

Book Review



Special Issue: Atheism, Secularity, and Science

Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions by Phil Zuckerman, Penguin Press, 2014, 288 pp. \$25.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1594205088

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Living the Secular Life begins with a popular assumption: life without religion is empty and meaningless. Without religion, one cannot develop a moral compass, raise decent and happy children, navigate tragedy, or cooperate effectively with others in society. Phil Zuckerman spends the remainder of the book refuting this claim. His goal is to explore “how secular people navigate their lives,” which is no small task. Throughout the book he discusses how secularists *do* in fact have morals, successfully raise children, deal with death and heartache, and build communities—basically, how they carry on without supernatural guidance.

This book aims to show how nonreligious people go about getting the things in life that are usually thought of as provided by religion, and it largely succeeds. Though it meanders at times, with some nonconsecutive chapters feeling as though they belong together (like chapters one and four, or five and eight), the central theme is never abandoned, and the reader soon remembers that these “chapters” of life—morality, children, community, tragedy, awe—are all connected. And though many (laypeople and scholars alike) would argue that religion persists because it is necessary, Zuckerman shows that although religion *can* do good things, some people just don’t need it.

Unlike his previous books that deal with secularism—*Society Without God* (2010) and *Faith No More* (2011)—there is no methodological appendix in *Living the Secular Life*. Zuckerman implies that this

book is an amalgamation of in-depth interviews from many previous research projects, with secularists “from all over the country and from all walks of life.” It’s unclear precisely how many secularists informed this particular work, but at one point he refers to “hundreds” of interviews, which is impressive. Based on these many interactions and conversations, he presents the everyday life of secularists.

Living life...Secularly

Explaining the source of morality is perhaps the most common challenge secularists face from religious others. Research shows that Americans tend to distrust and dislike atheists more than other minority groups, and this is largely the result of a deep cultural association of religion (especially Christianity) with ethical behavior. The line of thinking goes: if a person rejects religion, she must also reject the values that are obtained from religion. But in **chapter one**, titled “Morality,” Zuckerman’s interviewees claim that they don’t *need* religion to develop values. Rather, they simply employ “The Golden Rule,” or the idea that we should treat others as we would like to be treated. But how do secularists (and all people, for that matter) learn this rule? By developing empathy via interactions with other human beings.

In fact, many secularists even describe their morality as *superior* to biblical morality: they act ethically because it is right, not because they fear the consequenc-

es of disobeying an omnipotent being. Children, they say, don't need to be taught to treat others well; it's programmed into us because it's evolutionarily beneficial to be kind to others. Later in life, secularists tend to have lower rates of many types of "immoral" behaviors. For instance, they are less likely to be racist and are more tolerant in general; they are less likely to support torture or the death penalty; and they are more likely to support civil liberties, women's rights, and protecting the environment.

Chapter two, "The Good Society," extends the arguments put forth in chapter one, moving outward to investigate the morality of societies as a whole rather than individuals. Using Jamaica and Denmark as representative cases, Zuckerman shows that countries with "high levels of prosperity and peacefulness" are actually on average *less* religious than "poor, struggling, vulnerable, violent" countries—contrary to what many religious folk would like to think. The belief that without God a society cannot thrive is a prevalent one, and some today will still claim that catastrophes from hurricanes to school shootings are the direct result of society "forgetting" God. But the assertion that the world is somehow worse off today than it was "back then," when everyone adhered to traditional religion, is not empirically true. In fact, some research even shows the world is getting *better*—child mortality and absolute poverty rates are down, while life expectancy and literacy rates are up.

This should not suggest that secularity *creates* better people and conditions. Rather, nations may be more secular *because* they are doing well, not doing well because they are more secular. Still, the data provided here do at least prove that doing well is not *solely* an outcome of religious devotion. Again, one doesn't *need* religion to be good. If the people of a given nation organically and voluntarily disengage from religion (i.e., not forced to do so by a totalitarian regime), those people, as a whole, are likely to be doing just as well as—if not better than—their religious counterparts.

Though found throughout history, Zuckerman points out in **chapter three**, "Irreligion Rising," that historically, the number of people espousing secular viewpoints has been miniscule—until recently. Surveys now estimate that between 9 and 21 percent of Americans are agnostic or atheist, and increasing rates of nonaffiliation and nonbelief around the world add up to a powerful case for secularization. Indeed, Zucker-

man treats secularization as fact and doesn't discuss the contestation revolving around secularization theory. (The closest he comes to an explicit discussion of this debate is in an endnote in *Society Without God*; his position is basically that while secularization is not inevitable, it is not impossible.) Considering the strength of the data cited here, it's hard to imagine that secularization theory would continue to be contested—but although secularity is increasing worldwide, so is religion. A recent Pew report predicts that by 2050, the unaffiliated will increase in absolute numbers but decline as a proportion of the global population, due mostly to the low birth rates among the nonaffiliated compared to those of the religious.

