

The Difficulty of Respect

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.

I posted this quote from Steven Weinberg on my Facebook page a few days ago, with the disclaimer that I don't normally post that type of material. Now, both the quote and the disclaimer are starting to bother me.

Why is this? I'm a committed atheist. I don't believe as strongly as you do. Why shouldn't I feel comfortable with a quote like this?

It comes down to something that I've often found problematic with religions. Many religions believe that not only do you have to believe, but you have to convince others to believe as you do. With that generally seems to come denigration of others who don't believe as you do, or at least of their beliefs. Christianity hasn't cornered the market on this, either.

Apparently, however, neither have we atheists. I've followed the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) for several years, because I wholeheartedly believe in the separation of church and state, which is the heart of their cause. And while I still support the heart of that cause, I'm beginning to feel discomfort with the methodology – the denigration of others who don't believe as we do. It seems a bit familiar, and troubling.

But these are the difficulties of respect. You believe something. I believe something else. Neither of us can truly prove the other wrong. (Anyone who tells you differently is a liar, no matter which side they support.) And this isn't a shade of difference in belief – its polar opposition.

What I don't have the answer to is this, particularly if your believe system involves proselytizing – how do we treat each other with respect? You, as believers, don't want your beliefs ridiculed. You also have a mission to “witness to” or “save” those of us who don't believe. Those of us who don't believe want to be left alone. How do we get along?