

Atheists use a popular Bible app to evangelize about unbelief

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

November 6, 2013

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(RNS) Like lots of college students, Lauren has a smartphone loaded with some of the most popular apps around — Facebook, Twitter and eBay. And like a lot of unbelievers, she asked to not use her full name because her family doesn't know about her closet atheism.

One of the apps she uses most regularly is YouVersion, a free Bible app that puts a library's worth of translations — more than 700 — in the palm of her hand. Close to 115 million people have downloaded YouVersion, making it among the most popular apps of all time.

But Lauren, a 22-year-old chemistry major from Colorado, is not interested in the app's mission to deepen faith and biblical literacy. A newly minted atheist, she uses her YouVersion Bible app to try to persuade people away from the Christianity she grew up in.

"I know of a lot of atheists who have come to their nonbelief by actually reading the Bible rather than just the fluffy stories they choose to tell you about in church," she said. "Reading the full story with all its contradictions and violence and sexism, it should make you think, 'Is this really what I believe in?' At least it did for me."

Lauren is not alone. No one knows how many atheists have downloaded YouVersion and other smartphone and tablet Bible apps, but it is enough that word of the phenomenon has reached the Edmond, Okla., headquarters of LifeChurch.tv, the evangelical megachurch that created the app.

“I have heard that people use the app in that way,” said Bobby Gruenewald, the church’s “innovation pastor” and the creative force behind YouVersion. “But I view it as a win to bring the Bible into the conversation. I think it is a positive thing.”

Lauren said she uses YouVersion to debate believers about once a week, usually during a study break. Typically, she searches Twitter for someone who uses a Bible verse to support their belief that marriage is between one man and one woman. Marriage equality, she said, is a pet issue for her.

“I usually look up one of the many passages in the Bible that refer to different kinds of marriage” — like those of men with multiple wives — “and then I’ll screen shot it and send it to them,” she said. “Most of the time people just ignore it, but I hope they took a look at it and think about it in the future.”

Across the country in Pittsburgh, Pa., Tom Amon, a 37-year-old atheist, opens his YouVersion app nightly to engage believers in verse-on-verse debates via Twitter and the Internet.

“It’s free, it has good search features so I can search for certain words like ‘unicorns,’ and there are a ridiculous number of versions,” he said of the app. “It is supposed to be the Word of God, yet when you go from one version to the other you see how much the text varies.”

Not every atheist with a Bible app uses it to battle believers. Brian Abate, also of Pittsburgh, uses YouVersion on his iPad to follow the online sermons of a local Presbyterian pastor he knows and admires — but whose church he left years ago when he fell away from faith.

“I can get the church’s opinion and then I go read it for myself and see the difference” between the translations, he said. “The biggest thing for me is seeing how much the version will change the meaning of passage. It can make a pretty big difference in how you interpret it.”

Adam Wright, a 26-year-old nursing student in southern California, downloaded YouVersion because he felt he needed to be more biblically literate. Raised a Mormon, he never read the Bible in its entirety; since becoming an atheist a year ago, he felt he should know more about it.

“It has helped educate me,” he said. “I don’t know if I am a better atheist for it, but I am definitely more informed than I would be without it.”

Once in a while, he pulls out his iPhone and the app to debate.

“There was a girl in my math class who had a tattoo about Jesus and I asked if she knew Leviticus says you shouldn’t have tattoos,” he said. “She said that wasn’t true and I opened my app and showed her the verse.”

While it’s unknown how many atheists use YouVersion or other Bible apps, polls show atheists are among the most religiously literate Americans, topping Jews, Mormons and other Christians in a 2010 Pew Research Center poll.

But with Pew reporting that only 2.4 percent of Americans identify as atheists, all of them could download YouVersion and still be a small fraction of its total users.

Still, with the proliferation of Bible and other religion apps, young people — who are the most likely to both use personal technological devices and be religiously unaffiliated — the use of Bible apps by atheists is likely to continue.

“Young nonbelievers like to have those discussions,” said Hemant Mehta, a Chicago blogger and expert on young atheists. “They love to show the Bible can say anything you want it to say.”

And Bible apps, he said, “make stronger atheists.”

“Nothing makes you an atheist faster than reading the Bible,” he said. “It’s one of those beautiful side effects of having these Bibles free and easily accessible.”

But Elizabeth Drescher, a Santa Clara University lecturer who studies the nonreligious, is not as convinced. There is nothing new, she said, about atheists and believers using the latest technology — whether it is a leather-bound Bible, an online Bible or a Bible app — to engage and debate.

“All of the kinds of things that people have always done in other ways they are now doing with digital technology to the extent that there are apps to support them,” she said. “So yes, people are using these apps in the context of those conversations, but I don’t think those conversations are any more active than they have been in the last decade.”