Should Atheists Debate Theists?

by Herb Silverman

Understandably, we like to talk about things important to us. That's one reason evangelicals talk about religion more frequently than atheists. Religion is extremely important in South Carolina, where I live, so it frequently enters conversations. Many atheists are quiet about their religious views, especially in the Bible Belt, not wanting to appear impolite or offend others. Being polite by avoiding conflicts has never been a guiding light for me.

Pictured above, standing at center stage, is **Herb Silverman** participating in a May 25, 2005 debate at Oxford University. The topic was "Does American Religion Undermine American Values?" Silverman's debate opponent was **Rich Lowry**, editor of the *National Review*.

I've had quite a few public debates with Christian leaders on various topics including whether God exists; if we should have prayer in public schools; whether we are a Christian nation; if atheists should be allowed to hold public office; whether we can be moral without God; and whether society would be better off without religion. This last debate was at a Veritas Forum in 2019 with a professor from **Jerry Falwell Jr**'s Liberty University, and it may be viewed at the link below, along with some of my other debates:

http://lowcountryhumanists.org/default.php?page=videolibrary

Most of my debate opponents have been fundamentalist ministers, with most of the audience coming from the ministers' flock. Religious discussions and debates can be productive for atheists because a theist is more likely to hear something new from an atheist than the other way around. It can also help break stereotypes about atheists, especially when some know about atheists only from what they've heard from their preachers. Debates are never about changing the mind of the debate opponent, but to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of those in the audience who are open to new ideas.

Many atheists, myself included, have been overly optimistic that a rational argument will be sufficient to change minds. I initially thought I could apply logical arguments and biblical contradictions to show religious people that probably no god exists. However, you can't reason someone out of a belief that they didn't come to through reason. I now think the best we can do is to make good points in a reasonable and pleasant manner. I emphasize "pleasant" because many in the audience of a debate make unconscious judgments based more on personality than on arguments. That was difficult for me to understand at first, since it's so different from my academic world of mathematics. Smiling is effective in debates and useless in mathematics.

Whenever overly enthusiastic Christians in the audience interrupt, shout, or makes nasty comments, I try to look sad, but I am secretly delighted. I sometimes later get apologies from Christians about the inappropriate behavior of these other Christians. I then say, "There are good and bad Christians, as well as good and bad atheists, and we shouldn't stereotype."

We often have opportunities in debates to ask our opponent questions. In one particular debate, I asked the minister how his behavior would be different 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 of my love of Jesus and knowing how much it would hurt Jesus." My response was, "I'm sometimes tempted by other women, but I resist because of my love for my wife Sharon, knowing how it would hurt Sharon."

After the debate, several women in the minister's church told me they liked my answer a lot more than they liked his, and the minister's wife didn't look all that happy with his response, either. Whether to base decisions on the needs of an imaginary god or on real human beings is an essential difference between conservative religionists and humanists.

The atheist community is divided about religious fundamentalism and creationism, but not about whether such preposterous claims have any validity. They disagree on whether atheists should debate fundamentalists about the "science" of the Bible. Here are arguments against debating: "What's to debate? Evolution is true! That a man named Noah put pairs of all species from a 6,000-year-old Earth in an ark he built when he was 600 years old is false! Sharing a stage with creationists can lend them credibility." But if we don't defend our positions I worry about losing the battle of public opinion. As the saying goes, the best way to counter bad speech is with good speech.

I would not debate Holocaust deniers or members of the Flat-Earth Society because there isn't much of a constituency for these preposterous positions as there is for the equally ridiculous literal belief in the Bible. I understand why a famous atheist like **Dr. Richard Dawkins** doesn't want to give credibility to some theists by debating them. I've never worried about giving credibility to ministers, who more likely might be worried about giving credibility to me. **William Lane Craig**, one of the best-known Christian apologist debaters, has spent countless hours trying to get Dawkins to debate him. Craig has even debated an empty chair that he substituted for Dawkins (I think the chair won). Dawkins, who has debated people like archbishops of Canterbury, didn't want to give undeserved credibility to Craig by debating him.

On the other hand, I was happy to debate Craig. Dawkins, in the Foreword to my autobiography, *The Candidate Without a Prayer*, commented about my debate with Craig: "This full-time debater (Craig) fatuously asserted that the resurrection of Jesus must be a historical fact because the disciples were

prepared to die for their beliefs. Herb's answer was devastatingly succinct: '9/11.'"

