

Speaker 1:

Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. Your question is very important to us. A scholar will be with you shortly. Every question is an important one. And the scholars on call at 1-800-REL-HELP are eager to provide information on your requested topic. Thank you for choosing 1-800-REL-HELP for answers to your most burning questions about religion. Our scholars are more than well equipped to answer any questions. You may have.

Speaker 2:

Religious Studies helpline. How may I be of service?

Speaker 3:

How are you doing? I read on the internet that you're an expert on atheism. Is this true?

Speaker 2:

My dear madam, my expertise is of secondary importance. Whether or not I can help you, well, that is the rub.

Speaker 3:

Okay. So you're kind of weird, but that's strangely reassuring. Okay so, it's about my son. He's 17 and he told me recently that he's an atheist. Now I grew up Christian and I've dabbled with a little Zin, a little Kabbalah, a little soul cycle, but I'm totally in the weeds when it comes to atheism.

Speaker 2:

Hmm. I see your dilemma. Now with your permission, I'd like to ask you a series of questions. Is that all right?

Speaker 3:

Do your worst, doc.

Speaker 2:

Very good. Now, have you ever heard him talk about ancient Greek thinkers? Like Lucretia or Epicurus?

Speaker 3:

No, I don't think so.

Speaker 2:

What about the founding fathers? Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, or firebrands like Thomas Paine?

Speaker 3:

Nah, he's not really into politics.

Speaker 2:

I see. Have you heard him utter the names Darwin, Marx, or Nietzsche perhaps?

Speaker 3:

Oh, yes. He's got one of those Darwin fish on his bedroom wall, you know, the ones that have the little legs to symbolize evolution.

Speaker 2:

Yes. I am familiar.

Speaker 3:

As for Nietzsche, he mentioned him the other day. You know that famous "God is dead" line. Bupkis on Marx though. I don't think he's a commie, Thank God.

Speaker 2:

Interesting. What about the names Camus, Sartre, or Du Bois, the existentialists?

Speaker 3:

No, that's a hard no.

Speaker 2:

All right. One more question. What are his views on Islam?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, he doesn't like Islam. He says it's the worst of all the religions.

Speaker 2:

Hmm. I think that's enough information for now. In my humble estimation, I would say that your son's gravitation towards atheism is not really philosophical, but more than likely the result of certain things he's seen on the internet that for whatever reason, appeal to his sense of identity.

Speaker 3:

Well, he does live online.

Speaker 2:

In for a penny, in for a pound. My dear madam, it would appear that for your son, religion is perceived to be a threat to science. Or perhaps if not science, then some idea of logical rationality. The Darwin fish is a dead giveaway, but perhaps he just likes mocking certain types of Christians. It's hard to tell. A group of writers known as the new atheists popularized these ideas after the 9/11 attacks and pointed the guns at Christianity as the biggest threat to science and to Islam as the biggest threat to secularism and so-called Western values. Although they've had quite an impact, the direction of it all is rather messy. With social media being everywhere, the variety of online communities that identify with atheism today is frankly too much to keep up with.

Speaker 3:

All right, I got ya, but let's get down to brass tacks here. How can I put a stop to this?

Speaker 2:

My dear madam, I think you've mistaken my intentions. As a scholar, it is not my charge to tell you what to do, but rather complicate questions and put them in context. If there was a takeaway here it is this, there is no such thing as atheism in the singular. Only people in groups of people who draw upon this label to suit their needs and interests. While atheists may refer to some of the ideas and philosophers that I mentioned to you here as authorities, maybe even finding in them guidance and inspiration, it is much more important to ask what they're doing with the atheist moniker or label along with what and whom they are defining themselves against.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, I see where you're going there. But putting aside all this egg head talk, how would you boil it down for a 17 year old, if you were talking to him?

Speaker 2:

Touché. Well, perhaps I would simply ask him where he came upon these ideas. Why they are important to him and if you're serious, ask him what he is reading or watching online.

Speaker 3:

Touché. Can you recommend anything?

Speaker 2:

Well, that I can do. I would suggest encouraging him to read up on feminist, queer, and black atheism, all of which is outside of the mainstream. Appeal to his curiosity to explore how other people have used the label atheist by attaching it to their gender, sexuality or ethnicity. If he does this in earnest, I wager he'll begin to see how atheism is always being recreated in relation to the experiences and interests of different groups of people that decide for whatever reason to take up its name.

Speaker 3:

All right there, doc. Looks like I've got some work to do.

Speaker 2:

Don't we all, my dear madam? Don't we all?

Speaker 1:

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Speaker 3:

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Do your worst, doc.