Nonbelieving Believers

by Herb Silverman

I think most people identify more with a religious denomination than with a theology. People reflective enough to recognize they can no longer adhere to beliefs they grew up accepting can often justify to themselves why, nonetheless, they should remain part of a religious community.

They find numerous reasons not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Many have friends and family whom they don't wish to hurt. It might be too painful to break openly from a religion just for not believing any of its most sacred doctrines. Humans want to be part of a community. Traditions and rituals often provide much of this. Some wish to actively participate in the good deeds of a religious fellowship and then try to moderate the conservative views of their more fundamentalist members.

Those of us who have broken openly from religious traditions often criticize the insincerity of those who believe as we do and yet remain part of a religious community. I think we should be careful about indiscriminately casting stones. I try to understand and respect the motives of some who choose religious hypocrisy for the sake of being part of a community they like.

Then there are religious people who refer to themselves as "spiritual," though not necessarily god believers. Many atheists also claim to be spiritual. Such "spiritualists" find connections and meanings greater than themselves that do not include anything supernatural. They might refer to the universe with awe and wonder, as do I, but I am an unspiritual atheist. I prefer leaving spirituality to those who believe in invisible spirits in the sky, the more common meaning.

Similarly, in South Carolina where I live, many residents consider the Confederate flag to be a positive symbol for heritage, not hate. To me, and most of the rest of the world, that flag represents support for slavery and white Christian nationalism. Though personally unspiritual, I think we should support spiritual people who build communities that promote the values, ethics, and morals that we share, whether they consider themselves humanists or not.

Many people distrust atheists because atheists don't believe in a judging God who will reward or punish them in an afterlife, which supposedly makes atheists untrustworthy and more likely to commit any kind of atrocity they think they can get away with. While atheists easily dismiss this allegation as foolish and demeaning, it needs to be addressed. **J. C. Watts**, a former conservative member of Congress from Oklahoma, once said, "Character is doing the right thing when no one is watching." By that definition, Christians can't display good character, but atheists can. Many Christians believe that nobody naturally has good character, and people must be kept in line by a real or imagined authority figure.

I've been asked, "What keeps you, as an atheist, from committing rape or murder?" My response is, "With an attitude like that, I hope you continue to believe in a god." I also say that I commit as many rapes and murders as I want to — none.

The message that needs to get out is that many non-atheists live like atheists, for all practical purposes, without belief in a god involved in the workings of the world, a god who does not judge actions in this life to decide what to do with us in an alleged afterlife. I think a number of politicians, if asked, would be willing to acknowledge publicly that the policies they promote have nothing to do with belief in an afterlife.

A lot of folks believe in a god who is beyond human understanding, which sounds more like a belief in a belief. Some define a god in a way that blurs any distinction between theism and atheism, saying "God is Nature," or "God is the potential within us," or "God is love." However silly those notions of God sound, I take comfort in knowing that these characterizations are more upsetting to the religious right than to me. They are "nothing gods."

Speaking of nothing gods, I am reminded of the story of the man who entered a small courtyard and saw an altar with a large zero in the middle and a banner that stated "NIL." White-robed people were kneeling before the altar chanting hymns to The Great Nullity and The Blessed Emptiness. The man turned to a white-robed observer next to him and asked, "Is Nothing Sacred?"

Many who identify with a religion are also open atheists. A Pew survey showed that 27 percent of Jewish Americans don't practice the Jewish religion. This rises to 40 percent for those under the age of thirty. These Jews call themselves atheists, agnostics, or nothings in particular. Many Hindus also identify as atheists. A colleague of mine in the Math Department at the College of Charleston is a priest at the Hindu Temple in Charleston. He is also an open atheist. He suggested I watch the wonderful 2014 Bollywood movie *pk.* It's about an alien from another planet who comes to Earth to do research on humans.

PK lands in northern India and becomes fascinated by all the different religions and creation stories. PK always asks direct questions that some religious people find heretical, and others find thought provoking, such as:

"Why would an all-knowing god change his mind because of a prayer?"

"Why a god, who ignores the prayers from millions of starving children, would take a special interest in a football game?"

