

Nonbelieving authors make room for belief: "People like objectivity"

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Bruce Sheiman doesn't believe in God, but he does believe in religion. Setting aside the question of whether God exists, it's clear that the benefits of faith far outweigh its costs, he argues in his new book, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off with Religion Than Without It*.

"I don't know if anybody is going to be able to convince me that God exists," Sheiman said in an interview, "but they can convince me that religion has intrinsic value."

The old atheists said there is no God. The so-called "New Atheists" also say there is no God, and they have been vocally vicious about it. Now, the *new* "New Atheists"—call it Atheism 3.0—say there's still no God, but maybe religion isn't all that bad.

Faith provides meaning and purpose for millions of believers, inspires people to tend to each other and build communities, gives them a sense of union with a transcendent force and provides numerous health benefits, Sheiman says. Moreover, the galvanizing force behind many achievements in Western civilization has been faith, Sheiman argues, while conceding that for the most part he limits his analysis to modern Western religion.

"More than any other institution, religion deserves our appreciation and respect because it has persistently encouraged people to care deeply—for the self, for neighbors, for humanity, and for the natural world—and to strive for the highest ideals humans are able to envision," Sheiman writes.

Religion has always had its cultured defenders—atheists who speak up for the social benefits of faith. The philosopher Plato, for instance, did not believe in the gods of the Greek pantheon but argued that other people should, for the good of society. He even proposed criminalizing disbelief in the existence of deities and immortality of the soul.

In recent years, the skeptical scene has been dominated by the New Atheists—Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and others—who argue in best-selling books that religious faith is a mental illness or worse.

But now a new crew of nonbelievers is taking on the New Atheists, arguing that while they may not have faith themselves, there's little reason to belittle believers or push religion out of the public square. The back-and-forth debates over God's existence have shed a little light but far more heat, they argue, while the world's problems loom ever larger.

"The work that we need to do, we atheists, humanists and nonbelievers, is to build a better world and not try to tear down those with whom we disagree," said Greg M. Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard University. "When our goal is erasing religion, rather than embracing human beings, we all lose."

Epstein argues in his forthcoming book, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, that morality does not depend on a judgmental deity and that nonbelievers can lead meaningful, even purpose-driven, lives. But they can also learn from people of faith, such as California megachurch pastor and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren, Epstein says.

Warren's best-selling book basically says that "you have to have a purpose in life bigger than yourself, and that not everything is all about you," said Epstein. "And he's absolutely right about that. But he's wrong in saying that you have to believe in Jesus Christ, and if you don't, you're going to hell for eternity."

Atheists who insist that religion be removed from the public square are doing themselves a disservice, argues Austin Dacey, a former United Nations representative for the staunchly secularist Center for Inquiry and author of *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*. A godless public square not only shields religion from public criticism, it also circumvents a broader debate on morality, he contends. "If they privatize faith, they also won't be able to criticize it," Dacey said of the New Atheists in an interview.

On the flip side, atheists can be a "blessing" for believers, said Samir Selmanovic, cofounder and coleader of New York's interreligious Faith House Manhattan and author of *It's Really All About God: Reflections of a Muslim Atheist Jewish Christian*.

Atheists are “God’s whistle-blowers,” who keep believers honest and focused on the here and now, Selmanovic said. “Atheism at its best grabs us by the collar and throws us to the ground, demanding to see lives well lived, forcing us to dig deeper and live up to the best of our own religions,” he writes.

While no one expects the God debate to end any time soon, in the meantime perhaps people can agree to disagree a little more agreeably, the new New Atheists argue.

“There was a moment when atheist books were selling,” Dacey said. “But people like objectivity, they like the feeling of balance. So after this wave of atheist books and the criticism that they are extremist, people are trying to find a happy medium.” - *Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*