

Jesus Don't Skate

A few years ago, I was promoting my book in perhaps the least effective, but certainly the cheapest fashion by befriending anyone with even a passing interest in skateboarding on a certain social network (that now bans this practice). During my blanket campaign, I came across skaters, products, shops, parks, and groups of all kinds. Just as many of them were exploiting the network in the same manner. Of all the kids, crews, kooks, and cranks that I encountered, one sort stood out: the “skateboarding ministries,” as they often called themselves; “Skaters for Jesus” in my mind.

The tactics of some of these online holy rollers were irritating, but familiar from my childhood in the Bible Belt: they sent me friend requests and messages even after I had told them explicitly that I had no interest in their organization and wanted no further communication. Ministries of many kinds often have trouble taking “Scram!” for an answer.

The more I dwelled upon the idea of Skaters for Jesus, though, the more offended I became as a skateboarder, as an artist more broadly, and as a rational person (in my better moments). Skateboarding and Christianity, indeed most religions, are fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilably opposed. There can be no genuine Skaters for Jesus.

Before I proceed with this argument, I confess (Get it?) that I am not a Biblical scholar, church historian, or theologian. I was fortunate enough to study under highly respected men and women in these fields during my years at a leading Catholic university, however. The degree in Classics that I earned there also gave me a broader understanding of the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity developed. In my discussion below, therefore, I aim to present the views of the experts at the time I was exposed to them and as far as my memory recollects. I welcome any corrections.

The impossibility of a Christian skateboarding begins with Jesus himself. For the sake of the larger argument, I am willing to put aside questions about the existence of an historical Jesus; out of charity (Get it?), I will spot Christians one point at the start, so that we may get the game going: during the early first century BCE, a Galilean Jew named Jesus led a religious reform movement that earned him the suspicion of the Roman authorities, who executed him by crucifixion.

I will not concede, as no Biblical scholars do, that the canonical Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John represent objective, eyewitness accounts of the life and times of Jesus. The experts agree that they were written serially decades after his death, often with one author having in hand the work of his predecessors as well as other oral and written traditions. We know nothing about the lives of the authors themselves; their biographies are fabrications of much later periods. Nor were the canonical Gospels the

only accounts of Jesus' teachings and deeds. Other accounts with strikingly different portrayals existed alongside the four Gospels that the Church ultimately approved, fragments of which have survived to the present.

Nor do the letters of Paul to the early Christian communities scattered around the eastern Mediterranean provide an impartial, first-hand account of Jesus' career. These documents predate the Gospels and contain the earliest statements of Christian belief. Yet Paul, the person most responsible for spreading the Good News to non-Jews beyond the Levant, never encountered the man Jesus in the flesh. His faith and ministry arose entirely from the transformative vision of Christ that he claimed to have experienced on the road to Damascus, Syria, as he was carrying out the thuggery of collecting taxes for the region's Roman conquerors.

Despite the complexity of the primary sources, certain features of Jesus' ministry seem clear. Most important for our argument is the apocalyptic character of his teachings. Like many other preachers of his day—Jewish, pagan, and otherwise—Jesus declared that “THE END IS NEAR.” The Lord and Father would soon destroy this world and judge its inhabitants, admitting only the righteous and faithful into the Kingdom of God that would follow. Here, the earthly social order would become inverted (Get it?): the good, but downtrodden would rise to take the place of the mighty, but wicked. Jesus delivers this message repeatedly and consistently throughout all four of the canonical Gospels.

The famed Sermon on the Mount, for example, makes sense only in light of this apocalyptic mission. “Love your enemy,” “Turn the other cheek,” and “The meek will inherit the earth” are not guidelines for establishing a stable and prosperous society in the here and now; they are preparations for entry into the coming Kingdom. The ridicule, exploitation, and abuse that these behaviors would surely incur under earthly circumstances would be short-lived and well worth the heavenly rewards to follow.

