

## Chapter 7. Who gave them the moral high ground?

*Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.* Steven Weinberg, Nobel Prize Winning Physicist<sup>1</sup>

*People who reject the idea of a God--who think that we're just accidental protoplasm--have always been with us. What bothers me is . . . if there is no eternal standard of right and wrong, then all that matters is power. And atheism leads to brutality. All the horrific crimes of the last century were committed by atheists--Stalin and Hitler<sup>2</sup> and Mao and so forth--because it flows very naturally from an idea that there is no judgment and there is nothing other than the brief time we spend on this Earth.* Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels<sup>3</sup>

One of the most common defenses of religion (and assaults on atheism) is the presumption that religion makes people good. The persistence of this myth demonstrates the power of religionists to set the agenda. I reject completely the notion that religion makes people good. Further, atheists should feel no obligation to prove that they are good without religion. The question “can you be good without god,” should be as offensive and out of place as the question, “can a slave be good without his master?”

Religionists have been setting the agenda for so long, that their goodness premise is accepted without question. For example, laws on the books in some states prohibit atheists from testifying in court. The Arkansas Constitution provides, “No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil departments of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any court.”<sup>4</sup> Incredibly, such provisions were not judicially overridden nationwide until a 1961 U.S. Supreme Court decision<sup>5</sup> and as recently as 2009 attempts to change the Arkansas Constitution to allow atheists to have equal rights failed.<sup>6</sup> Atheists are still prohibited from testifying against Muslims in many Muslim countries.<sup>7</sup> But, however deeply rooted in history and vehemently defended by the powerful majority the goodness myth may be, it is false.

For example, the scriptures religionists use to support their claims of superiority are reprehensible. American religionists who oppose equal rights for gays and lesbians often cite the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. After reading that tale, it shocks me that the 31% of Americans who believe the Bible is the literal word of god, and the additional 47% who believe the Bible is the inspired word of god (a total of 78% of Americans)<sup>8</sup> can find an iota of moral guidance in the story.

In that story, two men visit Lot. Unknown to him, they are “angels.” A crowd gathers around Lot’s house and demands that Lot send the men outside to be raped. Lot, being a “moral” man, refuses, but instead offers his two daughters, probably about 14-years-old, to be raped instead. The “angels” do not object to this substitution, but the crowd does.

The “angels” then blind the crowd and give Lot and his family a chance to escape. But the Lot family’s prospective sons-in-law are left behind. For some bizarre reason, the “angels” instruct Lot and his family not to look behind them. Lot’s wife does, maybe thinking about what happened to her

daughters' fiances. She is turned inexplicably into a pillar of salt. Lot then moves into a cave with his daughters. The daughters get Lot drunk and have sex with him, thereby getting pregnant.

In case you think I am making this up, here is the Bible story:

### **Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed**

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."

"No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."

But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom--both young and old--surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."

Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."

"Get out of our way," they replied. And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here--sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it."

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and

your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.”

When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!”

\* \* \*

By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

\* \* \*

### **Lot and His Daughters**

Lot and his two daughters left Zoar and settled in the mountains, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He and his two daughters lived in a cave. One day the older daughter said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is no man around here to lie with us, as is the custom all over the earth. Let’s get our father to drink wine and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father.”

That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and lay with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up.

The next day the older daughter said to the younger, “Last night I lay with my father. Let’s get him to drink wine again tonight, and you go in and lie with him so we can preserve our family line through our father.” So they got their father to drink wine that night also, and the younger daughter went and lay with him. Again he was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up.

So both of Lot’s daughters became pregnant by their father. The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today. The younger daughter also had a son, and she named him Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.<sup>9</sup>

How a book that promotes this bizarre story can be held as a moral guide is grotesque, and how this specific story can be used to condemn gays and lesbians defies imagination. The religionists’ claim that this sacred text makes them “moral” is incredible. What is the “moral” lesson of offering innocent children to be raped in the name of hospitality to strangers? The story would have much

more authority if Lot had announced that no one in his house would be raped. What lesson does this story teach about the value of women and children? Apparently they have less value than male strangers. What kind of a deity kills all inhabitants of a city, including animals and children? Were newborn children sinners too? Why would the deity destroy the vegetation if he was angry with the humans? Christians' claim that this text makes them moral or justifies their discrimination against gays and lesbians is appalling.

Horror stories like Sodom and Gomorrah are not isolated in the Bible. Another story involves a crowd accepting the offer of a substitute for rape. The poor woman survives the sexual assault, only to be murdered by her boyfriend (a holy man)<sup>10</sup> and cut into pieces! Once again, I am not making this up. Here is the text from the Bible:

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."

