

FOREWORD

“What is the point of my life?” This question cannot have haunted many people in earlier centuries; they were too busy scratching out a living, providing food and shelter for their families, fending off threats to their health and security. But now that we have pretty well solved the most pressing problems of staying alive, and have the free time to reflect on what it all means, we are assaulted at every turn by a flood of information about the apparently meaningful lives of a lucky few—doctors, judges, guitar heroes, sports stars, billionaires, celebrities, politicians, explorers of ocean depths, and conquerors of the highest mountains. If we can’t all have glamorous lives—if we can’t all be famous for even fifteen minutes—what is the point, really? Why should we care about anything?

The best answer today has been the best answer for millennia: find something more important than you are, and devote your life to it, protecting it, improving it, making it work, celebrating it. But doesn’t this usually require joining forces with others, finding a supporting organization with a clear vision? Yes, it does, and for centuries the premier options have been religions, made all the more irresistible by one of the great master strokes of advertising: *you can’t be good without God*. There may well have been a time when this was practically true, when the only feasible path to a life of importance (and we all want our lives to be important) was to be a member in good standing of

one church or another, one temple or another. Step One in the project of having a meaningful life was to be *God-fearing*. Those who weren't God-fearing were seen as disreputable, untrustworthy, sinful, defective, empty.

The term "God-fearing" is a fascinating fossil trace of earlier times, when the standard or default conception of God was as an anthropomorphic Protector of Us (but not Them), Merciful Judge, Witness to our sins, Appreciator of our praise and our incessant declarations of undying loyalty. And that largely obsolete conception of God was itself a direct descendant of earlier conceptions of gods that were genuinely frightening, because they had to be appeased, and were far from loving or just or even good. How strange that the term should survive today with so little recognition of not only its obsolescence but its embarrassing history of oppression!

Wake up, folks! Listen to what your holy texts actually say! Among the delights of Dan Barker's book are the succession of startling juxtapositions, looking at our religious practices through the eyes of a quizzical Martian. Did you realize that all Christian ministers are essentially slave traders, prized for their ability to soothe and cajole their flock of slaves into ever more submissive obedience, and even getting them to pay their keepers?

Asking, "If there is no God, what is the purpose of life?" is like asking, "If there is no Master, whose slave will I be?" If the purpose of life is to become a submissive slave, then your meaning comes from flattering the ego of a person whom you should despise.

The historical Jesus is nicely compared to the historical Paul Bunyan. (Was there a huge lumberjack in the North Woods who inspired the tales? Maybe. Does it matter?) Then there is Barker's darker demonstration of how religion compromises our moral judgment, by telling a story of utter depravity and eliciting a judgment from an audience that this was the deed of a moral monster, and then changing the names and

circumstances oh so slightly and turning it into the horrific tale in the book of Job. As Richard Dawkins has so vividly and memorably put it, in *The God Delusion*,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Some people have found this assertion unforgivably rude, but if they pause to reflect on what the tales from the Old Testament, read literally, actually tell us, how can they not acknowledge that it is a fair assessment? Barker's ingenious exercises of imagination draw the point to our attention in a more playful spirit than Dawkins' blunt condemnation, but the message is the same. And the broader conclusion to draw is that a religion that cannot survive looking at itself through the eyes of others does not deserve to survive.

Barker is so good at this because he is intelligent and honest and has had lots of practice. As a former minister himself, he has an intimate knowledge not only of the Bible but of all the ways that clergy and their congregations subliminally conspire to blur their own vision when confronting the flaws in their traditions. He does not shrink from acknowledging the bleak prospect, even the terror, of letting go of all the paternalistic pabulum and becoming a grownup. But then he shows how surprisingly easy it is to be a good person! Yes, you can learn to ride a bike, and yes, you can become a good and meaningful person without bothering yourself with all the dark confusions and contradictions imposed on you by your heritage of irrationality and obfuscation.

We don't need religion to be good. Religion actually gets in the way. Getting rid of purely religious mandates makes life simpler and safer.

Rejecting religion filters out the noise to bring a clarity of judgment, making it easier to be a good atheist than a good Christian.

We all want to find purpose in our lives. Pastor Rick Warren, in his best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life*, designed an eloquent and subtle advertisement for subjecting yourself to the demands of Christianity, and without a doubt there are thousands of feckless young people who discovered thereby the discipline and self-respect to turn themselves into good citizens of the world, responsible and caring—but at a huge price: blinding themselves to the possibility of other good lives (for their purpose must be converting the world to Warren's brand of Christianity) and to all the hard-won discoveries of science (and history and literature) that contradict the Christian message.

Former pastor Dan Barker has designed an equally eloquent and subtle antidote in *Life Driven Purpose*, showing us by example how a very good person can get along fine without religion, inspiring others, accomplishing great works, and having a lot of fun in the bargain.

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LIFE DRIVEN PURPOSE

How an Atheist Finds Meaning

DAN BARKER

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