



Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment

By Phil Zuckerman

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“Silver” 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 “getting religion”—praising deities, performing holy rites, and soberly defending the world from sin. But most residents of Denmark and Sweden, he found, don’t worship any god at all, don’t pray, and don’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 “happiness index” 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 “society without God is not only possible, but it can be quite civil and pleasant.”

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Sociologist Zuckerman spent a year in Scandinavia seeking to understand how Denmark and Sweden became probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world. While many people, especially Christian conservatives, argue that godless societies devolve into lawlessness and immorality, Denmark and Sweden enjoy strong economies, low crime rates, high standards of living and social equality. Zuckerman interviewed 150 Danes and Swedes, and extended transcripts from some of those interviews provide the book's most interesting and revealing moments. What emerges is a portrait of a people unconcerned and even incurious about questions of faith, God and life's meaning. Zuckerman ventures to answer why Scandinavians remain irreligious—e.g., the religious monopoly of state-subsidized churches, the preponderance of working women and the security of a stable society—but academics may find this discussion a tad thin. Zuckerman also fails to answer the question of contentment his subtitle speaks to. Still, for those interested in the burgeoning field of secular studies—or for those curious about a world much different from the devout U.S.—this book will offer some compelling reading. (Oct.)

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Review

“Puts to rest the belief that you need God in order to be a moral person, that irreligious societies are wracked by social problems, and that godless people are unhappy and unmoored. . . . In the case of Scandinavia: God may be dead, but Swedes and Danes lead rich, full lives. *Society Without God* is a colorful, provocative book that makes an original contribution to debates about atheism and religiosity. Ideal for classroom use, it will get students thinking about their own lives and choices.”

-Arlene Stein, author of *Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture*

“For those interested in the burgeoning field of secular studies’ or for those curious about a world much different from the devout U.S.—this book will offer some compelling reading.”

-*Publishers Weekly*

“The book succeeds in documenting how the conditions of a liberal social welfare state promote contentment.”

-*Choice*

“*Society without God* is both a sociological analysis of irreligion and Zuckerman’s apologia *pro vita sua*. He wants us to know that, contrary to the deeply held beliefs of some Americans, a society without god can be a good society and an irreligious person can be a moral person, too. To his credit, Zuckerman provides enough nuance and detail to allow a skeptic like me to see what Peter Berger called ‘signals of transcendence’ in the society without god he portrays. Along with the volume’s engaging writing style, this makes it ideal for classroom use. I know my students will enjoy reading and discussing *Society without God*.”

-David Yamane, author of *The Catholic Church in State Politics*

“His reporting of previously published material is invaluable to persons not previously familiar with such information.”

-*Humanism Ireland*

“Most Americans are convinced that faith in God is the foundation of civil society. *Society Without God* reveals this to be nothing more than a well-subscribed, and strangely American, delusion. Even atheists living in the United States will be astonished to discover how unencumbered by religion most Danes and Swedes currently are. This glimpse of an alternate, secular reality is at once humbling and profoundly inspiring— and it comes not a moment too soon. Zuckerman’s research is truly indispensable.”

-Sam Harris, author of the *New York Times*

"*Society Without God*" offers a unique perspective on the active debate regarding the necessity of religion . . . By turning to one of the most secular societies in the world, Scandinavia, Phil Zuckerman offers an empirically grounded account of a successful society where people are happy and content and help their neighbors without believing in God. The book is fluently written and highly illuminating. It offers an accessible entry to important questions in the study of religion and secularism."

-Michael Pagis, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

“Despite this book’s weighty topic, with its conversational writing style, *Society Without God* is amazingly readable, even fun. It presents rigorous arguments that are deceptively simple to understand, but that are, when you think about them more deeply, quite transformative.”-*PopMatters*

“[Zuckerman] tells of a magical land where life expectancy is high and infant mortality low, where wealth is spread and genders live in equity, where happy, fish-fed citizens score high in every quality-of-life index: economic competitiveness, healthcare, environmental protection, lack of corruption, educational investment, technological literacy . . . well, you get the idea. Zuckerman (who has explored the sociology of religion in two previous books) has managed to show what nonbelief looks like when it’s ‘normal, regular, mainstream, common.’ And he’s gone at least partway to proving the central thesis of his book: ‘Religious faith—while admittedly widespread—is not natural or innate to the human condition. Nor is religion a necessary ingredient for a healthy, peaceful, prosperous, and . . . deeply good society.’ ”

-Louis Bayard, *Salon.com*

“In an anecdotal and eminently readable manner, Zuckerman offers a novel idea within the study of religious sociology.”

-*Library Journal*

“While never presuming to offer a strictly generalizable snapshot, by focusing his attention on what are “probably the least religious countries in the world” (2), his provocative and engagingly written book is very effective in helping readers to examine numerous assumptions concerning the place of religion in the modern

world... The real strength of this book is that, by challenging widespread analytical assumptions, it presents us with more complexity and with more nuanced questions regarding the nexus of the religious and the secular in contemporary life. To quote a famous Dane on this very point, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." If, as Horatio should have done, we are to heed these words in terms of expanding the frameworks of our accordingly, it will be due in good measure to paying attention to thoughtful and creative books like this one. In my estimation, not to do so would be, well, a tragedy." -Sociology of Religion

"Much that he found will surprise many people, as it did him."
-*The New York Times*

About the Author

Phil Zuckerman is Associate Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. He is the author of *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* and *Strife in the Sanctuary: Religious Schism in a Jewish Community*.

Users Review

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