The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing."

But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.

When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.

When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

The apparent "moral" lesson of this story appears to be, if you force your girlfriend to get raped in your stead, you should murder her. Once again, that a book containing these brutal tales can be called a moral guide is beyond belief.

### **Expected to sin.**

Looking beyond the absurdities of the Bible, there is no logic behind Christians' claims of moral superiority. Christian doctrine expects people to act immorally—to sin. But church doctrine forgives them for their sinful conduct. For example, Catholics can confess their sins to a priest and be

dispensed a magical incantation that removes the violation. The Catholic Encyclopedia reads, “Penance is a sacrament of the New Law instituted by Christ in which forgiveness of sins committed after baptism is granted through the priest’s absolution to those who with true sorrow confess their sins and promise to satisfy for the same.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, a Christian can live his whole life in “sin” and by speaking some magic words, achieve forgiveness. In the Jesus story, a criminal who was sentenced to death along with Jesus acknowledged his guilt. But he spoke kindly to Jesus, and Jesus told the criminal that he would join Jesus that day in paradise.<sup>13</sup> No muss, no fuss, just instant forgiveness. Christians are faced with being brother to notorious serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer, who “found god” and was baptized before his murder in prison.<sup>14</sup> The preacher who baptized Dahmer declares him forgiven,<sup>15</sup> saying, “God forgives all sins, God does not consider one sin greater than the other.”<sup>16</sup>

So, Christians are expected to sin and can get forgiveness by saying magical words. But an even bigger flaw in their claim of moral superiority is that the god they supposedly answer to is imaginary. There is no enforcer of their moral code. There is no heaven, there is no hell, there is no man in the sky who sees what they do and punishes them.

Perhaps children believe in the sky god’s power for a while, but a little scientific experimentation with his “powers” quickly proves the myth false. A cute story is of a child who experiments “taking the lord’s name in vain,” violating one of the infamous Christian ten commandments,<sup>17</sup> but suffering no supernatural consequences. Sickening stories of adults who know there is no moral enforcer are found in countless newspaper accounts of “holy” people who abuse children.<sup>18</sup> The acts are different, but the result is the same, the religionist quickly establishes there is no bearded man in the sky enforcing the rules.

Contrast that to the position of an atheist like me. I carry my moral code in my head. I do not expect myself to violate the code and I do not forgive myself for violations. My conduct will be unaffected if the bearded man myth is incontrovertibly refuted, or if the myth continues unabated. In chart form, a comparison of the morality of an atheist and a Christian creates a “morality matrix” that looks like this:

	Christian	Atheist
Expected to sin	Yes	No
Forgiven for sins	Yes	No
Enforcement of Code	No, there is no god	Yes, enforced by self

**Morality in action.**

All the talk in the world can be refuted by a few facts. A 2005 study published in the Journal of Religion and Society looked at the religiosity and various measures of moral health of first world nations. It concluded:

In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies. The most theistic prosperous democracy, the U.S., is exceptional, but not in the manner Franklin predicted. The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developed democracies, sometimes spectacularly so, and almost always scores poorly. The view of the U.S. as a “shining city on the hill” to the rest of the world is falsified when it comes to basic measures of societal health. . . . No democracy is known to have combined strong religiosity and popular denial of evolution with high rates of societal health. Higher rates of non-theism and acceptance of human evolution usually correlate with lower rates of dysfunction, and the least theistic nations are usually the least dysfunctional. None of the strongly secularized, pro-evolution democracies is experiencing high levels of measurable dysfunction.<sup>19</sup>

Another way of looking at it, a 2009 report rated the world’s happiest countries as Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> The same countries are among the least religious and have the lowest crime rates in the world.

**Divorce.**

The pro-religionist Barna Research Group conducted a survey in 1999 and found that Christians have a higher divorce rate than atheists. The survey showed the following results:

Religion	% divorced
Jews	30%
Born-again Christians	27%
Other Christians	24%
Atheists, agnostics	21%

George Barna commented, “While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. . . . [T]he research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages.”<sup>21</sup> The 1999 Barna survey is no longer available on the group’s Website, but Ontario-based Religious Tolerance.org provides a summary of the results on theirs.<sup>22</sup> Barna was roundly criticized by the Christian community for his 1999 survey. So he did another one in 2008.