But these figures don't adequately reveal how complicated a concept "secularization" is. Sally, an interview respondent, is a perfect illustration of the complexities that secularization theory is fraught with. Sally is nonreligious, but not atheist. She is raising her children without religion, but questions if this is the right decision. She doesn't believe in the God of Catholicism, but says she believes in "something." If Phil Zuckerman was to hand Sally a survey and ask her to choose from a list of religious traditions, would she identify as "none," "other," or "Catholic," the tradition she was raised in? Would she consider herself religious, secular, or perhaps spiritual? She is certainly "living the secular life" as described in this book, but Sally would have a hard time categorizing herself in a way that would be useful to survey research.

Chapter four, "Raising Kids," alludes to chapter one, and reminds the reader that religion is often viewed as a vehicle for instilling morals and values in children. Secular parents, then, often struggle with the judgment of others if raising their kids without religion, particularly in more religious environments. However, as discussed previously, theism is not necessary for instilling morality in children, and—again—this seems to be one of the core misunderstandings regarding secularists, and therefore one of the most important myths to dispel. Making matters more complicated, there is no established body of literature on secular childrearing from psychologists, social scientists, or historians.

One thing that secular parents do seem to have in common is the value they place on choices; they tend to talk about religion openly and honestly, and are reluctant to impose their own beliefs (e.g., atheism) on their children. Secular families have the advantage of

“choice” over traditionally religious families: they can *choose* the rituals and traditions they wish to participate in, rather than participating in something simply because that’s what has always been done. The number of parents raising nonreligious children has nearly tripled throughout the 20th century (more evidence of secularization?), and social scientists may soon have more to say about the rituals and trends that develop among those raised without religion.

A possible trend could be the rising organization of secularists into formal groups or communities. Zuckerman discovers that people join such groups for a number of reasons, primarily to “get together with like-minded people.” In **chapter five**, “Creating Community,” he describes some of these organizations: Camp Quest, a secular summer camp emphasizing curiosity and autonomy; the Secular Student Alliance, a club for nonreligious high school and college students; and the Humanist Community at Harvard, a community center offering the traditional benefits of religion (music, education, fellowship) without the dogma. These, and many other groups mentioned in the chapter, are not “against religion,” but rather are “for humanism.” In other words, humanism encompasses an ideology of what one is for (“the positive potential for humans to do and be good, loving, and altruistic”), not against.

However, of all the people in the US who are secular, only a small portion is likely to join an organization. On this note, Zuckerman distinguishes between the “religiously secular” and the “truly secular in secularity,” or those who may find the communal aspects of religion appealing and desire to be part of a group that emulates a church community, and those who remain indifferent to their secularity. The “religiously secular” may be the ones joining these groups. Given the emphasis in this chapter on the importance of community building, I would have liked to hear someone from the “truly secular” majority discuss his reasons for *not* joining a secular community, or how the need for community is satisfied through other means.

Chapters six and seven deal with similar themes; while “Trying Times” addresses how secularists cope with difficult circumstances and life events, “Don’t Fear the Reaper” deals with a more specific and universal type of tragedy. Religion is often viewed as a source of support and comfort in sadness, and people may wonder how secularists cope without it. Zuck-

erman interviews a paraplegic, Holocaust survivor, and former drug addict, and finds that none of these respondents (and presumably many others he has interviewed) indicated the slightest temptation to turn to religion. There is an assumption among the general public that people turn to God in times of need; in other words, there are no “atheists in foxholes.” Based on Zuckerman’s interviews, however, this simply is not the case. He also suggests that secular people, when in the company of other secularists, should fare just as well psychologically as the religious—another good reason for nonbelievers to organize!

People might also think nonbelievers struggle with death and fear of the unknown, given religion’s historical monopoly over answers to these questions. Zuckerman’s interviewees, however, have no such qualms with death. Overwhelmingly, secularists embrace the “here and now.” Experiences with death don’t drive secularists toward religion, in much the same way that single experiences don’t draw believers to *non*religion (when this does happen, it tends to be a gradual process). Secular people may not *want* to die, but they aren’t afraid of it.