PK discovers that humans usually grow up with god beliefs implanted at birth by family and culture. This is why people from India are mainly Hindus, most Asians are Buddhists, Saudi Arabians are Muslims, Israelis are mostly Jews, and the majority in the United States are Christian. To PK, religious belief seems to be based more on geography than theology.

Then there's the question of an afterlife, which confuses PK because he hears so many different and conflicting views from humans who claim to know the one true way to that afterlife. PK recognizes that the conflicting faith beliefs can't all be right, but they can all be wrong.

PK says whatever is on his mind because people from his alien planet do not know how to lie. This behavior seems so strange to humans that they think he must be drunk. That's why they named him Peekay (PK for short), which in Hindi means "tipsy."

PK reminded me of the 2009 movie *The Invention of Lying*, starring atheist **Ricky Gervais**, who also wrote the film. It's about a culture in which nobody is able to lie until one person (a character named Mark) develops the ability.

With the best of intentions, Mark tries to comfort his dying mother by telling her that she will be going to a wonderful afterlife. Of course she and others believe him. Soon everyone wants information about this afterlife. Every word Mark makes up is taken as, well, gospel. In the biggest lie of all, he tells the world there is a "man in the sky" responsible for everything, and they can be happy up there with him after death. When asked if the man in the sky is also responsible for cancer, Mark has to grapple with theodicy, a problem in all monotheistic religions: Why is there evil in a world created by an all-powerful and benevolent deity? Incidentally, on the back of two pizza boxes (tablets?) Mark writes down the Ten Rules of Conduct from the man in the sky, guaranteeing a wonderful afterlife. These humanistic rules are a lot better than the biblical Ten Commandments. The movie's message for me is that the "man in the sky" religion is possible only in a world where people can lie.

I hope more people will dare to be thoughtful and honest with themselves about what they really believe. If they wind up having the courage to tell others about those beliefs, it probably won't lead to all the negative consequences they feared. I've heard from people who guardedly mentioned their atheism to friends and coworkers and were pleasantly surprised by a "me, too" response. This "coming out" worked well for me in my life. I not only made many new friends, I also found a wife — but that's another true story.

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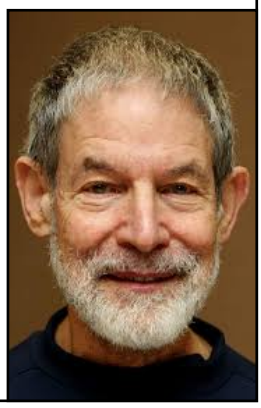
Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.



Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through amazon.com.

Designating "The Freethought Society" as your chosen AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

The Secular Student Alliance (SSA) is the only national secular nonprofit specifically supporting atheist, humanist, and nonreligious students in middle schools, high schools, and colleges/universities across the county.

As it was for many people, the past year has been difficult for secular students. When schools closed in the Spring of 2020, many nonreligious students returned home to unsupportive religious families and communities. SSA was there with special programs and social opportunities for thousands of students. When SSA student members and individual students return to campus this autumn, the freethought community must support them! Thousands of SSA student members will restart chapters and reengage the campus community. Over 100 individual new students will begin the process of starting a chapter on their campus.

When you become a non-student member of the SSA, you enable the organization to provide free membership and a multitude of services to students in middle school, high school, and college/university. You also enable SSA to provide free promotional material to student chapters across the county and free educational material for students to distribute to help normalize atheism, humanism, and nontheism for young people.

The goal this Fall is to have one non-student member for every student member. When you join as a member today, you can sponsor one student or multiple students.

Diamond Level: for $1,200 or $100 a month you sponsor 50 students
Platinum Level: for $600 or $50 a month you sponsor 20 students
Gold Level: for $240 or $20 a month you sponsor 8 students
Silver Level: for $120 or $10 a month you sponsor 3 students
Bronze Level: for $60 or $5 a month you sponsor 1 student

secular student alliance

Together, we can support thousands of nonreligious students in middle schools, high schools, and colleges/universities. Through your membership in the SSA, you give students membership into a welcoming secular community and give our secular youth the resources they need to educate and impact their campuses. After the past year, this is more important than ever.

Please become a member of the Secular Student Alliance today at bit.ly/SSAmember.