

Can Atheism Create a Virtuous Society?

by H. David Schuringa

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A couple years ago I read *The Courtier and the Heretic* by Matthew Stewart in which he compares the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz.¹ It's a fascinating read, but something that really struck me was that throughout the book Stewart laced the contention that Spinoza, the atheist, lived on higher moral ground than Leibniz, the theist.² This counters, of course, the common notion that if a person has no God to whom he is accountable, he will inevitably tumble into a horribly wicked and perverse lifestyle of unspeakable proportions.

I'm not an expert in the literature of atheists. However, atheism is nothing new. The Bible itself speaks of it in Psalm 14 in unflattering terms where it is written, "The fool says in his heart, there is no God."³ Following in the footsteps of the Enlightenment philosophers who touted God as non-essential, it's no secret that secular universities today are hotbeds for atheism. But, like Stewart, there are atheists today who are not only denying the existence of God but also seem to be ratcheting the discussion up a notch by maintaining that not only is religion based on a lie, society would be better off without religion at all.

Godlessness, atheists are claiming, can produce a virtuous society because instead of concentrating on an "imaginary" place like heaven to spend eternity with our "imaginary" friend, we would live better lives if we realized that this life is all there is and we'd better utilize each opportunity for renewal now. This idea was popularized by John Lennon in his song, "Imagine." If we just imagine that there is no heaven there will be:

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

¹ Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, International, 2006).

² Cf. page ??.

³ Psalm 14:1 (NIV).

Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world.⁴

And, in fact, atheism is trickling down from the universities to the masses as entire Internet sites such as blasphemychallenge.com are dedicated to young people boldly shaking their fists toward heaven, proudly declaring their unbelief for all the world to hear, daring God to strike them down. Truly, increasing numbers of people think society would be better off without God.

Along these lines, an article appeared in *The Chronicle Review* by Phil Zuckerman entitled, “The Virtues of Godlessness” based on his recently published book, *Society without God*. He seeks to prove the idea that godlessness is best for society.⁵ He notes that Christians in America frequently attribute the defeat of atheistic communism to the order of Christian democracy. However, it’s one thing when atheism is forced down people’s throats, he says, but quite another when it is of their own free choice.

To prove his point that society can excel without God and his Bible, Zuckerman turns to Scandinavia. Zuckerman reports Denmark and Sweden to be largely irreligious. According to his research, anywhere from 31-72% of Swedes do not believe in God. In Denmark, anywhere from 43-80% of Danes do not believe in God.⁶ These rates are some of the highest in the world. Zuckerman states, “In fact, most Danes and Swedes don’t believe in the problem of sin.”⁷

Contrary to what many would think, these countries, although lacking religion, are some of the most peaceful. Scandinavia has a high rate of petty thefts, but Zuckerman says, “Their overall rates of violent crime—including murder, aggravated assault, and rape—are among the lowest on earth.”⁸

In addition to being peaceful, these countries are also rated as the happiest countries in the world. According to Ruut Veenhoven, Professor Emeritus of Erasmus

⁴ John Lennon, *Imagine*, EMI records.

⁵ Phil Zuckerman, “The Virtues of Godlessness.” *The Chronicle Review*, January 30, 2009.

⁶ Ibid., “Atheism Contemporary Rates and Patterns.” www.pitzer.edu/academics/faculty/zuckerman/Atn-Chap-under-7000.pdf (accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

⁷ Ibid., “The Religious Support Behind Proposition 8,” *The Huffington Post*, November 20, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/the-religious-support-beh_b_145180.html (accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

⁸ Ibid., “The Virtues of Godlessness.”

University in Rotterdam, Denmark is the happiest country in the world, with Sweden near the top as well.⁹

These facts still leave room for a connection between religion and society, but given the facts, is this connection needed for a fruitful society? Zuckerman argues no. He believes that although religious Americans are a good “counterbalance to individualism,” with lower divorce rates and better family cohesion, this still doesn’t mean religion *ensures* a better society.¹⁰

Zuckerman states, “According to the latest Global Peace Index, the top five most peaceful nations are simultaneously among the most secular, such as Denmark, which ranks in at #2. Even when it comes to suicide rates, it is the former Soviet nations that lead the pack, some of which are fairly secular, but most of which are quite religious, such as Lithuania.”¹¹ Therefore, according to Zuckerman, religion isn’t needed for a good society.

Not surprisingly, conservatives like Ann Coulter and Pat Robertson are ardently against this point of view. Ann Coulter is known to believe that, “societies that fail to grasp God’s significance are headed toward slavery, genocide and bestiality.”¹² And, of course, a central tenet of Crossroad Bible Institute’s philosophy of ministry is that the Christian religion can put an incarcerated individual on the right path by helping him or her become productive members of society. Perhaps my vested interest in keeping my job biases my viewpoint, but if the atheists are right, CBI and the rest of the church is wasting valuable resources by proclaiming religion as a key component to a just society.