Zuckerman’s final substantive chapter is a short one. In **chapter eight**, “Aweism,” he discusses the labels a secularist (in this case, himself) might utilize and finds them lacking. “Atheist” doesn’t really tell anyone anything beyond what you *don’t* believe; depending on the usage, “agnostic” comes across as either indecisive or cold and sterile; and “secular humanist” might accurately describe what you *support*, but not who you *are*. Here, Zuckerman coins his own term: he is an “aweist.” He writes:

I am often full of a profound, overflowing *feeling*. And the word that comes closest to describing that feeling is awe...a religious or spiritual person will...interpret feelings or experiences of wonder, awe, and the sense of rapturous mystery as evidence of there being Something More, Something Else, Something Holy Out There. An aweist makes no such leap of faith. An aweist just feels awe from time to time, appreciates it, owns it, relishes it, and then carries on—without any supernatural or otherworldly baggage.

Being Zuckerman’s most original contribution to the book, I’m surprised this chapter only takes up 13 pages. He discusses intellectuals who influenced the con-

cept, including Albert Einstein and Joseph Conrad, but includes no conversations with interviewees or experiences beyond his own. I have a hard time believing that over the course of hundreds of interviews Zuckerman never encountered someone who articulated this sense of “awe,” or “wonder,” and I wonder why their voices aren’t also heard in this chapter.

Living the Secular Life concludes with the assertion that atheism and secularism are often characterized as “un-American,” despite the Founding Father’s intention that the US remain a secular nation. Zuckerman suggests that the best way to dispel the negative images attached to being secular is for people to “assert their position with knowledge, confidence, and pride.” Indeed, much of the success the LGBTQ community has experienced in recent decades is the result of “coming out of the closet.” Once people are made aware that they actually *know* someone who is LGBTQ, they become more accepting. Likewise, people may dislike secularists simply because they don’t know (that they know) anyone who doesn’t believe in God.

A leading voice on the social science of secularism

In his book *Faith No More* Zuckerman describes why people lose their faith, and the different pathways they take to non-theism. These stories are interesting and important, but in many ways, the answer to the question “Does God exist?” is not. *Faith No More* takes the reader on an incomplete journey. *Living the Secular Life* completes the journey by dealing with the important part of being a secularist: what comes next.

Given the accessible nature of his writing, I suspect that Phil Zuckerman will soon become a household name among secular circles, if he isn’t already. When I meet other secularists and tell them I’m a sociologist studying nonbelievers and nonreligious communities, I’m pleasantly surprised when they respond, “Do you know Phil Zuckerman?” This happens more frequently than you might expect, and suggests that his work is resonating with an audience outside the academy. In just the past few months, I’ve seen secularists share articles and interviews about his work on social media saying, “This is what we’re trying to do in our community.” I’ve been asked if I’ve seen the debate where he argued that secular humanism is a better basis of government than Christianity, in which he “completely destroyed” his opponent to the point that

the sponsoring religious organization would not post the recording online. And I’ve seen local humanist organizations use quotes from *Living the Secular Life* in their promotional material.

This book is meant for a popular audience, but is Zuckerman simply preaching to the secular choir? Maybe. But *Living the Secular Life* can also serve as a tool to help secularists dispel the misconceptions they encounter from people who buy into claims that atheists don’t have morals or can’t raise ethical children or develop meaningful relationships. In chapter four, Zuckerman relays the heartbreaking story of Tonya Hinkle. Tonya became known as the “atheist parent” at her children’s rural elementary school, and often dealt with pushback from religious teachers, administrators, and even the principle when religious classmates began bullying her children. The worst came when she attempted to take her children out of school to visit their grandmother on her deathbed. In her own words:

I was told by the school secretary, in the principal’s office, who I had had dealings with before—she knew my point of view—she said that they were not allowed to be taken out of school. My children. I could not take them out.... When I explained the situation to her—that my mom was literally about to die and I wanted the kids to be able to say goodbye to their grandmother—she looked me in the eye and said that I could tell my children that they could see their grandmother in heaven.

Tonya could not remove her children from school and her mother died that afternoon. After describing the ordeal, she said, “You know, at the time I really didn’t have the tools to defend myself.” What “tools” is Tonya referring to? Most fundamentally, it’s the confidence and empowerment that comes with knowing you’re not alone. Many secularists, especially those embedded in deeply religious contexts, simply don’t know anyone else who is not religious, and don’t realize they share these experiences with others.

Books like this may be criticized for pandering to their audiences—but *Living the Secular Life* is the type of engaging, relatable book that secular people can share with their religious friends and family and say, “This is me. If you want to understand, read.”