

FOREWORD

If a man is going to publish his life story, he had best take the precaution of leading an interesting life first. Or at least of being a very funny writer or of lacing his pages with wittily unconventional wisdom. Or even of being just an exceptionally nice person. Fortunately, Herb Silverman ticks all these boxes, and more.

Not every autobiographer can begin his life with an amusing childhood supervised by amusing parents but, by Silverman's hilarious account, his mother was the mother of all Jewish mother jokes. And his story just goes on getting better, through adolescent encounters with girls to his career as an academic mathematician, then secular activist and his gentle and courteous puncturing of hypocrisy and illogicality whenever he finds it—which is pretty much every day in the life of a sensitive atheist. Silverman has the endearing capacity to laugh at himself and poke fun at his shortcomings. Boswell to his own Johnson, he quotes his own past sayings and writings, but with a conspicuous lack of the irritating self-regard that this might, in others, suggest.

Endearing pleasantries adorn every page. When his schoolfellows, asked to write an essay on a chosen U.S. president, selected the obvious ones like Washington and Lincoln, the young Herb chose John Adams. Why? For the sufficient reason that his family could afford only two volumes of the encyclopedia: A and B. “Were it not for the Adams family,” Herb added, “it would have been considerably more difficult to justify why my favorite president was Chester A. Arthur or James Buchanan.”

Later in life, he visited Israel and was standing by the River Jordan at John the Baptist's reputed *Stammtisch* when a young man approached and asked Herb to baptize him. Herb's “spiritual” demeanor had impressed him, and the beard and sandals reminded him of Jesus. The genial atheist unhesitatingly obliged, and no doubt did it beautifully.

Back in America, he has undertaken various political campaigns, losing them with his own distinctive panache as a means to winning a more timeless battle. The Constitution of South Carolina stipulated

that no person could be eligible for the office of governor who denied the existence of “the” Supreme Being. That Herb’s sole motive in running for governor was to test the legality of that prohibition is attested by the answer he gave when asked what would be his first action, if elected: “Demand a recount.” I’m reminded of the paradoxical maxim that anybody who actively wants high office should be disqualified from holding it.

I once publicly criticized American atheists for tokenism (defacing banknotes, for example, in protest against the 1957 addition of “In God We Trust”) when they should be going after what I saw as more important issues (like tax-exemptions for fat-cat televangelists). I now realize that that particular criticism was misplaced (because ignorant people demonstrably *use* the banknote slogan as alleged *evidence* that the United States is a Christian foundation). One might still criticize token gestures like refusing to bow the head in prayer at university prize-giving ceremonies. But this criticism, too, receives a beautifully Silvermanian response. At one gathering when most eyes were closed and heads bowed in prayer, Herb reflected that his erect, open-eyed posture was the perfect dissenting gesture. It couldn’t give offense because the sincerely devout wouldn’t see it, while those not offended could catch each other’s eyes and take reassurance from the company.

This last is an important point, as I have discovered when lecturing to surprisingly large but beleaguered audiences around the so-called (though overrated) Bible Belt. When people tell Herb Silverman he is the only atheist they know, he says, “No I’m not. You know hundreds. I’m the only one who has been public about it.”

Silverman enjoys arguing—he might say it is a Jewish trait—and he takes a gentle delight in teasing his opponents. Persuaded to attend a Billy Graham rally, he characteristically went forward to be “saved.” He was received by one of Billy Graham’s underlings (vicars in the literal sense, I suppose), Pastor A. Pastor A discovered Silverman’s Jewish background and handed him on to Pastor B, who had converted from Judaism. On hearing that Pastor B’s parents were dead, Herb asked whether he relished the thought that, as Jews, they were roasting in hell. When Pastor B demurred, Herb simply summoned Pastor A over, and happily left the two of them to fight it out.

In an effort to convert him, Christian apologists might quote a verse

like “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light.” Did they expect him to slap his forehead and say, “Gee, I never knew that. Now I’m a believer”? How many times have we all wanted to say something like that? Equally familiar, the media often refer to Silverman as an “admitted atheist” or a “self-confessed atheist.” How do they feel when described as an “admitted Baptist” or a “self-confessed Catholic”? And the following is vintage Silverman:

However, the oddest comments came from those who thought my not believing in a judging God meant I must feel free to rape, murder, and commit any atrocity I can get away with. I’d respond, “With an attitude like that, I hope you continue to believe in God.”