In a sweeping statement, Zuckerman states that conservatives can disagree with him but, “the fact still remains that it is not the most religious nations in our world today, but rather the most secular, that have been able to create the most civil, just, safe, equitable, humane and prosperous societies.”¹³ As further evidence, Zuckerman reports

⁹R. Veenhoven, *Inequality-Adjusted Happiness in 94 nations 1995-2005*, World Database of Happiness, Rank Report 2006-4b, <http://www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl> (accessed Feb. 4, 2009).

¹⁰ Phil Zuckerman, “The Virtues of Godlessness.”

¹¹ Ibid., “The Religious Support Behind Proposition 8.”

¹² Ibid., “The Virtues of Godlessness.”

¹³ Ibid.

that Hans-Böckler Stiftung says Denmark and Sweden are tied for being the most successful *socially just* nations in the world.¹⁴

Zuckerman concludes, “It is a great socioreligious irony—for lack of a better term—that when we consider the fundamental values and moral imperatives contained within the world’s great religions, such as caring for the sick, the infirm, the elderly, the poor, the orphaned, the vulnerable; practicing mercy, charity, and goodwill toward one’s fellow human beings; and fostering generosity, humility honesty and communal concern over individual egotism—those traditionally religious values are most successfully established, institutionalized, and put into practice at the societal level in the most irreligious nations in the world today.”¹⁵

This is an interesting argument by Zuckerman, but what he fails to examine is where do these so-called “irreligious” countries get their values from? Sweden and Denmark are western and therefore highly Christian-influenced cultures. Zuckerman himself notes that caring for the down and out is a central tenet of religion! Isn’t he jumping to conclusions when these countries are barely a generation away from that thorough Christian influence? If Sweden and Denmark are increasingly secular, then maybe the real question is how long will these Christian values last until the standards begin to disappear? A strong case can be made for the fact that the social conscience of modern secularism is anchored in the Protestant Reformation.¹⁶ Matthew Stewart’s conclusions regarding Spinoza’s high moral ground as an atheist are also dubious since the philosopher was brought up in a devout Jewish home.

And are things really as rosy in Scandinavia as Zuckerman claims? Chuck Colson, in his book, *How Now Shall We Live?*, reports that he has spent time with prisoners in both Norway and Sweden. Both countries are said to contain some of the best prisons in the world. However, Colson was puzzled when upon one visit in Norway, a prison psychologist stated, “Anyone who commits a violent crime is obviously mentally unbalanced.” Colson noted that the psychologist didn’t acknowledge any of the prisoner’s spiritual needs, just their psychological ones.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cf. Andrew Koppelman, “Naked Strong Evaluation.” *Dissent Magazine* (Winter 2009),

When Colson spoke at this prison, he said a young correctional officer approached him and said, “I’ve prayed for this day, when these men would be confronted with a solid message of sin and salvation.” Colson says the prisons in this Scandinavian country had no concept of “personal responsibility [...] and therefore no reason to seek personal transformation.”

A few days later, Colson was in Scotland when he got a phone call. He writes, “They soberly informed me that the young officer I had met had been given the responsibility of escorting an inmate out to see a movie—part of the inmate’s therapy—and on the way back, he had overpowered her, raped her, and then murdered her. A sign of mental illness? A result of social or economic forces? [...] Colson says that when we refuse to listen to the true diagnosis of the sickness of the soul, we will not find a true remedy and in the end it will destroy us.”¹⁷

The 20th century philosopher, Cornelius Van Til, was fond of noting that atheists are like the little girl who has to sit on her daddy’s lap to slap him in the face. They have to use the gifts that God has given them, their intellect for one thing, to deny his existence! There’s no denying that religion has been abused and misused and that many wars and even atrocities have been committed in the name of wrong-headed religion. But scientific research on rehabilitating people in prison has found that the Christian religion, rightly practiced, is very good for society. The fact is that most criminals, left in prison untreated, will return to a life of crime. Indeed, 75% of released criminals will do so within five years. However, research shows that inmates involved in sustained Bible study during incarceration, are less likely to commit another crime.¹⁸ When it comes to the question of whether religion or atheism is better for society, are you going to lean toward the evidence of thousands of changed lives or two small secular countries living on borrowed capital?

A lengthy email discussion can be found on the Internet between two scholars: atheist Sam Harris and theist Andrew Sullivan.¹⁹ By the end of their debate they’re

¹⁷ Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999) 191.

¹⁸ Cf. Byron Johnson, “Religious Programs and Prison,” *Crime and Justice International* (April 2002). “Assessing the Impact of Religious Programs and Prison Industry on Recidivism: An Exploratory Study,” *Texas Journal of Corrections* 28: 7-11 (2002).

