

HOW THEY SEE US

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Sometimes, it is useful to ask about ourselves: "How do they see us?" How do non-Christians, especially the secular elite in the media and university, view evangelicals? And, what can we learn from their point of view of us? Is their view jaundiced by false stereotypes? Is there any validity in their critique, hostility or indifference? And, most of all, are evangelicals – at least in part – responsible for creating a negative impression? Is there any responsibility to bear for self-inflicted scorn?

Back in 1993, I wrote the following, which seems valid even at this time:

For many Christianity seems irrelevant. It is not germane for daily life. It is not "politically correct." It is not intellectually tenable. It is, in short, perceived as inherently unreasonable, divisive, obscurant, and toxic. (In this day and age, who *needs* God anyway?)...In such a syncretistic milieu, beliefs are mixed and matched according to fad, fashion, and psychic need. Tolerance and relativism are creedal assumptions. Christianity is no longer viewed as justifiably unique or exclusive. Cynics charge: Christianity is merely another, particularly noxious, "weed" in the "garden of god."

Let's listen to three recent writers describe the way that evangelicals are often viewed in popular culture and among the intellectual elite. Afterwards, I will pose a few questions for further reflection. (In each case, I will simply quote from their books.)

Francis Spufford – Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense (2012)

We're weird because we go to church...believe a lot of bronze-age absurdities...dogmatic...self-righteous...too stupid to understand the irrationality of our creeds...savagely judgmental...as bad as Muslims...better than Muslims, but only because we've lost the courage of our convictions...infantile and can't do without an illusionary daddy in the sky...oppose freedom, human rights, gay rights, individual moral autonomy, a woman's right to choose...oppose modernity and progress...cover up child abuse...care more about power than justice...the villains in history, on the wrong side of the struggle for human liberty...provided pious cover stories for racism, imperialism, wars of conquest, slavery, exploitation...stuck in the past...want people to be afraid...to be ashamed...prostrate ourselves before a god who has the reality status of Santa Claus...prefer scripture to novels, preaching to storytelling, certainty to doubt, faith to reason, law to mercy, primary colors to shades, censorship to debate, silence to eloquence, death to life...And worst, there is no reason for it...Most people's lives provide them with a full range of loves and hates and joys and despairs, and a moral framework by which to understand them, and a place for awe and transcendence, without any need for religion. Believers are the people touting a solution without a problem, and an embarrassing solution too....

Rosaria Campagne Butterfield – The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith (2012)

Christ and Christianity seemed eminently irresistible...shared the gospel with me in some used-car-salesman way...Christians always seemed like bad thinkers...could maintain their worldview only because they were sheltered from the world's real problems, like the material structures of poverty and violence and racism...seemed like bad readers...bring the Bible into a conversation to stop the conversation, not deepen it...like a mantra that invited everyone to put his or her brain on hold...their catch phrases and clichés were equally off-putting: "Jesus is the answer" seemed like a tree without a root...the only people who could genuinely be satisfied

with this level of reading and thinking were people who didn't really read or think very much—about life or culture or anything...the Christian community appeared exclusive, judgmental, scornful, and afraid of diversity...reduce Christianity to a lifestyle and claim that God is on the side of those who attend to the rules...Christians truly become ugly... feminism has a better reputation than Christianity at all major U.S. universities...often the church does not know how to interface with university culture because it comes to the table only ready to moralize and not dialogue...spiritual pride and club Christianity.

Holly Ordway: Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms (2014)

I thought faith by definition was irrational, that it meant believing some assertion to be true for no reason...never occurred to me that there could be a path to faith in God involving reason, or that there might evidence for the claims of Christianity...Believing was irrationality on demand to get a prize: that is what the evangelical invitation to "accept Jesus and get eternal life in heaven!" sounded like...the prize didn't sound very inviting...faith was at best a delusion and at worst a total hypocrisy...so-called believers were either hypocrites or self-deluded fools...a waste of time even to consider any claim a Christian made about the truth...my image of the Christian faith as a self-serving, politically useful fiction...Christians, whom I viewed as weak and unable to face the truth...Christianity was a historical artifact or a blemish on modern civilization...anti-intellectuals who were to be pitied...Christian missionaries as narrow-minded colonialists who extinguished authentic expressions of native religion...their beliefs were entirely private and subjective...only knew the word "evangelist" in the form of "televangelist"...bumper-sticker expressions of Christian affirmation – "I'm not perfect just forgiven!", "God is my co-pilot!" and the kitsch art that I saw presented faith as a kind of pious flag-waving...This Jesus didn't look He could handle anything worse than a skinned knee...the faux-sadness of "Jesus died for you!", the faux-compassion that can't bear to look at the crucifix (so morbid).

Finally, let's consider several questions for further reflection:

Among the comments, which reflect Jesus' teaching: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt 5:11)?

Which negative comments are based upon faulty stereotypes?

Which negative comments are untrue or unfair?

Which negative comments are valid criticisms of Christians and the church today?

What might we change about the ways we express and defend our faith?

What can Christian schools, seminaries, and churches do to prepare believers for engagement in a post-Christian culture?