Barna, a pastor, and his business serve the Christian community.<sup>23</sup> If anyone had a horse in the race, it was Mr. Barna. Nonetheless, his second study found no statistically significant difference in the divorce rate of the general population and born again Christians. Atheists would have had the lowest

divorce rate, however, Barna created a small Christian subgroup he labeled “Evangelical Christians” for whom he reported a divorce rate of 26%, the lowest in the 2008 survey, but still way above the 21% rate for atheists found in the 1999 survey.<sup>24</sup>

**Crime.**

Although Christians would likely argue that divorce rates are related to “morality” or being good, atheists likely would not. Morals and ethics are amorphous concepts difficult to measure.<sup>25</sup> However, crime rates are not. Crime rates measure both a “moral” violation as well as a violation of the social contract called law. The following chart looks at the rates<sup>26</sup> of crime in the three most religious and least religious states.<sup>27</sup>

State	% who say religion important	Violent Crime	Murder	Forcible Rape	Robbery	Burglary
Mississippi	85%	284.9	8.1	30.3	102.6	885.6
Alabama	82%	452.8	7.6	34.7	157.6	1081.3
South Carolina	80%	729.7	6.8	36.6	147.3	1026.1
<b>National Average</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>454.5</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>29.3</b>	<b>145.3</b>	<b>730.8</b>
Vermont	42%	135.9	2.7	20.4	14.3	557.2
New Hampshire	46%	157.2	1.0	29.7	31.8	325.7
Maine	48%	117.5	2.4	28.5	25.3	495.4

There is no overlap, the crime rate is higher--often significantly higher--in each category in the most religious states.

**Prison.**

A telling statistic is that in January 2010, only .08% of the federal inmate population was atheist.<sup>28</sup> Using the Pew 2008 statistic of 1.6% of the U.S. population being atheist,<sup>29</sup> this means the federal prisons have 1/20th the expected number of atheists. Now of course, this alone does not mean atheists are more law abiding than religionists. It could mean that atheists do not get caught as much, or it could mean that atheists think parole boards like religionists, so they say they are religious. But, nonetheless, the fact stands that atheists appear in federal prison at 1/20th of the rate one would expect from their presence in the general population. This statistic must really irritate religionists like Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, quoted at the start of this chapter, whose assertion that atheists are evil should be supported by a disproportionate number of atheists in prison.

**Godless communists.**

Religionists frequently say, “Stalin, Mao, and godless communists” to justify their position you need god to be good. The quick reply is “Hitler, Hirohito, Franco, Ahmadinejad,” all despised religionists.

A more thoughtful reply is to quote Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg, “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”<sup>30</sup> But an even deeper answer involves the shared psychological profile of religious and totalitarian followers. The same “right-wing authoritarian follower” psychological profile of the ultra-religious applies equally to the party loyalists in communist countries. That is right, the communist party loyalists the religionists attack exhibit the same traits as the religionists themselves. The distinction is that religionists follow a religious authority while communists follow a political authority. The crowd yelling “godless communist” is ironically vilifying the segment of the population most like them.

### **A question that should not be answered.**

Asking whether people can be good without religion is as crazy as asking if a slave can be good without his master. Both questions are offensive and reflect a mind-set that has been in place for too long and questioned too little. If anything, atheists are more “moral” than religionists. Entertaining the question “can a person be good without religion” is letting religionists set the agenda. It is time that we stop dancing to their tune.

1. “Emperor Has No Clothes Award,” Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1999,

<http://www.ffrf.org/outreach/awards/emperor-has-no-clothes-award/steven-weinberg/>

2. Governor Daniels is a bit confused, Hitler was a Catholic. For example, in one speech Hitler said, “In this hour I would ask of the Lord God only this: that, as in the past, so in the years to come He would give His blessing to our work and our action, to our judgement and our resolution, that He will safeguard us from all false pride and from all cowardly servility, that He may grant us to find the straight path which His Providence has ordained for the German people, and that He may ever give us the courage to do the right, never to falter, never to yield before any violence, before any danger . . . I am convinced that men who are created by God should live in accordance with the will of the Almighty. . . If Providence had not guided us I could often never have found these dizzy paths. . . Thus it is that we National Socialists, too, have in the depths of our hearts our faith. We cannot do otherwise: no man can fashion world-history or the history of peoples unless upon his purpose and his powers there rests the blessings of this Providence.” Adolf Hitler, in a speech at Wurzburg on June 27, 1937, as quoted at

