

Humanism for Head and Heart

A Book Review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Atheist Mind: Humanist Heart, by Lex Bayer and John Figdor. Rowan and Littlefield: Lanham, MD, copyright, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-4422-3679-0, 178 pp., Cloth \$.

This book is subtitled, "Rewriting the Ten Commandments for the Twenty-first Century." These two humanists are not the first to re-write the Ten Commandments. However, like probably all of the others before them, they greatly improve upon the "original" ten, which is extremely easy to do.

Lex Bayer is on the board of the Humanist Connection, a group that reaches out to Stanford University and Silicon Valley. John Figdor is a humanist chaplain at Stanford. Like many other atheists, they believe it is not enough to simply reject a belief in God. Atheists, they contend, should become humanists and have something to live for. They can learn to live ethical and happy lives.

In reality, the authors advocate Ten "Non-commandments." Unlike the primitive religionists that came up with the Ten Commandments, these non-commandments are not engraved in stone and considered to be perfect and immutable. On the contrary, readers are encouraged to challenge and improve upon them, and to come up with their own. This is as it should be.

Unlike many postmodernists, solipsists and others, the first non-commandment assumes that "the world is real" and that all human beings (and other animals) conduct their lives as though this is the case. Questioning reality is foolhardy and can lead to a world of trouble.

According to the second non-commandment, we are able to use our five senses to perceive the real world. Much of this might seem like common sense. However, others believe in alternative realities and embrace beliefs which do not correspond to reality and have no basis in our sensory perceptions.

Moving ahead to the fourth non-commandment, we must use our powers of observation, evidence and the scientific method to arrive at truth. Subjective experiences are not enough and extraordinary truth claims must be backed up by solid evidence before they can be accepted.

In non-commandment five, it is asserted that there is insufficient evidence for believing in God. The authors chop Pascal's wager down to size and show that believing in any God is like playing a "religious lottery." That is to say, there are so many gods from which to choose, practically everyone is bound to lose, especially because it is highly unlikely that any of the gods exist.

According to non-commandment seven there is no objective moral truth. What we consider to be right or wrong is undeniably linked to our desires, our experiences, and culture. That is why slavery, for example, was condoned by the writers of the Bible. We should always be striving to make moral progress, just as we are always striving to make genuine scientific progress, and so on, as non-commandment ten makes clear.

Non-commandment nine might be the most important one. It states that ethical societies benefit everyone. It is an appeal to enlightened self-interest rather than mindless obedience to the supposed will of God.

Critical thinking is essential to ethical progress. Reactionary religionists want to be hopelessly stuck in the past. As the authors, contend, however, "If the unexamined life is not worth living, then the unexamined belief is not worth holding or acting on."

Refreshingly, these authors do not viciously attack the New Atheists. On the contrary, they quote them liberally and respectfully. They understand that despite the New Atheists shortcomings, their critiques of religion are often necessary and spot on.

Atheist Mind: Humanist Heart offers many serious challenges to religion. For example, most Christians that believe we are living in the last days routinely assert that today there are more wars than ever, and this fulfills biblical prophecy. However, as Steven Pinker points out in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, there

are actually *fewer* wars than in times past. Moreover, we are not the hopelessly evil sinners that many religionists believe us to be.

It is always great to read a book that demonstrates that there have been many secular ethical systems throughout history. For example, the authors briefly discuss “Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, and John Rawls’s ‘veil of ignorance.’” (pp. 86-87) Yet, many religionists continue to ask, “If there is no God, where do you get your morals, or what stops you from committing murder and rape?” In response to this kind of ignorance, the late Paul Kurtz used to ask: “Haven’t these people had an introductory course in philosophy?”

Atheist Mind: Humanist Heart is an excellent book, especially for those just beginning their humanist journey. It comes highly recommended by the likes of scholar Rebecca Newberger Goldstein and Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein. It has something for everyone interested in fostering and embracing a humanist life stance.