



The Enlightenment



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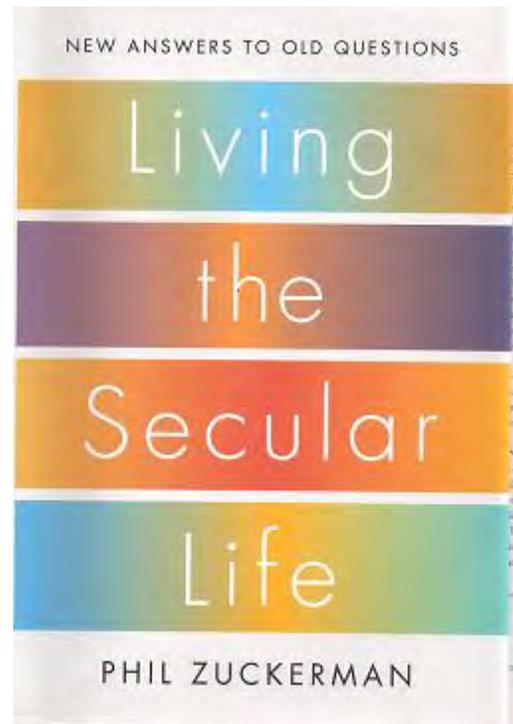
Book Review

Living the Secular Life – By Phil Zuckerman

The title of this book describes what it is all about, ie., living a rewarding and fulfilling moral and ethical secular life without belief in the supernatural. In the Introduction, Zuckerman puts it this way. Secularists “share certain key traits and values, such as self-reliance, freedom of thought, intellectual inquiry, cultivating autonomy in children, pursuing truth, basing morality on the empathetic reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule, accepting the inevitability of our eventual death, navigating life with a sober pragmatism grounded in this world (not the next) and enjoying a sense of deep transcendence now amid the inexplicable, inscrutable profundity of being.”

A secondary theme in the book is the recent spike of secularity that has been a remarkable phenomenon unprecedented in America’s history. Back in the 1950s, fewer than 5 percent of Americans were non-religious. By the early 1990s the number had grown only modestly to 8 percent, but jumped to 14 percent in 2001 rising to 19 percent in in 2013. Today the overall figure is close to 30 percent. Furthermore, over a third of individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine now claim to be non-religious. Yes, despite the efforts of the religious-right evangelists, secularism is the fastest growing orientation in America. For the first time ever, more people are leaving churches than are joining them.

Chapter 1 is entitled Morality, in which Zuckerman deals with the age-old question of: how can one be good without God? Many religious believers seem to feel that morality originated only from God, but this is far from reality as George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the word secularism back in 1851, explains. “Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: (1) The improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good.” In sum, morality must stem from our humanity, and from our experiences with other humans.



Other chapters are entitled, The Good Society, Irreligion Rising, Raising Kids, Creating Community, Trying Times, Don't Fear the Reaper (This life is all we get. Never take it for granted, because it is precious) and Aweism. All great chapters, but I want to comment especially on Community and Aweism.

Creating community is a challenge for humanists. How do secularists create the sense of community present in most churches? Many mainline churchgoers readily admit that it is not a firm belief in creeds and dogmas that is the attraction; it is mainly the "social glue" and perhaps the opportunity to engage in outreach social work. So what about secularists? How do they participate in community activities? Or on the other hand, do most secularists really feel it is even necessary to belong to an organized group?

According to anthropologist Dr. Frank Pasquale, the "natural resting state" of secularity for many secularists is an indifference or lack of interest concerning joining a secular group. Why? Because the very nature of being secular is such that it does not lend itself to joining large groups of like-minded people specifically on the basis of their secularity. His recent research indicates that atheists and agnostics tend to value the autonomy of the individual rather than loyal bonds to a collective. Other research by Dr. Catherine Caldwell-Harris seems to confirm this view. She has found that non-believers tend to be much less social, less conformist, and more individualistic than believers on average, and ultimately less in need of social support. And observations on the ground appear to confirm these findings. Memberships in organized humanist groups are not large, except in Norway where the Norwegian Humanist Association is able to claim up to 80,000 members, mainly because this group receives a part of the National church tax. In most other official humanist organizations, membership is in the low thousands. (The Freedom From Religion Foundation is an exception. It has about 20,000 members). Most humanist organizations do not have the critical mass of numbers necessary to guarantee the political clout required to insure the continuance of secular societies with firm separation of church and state. It seems that most secularists just want to go about engaging in a moral and ethical lifestyle, raising their families, furthering their career and enjoying the "good things" in life. Joining organizations does not seem to be a priority for many secularists.