Likewise, some scholars have interpreted Jesus' dying words on the cross in light of his zeal for the Last Days. As much as a cry of physical anguish, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” might have been an expression of bitter disappointment that the End had not come during Jesus' lifetime; the world appeared to be continuing as it always had, while he succumbed to one of the most miserable deaths humans have designed for one another. Every generation of believers after Jesus, beginning with the Gospel writers themselves, had to find ways to explain the fact that the Kingdom had not arrived. Pushing the expected date into the future, revising each time the new terminus came and went, has been the method most common among fundamentalist sects. Playing down the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' ministry in the first place, by separating sayings like the Beatitudes from their fire-and-brimstone context or by giving his sharpest pronouncements gentler metaphorical interpretations, has been the preference of more liberal Christians.

Whatever the means of explaining away Jesus' apparent error that the world would soon come to an end, his apocalyptic teachings collide with art generally and skateboarding in particular. The latter dedicate themselves to life in *this* world. For all of

the difficulties of earthly existence, skateboarding and the other arts do not scorn it, turn away, and dream of some higher plane. Instead, they summon the courage and do the work necessary to transform the one world that we know we've got, however short-lived the effects. By daring and effort, the arts make life's pains bearable and its pleasures more intense and lasting. To do so, they require us to take control of our bodies, our minds, and our physical environment. Often they demand that we take control *away* from the usual authorities: politicians, police, fellow citizens, family, friends, and even our own customary attitudes and habitual behavior. Skateboarding and the other arts are in every way the opposite of the obedience, conformity, passivity, and self-loathing commanded by Christianity and other creeds. The various Jesus cults and like-minded religions make misery and suffering into virtues, inflicted upon all and relieved only for a select few by a superhuman Creator and Savior. Skateboarding and the other arts encourage disobedience, individuality, and self-confidence. Skaters and other artists make lives of joy and satisfaction for themselves here and now on their own terms. We save ourselves, thank you very much.

If Christianity and similar faiths are so plainly at odds with the arts, how can some believers attach skateboarding to Jesus? I am no psychologist, but one answer seems likely: compartmentalization. Human minds seem not only capable, but predisposed toward holding contrary ideas simultaneously. Doing so is a clear violation of reason, the quality of mind philosophers of the past often invoked as the defining characteristic of human beings. Evolutionary anthropologists of today, however, have shown that our reason and the brain structures responsible for it are recent developments in the history of our species. Emotional centers are far older and deeper; without training and practice at thinking logically and scientifically, our feelings easily overwhelm our reason. The chief stimulus for our emotions appears to be our interactions with one another; we have always been social creatures (in the secular sense; no Creation event was necessary). We find little difficulty switching back and forth between obviously opposing propositions when personal relationships are at stake. A Skater for Jesus can ride like a bat out of hell one moment, then praise the Lord the next to maintain his membership in both communities; more than skating or faith itself, he wants to belong. On an animal level, we cannot blame him; in our youth and moments of weakness, all of us compartmentalize inconsistent beliefs, alternating between them as company demands, lest we lose connections to family, friends, and other social networks. To reach a higher level of maturity, though, we must acknowledge that this vacillation is intellectually dishonest, unhealthy, and only sustainable for so long. Expectations from friends and family that we continue shift back and forth for their comfort are unfair; no one, however close, may ask us to deny our reason and delay developing beyond our animal instincts, least of all by threats of ostracism and denial of love. Communities like that are not worth abiding nor joining.

And here, last of all, we reach some explanation for the fervor with which Skaters for Jesus and other religious groups pursue new members online and face-to-face: surrounding oneself with others who mutually reinforce their compartmentalization postpones the realization that the skateboarding art and Christianity are not compatible; that one must choose one and leave the other behind; that one must take the risk of

finding his or her own path, suffering some disconnection and disapproval along the way.

Skateboarders, artists, and rational people are not sheep in search of a flock and in need of a shepherd. To hell with Skaters for Jesus and the like, we say.

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