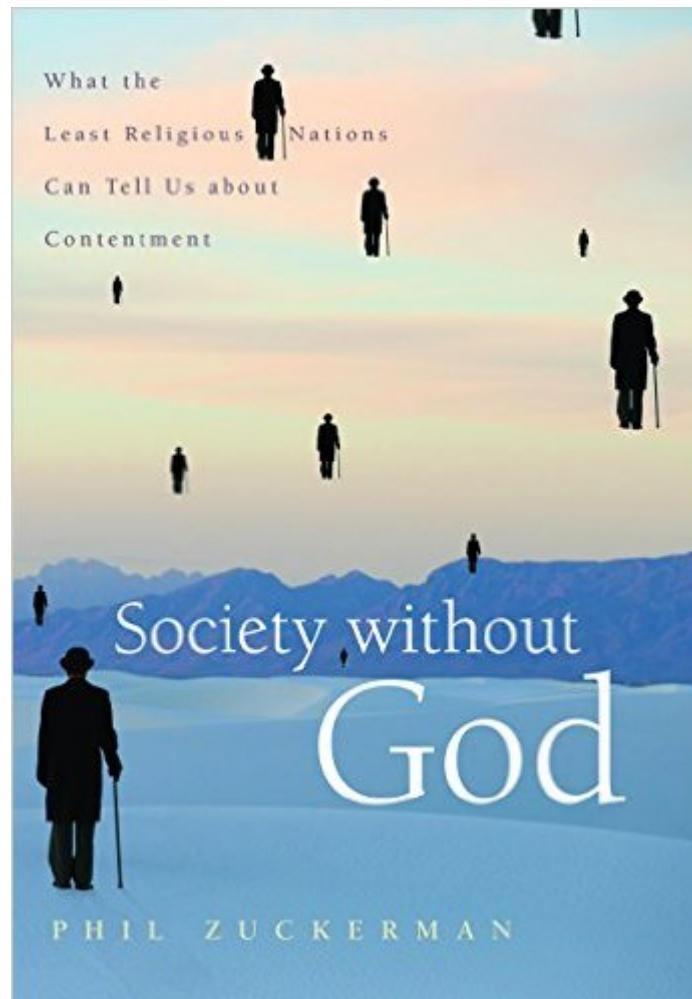


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Society Without God: What The Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment



Synopsis

â œSilverâ • Winner of the 2008 Foreword Magazine Book of the Year Award, Religion Category

Before he began his recent travels, it seemed to Phil Zuckerman as if humans all over the globe were â œgetting religionâ •â ”praising deities, performing holy rites, and soberly defending the world from sin. But most residents of Denmark and Sweden, he found, donâ™t worship any god at all, donâ™t pray, and donâ™t give much credence to religious dogma of any kind. Instead of being bastions of sin and corruption, however, as the Christian Right has suggested a godless society would be, these countries are filled with residents who score at the very top of the â œhappiness indexâ • and enjoy their healthy societies, which boast some of the lowest rates of violent crime in the world (along with some of the lowest levels of corruption), excellent educational systems, strong economies, well-supported arts, free health care, egalitarian social policies, outstanding bike paths, and great beer. Zuckerman formally interviewed nearly 150 Danes and Swedes of all ages and educational backgrounds over the course of fourteen months. He was particularly interested in the worldviews of people who live their lives without religious orientation. How do they think about and cope with death? Are they worried about an afterlife? What he found is that nearly all of his interviewees live their lives without much fear of the Grim Reaper or worries about the hereafter. This led him to wonder how and why it is that certain societies are non-religious in a world that seems to be marked by increasing religiosity. Drawing on prominent sociological theories and his own extensive research, Zuckerman ventures some interesting answers. This fascinating approach directly counters the claims of outspoken, conservative American Christians who argue that a society without God would be hell on earth. It is crucial, Zuckerman believes, for Americans to know that â œsociety without God is not only possible, but it can be quite civil and pleasant.â •

