

Some Pros and Cons of Reading the Bible

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The Bible is the most widely read and least examined book in the world. – Thomas Paine

GQ recently came out with an article titled “21 Books You Don’t Have to Read.” It is a list of books traditionally considered to be classics and required reading. Many Christians went nuts when they discovered that the Bible made the *GQ* list.

The so-called Good Book is considered to be vastly overrated, “repetitive,” “foolish” and weak in other ways. What is lesser known is that there are other books on the list that I consider to be essential reading, including the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Before I continue, I must point out that the Bible is more than a book. For many, it is little more than a symbol of the Christian faith. For example, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) headed by Mikey Weinstein is involved in a case in which a Bible is part of a POW/MIA display at the US Naval Hospital in Okinawa. That is the navy’s largest overseas hospital. Mikey and the MRFF want the Bible removed from the display because it was never part of the original display, because it alienates many Christian and non-Christian military members, and because its inclusion in the display might be unconstitutional. The San Diego Navy Rear Admiral that heads the department overseeing all navy hospitals in the Pacific has so far refused to investigate the matter, contending that the Bible is not there for religious purposes. However, it is clear that the presence of the Bible is meant to show that the U.S. is a Christian nation, that patriotism and Christianity are inextricably linked, and that the military is blessed by the biblical God.

I readily agree that the Bible is highly overrated as literature and as a guide for moral instruction. However, it has some literary and entertainment value. Still, I have some serious concerns about who should read it.

First and foremost, I seriously believe that children should not read it without proper guidance from openminded adults. I am especially concerned about the biblical teachings on Hell and biblically sanctioned acts of brutality.

Some years ago, a former Sunday school teacher wrote an excellent letter to the editor of *Freethought Today*, the newspaper of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). The woman related that she was teaching children the story of Noah's Ark and how God drowned all life on Earth. Suddenly, a little girl burst into tears. The teacher asked the girl why she was crying, and she said, "all those poor kittens and bunnies." The woman said that from that day forward, she abandoned religion, realizing the harm that such Bible stories can have on young minds.

Similarly, Richard Dawkins maintains that it is child abuse to teach children that they could wind up burning in Hell forever. I could not agree more. Indeed, I consider it to be a dereliction of parental duty to allow one's child to be exposed to this heartless, unsubstantiated kindergarten silliness.

Many adults try to protect children from the negative influences of fictional violence in movies, video games and on television. Yet, how much more disturbing must it be for children (and adults) to read about the purportedly real violence condoned in the Bible? God's Chosen People are routinely commanded by the Heavenly Father to slaughter young children, men and women. Most responsible parents do not want their children exposed to porn. But as bad as porn might be, it does not lead to legalized slavery, mass murder, intolerance, witch burnings, religious bigotry and other biblically sanctioned crimes against humanity.

Back in the 1990s, I used to place stickers from the FFRF with the message that reading the Bible could be hazardous to your mental health. Seriously, this is a good idea. Bobbie Kirkhart, an atheist from California, has pointed out that too much religion is like too much alcohol. Similarly, in his fine book *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett noted that some religionists cannot handle certain religious doctrines, just as some people cannot drink milk because they are lactose intolerant. The world is full of religious fanatics that make this fact abundantly clear to all with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Due its inconsistent and contradictory nature, the Bible can make liberals more conservative or reactionary and conservative and reactionary religionists more progressive. Then again, the more closed-minded the believer is, the more likely she is to simply be attracted to those biblical messages that confirm her biases.

Finally, there are some good reasons for reading the Bible. There are good parts like the erotic Song of Solomon. The Sermon on the Mount is important. There is some good wisdom in Psalms and Proverbs. If you don't take it seriously, Exodus is entertaining. The story of Job is thought-provoking. And I have heard that if you are high, Revelation is a gas.

The Bible is not a book I would recommend except to those that are already Christians or who want to learn what Christians are expected to believe. (And if you're not also going to examine it, what's the point of reading it?) In the scheme of things, the Bible should not be a big deal for most people.