

Is Theism Ever *Necessary*?

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

There is no shortage of theists claiming that a belief in God is absolutely necessary if one expects to achieve and maintain sobriety, win at sports, be happily married, and so on. However, this view is not only insulting to non-theists – and utterly wrong – but it can be dangerous.

Just think, for example, if most non-theists with drinking or substance abuse problems actually believed that they could not become and remain sober unless they believed in God or some sort of “Higher Power.” Just think how many would lose all hope, some even committing suicide.

Fortunately, there are many non-theists demonstrating the fact that theism is not necessary for anything worth having or achieving. For instance, since 1985, Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) have been positively transforming the lives of thousands of people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse, and other addictions. Moreover, they have done so without a 12-step program or reliance upon a Higher Power.

The majority of SOS members are atheists or agnostics, but a large minority consider themselves to be spiritual. The bottom line is that theists are welcome and not made to feel that their belief in God will necessarily have a negative impact upon their efforts to achieve and maintain sobriety. (However, some non-theists do believe that to place too much emphasis upon God in recovery is just substituting one addiction for another.) SOS is just one of many secular groups helping addicts to get their lives together.

Many people believe that their side cannot win a war unless they are aided by God. However, there is no strong evidence to back up this outlandish claim. Wars are won by courage, superior strategy, knowledge of the territory in which the wars occur, superior technology, sometimes, superior numbers, blunders by the enemy, fortuitous weather conditions, and so forth. (And as Voltaire quipped, it seems that “God favors the side with the largest armaments.”) In reality, however, there is simply no good reason to suppose God chooses sides during wartime.

Similarly, there are people that maintain that a belief in God is necessary for all struggles for human rights. They point to the civil rights movement as a primary example. However, there were many non-theists with leading roles in that movement, including former African Americans for Humanism (AAH) member, the late James Farmer, and former AAH supporter, the late James Forman. A. Philip Randolph, the “Grandfather” of the movement, and, like Farmer, an acquaintance of the late Paul Kurtz, signed Humanist Manifesto II (as did Farmer.)

The role of humanists in the movement was even acknowledged by some leading religionists. For example, in his book, *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King thanked the thousands of humanists that helped make the movement possible. He wrote that it is better that one be a committed humanist than a non-committed Christian.

The bottom line is that the movement succeeded due to human thought, human action, human organization, and so on. Though many theists led and participated in the movement, there is no strong evidence to support the notion that any God had anything whatsoever to do with it.

Some theists dogmatically maintain that all successful actors, athletes, musicians and others owe their talent to God, and that prayer is necessary if one is to succeed in such fields.

Yet, again, there are plenty of examples of incredibly talented people that do not pray or rely upon a Higher Power. They include actresses Jodie Foster and the late Katherine Hepburn, actor Morgan Freeman, the late martial arts film star Bruce Lee, NFL running back Arian Foster, former star NFL running back Robert Smith, former musical genius Charlie Parker, and numerous others.

A lot of theists claim that one must pray and believe in God to attain great wealth. Yet there are many wealthy businesspersons that do not pray. (Some of them even finance humanist and atheist organizations.) Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Ted Turner are examples of nonreligious people that have attained great wealth. Turner once accepted an award from the American Humanist Association.

Some theists are even specific about the God in whom one must believe if he or she expects to succeed in life. For example, some say that without Jesus Christ

one can never achieve success. Yet Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabaar, Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad Rashad, Shaquille O'Neal, Hakeem Olajuwon, Muhammad Wilkerson, and Yusef Lateef are just a handful of Muslims that have made it just fine without Christ at the center of their lives.

It is one thing to say that a belief in God can help theists achieve and maintain success. However, it is a popular delusion to claim that a belief in God is *necessary* for one to achieve success in any human endeavor.