

*The Myth of the Non-Christian:
Engaging Atheists, Nominal
Christians and the Spiritual But
Not Religious*

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Old Testament Violence – Talking it Out

In my experience, when someone tells me the Bible condones something horrible, often they have misunderstood the text or been provided with faulty information. This became very clear to me when I was speaking recently at a café-style event in the north of Romania. . . .

A physiotherapy student named Oana approached me afterwards to thank me for my talk. She said it was her first time attending a Christian event. She considers herself a spiritual person, and what I said had resonated with her. Becoming a Christian, though, was completely off the table for her. She had read online about how the Old Testament, supposedly part of God’s book, is full of violence and rape and murder. Her own brief perusal of its pages had confirmed that this was the case.

I agreed that bloodshed and misogyny are rife throughout the Old Testament, and that many of the scenes within are horrific. Then I added, smiling and intentionally being a little provocative, “And that’s why I love it!”

Oana stared at me. “That’s why you love it?!” she said, intrigued and thankfully a little amused. “How can you love that kind of thing?”

“Well,” I said, “Have you ever seen *Schindler’s List*?”

“Oh yes, great movie, but very sad.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “it’s brilliant. But it’s also full of genocide, abuse, murder and rape. Is it an immoral movie?”

Oana replied immediately, “No, it’s probably one of the most moral films ever made. It’s taught millions of people about the horrors of the Holocaust.”

“Exactly,” I said. “It needed to portray those terrible things in order to tell an accurate story about that period of history. A Holocaust movie that only showed hugs, rainbows and fluffy bunnies would do no justice to the reality of what occurred.”

“It would be ridiculous,” she agreed.

“Right, and if the Bible is to be a book which tells us the truth about the dark realities of our world, as well as its beautiful aspects, it’s going to have some pretty gruesome scenes. Almost half the Bible is straight narrative. But it’s no more condoning all the terrible events it records than Steven Spielberg, the director of *Schindler’s List*, was endorsing the Holocaust.”



Oana thought for a moment and then replied, “So that’s why you love that the Bible has these awful things in it. Not because those things are in themselves good?”

I agreed. “Any spirituality that makes a difference in the real world is going to have to be one that faces the nastiest aspects of reality square in the face. I think the Bible does that.”

As she thought about this for a moment, I added, “I’ll admit, there are a handful of tricky passages that give the impression that the Bible is not just recording events, but that God himself commissions some outrageous violence. But if you read them carefully, you’ll find they’re not all they seem. If you want to discuss those passages we could. But I’d be curious to know a little about your take on Jesus, because I think his story is the portion of the Bible that has most helped me understand not just that the world is dark, but that there is also hope in it.”

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She wasn’t too interested in detailed discussion of Old Testament passages. Relatively few people are. So we spoke instead for a while about Jesus. She had an intuition that he was a positive figure but knew little else about him.

I’d shared in my earlier talk that Jesus touched those with infectious, deforming skin diseases, was kind and welcoming (yet never physically involved) with sex workers, and yet for all his edgy, risk-taking actions, kids still felt comfortable casually approaching him and he was constantly invited to parties. He displayed an unusual combination of passionately confronting the darkness and also being warmly approachable.

As we talked Oana said that she’d found this a really attractive model of a spiritual life. I asked her if it was the kind of life she aspired to live. “Definitely,” she replied firmly. . . .

The nasty aspects of the Bible, then, are not something for which we need to be ashamed. They show us that the Scriptures are realistic about the horrors of our world. The turbulent pages of the Old Testament raise the question of hope and transformation: as soon as we realize we’re in darkness we begin searching for the light switch. My conversation with Oana therefore inevitably led to discussing Jesus. My specific emphasis on Jesus’ capacity to reshape us personally was intentional. . . .

Sharing our experiences of Jesus, along with explaining what it means to follow him, can open others’ imaginations to the possibility that life with him could be the very thing to which their desires are pointing. We need, for sure, to clarify and address misunderstandings. But no hope can be offered, nor can any issue with Scripture be adequately dealt with, unless we eventually find ourselves discussing Jesus.

– Taken from chapter five, “Does Christianity Enable A Richer Spirituality?”



Luke Cawley is the director of Chrysolis, an organization he helped start to enable organizations and churches to communicate the Jesus story. He has a master's degree in evangelism and leadership from Wheaton College and a certificate in theological and pastoral studies from Oxford University. He has spent most of his adult life founding and developing missional communities on university campuses in Britain and Romania. He is a regular speaker at conferences and outreach events around the world and an active writer and blogger. He enjoys engaging with people who wouldn't normally consider Jesus and often speaks in contexts where God is not typically discussed, such as schools, bars, cafes and theaters.