He regularly horrifies “Bible-believing Christians” by showing them what is actually in the Bible. He happily accepts invitations to debate with religious apologists, usually Christian but, on one notable occasion, Jewish. Silverman’s Orthodox opponent expressed religious objections to medical research on dead human bodies. He conceded to Herb that many lives had been saved by such medical research, but argued, “There are lots of *goyim* and animals available for such things.” Wow, just wow, as young people say.

On another occasion Herb was pitted against a Christian apologist, a “philosopher” from an unknown “university,” who seems to do nothing but travel the country from one debate to another. This full-time debater fatuously asserted that the resurrection of Jesus must be a historical fact because the disciples were prepared to die for their beliefs. Herb’s answer was devastatingly succinct: “9/11.”

Another moment to savor took place in the Oxford Union, in my own university, a debate for which Herb took the unprecedented step of hiring a (too large) tuxedo. The motion was that “American religion undermines American values.” Herb well deserved his applause for the following:

In the melting pot called America, we are one nation under the Constitution . . . but not one nation under God. Given how the religious right opposes the teaching of evolution or any scientific and social view that conflicts with

a literal interpretation of the Bible, we are really becoming one nation *under-educated*. And this is not an American value to be proud of.

Once, when debating with a Pastor Brown, Herb asked the pastor what he would do if God commanded him to kill a member of his family, as God had commanded Abraham: “Depending on your answer, I might move a bit farther away from you.” He doubtless said it with such good humor that the pastor could not take offense—but was consequently all the more stuck for an answer.

Pastor Brown generalized the question to one of whether he was ever tempted to disobey God: “I’m sometimes tempted by women to cheat on my wife, but I resist because I know how much it would hurt Jesus.” Herb Silverman’s retort was almost too easy: “I’m sometimes tempted by women to cheat on my wife, Sharon, but I resist because I know how much it would hurt Sharon.”

Herb and Sharon married late, and their love story is moving because it flies above mawkish sentimentality. By Herb’s account the mystery is how she puts up with him, the answer being that he makes her laugh every day. It is a story both humorous and touching.

Herb Silverman is such a legendarily nice guy that he is the perfect mediator—albeit in his unambassadorial shorts and T-shirt (saying something like “Smile, There Is No Hell”). He loves fraternizing with those who wish to argue with him, perhaps because he wins the argument. He supported the Moonies when they were denied access to his campus, on the grounds that a university should hear all points of view (and in any case the Moonies are no more bonkers than other branches of Christianity, just more recently founded).

If a religious person says to an atheist (I can confirm that they often do), “I’ll pray for you,” Herb Silverman is too nice to use the reply that first occurs to him, “OK, I’ll think for both of us.” Instead, he says, “Thank you.” He knows how to disagree without being disagreeable. Nowhere is this gift more necessary than when reconciling rival groups of atheists, agnostics, humanists, and freethinkers. “Herding cats” may be a cliché, but clichés can be true as well as tiresome. Herb Silverman is the cat herder beyond compare: quite possibly the only person in America who could amicably unite all factions of the nonbelieving community.

In this capacity he is the founder and president of the Secular Coalition for America: a union of ten member organizations including the American Atheists, American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, Atheist Alliance of America, Camp Quest, Council for Secular Humanism, Institute for Humanist Studies, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Secular Student Alliance, and Society for Humanistic Judaism. Endorsed by an even larger number of organizations, and with an advisory board on which I have the honor to serve, the Secular Coalition runs the only lobby in Washington dedicated to secular causes, and its officers coordinate activities countrywide. But the driving force and guiding spirit of the Secular Coalition is the gentleman—in the best sense of the word—who is the author of this splendid and idiosyncratic book. Let me end with one of his most characteristic aphorisms: “Changing minds is one of my favorite things, including my own when the evidence warrants it.”

RICHARD DAWKINS
OXFORD, ENGLAND