

What Kind of Billboard do You Wear? (Fr. John Parker)

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Atheists with Signs

“A fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God’.”

Today I wore a “Billboard for Hell”, the self-professing atheist told me in the produce section of Costco. I had turned from my cart for a small container of strawberries, and spinning around, I nearly opened them upon him, as he stepped between ‘me and mine’.

“Terribly sorry—I didn’t expect any—,” I was saying as he interrupted me.

“Well I suppose we’re all human—or at least you’d say so. And we all make mistakes, but here you are, wearing a billboard for Hell. I am an atheist. Do you

want to debate me?”

“No, but I will be glad to sit down and have a cup of coffee with you.” I replied.

“Do you welcome atheists to your church—is that what you call it?”

“Sure, you can come pray at our church, or we can sit down there and talk.” I offered.

“Good, ‘cause I want to come there and get as many people out of that delusion as possible. Don’t you know that religion is the most immoral thing on the planet? And you think that some human sacrifice and some blood rubbed all over you some how magically saves you?”

“No, I don’t believe that—I am not sure you have the facts...”

“Can you prove there’s a hell?” he asked me.

“Sure,” I responded. “Are your parents divorced?”

“No, they are dead.”

–“Were they married before they died, or divorced?”

“Married. They died one after another. Are you going to prove this or not?”

–“Why don’t you call me and we’ll sit down sometime? What is your name?”

“Jacob.” He offered.

–“Fr John, Jacob. I look forward to your call.”

This was not our whole conversation in front of the strawberries and a dozen shoppers, but it is most of it. My cassock is a “Billboard for Hell.” Wow! I had never thought of it in those terms. A billboard, to be sure, but for Hell?

It seems there are several kinds of atheists. The biblical term for one sort is ‘fool’. The kind who says in his heart, “there is no God”. This is an ancient sort of atheist. Historically speaking, it seems like there must have been rather few of them. It seems on a cursory view of the world, almost everyone has believed in **some** kind of god, even if it is some dumb idol. (I use both ‘dumb’ and ‘idol’ in their technical senses.) So, long ago, it really would have been a fool who said such a thing. Perhaps we can hear an echo from 4000 years ago: “You don’t believe in a god? What kind of fool are you?” In the deep South, one might have heard, “Wheh-

ah ahr you fruuumm?” Like an American who doesn’t eat Turkey on Thanksgiving or Hot Dogs on July 4. A total, indescribable, inexcusable, bewildering anomaly.



Priest

Today, though, I wonder. I don’t think Jacob is an old-world fool. My pastoral intuition tells me that he is a deeply saddened, deeply hurt, perhaps even deeply violated man. Today, I had to ask myself in rapid interior dialogue: take the bait or be silent? Respond or invite? Debate or argue?

I am hardly worthy of salvation, sinful man that I am, but in the recesses of my mind, I heard all of this morning’s Lenten Matins texts ringing out. Today we remember the Cross (as on any Friday) and we anticipate venerating it this Sunday, since we are coming upon the 3rd Sunday in the Great Fast.

So I decided, small effort by comparison to my Lord’s as it was, to take the

buffeting, the spitting, the scourging, the taunting—all done with words only (granted) but in public. And silently to pray for this fellow. He wants desperately to argue with me. But Christ didn't argue. He wants desperately to rile me up, but Christ was not riled up. He wants desperately for God to love him—but he will not show it in the usual way. Right now he is not capable of that.

My guess is that he was raised Baptist in the South, and he was assured on some occasion (or many) that he is going to burn eternally in Hell, and having heard it enough, he simply consigned himself to it. Which is why, I think, he reacted so strongly to my 'billboard' near the strawberries.

If he were a fool, we'd have to admonish him, and call him back to sanity. But since he, I think (I could be very wrong), is a different sort of atheist, well then, I must give him the other cheek; walk the extra mile; give him my cloak as well. Today, for all I know, I was the first person not to argue back at him. Maybe I was the first person not to consign him to hell. God knows, and time may tell.

One thing is almost certain—and I'd use this line with every atheist in North America, since statistically speaking it nearly has to be accurate: "Jacob—tell me about the god you don't believe in. I am confident that I don't believe in that one either."

Our Orthodox Christian impact remains so small in North America so as to round nearly to zero. So, if Jacob knows any christianity (I use lower 'c' on purpose), most assuredly it is not the Gospel as we Orthodox Christians have received it. So: he is operating from 'no gospel at all' to quote St Paul. And it might take a lifetime—if he is interested even to hear it—to undo that.

But another fact is certain: if he hasn't heard the Gospel as we have received it (whole and unaltered), it is our fault. Jesus said to us, "Go make disciples", not "sit and wait for inquirers".

I'd never really thought before: could you prove "hell" exists? It might be an interesting idea to discuss. I have some good, clear musings since my conversation with Jacob 4 hours ago—though I would probably start with heaven, or perhaps Fiji, which neither of us has ever visited, but both know exists by faith.

God help me and forgive me where I was wrong with Jacob. God help Jacob, and forgive me!

Brothers and sisters—we have a lot of work to do! What kind of billboard do you wear?

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