Do We Need God in Our Lives?

by Herb Silverman

Many claim that the United States of America is a good and moral country because we are a "God-fearing nation." Can you imagine what kind of morals and values we would have if we weren't a God-fearing nation? Without religion, the United States would probably have the highest rates of violent crime — murder, rape, and robbery — in the developed world. Without a deep commitment to our faith-based values, we'd probably have an educational system that's an embarrassment, with our children ranking among the lowest in the world in science and math scores. Furthermore, without solid morals rooted in our religious character, we would probably have teen pregnancy rates that are among the highest in the world.

Oh, wait — the United States does have the highest violent crime rates in the developed world. We do have an educational system that ranks poorly compared to other developed countries, with our kids consistently ranking low in math and science scores relative to the rest of the world. And our teen pregnancy rate is among the highest among developed countries.

The reason these statistics are not even worse is partly because of the rise of secular Americans who choose to live without theistic religion. Only in recent years have secular Americans begun to stand together in expectation that a secular worldview will be recognized and respected. Please take a look at the 20 national member organizations affiliated with the Secular Coalition for America:

https://secular.org/about/members/

Unfortunately, many secular Americans feel the need to identify with the religion of their upbringing. Religious labels are often more cultural than theological. Millions of Americans might refer to themselves as Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, or Muslim because of how they were raised. They might stay with their childhood indoctrinated identity because they don't want to hurt family or friends. To break openly from a religious tradition might be too painful for them and their loved ones, even though they now think that an Abrahamic God intervening in their daily lives is as true as the myth of Thor.

I have no problem being a Jew. Among Jews, I happen to be in the majority. Most Jews have no god beliefs. Below is a link to an interesting article published by Judaism Online about this subject ("Guess Who Doesn't Believe in God?"):

https://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/jewsdontbelieve/

The category of "nones," those with no particular religion, is the fastest growing demographic in the country, representing over 30 percent of Americans, and considerably higher among millennials. The "nones" outnumber the combined populations of American Methodists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Jews, Episcopalians, Mormons, and Muslims.

I'm sometimes asked if people can be good without God, and where atheists get their morality — if not from religion?

How do we make moral decisions? One criterion is to look at what has stood the test of time in creating a livable society. As an atheist and secular humanist, I think ethical values are derived from human needs and interests, and are tested and refined by experience. We are part of a natural world, the result of unguided evolutionary change. Our ancestors thrived because traits we call moral were beneficial for survival. Such favorable genes were passed to us over many generations. Natural selection could have provided us with the psychological makeup that favors cooperation, empathy, reciprocity, social affinity, and the interests of the entire community, which is the essence of human morality.

I think morality is partly innate and partly learned. We need ongoing discussions as we continue to revise and refine our views about how best to maximize happiness, minimize suffering, and promote human dignity.

To quote **Abraham Lincoln**:

> *"When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion."*

Another pithy comment with which I agree comes from the Jewish sage Hillel, who was asked to provide the essence of his religion while standing on one leg:

> *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. All else is commentary."*

And now for my commentary. I think it's meaningless to ask whether people can be good without God. As an atheist, I think we are all without any gods. The question is really whether people can be good without a belief in God. And by just about any measure, the answer is "yes." Scandinavian countries, for example, are the least religious and have low crime rates, as well as good social programs and a high quality of life.

I question the morality of those who believe people can't be good without a god belief. If their behavior is based solely on perceived rewards or punishments from a deity, then they are acting out of self-interest alone. Is morality more about being good for goodness' sake or about being good for fear

of a god condemning you to hell? To make ethical decisions without revelations from a deity means the responsibility for those decisions ends with you, and no one else. When you accept there is no world beyond this one, you have to turn your eyes away from the sky and look at the people around you.

I was once a guest on a talk-radio show when a caller said to me, "Since you don't believe in God, I suppose you can go out and rape and murder and do whatever you think you can get away with." My response was, "With an attitude like that, I hope you continue to believe in a god." Sometimes I say. "I rape and murder as many people as I want to — no one."

When I'm questioned more rationally about how I make moral decisions without a god belief, I sometimes answer with the following questions: "How would your behavior toward other people change if you stopped believing in a god that judges your actions? Wouldn't you continue to be the same ethical and moral person you are now?" I have more respect for those who admit their behavior would change little or not at all if they stopped believing in a god.

In a debate with a pastor I asked him how his behavior would change if he stopped believing in God. He thought for a minute and said, "I'm sometimes tempted by other women to cheat on my wife, but I resist because I know how much it would hurt Jesus." My response was, "I resist such temptation because of my love for my wife, Sharon, knowing how much it would hurt Sharon."

After the debate, several women from the pastor's church told me they liked my answer a lot more than they liked his, and the pastor's wife didn't look all that happy with his response. Our answers represented a significant difference in worldviews. Do we look to please other humans or an imaginary god?

Some say their behavior might not change much, but their god beliefs provide them with a great deal of comfort. I understand this perspective, but I'm concerned about those who are overly dependent on such beliefs. That level of dependency can turn their god into a drug to which the believer is addicted.

When **Napoleon** asked the mathematician **Laplace** what place God had in his theory of Celestial Mechanics, Laplace responded, "I have no need of that hypothesis." And I can say to a god-addicted believer, "I have no need of that drug."

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the quarterly publication *The Freethought Society News*.

His past submissions can be found at the following Freethought Society web-site page:

https://www.ftsociety.org/herb-silverman-articles/

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available online and at your local bookstores.

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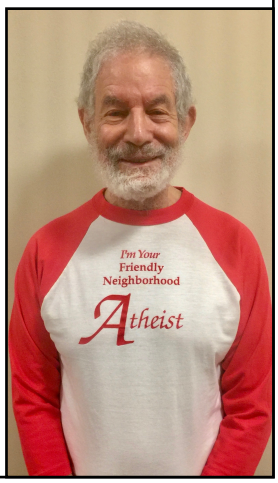

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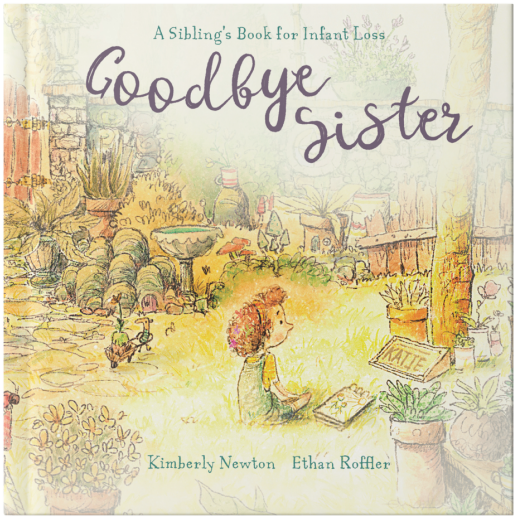

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-Korie Leigh, PhD, MPH, CCLS, CT, Child Development/Parenting Coach & Grief Counseling

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