

Reading the Culture: Tim Tebow and Theophobia

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An ESPN poll recently named Tim Tebow the most popular athlete in America. Many admire his athletic success and especially his personal character and religious commitment. Many others criticize—some vehemently—his public demonstrations of faith. Why is he such a controversial figure?

A second question: Why are "angry atheists" so much in the news? From Christopher Hitchens' bestselling [God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything](#) to Richard Dawkins' recent attacks on the ethics of religion, opponents of faith seem to make headlines more often than ever before. Why are they so antagonistic to religion?

[Michael Murray](#) may have the answer. Murray is executive vice president for the John Templeton Foundation and a longtime professor of philosophy at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Penn. "Who's Afraid of Religion?" is his fascinating lecture on "theophobia," which the dictionary defines the term as "morbid fear or hatred of God." Murray uses the term differently. To him, theophobia is the discomfort people feel when they meet people who express their faith in public ways. This angst especially is prevalent in academic circles. Murray lists several arguments theophobic scholars make against the legitimacy of religion:

- *Religion supports oppression, violence and tyranny, and should be ignored or even opposed.*
- *Religion is a personal matter and cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny. As a result, it has no place in the academy.*

- *If religion is allowed a role in academic discourse, it will intrude into other domains.*
- *Religion implies there is something in the universe over and above the natural, and that it deserves my attention, allegiance or honor.*

Murray cites atheist Thomas Nagel as an advocate for the last objection. In *The Last Word*, Nagel admits: "I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."

I think Nagel speaks for many in our culture, whether they go to church or not. If the personal God that Christianity describes truly exists, acknowledging his existence is not enough. We know this God wants an intimate, personal relationship with us. That's a scary proposition, because it requires us to give up control of our lives to him.

When people like Tim Tebow are sincere and public about their faith, they demonstrate the kind of life-changing relationship God wants each of us to experience. If we settle for less, and have become comfortable in our spiritual complacency, we feel convicted by such examples of surrendered Christians. It is easier to criticize their commitment than to emulate it.

If you find yourself becoming uneasy when you hear people talking about their faith, take a moment to ask yourself why. You might be surprised at the answer.

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