But don't tell this to Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard University and author of *Good Without God*. He takes exception to the views of Pasquale and Caldwell-Harris and states his mission is to establish dynamic and successful humanist community centres in every city in America. Greg has had considerable success in Boston where hundreds of students are involved in his Humanist Community Project and, as stated above, he envisions similar organizations in other cities. Indeed, secular community groups are forming in other American cities where there are dynamic leaders willing to take on this challenging task. And leadership is probably the key. Without dedicated competent leadership, these organizations will have difficulty prospering. Let's hope the leaders emerge.

Now on to Aweism. The word aweism is not in the dictionary. It was coined by Phil Zuckerman in an article he wrote back in 2010 where he asks the question: If you are not presently an adherent of one of the world's traditional religions, how would you describe yourself in terms of your beliefs? Do you say atheist, agnostic, non-believer, humanist, secular humanist, or something else? When Phil Zuckerman contemplated this question, he felt that none of the terms or labels listed above accurately reflected his personal orientation.

Zuckerman readily admits that since he does not believe there is a God “out there,” he does fall into the atheist camp. But because he has a real love of life – not to mention a deep sense of the profound mystery that is existence, the beauty that is creativity, and the power of justice – he finds that the self-designation of atheist simply falls short, falls flat. He wants to offer a positive, affirming designation, not one that merely negates what others believe. And he finds that the label agnostic falls short as well. Agnosticism is really just an absence of a firm position because it simply implies that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists. Many who call themselves agnostic are really atheists, but hesitate to use the term because the word atheist has a derogatory connotation in the eyes of many of the general public.

So what about secular humanism as a label? A secular humanist begins with the rejection of supernatural beliefs or theistic assertions, and then goes on to positively advocate an optimistic belief in the potential of humans to solve problems and make the world a better, safer and more just place. A secular humanist believes in reason, science, and rational inquiry and is committed to democracy, tolerance, open debate, and human rights. He or she believes in the cultivation of moral excellence and in the moral education of children. But in describing what he *is*, Zuckerman wants something else, something more personal than the values he supports and advocates. He wants to describe what he feels and experiences -- like the tearful joy and wonder he encountered when he first heard his daughter’s heartbeat, like he feels when listening to great jazz or Mozart, or when overlooking a pristine mountain lake during a thunderstorm, and when thinking of important, memorable, and meaningful moments in his life. At these times he feels secular humanism leaves a bit to be desired. Instead, for him, the word that comes closest to describing these profound feelings is awe; hence a new word, aweism.

Aweism is the belief that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder, and that the deepest questions of life, death, time and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy, and sublime awe. To be an aweist is to be an atheist, or an agnostic or a secular humanist – and then some. An aweist is someone who admits that existing is wonderfully mysterious and that life is a profound experience. Aweism can also be described as embracing and experiencing joyful exuberance, *sans* theistic assumptions. But can it be considered a form of spirituality? Zuckerman says no, because he is unable to separate spirituality from religion or the supernatural. Aweism has a decidedly secular orientation. His various experiences of awe that momentarily flow through his being don’t convince him that there is some supernatural force permeating the universe. An aweist just feels awe from time to time, appreciates it, owns it, relishes it and carries on – without any supernatural, cosmic, karmic or other worldly baggage.

Zuckerman feels comfortable being described as an aweist because it adds “colour” to secular orientations that are sometimes described as lacking any sense of awe and wonder. Has the label caught on? Not really. Aweism will require a considerable amount of explaining before this new word becomes part of our general vocabulary.

In the concluding chapter, Zuckerman notes that religions are not going to disappear overnight and that anyone who fails to understand the religious impulse doesn’t fully grasp the human condition. But he also notes that secularists just don’t see religion as the solution, either in the realm of politics or in our personal lives. He says, “secular men and women value reason over faith, action over prayer, existential ambiguity over unsupportable certitude, freedom of thought over obedience to authority, the natural

over the supernatural, and hope in humanity over hope in a deity, and what it means for us to experience awe in the midst of this world, this time, this life." *Phil Zuckerman is a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, California.* (DAH).

Christianity 101

By Goldwin Emerson

A medical student named Li Min arrived from a foreign country to attend a university in Canada. She hoped to complete her studies in medicine and return to her own country as a doctor. On the first day of classes she met a friendly Canadian student, Kristen, who offered to assist her on her new venture. As they became closer in their friendship Li Min admitted that she did not understand Christianity and Canadian customs, but she wished to learn from her Canadian friend.