I've become more sympathetic toward religious fundamentalists who want to convert me because I now see why it's so important to them. Since I came to atheism through following what I consider to be a sensible, evidence-based path, it doesn't much matter to me whether others adopt my position. For Christian fundamentalists, on the other hand, eternal life is at stake. And for many of them, that's more important than life itself. I find such a worldview odd at best, and potentially dangerous, but I understand that they want to "save" me from hell.

I also understand why some Christian fundamentalists want nothing to do with to me. They have taken to heart II Corinthians 6:14:

> *Believers must not commune with unbelievers. What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, light with darkness, believers with infidels?*

On the other hand, I like finding ways to get along with people with whom I have significant disagreements. Instead of bashing each other, I suggest organizing the kind of group we once formed in Charleston, South Carolina. Several Baptists and Secular Humanists decided to meet periodically for conversation and refreshments, simply to get to know one another and learn about different perspectives and world views. We gave ourselves the acronym BaSH (Baptists and Secular Humanists). Our goal was to find common ground, without attempting conversion. We succeeded, and managed to disagree without being disagreeable.

An article about BaSH appeared in our local paper, *The Post and Courier*. The article's title was "Squared off, but not angry." First Baptist Church **Pastor Lamar King** said that we were more tolerant than many on the Religious Right. Another Southern Baptist was quoted as saying about our discussions, "It really makes me sharpen my thinking and question what it is I really believe and how I can put my beliefs forward in such a way that's attractive and not offensive to people."

These Southern Baptists wanted to prove to us that they can be reasonable. They proved their case, but shortly thereafter Pastor King lost his job. Assuming that his public comments about secular humanists was a factor in his being fired, it appears that there weren't enough like-minded congregants at his church. This should indicate to all concerned that atheists are more tolerant than Southern Baptists.

Freethought Society President's Ohio Speaking Tour

The Center for Inquiry's Northeast Ohio affiliate recently teamed with the Cleveland Humanist Alliance (CHA) and the Cleveland Freethinkers to host Freethought Society (FS) founder and president **Margaret Downey** as a two-day speaker. They shared transportation and hotel fees to bring Downey into town.

On Friday, September 20, 2019, Downey delivered a presentation about the 80-year struggle of Women's Suffrage. Center for Inquiry Northeast Ohio's VP of programming **Mark Tiborsky** said:

> *"Our 2019 Humanism Awards Banquet had a theme — the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. When I saw that one of the presentations Downey offered was on that very topic, I thought her talk would be perfect for the banquet. And it was! We were treated to a very interesting and informative presentation that was loaded with great visuals. Downey's talk was very well received, and everyone in attendance came away with a better knowledge of the history of the Women's Suffrage Movement."*

On Saturday, September 21st, Downey spoke about the FS *Tree of Knowledge* project. CHS's founder and organizer **Megan Denman** said:

> *"Margaret Downey's presentation about the Tree of Knowledge deeply inspired a segment of the secular population of Cleveland. We were moved to share a positive, meaningful Winter celebration and to be counted alongside our religious brothers and sisters."*

Below is a photo of Downey speaking at the Cuyahoga County Library. Downey is available for other speaking engagements and has many topics from which organizations and groups may choose. Please see her bio and topic list at the two links below:

https://centerforinquiry.org/speakers/downey_margaret/

https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/speakers-bureau/margaret-downey/

To arrange for Downey to speak at your venue, please contact her at: Margaret@FtSociety.org. She is particularly eager to book speeches about The Women's Suffrage Movement, as 2020 marks the 100th year anniversary of women finally obtaining full voting rights in the United States. "The history and details of the Women's Suffrage Movement should never be forgotten, and my goal is to tell the story in an entertaining and educational way," Downey said.

Downey is in discussion regarding the possibility of delivering Women's Suffrage speeches to Orange County, California and Las Vegas, Nevada Girl Scout of America (GSA) troops. She is hoping to be scheduled at many more GSA locations across the nation.

FS supporters are encouraged to contact local Girl Scout Troops to suggest that they host Downey as a speaker. Reimbursement of hotel and all travel expenses are required. Donations can be sent to FS earmarked for a GSA Women's Suffrage speaking spon-sorship. Donate at: www.ftsociety.org/donate/