¹⁹ Sam Harris and Andrew Sullivan, “Is Religion ‘Built Upon Lies?’” *Beliefnet* <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Secular-Philosophies/Is-Religion-Built-Upon-Lies.aspx>

stuck: Sullivan can't prove to Harris that God exists and Harris can't prove to Sullivan that he doesn't. Their debate ends in a stalemate.

Christian apologists who consider themselves “evidentialists” believe there is “evidence” for the existence of God such as order and purpose in the universe. Another line of evidence with which I'm particularly amused has been in connection with the wondrous complexity of the universe. It has been said that for this all to have come into existence like it is, by chance, without God, would be like putting 100 monkeys in a room with typewriters and by chance their coming up with the complete works of Shakespeare. Possible to some infinitesimal degree, I suppose, but unlikely.

Few would deny however, that there is no scientific evidence for the existence of God. Neither can you prove that the Bible is God's Word. By the same token, neither can science ever prove that God does NOT exist! Stephen Hawking, after theory upon theory of quantum mechanics, says, “An expanding universe does not preclude a creator.”²⁰ This statement shows that science does not exclude God, but it isn't a cry of salvation either. Theologians have always said that while we believe the Bible to be the Word of God because it says so, the fact that we believe what the Bible says is attributed to the Testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As Herman Bavink states, “The proofs, as proofs, are not the grounds, but rather the products of faith.”²¹

From an apologetic perspective, there is also presuppositionalism. God's existence or the denial of his existence is presupposed in one's worldview. And, it is only by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit an atheist can come to know that God exists. As long as he resists the Testimony of the Spirit, he will never know and will always be crippled intellectually because he is functioning with faulty presuppositions.

Provisionally, to reference Bavinck again, “Unbelief requires enormous effort!”²² Man in God's image is wired to have a relationship with him. Even science is pointing towards man's wiring for God, whether or not God exists. “Born believers: How your brain creates God,” by Michael Brooks of *New Scientist*, supposes our brains naturally need an “imaginary friend.” Ironically, although Brooks comes from a secular

²⁰ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (New York: Random House, 1996) 15.

²¹ Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 53.

perspective he says, “Religious belief is the ‘path of least resistance’ ...while disbelief requires enormous effort,”²³ which is almost a direct quote from the theologian, Bavinck!

It’s nothing new that you can have a virtuous society without God, at least for awhile. God’s common grace empowers even unbelievers to do many good things. But the point is that it is GOD’S grace and to continue to deny his existence and rebel against him will in the end not be good for man, nor for the society in which he lives.

Everyone has a religion, even atheists. Your religion is defined by what or who is your ultimate point of reference and by what guides your life. As a Christian, my ultimate point of reference is God as he has revealed himself in his Word. I seek to interpret what his Word means for life in today’s world. Atheists bow down before the altar of human reason including, perhaps, the scientific method. They trust in a consensus of the academic intellectuals as to what human reason means for living in today’s world.

The question is not *whether* religion should guide society but *which* religion you would prefer: a religion based on human reason or a religion based on divine reason. Zuckerman, the atheist himself, concedes that the world’s great religions like Christianity stand for, “caring for the sick, the infirm, the elderly, the poor, the orphaned, the vulnerable; practicing mercy, charity, and goodwill toward one’s fellow human beings; and fostering generosity, humility honesty and communal concern over individual egotism.”²⁴

Is religion good for society? Atheist, Matthew Parris, recently wrote in *The Times* about his homeland in an article entitled, “As an Atheist, I truly believe Africa Needs God.” He admits, “I’ve been trying to banish all my life an observation I’ve been unable to avoid since my African childhood. It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my world view, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God.”

He goes on to explain: “Now a confirmed atheist, I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone

²³ Michael Brooks, “Born believers: How your brain creates God.” *New Scientist*
<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20126941.700-born-believers-how-your-brain-creates-god.html?full=true>.

²⁴ Phil Zuckerman, “The Virtues of Godlessness.”

will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.”

Parris confesses that like other atheists he used to applaud the “practical” benefits of non-profits such as teaching people to read and write but he regretted that “salvation came with the package.” But “this doesn’t fit the facts.” He came to see the truth of what was happening in African society. “Faith does more than support the missionary; it is also transferred to his flock. This is the effect that matters so immensely, and which I cannot help observing.”²⁵

While you may not be able to prove the existence of God, and that the Bible is truly God’s Word, you cannot deny the transformation of a society by the Word of God. Bavinck states in similar terms, “The arguments of the existence of God may be weak, but in any case they are stronger than those advanced for its denial. It is even impossible to prove there is no God.”²⁶ To offer as proof that society doesn’t need God by pointing to two tiny countries in Scandinavia which were built up on centuries of Christianity, should insult any person’s intelligence.

²⁵ Matthew Parris, “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God,” *The Times*, December 27, 2008.

²⁶ Herman Bavinck. *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 59.