

God Wants You Dead

Book Review by R.C.W. Ettinger

Above is the title of a book by Sean Hastings and Paul Rosenberg, which apparently was written or started in 1996 and published in 2007 by Vera Verba (*True Word*, paperback, 349 pp). The book is pro-life extension and pro-cryonics, but includes opinions on many topics. For many cryonicists, it will be preaching to the choir, but will still be enjoyable.

Its avowed purpose is to help persuade people to be independent thinkers and serve themselves and other individuals rather than institutions or icons, and in particular to try to extend their lives, including the cryonics route. (The Cryonics Institute, which Hastings visited, is mentioned.) To what extent it may succeed in this of course I don't know. At the worst, it will inflame the inflammable and make passive enemies into more active enemies, but I think this unlikely. Those who only glance at the title or a few excerpts will probably just shrug it off as another atheist rant, and those who actually read it carefully will note the many disclaimers and qualifications that tend to take the sting out of anti-religious sentiments.

The authors acknowledge they have probably made mistakes, and ask the reader to consider the various ideas separately on their individual merits, rather than lump everything together. (Lumping things together, all-or-nothing thinking, is one of the bad habits that work against us.) I'll just very briefly mention a few places where I think they err, then go on to the main ideas.

The technical errors as I see them include flawed understanding of the problem of personal identity and criteria of survival, as well as the questions of intelligence, life, and Turing Tests, and the nature and centrality of qualia. They misinterpret the undecidability theorems. There is a bit of confusion in the discussion of free will. Their political opinions are of course arguable, and for some people will weaken the appeal of the book. They appear to use the "meme" concept uncritically. They define "identities" as "predictive models of behavior," which doesn't really fly. But these are not major problems, at least for me. The arguments are interesting, often droll, and the emphasis is where it belongs—on self-reliance and personal responsibility.

God? The "God" of the book is not the Big Guy in the Sky, but any Higher Power, which includes not only religious entities but could be many things including the Founding Fathers, Mother Nature, government, or a corporation—an ideo-organism or idea organism. (In the narrow sense, "God" is an acronym for Generic Omnipotent Deity.)

Now for just a few of the notables or quotables.

Substitute God. Some Christians use for guidance the initials WWJD, What Would Jesus Do? The authors suggest WWMISD—What Would My Ideal Self Do? It's really the same construction, they say—just different bases. For Christians, presumably the base is the Bible, or for Catholics the Catechism or other body of directives. For the individualist the base is rationality and self service (which of course does not necessarily mean "selfishness"). The Higher Power is in a sense yourself—not as you are, but as you hope to become.

Religion isn't all bad. Among other virtues, since God is the Highest Authority, in many times and places religion has served as a counter-balance to other (lesser) Higher Authorities. It didn't succeed in stopping communism or fascism, but it tried, and it did dampen a number of other oppressors.

Environmentalism, the authors say, is one of the undesirable Higher Authorities. As an example, the book *Silent Spring* was apparently instrumental in outlawing the use of DDT in many places. The result reportedly was the unnecessary deaths of at least 50 million people because of malaria.

We need more legislative gridlock. Fewer new laws, fewer new problems. When the Congress was fixated on Bill Clinton's sexual adventures, they did little else, with excellent results for the country.

Pro-Life? A cartoon shows some protest signs. One says, "Every sperm is sacred." (No credit given to Monty Python.) Another says, "Life begins at erection. Saying 'No' kills!" Another says, "Abstinence is murder."

The last portion of the book relates to cryonics and anti-senescence, and might even bring us some customers, if the book makes any impact. The last couple of pages frame the issue as the Hero/Coward choice. When you have questions about ideas or principles, "Don't ask your minister. Don't ask your relatives. Don't ask anyone. Ask yourself." The Hero will accept the responsibility, while the Coward will rely on Higher Authority.

