

Giving Theists All They Can Handle

A Book Review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Fighting God: An Atheist Manifesto for a Religious World, by David Silverman. Thomas Dunne Books: New York, NY, 285 pp., 2015, ISBN: 978-1-250-06484-4, Cloth, \$26.99.

David Silverman is the hyper-aggressive, abrasive, arrogant and antagonistic president of American Atheists. He constantly whines about alleged political correctness and always complains that many people – even other atheists – call him “a dick,” which he vehemently but unconvincingly denies.

Silverman is of the opinion that atheists should disrespect theism without disrespecting theists. His view is reminiscent of the idea that Christians should love the sin and hate the sinner. The problem is that hating the sin looks very much like hating the sinner to most people. Similarly, Silverman often makes cringe-inducing statements that many theists find unacceptably insulting.

The author is a lot like the late Madalyn Murray O’Hair before him. Many atheists believed that O’Hair was gruff, disrespectful and unlikeable. They were embarrassed to have her as a spokesperson for atheists.

Shortly before I became involved in organized non-theism, I wrote O’Hair a letter. She was nothing if not consistent. Her writing style was exactly like her speaking style. She was hardcore. In her response to my letter, she expressed the idea that humanist leader Paul Kurtz was a “bullshit” artist. (She used to talk about “chicken shit humanists” and “bullshit freethinkers” that did “not have the balls to call themselves atheists.”)

O’Hair was critical of the 19th Century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll because he did not call himself an atheist. Yet, Ingersoll was one of the most charismatic and eloquent critics of religion and defenders of humanism that ever lived. And he was extremely likeable, and even loveable.

Silverman believes that all people that do not believe in God should call themselves atheists. He draws upon research that shows that practically everyone knows what an atheist is, but that hardly anyone knows the definition of humanist, freethinker and other terms. This makes it appear that there are not as many atheists as there are in reality. He believes this hurts the cause of atheism.

I have always believed that people can reject labels altogether or call themselves whatever they wish. Kurtz rightly understood that in 1980, many Americans associated atheism with Stalinism and Maoism. He therefore thought it was necessary to found the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH) to show that people could reject a belief in God without rejecting democratic values, institutions and governments.

Atheists have included many disreputable people. Today many people do not want to be associated with the New Atheism because many New Atheists embrace libertarianism, Islamophobia, racism, and so on. (Sam Harris has reached out to Charles Murray and apparently embraces the idea that Blacks are intellectually inferior to Whites.)

On page 245, Silverman quotes O’Hair, who was called “the most hated woman in America.” In her brief to the Supreme Court during her successful attempt to have prayer removed from the public schools, she stated:

An atheist knows that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist knows that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated.

If O’Hair had replaced “atheist” with “humanist,” she would have had a strong point. However, there are selfish atheists that do nothing to build hospitals (compared to those Christians that *do*.) Not all atheists are interested in doing good deeds. Some atheists are nihilists. Some are not interested in vanquishing poverty, and some are warmongers. *This* is why so many secular humanists prefer to be labeled by what they *do* believe in as opposed to what they *don’t* believe in. And they should be respected for their decision. This is not about cowardice. It is about proper branding.

Like O'Hair before him, Silverman often undermines his important message with his strident tone. However, he relishes the role of the extremist. He says that just as Malcolm X helped to make Martin Luther King's messages more palatable to many people, strident atheists can make it easier for the accommodationists.

The author brags a great deal about the in-your-face billboard campaign of American Atheists. However, one billboard that was noticeably missing from his discussion was the campaign that featured a Black slave on his knees and in chains accompanied by the words "slaves obey your masters." That billboard went over like a lead zeppelin in the Black community. Black theists and Black atheists alike were highly offended by it. I imagine that Silverman could call it a courageous assault upon political correctness. Yet most Blacks saw it as insulting and disrespectful, which, after all, is the same thing.

Despite everything, Silverman makes a strong case that American Atheists plays a major role in promoting atheism and making atheists more acceptable to mainstream America. Atheists can only hope that he continues to succeed in those areas, and to bring atheism to victory by 2040 as he predicts.