



Although they have few shared values, as Esther shares her petition with King Xerxes, she astutely creates an ally by finding a common goal, the survival of a group loyal to the King, the Jews. Guinness points out that we have a similar opportunity with atheists, a group with whom we have the common goal of freedom.

Atheism has its heroes, hypocrites, and blackguards, but any honest account has to acknowledge the sorry role of the church in fueling the rejection of the faith and stoking the force of atheism. This is sadly plain in the case of European atheism. There is no question that there is a direct link between the intensity of the convictions of atheism and the intolerance of the European church's attitude to dissent. The late Renaissance period was the golden age of dissimulation because it was too dangerous to think freely in public. People who did not agree with the Catholic Church did not say what they thought. Often they said the opposite of what they thought, and sympathetic readers learned to read what the authors wrote as if it were in code.

"Dissimulation is one of the most notable qualities of this age," wrote Montaigne in the sixteenth century. A little later Descartes wrote that he did not wish to suffer the same fate as Galileo, so he would abide by the maxim of the Roman poet Ovid, "He has lived well, who has remained well hidden." Today, we object rightly to the stifling political correctness of many campuses and parts of public life in the West, but we have to confess with sorrow that the church's earlier intolerance was political correctness writ large, and behind it were the threat of its sanctions—the gallows and the stake. It is a tragedy of historic proportions that God made the mind free, but the church made it necessary for people who wished to think freely to reject the faith and call themselves freethinkers in contrast. . . . It is a stunning truth that all too often the strongest arguments for atheism are Christians and the Christian church.

. . . How might Christians and atheists become partners in standing for a better way forward in public life, first in the West and then eventually in other parts of the world? Such a partnership might seem unlikely, but the time is ripe, for what is at stake is no less than the viability of free and open societies. Can such societies flourish and endure, or will today's freedom and diversity undermine each other to the fatal weakening of the societies that promote them? The stakes are extremely high, for if free and open societies fail, the turning of the political wheel can only lead backwards from corrupted democracy to new forms of tyranny or oligarchy.

Let no one misunderstand or distort what I am saying. Given their starkly different worldviews, Christians and secularists disagree, they should disagree, and they will always disagree over their religious, philosophical, and ethical differences. But that said, the question is, Can Christians and atheists still be cobelligerents, united in their common commitment to freedom? . . . The atheists are our neighbors whom we are to love, and the gospel is never more glorious than its sufficiency in speaking to the "something more" that is missing in their atheism. So our differences with atheists must be fought out firmly and unflinchingly, but with a sorrow, a humility, and a grace that allows us to fight for the good of the atheists themselves, and to fight alongside them for the good of our common humanity.

*Impossible People*

### Discussion Questions

How do you feel when you discover that others are seeking relationships with you simply for their personal benefit, whether it is to make themselves feel good about themselves or profit somehow?

How do you respond to people who care for others, even if they aren't doing it the way you would? What does it take to work with others even when you don't agree, and how can it open the door to the gospel?

What things irritate you most in other people? If Esther can work with arrogant Xerxes, how can we surrender these irritants and barriers to God and develop his eternal perspective?