<http://www.catholicarrogance.org/Catholic/Hitlersfaith.html>

3. “Daniels talks candidly about his faith,” WANE-TV, December 24, 2009,

<http://www.wane.com/dpp/news/politics/Daniels-talks-candidly-about-his-faith>

4. Arkansas Constitution, Article 19, Section 1, 1874,  
<http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/Summary/ArkansasConstitution1874.pdf>
5. *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961),  
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=367&invol=488>
6. "Atheist Revival in Arkansas," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2009,  
[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2009/02/advocate\\_for\\_atheists\\_in\\_ar.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2009/02/advocate_for_atheists_in_ar.html); "Status, HJR1009," Arkansas State Legislature, 87<sup>th</sup> General Assembly 2009,  
<http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2009/R/Pages/BillInformation.aspx?measureno=HJR1009>
7. Warraq, Ibn, "Democracy vs. Theocracy--Islamic Human Rights and the Universal Declaration," International Humanist and Ethical Union, May 26, 2009,  
<http://www.iheu.org/democracy-vs-theocracy-islamic-human-rights-and-universal-declaration>
8. "One-Third of Americans Believe the Bible is Literally True," Gallup News Service, May 25, 2007,  
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/27682/one-third-americans-believe-bible-literally-true.aspx>
9. The Bible, Genesis 19:1-36.
10. The man is described as a "Levite." The Bible, Joshua 3:3 (King James Version) says "When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it." In some contexts, Levites are not priests, but are holy assistants. "Levites," Bible Dictionary (Mormon), undated, <http://scriptures.lds.org/en/bd/l/26>
11. The Bible, Judges 19:22-29.
12. "The Sacrament of Penance," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, undated,  
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11618c.htm>
13. The Bible, Luke 23:39-43.
14. "Did Dahmer Find God?" TruTV/Turner Broadcasting System, undated,  
[http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/serial\\_killers/notorious/dahmer/22.html](http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/serial_killers/notorious/dahmer/22.html)

15. "Saving a Serial Killer," Christian Broadcasting Network, undated, [http://www.cbn.com/entertainment/books/elliott\\_Jeffrey.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/entertainment/books/elliott_Jeffrey.aspx)

16. "Dahmer Is Baptized in Prison Tub," The Milwaukee Sentinel, May 12, 1994, republished at [http://www.adherents.com/people/pd/Jeffrey\\_Dahmer.html](http://www.adherents.com/people/pd/Jeffrey_Dahmer.html)

17. The Bible, Exodus 20:7.

18. For example, one priest abused as many as 200 deaf children over a period of 24 years. "For Years, Deaf Boys Tried to Tell of Priest's Abuse," The New York Times, March 26, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/27/us/27wisconsin.html>. The long duration of his depraved conduct demonstrates that there is no supernatural punishment for violating the rules of the sky god.

19. Paul, Gregory, "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies," Journal of Religion and Society, Volume 7, 2005, (citations omitted), <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>

20. "World's Happiest Places," Forbes, May 5, 2009, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/05/05/world-happiest-places-lifestyle-travel-world-happiest.html>

21. "U.S. divorce rates for various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas," Religious Tolerance.org, July 20, 2009, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_dira.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm)

22. Id.

23. "George Barna," The Barna Group, undated, <http://www.barna.org/about/george-barna>

24. "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," The Barna Group, March 31, 2008, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

25. The Barna group notes distinctions between religionists and atheists in opinions about issues like gambling, cohabitation and abortion. "Morality Continues to Decay," The Barna Group, November 3, 2003, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/129-morality-continues-to-decay?q=generational+differences>. However, atheists and religionists would likely disagree as to whether these are moral

issues.

26. Rate is per 100,000 of population.

27. Crime data from the FBI, Uniform Crime Report, 2008,  
[http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table\\_05.html](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table_05.html); religiosity data  
from Gallup Polls, "State of the States: Importance of Religion"  
January 28, 2009,  
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/State-States-Importance-Religion.aspx>

28. Religious Affiliation of Inmates Data as of January 30, 2010,  
report produced in response to the author's freedom of information act  
request to the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons,  
[http://bornatheist.com/files/Federal\\_prison\\_statistics.pdf](http://bornatheist.com/files/Federal_prison_statistics.pdf)

29. Pew 2008,  
<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/affiliations-all-traditions.pdf>

30. "Emperor Has No Clothes Award," Freedom from Religion  
Foundation, 1999,  
<http://www.ffrf.org/outreach/awards/emperor-has-no-clothes-award/steven-weinberg/>