

Why Atheists Read the Bible Like Fundamentalists

[Benjamin Corey](#) is a formerly fundamentalist Christian scholar who claims to have had some fruitful dialogue with atheists. Having examined the evidence, I agree with that claim.

But he [remains puzzled](#) by a tendency I too have noticed: atheists often read the Bible just like fundamentalists!

For instance, Corey has fun rebutting an atheist who accuses a “devout” Christian girl of hypocrisy for having tattoos, because those are supposedly forbidden by the Bible—if you read the Bible like a fundamentalist.

As a Christian myself, I’ve been accused by atheists of inconsistency for holding that neither Christians nor theists in general need believe that God created the universe in literally six 24-hour periods, somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. It’s as if I can’t be a creationist at all without being what’s called a [young-earth creationist](#). That would be news to [St. Augustine](#) as well as to many respectable contemporary Christian thinkers. And of course atheists such as Richard Dawkins, as well as many religious believers, are morally repelled by the God of the Old Testament, who seems to order the Jews to commit genocide on at least one occasion.

To understand why reading the Bible like that is a problem for atheists, we first need to consider how the term “fundamentalism” has evolved.

As used nowadays, it’s often just a term of opprobrium for any form of religion too traditional for the speaker’s tastes. But its original, century-old [meaning](#) was a kind of theological program: returning to certain tenets taken as “fundamental” by American Protestant evangelicals in reaction to the “Social Gospel.” After [the Scopes “Monkey” Trial](#) of 1926, which was

about the teaching of evolution, it came to mean a consistently “literal” interpretation of the Bible—especially the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis.

This last sense of term is the one Corey has in mind. He wonders why atheists and fundamentalists alike so often interpret the Bible so literally (or literalistically).

And he’s right to wonder. For one thing, nobody reads the Bible that way *consistently*. Few believers who call themselves fundamentalists, for example, believe that homosexual acts between men should be punished by execution, as the Book of Leviticus calls for. Hardly any actual fundamentalists would agree that when Jesus said of a piece of bread at the Last Supper “This is my body,” he himself meant that statement literally. (Catholics and Orthodox *do* believe he meant it literally; but they don’t think we need to be young-earth creationists.)

So if not even fundamentalists can manage a consistently literal interpretation, why should atheists expect them to, or even try to themselves?

I used to think the explanation consisted exclusively of two facts: Fundamentalism makes an easy target for skeptical criticism, and many atheists have no familiarity with any other form of religiosity.

But that’s only part of the explanation. It doesn’t tell us why atheists, who generally pride themselves on being intellectually responsible, often fail to exercise that responsibility by learning how different churches and theologians can, and do, read the Bible in non-fundamentalist ways.

I suspect it’s because getting motivated to achieve such a sophisticated understanding of the varieties of religious belief would require a degree of sympathy with the subject matter that few atheists enjoy. The responsible thing for them

to do would be simply to admit that and be more circumspect about critiquing "religion."