

Religious questions, atheist answers



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

In the November/December 2024 edition of "The Freethought Society News," secular humanist Herb Silverman presents his responses to questions brought by religious people. I find his answers useful, since those of us in the secular community often hear these kinds of challenges. Some people of faith are genuinely curious to learn how non-religious people think, while others seek to prove the superiority of faith — their chosen faith — over non-belief. They simply can't believe that someone doesn't believe what they believe. Sincere and respectful dialogue is possible, if people with differing viewpoints are willing to listen and reign in the impulse to proselytize. As I've observed, atheists can sometimes be as pushy with their worldviews and opinions as the religious. Evangelism of any sort is, at best, unhelpful in an exchange of opinions, and at worst, disrespectful, shutting down potential mutual learning.

Silverman addresses some of the most basic questions we hear from religious believers, such as:

How can you be moral without God? He quotes a line attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That is my religion." Whether Lincoln said that or not, it stands to reason the point is clear: we innately know good from bad, and if we choose to live by the good actions, perhaps that would be the best kind of religion to believe and practice. In my view, Silverman gives a perfect response to the frequently repeated question: How is your morality different from religious morality? He explains: "Morality is doing what is right, regardless of what we are told. Religious morality is doing what we are told, regardless of what is right." I've always thought living a natural, conscientious ethical life is healthier than a moral life that merely conforms to orthodox doctrines and dogmas. It's too easy, too simplistic, to hold the old notion that only a religious person can be moral.

Where does an atheist find meaning in their life? Silverman answers: "We create or find our own meanings in life." In the religious mind, meaning and purpose primarily originate in a belief in God. One's chosen deity bestows meaning on an individual, and a life purpose comes from devotion to the deity. Without a God, these folks believe we are "lost" and life essentially has no value. If you aren't living for God, living by faith,

then how can you possibly have any reason to live at all? This view overlooks the obvious: there are millions of people who discover much to live for, who have purposes for living, without religious belief. This relates to the next question Silverman fields: Do atheists believe in the importance of being good? He matter-of-factly responds: "The atheists I know feel better about themselves when they are good to others in this one life they have. Make others happy, and we will be happy too."

It may be helpful to widen the lens here. The world is made up of billions of believers and large numbers who choose not to believe in any gods. There are those who believe there is a supernatural reality, and those who see nothing but the natural cosmos. There are those who try to convince the other side they are right and those who see things differently are wrong. This leads to endless, and perhaps pointless, debates, arguments and at the extreme, violence. I'm curious about the intentions behind the inquiries, what motivates people to ask questions. Do they really want honest answers or are they looking for a fight? Are they already convinced there are winners and losers? In battles, or games, this may be true. But in the search for better understanding, to learn the truth about how another individual sees the world, if we are only see-

ing "enemies," and what amounts to caricatures or straw-men (scarecrows?) — a dehumanized "other" — sincere education is not possible.

In his responses to two other questions, Herb Silverman presents a reasonable outlook any thoughtful believer might seriously consider. What is an atheist's philosophy of life? His answer makes a lot of sense to me: "My philosophy of life is based on the title of an old soap opera (which I never watched): 'One Life to Live.' Atheists, who believe this life is all we have, try to make the most of it in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. This usually requires that we help others fulfill their needs, too." When asked his opinion on how we should live, he replies with a quote from British philosopher Bertrand Russell: "The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge."

Personally, I welcome sincere questions arising from sincere curiosity. I might respond similar to Silverman; and ask a few questions in return.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).