Li Min asks if it is true that Christians believe in three different Gods. Kristen explained that while God is known as a trinity, nonetheless, God is really one unified God. There are however, three aspects to God: God the Father, God the Son who is Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Ghost. But Li Min finds Kristen's explanation unusual and complex and asks whether Jesus existed from the beginning of all time or has God's Son existed just a little over 2,000 years. Kristen hesitates for a moment. She has not thought much about this matter before, but since Jesus has special supernatural powers Jesus probably existed for all time with God the Father.

Li Min then asks why God the Father would choose to have Jesus appear on earth only several thousand years ago. Kristen replies that by God's Son appearing on earth, Jesus worked among His fellow humans and taught about God's plans for human beings. Jesus was able to interpret the will of God and explain how people could behave in a manner pleasing to God. Those who accepted Jesus as the savior of humankind would be accepted by God for eternal life after their earthly death. More than that, Jesus, the Son of God, lived as a sacrifice from God to absolve people from their sins. Li Min thinks that Kristen didn't really answer the question she asked about *when* Jesus was born, however, she wonders whether Jesus was actually human or was He God? Again Kristen thinks for a few moments and answers that He was both. He had an earthly human mother, but He had no earthly human father. One could say that indirectly Jesus was God's Son.

Li Min asks Kristen to explain in what way Jesus had supernatural powers. Kristen responds that according to our scriptures, Jesus performed many miraculous things while living on earth. Jesus healed the sick. He caused the blind to see. He changed water into wine. He fed multitudes with a few loaves and fishes. He brought Lazarus back to life. He walked on water. Jesus calmed the stormy sea. Jesus arose from His own earthly death. Most important, Jesus offered eternal salvation to those who believed in Him.

Li Min wonders how Mary, the mother of Jesus, became pregnant, but she decides to leave that question for another time. She asks Kristen what sins humans are born with from which they need forgiveness. Again Kristen ponders this new question. She answers Li Min by explaining that God is so infinitely good, and humans, by nature, are self-serving creatures who seek their own interests, and pleasures. So we need supernatural aid in making us worthy of the heavenly eternal afterlife that we seek.

Next Li Min wonders if it is possible that even the most evil people in the world who have committed murder and other vile crimes could be saved by being repentant and by accepting Jesus as their savior. Once again, Kristen is faced with another difficult question, but she thinks, "Yes". Everyone who is truly repentant and accepts the gift of God's Son, Jesus, can be saved.

The time has now come for Li Min and Kristen to go to their classes on human anatomy and microbiology. Both depart. Kristen did her best to answer Li Min's questions, but she wishes she could have presented Christianity in a more simple and positive way. Li Min, not having previous information about Christianity, is confused by the complexity and mystery of Christianity.

I think many, perhaps most, rational intelligent adults not acquainted with Christianity until their mid-twenties would have the same feelings of skepticism and puzzlement as Li Min. What do you think?

Editor's Note. The Chinese name Li Min translates into "Intellectually Astute Woman" in English. Goldwin Emerson has cleverly used this name in the imaginary conversation shown above.

Life is a Stream Evolving

Enlightenment readers will be familiar with Pat Duffy Hutcheon's poem *Amazing Life*, which cleverly describes the process of human evolution in six verses. It can be sung to the tune of *Amazing Grace*. She has also written another poem with a similar theme called *Life is a Stream Evolving*. It can be sung to the tune of: *There is a Baum in Gilead*. The complete poem is printed below.

There is a stream evolving
down through the hills of time.
There is a stream evolving;
the stream of life sublime.

Refrain

Life is a stream evolving
from out an ancient sea.
Life is a stream evolving
and will not cease to be.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my years in vain.
But the fact of evolution
redeems my life again.

In evolution's river
each self is but a wave;
yet, like pebbles in the water,
our deeds survive the grave.

If we can build sound values,
and preserve the urge to know;
if we use the tools of science
for guidance as we go --

There'll be a brighter future;
for wisdom is the key,
and knowledge is the basis
of all morality.

If we can live like Schweitzer,
if we can die like Hume,
the glory of our journey
will live beyond the tomb.

Pat Duffy Hutcheon has written another poem entitled *Humanist Chorus* that can be sung to the tune of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. It will be printed in a future *Enlightenment*.

I thank Adriaan Mak for informing me that in addition to *Amazing Life*, Pat has written other poems that can be sung to well-known tunes. Adriaan says, "I hope that future humanists will write their own lyrics and contemporary music rather than rely on protestant hymnody. Much as I like traditional hymn tunes, especially the those that caused Bach to write his preludes, John Lennon's *Imagine There's no Heaven* might be a model for church alienated youth."

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