to impose the burqa and the rest of it on people in Afghanistan and in Iran, but Christianity is seen as interfering with the moral freedom of people here in the West, in other words, in Paris, in Boston, in San Francisco and so on. But this is why Christianity is the enemy—it's not even so much a theological enemy—it's a moral enemy. People don't object to the Trinity or transubstantiation, as so much as what they object to is the Ten Commandments, the sort of moral code. This is very important because very rarely is the objection to Christianity explicitly stated in that way.

What's the motive for atheism? Why are people attracted to it? Think about it his way: I don't believe in unicorns but I don't go around writing books about them. Why are guys like

Hitchens on a secular crusade against Christianity and against religion? I think that their objection ultimately isn't so much rational as it is a kind of objection that says that the idea of God puts moral judgment on the world. What the atheists want to do is get rid of moral judgment by getting rid of the judge.

Bill: In your book you made a very insightful comment about the effect of Darwin on today's militant atheists. How do these people account for the very existence of morality?

Dinesh: Morality is a massive problem for Metaphysical Darwinism, and by Metaphysical Darwinism I mean the people who believe that evolution is not simply a theory of how life from A gave rise to life from B, but rather it is a comprehensive key that is the clue to unlocking how the entire universe, and certainly all of life, functions. The problem for the Darwinians is simply this: evolution is based fundamentally on survival, reproduction, and self-interest. As Kant noted a long time ago, it's the very definition of morality to check self-interest. "I would like to do this but the little voice says no," or "I'm inclined to do that but the commandment says no," so the essence of morality is ultimately to militate against self-interest. Now, why would such a quality evolve? The Darwinians have been now for several decades beating their heads to the ground to try to find an adequate evolutionary account for morality. They essentially have to show that what seems to be unselfish, what seems to operate against self-interest is actually a disguised form of self-interest that is simply not obvious to us. So for example, a mother who jumps into the car to save her son is actually just trying to perpetuate her own genes. She may not be aware of that but that's the reason she's doing it. That's the evolutionary fraud that's pushing her in that direction.

The evolutionists have had modest success in trying to explain why people who share the same genes might act for the welfare for each other. But, of course, as I get up to give my seat to

somebody on a bus, I don't know that person. There's no reason to believe that they would ever help me. Or if I donate blood, or if I am a soldier giving my life for my country. Here these are sacrifices of strangers, or Mother Teresa, or Maximillian Kolbe, and so on. You can go on and on down the list as a whole domain of human morality that cannot be reduced to simply, "I'm just doing it because this person is, in some sense, related to me."

Bill: It's funny you mention that, because the fixation on Mother Teresa that Christopher Hitchens has lies to some extent with the fact that he thinks that the state ought to salvage the poor. He doesn't accept the idea of altruism and so he looks at this little Albanian nun as almost a threat to everything that he stands for.

Dinesh: I think that is part of it but there's another part of it that is much deeper than that, and it's the following: Mother Teresa, at one point, was hugging a leper, at which point someone said to her, "I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world." And she replied, "I wouldn't either, I'm doing it for the love of Christ." Now what this suggests is that Mother Teresa's motivation goes way beyond secular explanation. Ultimately a certain level of human goodness requires transcendent motivation. This is what gets Hitchens. They can say, "Obviously one does not have to be a believer to do good." And that's true. But the question is, "Does the kind of life that Mother Teresa represented, can that occur with a purely secular outlook? What would be its rationale? Why would you act that way if you didn't have her motive?" I think this is what makes Mother Teresa a supreme example of human goodness. That's why it's so important for the atheists to pull her down.

Bill: You mention also in your book about Darwin, how he lost his faith at least in part because he rejected Christianity's concept of eternal damnation. I can't help but think there is almost an infantile rejection of authority that we are working

with here, or a kind of narcissism. The concept of do's and don'ts, and eternal damnations, and the Ten Command-ments—this is positively threatening to these people, and particularly when it gets into the realm of sexuality.

Dinesh: Yes, I think we're seeing a new phenomenon that's occurred in the West really since World War II. This is the idea that the only guide for how I should act is my inner self, an inner self in pursuit of unceasing self-fulfillment and self-expression. My point is that what happened in the 1960s was that this morality went mainstream. And so we began to see, if you will, not only an attack on traditional morality as sort of constraining this quest for self-fulfillment, but a sort of new morality that adopts self-fulfillment itself as a moral ideal and sort of turned against traditional morality as being nothing more than a disguised form of hypo-crisy. This is why whenever people espouse moral values and fall short of them, there's almost a gleeful howl that goes through the culture: "Look, you espouse A but you do B." And so hypocrisy has now become our cardinal virtue. And why? Because in this code of self-fulfillment, the only value is be true to yourself, and to be true to yourself means, "Don't say one thing and do another." In a sense, you may say that the standard is lowered to bring it into line with human desire.

Bill: Atheists talk about how religion poisons everything, yet when atheism is embraced by the nation-state—we've seen this in the twentieth century with Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao—it always winds up with blood. How can they logically even begin to say that the secular crusade embraced by these totalitarians in the twentieth century is somehow triggered by some religious impulse?

Dinesh: Well, this is where the atheists are on very weak ground. They try to show that religion is the source of most of the mass murders and conflict in history, but the reality, of course, is that the atheist regimes are. And so people like

Dawkins and Hitchens do backwards somersaults to try to show that totalitarianism, even if it is explicitly secular, arises out of a mindset that is very similar to that of religion. And so, for example, their extremely convoluted efforts to show that communism was just another name for a certain kind of religion. So the idea here is to blame religion not only for the crimes of religious people but also for the crimes of atheists.

Bill: It's been great talking to you. Congratulations on your splendid book.

Dinesh: Thanks, Bill.

Dinesh D'Souza's What's So Great About Christianity is published by Regnery.