

David Myers

A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn't Evil

Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2008, 160 pp.

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Reviewed by James Garth

Professor David G. Myers is a distinguished social psychologist and psychological science writer whose extensive works include the most widely used psychology textbook on North American college campuses today¹. *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists* is his contribution to the current dialogue between modern science and religion, and constitutes a short compendium (132 pages, plus references and appendices) of twenty or so loosely connected essays which engage with numerous topical issues with sensitivity and panache.

Myers treats his intended audience — secularists, skeptics and agnostics — with warm respect, and his approach is mature, pleasant, non-polemical and wholly devoid of preaching. Instead, on each page Myers invites his readers to calmly and sensibly examine the available evidence and draw whatever conclusions are appropriately warranted. In many ways this book is an apologetic equivalent of *aikido*², neatly defusing straw-man issues including creation/evolution, the mind/body dichotomy and religious fanaticism with impressive efficiency.

Myers devotes considerable time to examining the frequently made claim that religions are inherently dangerous and harmful. With careful analysis, he calmly scrutinizes this assertion by drawing on extensive published research and population survey data, controlling for extraneous variables as appropriate. His conclusion — that, in Western countries at least, 'an educated and engaged faith is associated with happiness, health, tolerance, generosity and volunteerism' — warrants careful consideration.

Conversely, Myers is unconvinced by claims that intercessory prayer produces measurable results, citing a string of experiments — flawed though they may be — that uniformly deliver null results on the question of efficacy of prayer (Myers 2006). The implication, confronting though it may

¹ According to a review on the John Templeton Foundation website, http://www.templeton.org/newsroom/newsletters_and_publications/books/supported_books/abstracts.html, viewed 31 August 2009.

² The philosophy of Aikido involves blending with the motion of the attacker and redirecting the force of the attack rather than opposing it head-on. It is notable among the martial arts for its concern for the well-being of the attacker.

be for some, is that perhaps over-enthusiastic believers need to take pause and give more thought to how the delicate interaction between divine prompting and petitionary prayer might actually operate in the real world.

There are other ideas floated in this book that may similarly challenge Christians of a more evangelical or conservative persuasion. One such instance is Myers' endorsement of gay marriage — he is a strong advocate of lifelong marriage, full-stop, whether heterosexual or homosexual — however his points are made with clarity and good grace and contribute a genuinely fresh perspective to this discussion. It seems clear that Myers has included such perspectives in order to accentuate his fundamental point: that believing in God and choosing to follow Jesus does not require one to embrace rampant irrationalism or hold to a narrow set of prescriptive positions on political wedge issues. In Myers' own words:

There exists a faith perspective that is both rationally plausible and conducive to human flourishing. Moreover, when people ask me, 'How can you, as a Christian, embrace evolution? Advocate gay marriage? Agree with the prayer experiment skeptics? Report so enthusiastically on psychological science?' my response is that I embrace science and draw these conclusions not *despite* my faith but motivated and set free *by* my faith.

Myers 2008a, p121

In summary, *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists* rings true to its title, and can be recommended unreservedly to unbelievers and believers of all persuasions. It is an engaging and easy-to-read book that deserves the praise it has received from both prominent theists and atheists alike.³

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References:

Myers, DG 2008a, *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn't Evil*, Jossey-Bass/Wiley, San Francisco, CA.

Myers, DG 2008b, 'Believers can be reasonable', *The Washington Post*, September, viewed 31 August 2009, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/09/believers_can_be_reasonable.html

Myers, DG 2006, 'Arm-twisting with the Almighty: prayer experiment yields predicted result', *Science and Theology News*, May, pp. 11-12.

³ Francis Collins, Alister McGrath, Owen Gingerich, Michael Shermer and Jonathan Haidt have all lent their endorsement to this book. (<http://www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pageID=139>)