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Customer Reviews

A readable and interesting presentation of preliminary field research showing rather convincingly that societies need not be religious/god fearing in order to be good. The methodology was a bit loose (interviewees were anyone the author could cajole into sitting for a rather lengthy interview) and the presentation of results was for the most part anecdotal. I just had a couple quibbles with the author. First, in his introduction Zukerman states that in the U.S. and much of the world religiosity is on the increase without citing any studies to back up the statement. Since so much of the book is well documented I found this a lack, coming from an academic. This is particularly the case given the results of the recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (published after Zuckerman's book.) This is a minor quibble and in no way detracts from the conclusions in the book. My second quibble I find a bit more troubling. In his discussion of social well being in Denmark and Sweden Zuckerman cites studies showing that these two countries rank very high in economic competitiveness, gender equality, lack of corruption, quality of education, etc. He frequently mentions other countries that also rank high, but never does he mention the country that consistently ranked higher than Denmark and Sweden, and was more often than not ranked first: Finland. Granted, Zuckerman didn't get to visit Finland during his stay but I find it rather puzzling that he never once mentioned their ranking in these studies, considering that Finland is a Nordic country sharing many characteristics with her Scandinavian neighbors.

The book presents an excellent case study of how solid, peaceful, and advanced society can be when we collectively view the world without acting out the literal word of the books that support organized religion. One major takeaway that surprised me was the contrast and comparison between how the Danes and Swedes viewed religion with a sense of spirituality and culture and the Americans viewed religion with a sense of literal and rigid interpretation and how that translated into our societies differences. I am personally embarrassed of how our America thinks and behaves relative to this topic. To a great degree, we can step back and view American Christianity similar to how we view the worship of ancient cultures - Greek, Egyptian, Mayan, Incan, and see how antiquated our thinking is around this subject. This book was recommended to me through the Sam Harris blog, and I recommend it for anyone that is asking the question, what would society look like if we walked away from the literal interpretation of the Bible? While the book doesn't get into Islam,

the same parallels can be drawn and points inferred. It briefly touches Judaism, which is ironically viewed more similarly to the Dane and Swede view of Christianity. Jews are surprisingly secular when viewing social topics. One last stat that surprised me was how large the secular/free-thinking/humanist population is across the world - 4th largest group (if you had to group this population against labeled groups of believers and non-believers). Of the 6.8 billion of us currently on our planet, 2 billion are admittedly Christian (Catholic, Episcopal/Anglican, Lutheran, etc), 1.2 are Muslim, 900 million are Hindu, and 750 million are admittedly freethinkers.

The Danes and Swedes live in countries that consistently rank among the world's best in terms of social conditions. They have low crime and high economic equality. They have some of the lowest rates of infant mortality and highest life expectancy. They have one of the most educated populations on earth and as well as highest levels of happiness. They also are some of the most secular societies in existence today. Sociologist Phil Zuckerman spent over a year there interviewing and trying to ascertain how and why this is. His findings and explication of this culture would shock many believers who think that society and morality is founded upon religion. For instance, most Americans would describe about 75% of these people as atheist or agnostic for if they do not explicitly say they don't believe in God or a higher power, they will only say that they "believe in something." And many evangelicals would take that 75% to 95% for only about 5% of these Scandinavians believe that the Bible is the "Literal Word of God." But this isn't some simplistic screed saying that secularism begets a heavenly society for by no means is correlation necessarily causation. Nor are these countries without their share of problems (as is documented in the book). However, Zuckerman delves deeply into the multi-faceted and complex web of interactions that have led to such a very good society and his answers are many. They have a welfare state with free healthcare, virtually no poverty, and some of the least disparity between the rich and poor. They have had a different historical relationship with religion. Their state religion of Lutheranism has, like a lazy monopoly, failed to market its message (contrast that with the constant religious advertising we see in the US).

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