There's No Such Thing as a Non-Christian

If answers to people's doubts about Christianity feel illusory, it may be because we are resting on a false premise: non-Christians are all the same. The Myth of the Non-Christian forces us to do away with the idea of a generic "non-Christian," calling instead for an understanding of context coupled with apologetics. The book focuses on "the spiritual but not religious," convinced atheists and nominal Christians. It outlines best practices for evangelism as well as answers to the common misgivings of these three distinct groups of people who don't know Jesus.

Why do you say that "non-Christians" are a myth – that they don't exist?

Luke Cawley: "Non-Christian" is a category so broad it is obsolete. It's not even something people call themselves. . . . It's strange, then, that we Christians persist in treating the label as if it were somehow rich with meaning. Perhaps the time has come to retire the term and to rediscover the rich variety that exists among people who are not yet following Jesus.

Which groups of people do you address in your book, and why?

Cawley: You will be introduced to three sets of people: The "spiritual but not religious," convinced atheists and nominal Christians. These groups include the majority of the people not following Jesus in the West today.

The foundation of your book is "contextual apologetics," the pairing of apologetics with awareness of your context. What makes contextual apologetics more effective than either method on its own?

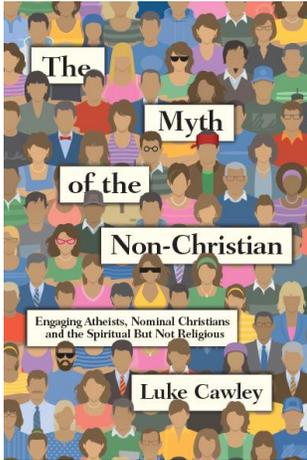
Cawley: "Contextual apologetics" combines the strengths of both its parents. It blends contextual awareness with an apologetic emphasis on contending for the plausibility of the Christian faith. Each of these emphases are frequently used to the exclusion of the other, but used together they can have an incredible combined effect.

This is contextual apologetics at its best: convincing and persuading the listener by using forms and methods appropriate to the setting.

How did your studies and life experience develop into the idea of "contextual apologetics" and the writing of this book?

Cawley: The idea for this book came to me at the Burning Man festival after a visit to the neo-pagan temple that stands at its center. That visit, combined with the interviews I conducted with participants, crystallized my long-standing sense that the church is underestimating the openness and interest of those (like spiritual but not religious folk) assumed to be far from the church.

This sense was one which had been growing over the preceding years, most of which I spent



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in university campus ministry. I had noticed that all the groups the church typically sees as hostile – atheists, SNBRs, former churchgoers – were actually among the most open people we encountered. They all take time to come to faith. But who doesn't these days? I found, though, that if you approach them the right way then they are quite ready to engage with Jesus.

One of the greatest blocks to engaging these people, though, was a tendency to treat them as all the same. Grand sweeping statements like "community is the key to reaching this generation" or "just convince them Christianity is true" applied only to *some* people but by no means all of them.

So I began using some of the tools I had gained during my past period of missionary service overseas. I began thinking missionally about the West and seeking out the best thinking and practice for engaging each major group I encountered. This came through a blend of mentoring connections I made, networks into which I was invited, and my opportunities to study for an MA at Wheaton (a very cutting-edge course on evangelistically engaging those in contemporary culture) and a CTPS at Oxford University (an intensive grounding in effective apologetics).

I struggled for a while with being torn in two competing directions by my Wheaton and Oxford studies. I came to see, though, that both radical missional thinking and the discipline of apologetics can fit together very comfortably. As I combined the two, in fact, I found I had stumbled upon a potent and little known combination that had potential for great evangelistic impact.

You explain that we should argue "from" and "toward" Jesus when answering people's doubts about Christianity. This way they have answers to their questions and also learn how to follow Jesus. Can you share an example of arguing from Jesus?

Cawley: Consider, for example, a person who says that they dislike Christianity due to hypocritical behavior they have experienced within the church. You could sympathize and say, "Some of Jesus' harshest criticisms were aimed at phony religious leaders. He said they were like beautifully painted graves, attractive on the outside but rotting on the inside. I think he'd agree with you on this one."

It's a simple response that draws *from* the life of Jesus to highlight to your conversation partner that disappointment with the church doesn't put them at odds with Jesus. Their criticisms actually echo ones which passed through his own lips.

– Portions of this interview adapted from chapters one and two