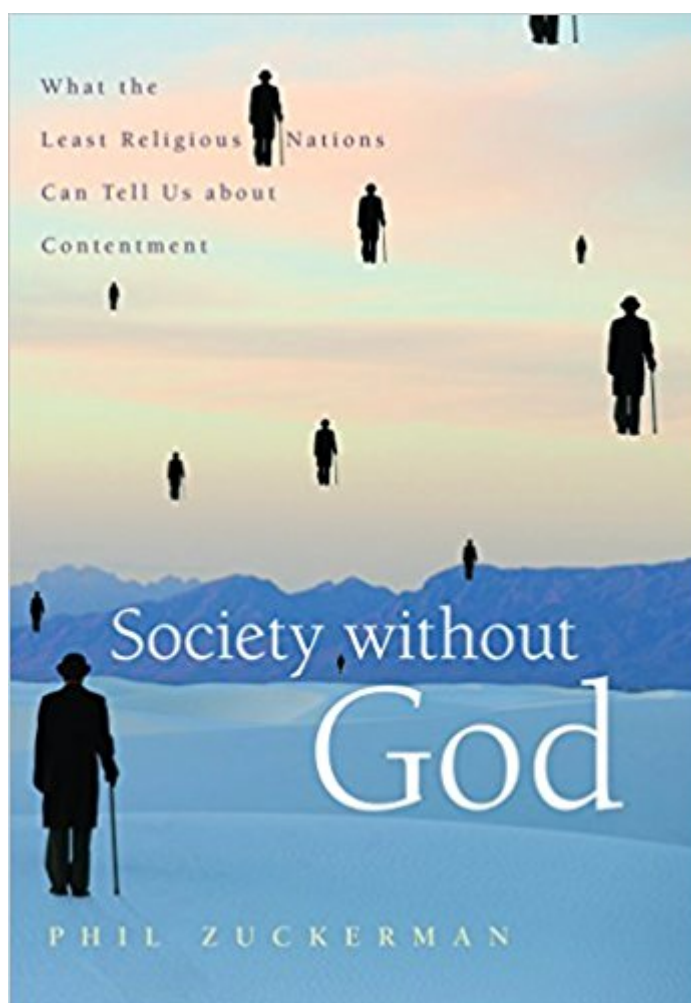


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Society Without God: What The Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment



Synopsis

“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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Customer Reviews

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.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“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*

This is an eye-opening book telling how the Scandinavian countries are the happiest in the world. Made me want to move there and leave the USA behind.

I enjoyed the author's attempt to statistically quantify the impact of belief, or lack thereof, in God has upon a given society based upon interviews of its members. In no way scientific, it does provide a glimpse into the minds of those that do not, and most never did, have a strong belief in the God of Abraham. This completely contradicts the long-held belief that societies without religion are doomed to complete suffering and misery. My only disappointment is that the book does not really convey anything specific that might persuade misguided evangelicals of our world to stand down from their conviction that (their) religion is of utmost urgency for all humans to adopt.

The author spends far too many pages asking Scandinavians the same questions about religion and getting the same answers. By and large they give it little thought and are basically indifferent to it. They go to church to get married and when someone dies, but that's because it's just an accepted ritual. But instead of then examining the factors that do make Scandinavia consistently near the top of so many international surveys on quality of life, he just goes on fairly pointlessly about how irreligious the Scandinavians are but that things there are great. No societal decline into depravity despite a lack of religion. Therefore it would have made more sense to get over the religious stuff in the first chapter and then focus on what the real differences are that exist between

Scandinavia and the US. Inequality would be a major difference as would education, health care, taxes etc but these are not considered in any depth. Only in the last chapter do things come alive with regards to religion when a Scandinavian that the author had known when he first arrived in Scandinavia and who he then met again later after he had lived in the US for nine months. Living in the US had certainly changed his views on religion and in doing so highlighted a key factor regarding those who proclaim to be religious. Easily the most interesting part of the entire book and one that says at least as much about the US as it does about Scandinavia. But if it isn't religion that explains Scandinavian economic and social success, why waste virtually the entire book on religion?

I appeared in this book as 'Henry 41' and am proud to have contributed to this fantastic book. Basically, Phil shows that societies don't need god to be 'good', or good places to live. Highly-recommended.

The author spent 14 months in Denmark and Sweden exploring in depth the religious attitudes of 149 persons and many more through conversations to determine whether it is possible to have an irreligious, good society. He is surprised to find that a majority of Danes and Swedes is culturally Christian but without a belief in God, the Virgin birth of Jesus as the son of God, eternal life, or hell. He expresses his surprise that the societies of Denmark and Sweden despite this are so remarkably good and people appears quite a bit more ethical than in the USA. Here a majority of people is extremely religious and often fundamental believers in the Bible. I did not know this and to my surprise, the recent issue of Times now shockingly questions "what if there is no hell". For me who was raised in Sweden in a family where my father was an agnostic and the live-in grandmother a born again pentacostal. I was encouraged to participate in a variety of Christian and cultural events. After having read this book, I discovered that I have a mainstream Scandinavian view on religion developed during my 36 years in Sweden and 41 years in the USA. However, I fail to comprehend how a majority of the US population can have a so profound literal view of religion counteracted by both scientific proof and common sense. Dr Zuckerman offers several theories how this is at all possible, including what I believe is the most plausible, separation of church and state limiting exposure of children to other views than that of the parents. This book is extremely revealing and should be of great value for anyone with an interest of religion in society.

In what reads like a combination of research paper and super-lengthy blog post, Zuckerman

presents a very convincing case that religion is unnecessary for a society to prosper. It's important to note that the book's hypothesis is not "secularism makes societies BETTER" but rather "lack of religion does NOT make societies fail." To this end, Zuckerman interviews 149 semi-randomly selected people from Denmark & Sweden, while living there for 14 months. The general consensus is that religion is mostly a non-issue for people. Some believe, most don't, but nearly all really just *don't care*. As for the support for his research hypothesis, one need look no further than the UN statistics on where Scandinavian countries place in terms of happiness, health, crime, poverty, etc. (hint: they do very well in all categories, significantly better than the US in most) The author does a good job of illustrating his personal experience while living there, as how it compares to living in northern California. If I could, I would give it 4.5 stars. The only reason I don't give it 5 is because at times, it feels a little bit too much like a research paper. At a mere 183 pages, it is a quick read; but there were a couple moments when it felt like the pacing was lacking. In spite of that, it is definitely worth reading; I highly recommend for anyone interested in socio-religious issues (whether a believer or a non-believer or a fence-walker).

None better in the field!

As a believer living in Sweden he is right on about how people think and live here. Good info in understanding the religious culture in Sweden and Denmark.

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