

Media Gives Atheism a Free Ride in 2007

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(March 27, 2008) Christians are used to seeing their faith portrayed negatively in the major media, but that wasn't case for atheists last year. The publication of several best-selling books on the subject in 2007 launched atheism into a year of glowing press coverage that lacked even a hint of the kind of criticism usually aimed at Christianity.

This was the conclusion of a study conducted by the Culture and Media Institute (CMI), a division of the Media Research Center, entitled "Apostles of Atheism."

CMI examined programs aired on the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), articles appearing in three leading weekly news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*) and four programs regularly aired on taxpayer-funded National Public Radio.

In the more than 100 stories studied, CMI found a consistent pattern of predominately positive features that presented atheism in a much less critical light than Christianity. While atheists were frequently employed by journalists to refute stories about Christianity, Christians were almost never interviewed to give a critical opinion of atheism.

"In 2007 three books by atheists—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens—made the bestseller lists," writes the author of the study, Kristen Fyfe.

"The news media used this fact to shine the spotlight on atheism and atheists throughout the year. And while there is nothing wrong with reporting a trend, media coverage of the godless and their beliefs was virtually uncritical. Unlike Christianity and Christians, atheism and atheists got a free ride."

Of the 105 stories about atheism that were studied, 80 percent had favorable coverage and 20 percent were neutral. Not a single negative story about atheism was found in any of the media studied.

The study also found a tendency among journalists to use atheists to challenge religious viewpoints much more frequently than they used religious viewpoints to challenge atheism.

For instance, in the most glaring example, *Newsweek* chose avowed atheist and well-known Mother Teresa-basher Christopher Hitchens to review *Come Be My Light*, a book about Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles.

"Hitchens said the subtitle of the book was 'slightly sickly,' described the handwritten notes contained in the book as 'scrawled' and 'desperate, called Mother Teresa a 'confused old lady' and wrote that her letters and what he presumes to be her loss of faith was 'the inevitable result of a dogma that asks people to believe impossible things and then makes them feel abject and guilty when their innate reason rebels'," Fyfe writes.

On the other hand, when the God-bashing movie, *The Golden Compass*, written by atheist author Philip Pullman, premiered in December of 2007, media outlets either ignored or trivialized the concerns of Christians about the movie.

Not only did atheism get positive coverage, they also got a lot of it. Stories about atheism or commentaries by atheists abounded in the press throughout the year. The CMI study found stories about atheism appearing in more than half of the *Newsweek*'s 49 issues in 2007. Seventeen out of 49 issues of *Time* included articles about atheism, or by atheists, last year. These numbers are in sharp contrast to *U.S. News and World Report* which only referred to atheism in one issue in 2007.

There was also a tendency to use atheists as critics in articles about Christianity, but not about other religions.

“Using atheism as a foil against Christianity, but not against any other religion, suggests an anti-Christian bias,” the report states. “If journalists call on atheists to comment on one religion, they should use atheists to comment on all. Further, if reporters use prominent atheists to offer opposing views on religion-themed stories, they should – in equal measure – invite leading believers to provide perspective on stories about atheism.”

The report concludes: “. . . (W)hether deliberately or not, the news media did not subject atheism or atheists to the same skepticism to which they subject Christians and Christianity,” the report concludes.

“By airing unchallenged interviews and reporting predominantly positive-toned features, the news organizations in this study effectively promoted atheism and held it in higher regard than other religions. While the media are not obligated to treat all religions and belief systems equally, their failure to subject atheism to the levels of skepticism directed at Christianity and other religions suggests a deplorable double standard.”

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