

A (FREETHINKING) WOMAN'S WORTH

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

A Book Review

Women Beyond Belief: Discovering Life WITHOUT Religion, edited by Karen L. Garst. (Pitchstone Publishing, Durham, North Carolina, 264 pp., 2016, ISBN: 9781634310826, Paper, \$16.95.)

In the 1990s I edited *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion*. It was a collection of essays by humanists of African descent (including myself) discussing our personal paths to humanism.

Humanist writer Karen Garst has come out with the same kind of book by and for nonreligious women; and it does not disappoint. There is much to recommend here. However, Sylvia Benner's "Of faith, feminism and master narratives" is especially noteworthy. Benner contends that "...third wave feminism...has no aspirational characters to offer for women (and certainly not for men.)" (p. 138)

Benner complains that, rather than offering role models for women that promote true personal power – especially sexual power – third wave feminists are obsessed with "victimhood." She complains:

There is a vision only of women as children who are utterly determined by their environment, are to be treated only as members of a group but never as individuals, and who have to be perpetually protected against upset [sic], lest they be permanently traumatized, for example, by jokes about dongles assaulting their sensitive ears and fragile egos. It is a rather Victorian view of women. (pp. 138-139)

Even more controversially, Benner goes so far as to argue that Christianity offers more liberating views of women than third wave feminism. However, she writes that, according to the Barna Group's 2015 State of Atheism in America poll, women make up 43% of those involved in organized atheism. (p. 142)

Benner also defends science extremely well and writes that: “The faster we switch our interest from resting in heaven to exploring the heavens, the faster we will progress along our path from darkness to light.” (p. 144)

This book has contributions from women from various backgrounds: White American, African American, African, European, Latina and so on. Moreover, there are numerous profound free thought quotations from the likes of Butterfly Queen, Jamila Bey, Katherine Hepburn, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and others, to begin each chapter.

Richard Dawkins wrote a blurb for the back cover of the book. This is especially noteworthy because Dawkins has long been accused of insensitivity and even sexism by many women in organized humanism. The criticism was especially prevalent during the infamous “elevatorgate” incident in which a woman attending a conference complained that she felt uncomfortable and threatened on an elevator with another man that was also attending the conference. Dawkins seemed to think it was much ado about nothing, and many women were furious with him.

Notably missing from the book is an essay by Black atheist activist Sikivu Hutchinson. Hutchinson had planned to come out with a similar book by and for Black atheist women, but her plans did not materialize. However, she did write a blurb for Garst’s book and called it “Highly recommended!”

The contributors to this book come from many different backgrounds: Jewish, Southern Baptist, Mormon, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh-day Adventist, and so forth. Some had sad tales of ostracism, abuse and other problems, making their personal journeys all the more challenging and amazing.

In the appendix, Garst discusses the subordination of women throughout Judeo-Christian history. Whether intentional or not, it provides an excellent counterweight to writers like Ayaan Hirsi Ali that contend that the sexism of the Judeo-Christian tradition is negligible when compared to the sexism in Islam.

Garst uses numerous biblical quotations to demonstrate that the Bible is all about patriarchy. Not only is the God of the Bible a male, he is a *hyper-masculine* male. Indeed, he should be every self-respecting feminist's worst nightmare.

The editor notes that the emphasis upon sexual abstinence among the early Christians arose because they were expecting the end times. However, the prophecy failed. Yet the early church could not rid itself of its obsession with celibacy.

Garst advocates a secular conception of morality and draws upon the ideas of Robert Green Ingersoll on the subject of happiness in this world. In the final sentence of her fine book, she hopes for "...a new secular view of the world that values all men and women equally." (p. 262)

It is great to see so many women contributing to a book of this kind. All too often, we are told about women's supposed natural spirituality. Many people even go so far as to say that women are spiritually superior to men. In response to this mindless bunk, we can now tell them to go read *Women Beyond Belief*.

Yeah. Read it and weep!