

# Don't Be a Lazy Atheist

While lecturing on the atheist Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in graduate school, my university professor lamented about the state of atheism today.

Men such as Feuerbach, he explained, were passionate in their atheism, and undertook a thorough study of a religion such as Christianity in order to criticize it. (Feuerbach's critique of Christianity is encapsulated in his book *The Essence of Christianity* [1841], which influenced Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.)

Many of today's atheists, however, typically don't bother beyond a superficial study of religion (if any at all) before they reject it. They criticize what they do not know, and call themselves "progressive."



But true progress requires that one thoroughly understands what has come before. That's the insight of R.G. Collingwood in his book [\*The Idea of History\*](#) (1946), which is the most influential work on the philosophy of history in the 20th century. He writes:

*"Progress... happens only in one way: by the retention in the mind, at one phase, of what was achieved in the preceding phase... If Einstein makes an advance on Newton, he does it by knowing Newton's thought and retaining it within his own... It is only insofar as Einstein knows that theory, as a fact in the history of science, that he can make an advance upon it..*

*Similarly with any other progress. If we want to abolish capitalism or war, and in doing so not only to destroy them but to bring into existence something better, we must begin by understanding them: seeing what the problems are which our economic or international system succeeds in solving, and how*

*the solution of these is related to the other problems which it fails to solve. This understanding of the system we set out to supersede is a thing which we must retain throughout the work of superseding it, as a knowledge of the past conditioning our creation of the future."*

So it goes with religion. If you want mankind to move beyond religion, to supersede it, try to understand the motivations behind its creation from its best representatives. Don't merely rely on generalizations and biases about religion that you have received secondhand. Dig deeply into the problems it attempts to address, and how it addresses them, before attempting to establish why the rejection of religion constitutes "progress."

In other words, don't be a lazy atheist.