

In which liberal commentators write strange things about Christians

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

October 8, 2014

I don't have much use for the notion that hostility toward religion generally or Christianity in particular pervades American media. Yes, Bill Maher can be kind of horrible, but there's really just the one of him on TV. What is common (if still hardly pervasive) among left-leaning commentators is an attitude toward religion that includes little hatred or vitriol but plenty of puzzlement, ignorance, and mild condescension.

[Here's an odd example](#) by science writer Brian Palmer, on medical missionaries in Africa:

Missionary doctors and nurses are stationed throughout Africa, in rural outposts and urban slums. Rather than parachuting in during crises, like some international medicine specialists, a large number of them have undertaken long-term commitments to address the health problems of poor Africans.

And yet, for secular Americans—or religious Americans who prefer their medicine to be focused more on science than faith—it may be difficult to shake a bit of discomfort with the situation. Our historic ambivalence toward missionary medicine has crystallized into suspicion over the past several decades. It's great that these people are doing God's work, but do they have to talk about Him so much? ....

I'm not altogether proud of this bias—I'm just trying to be honest. In his *Lancet* article, [Samuel] Lowenberg quotes a missionary who insists he does not proselytize, even though he tells his patients, "I'm treating you because of what God has given me and his love for me." That statement—which strikes me as obvious proselytizing— suggests that some missionaries are incapable of separating their religious work from their medical work. Whether implicitly or explicitly, some missionaries pressure their patients, at moments of maximum

vulnerability and desperation, to convert. That troubles me. I suspect that many others have the same visceral discomfort with the mingling of religion and health care.

Like it or not, though, we are deeply reliant on missionary doctors and nurses.

Like it or not! Sure, people are sacrificing first-world comforts and putting their lives at risk in order to serve others, but that doesn't mean those of us who spend our workdays in comfortable American office buildings have to *like* it. Sheesh. Also: I'm not a fan of "obvious proselytizing," but I don't think a first-person statement about one's own faith and motivation quite qualifies.

Ross Douthat offers a [smart response](#):

Palmer seems less hostile to Christian missionaries and their work than he is confused by what they're doing: He clearly has a set of ideological frames through which he sees the world, a set of assumptions (the separation of medicine and religion should be absolute, proselytization is wicked/backward/ignorant, helping people is what *governments* and *secular* groups are supposed to do) that simply don't fit with what's happening on the ground in Africa and who's actually there, which in turns leaves him both unsettled and subtly resentful at all these Christian missionary doctors for unsettling him.

Douthat goes on to compare Palmer to Pliny the Younger. Great stuff.

[Exhibit B, on a somewhat lighter subject](#), is by a blogger I generally admire, Kevin Drum. He gleefully finds some irrationality in a LifeWay survey about what people pray for:

My favorite is the 5 percent of respondents who prayed for success in something they knew wouldn't please God.

This is great. Apparently these folks are more willing to be honest with a telephone pollster than with God despite the fact that God *already knows*. If it displeases Him, then that's that. You aren't going to fool Him into making it happen anyway.

Sure. Or maybe people sometimes pray when they're not at their best or most rational or most consistent, trusting that God is big enough to handle it, and then

aren't too proud to admit this.

Then there's this brief aside: "Praying for your enemies is supposedly a Christian sort of thing to do (assuming you're praying for their redemption, of course)." No, Christians are *commanded* to *love* as well as pray for our enemies, for this reason: [so that we may be children of God](#). I don't expect Drum to know this passage off the top of his head—[even weekly churchgoers might not](#)—but he could at least use the Google.

Or, you know, take seriously the possibility that he's dealing with a significant spiritual and ethical tradition here, not just a bunch of weirdos who—get this—think they can *talk to God*.