Sacred Humanism without Miracles

ALSO BY ROY G. SALTMAN

The History and Politics of Voting Technology:
In Quest of Integrity and Public Confidence (2006)

NIST Special Publication 500-158
Accuracy, Integrity, and Security in Computerized Vote-Tallying

NBS Special Publication 500-30
Effective Use of Computing Technology in Vote-Tallying

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Copyright in Computer-Readable Works:
Policy Impacts of Technological Change

Sacred Humanism without Miracles

Responding to the New Atheists

2016 Edition

Roy G. Saltman

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SACRED HUMANISM WITHOUT MIRACLES

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For my late wife:

Joan Ettinger Ephross Saltman

I miss her.

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About the Author

Roy G. Saltman was born in New York City in the early 1930s as the only child of Jewish parents. Told at age six that "you killed our God," he was deeply affected by the widespread interreligious hostility of the times. There was significant discrimination in employment and housing, and quotas for Jews in college admissions. Significant types of discrimination by religion (as well as by race, which was considerably more severe) were made unlawful under the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964. This book is the result of decades of observation and reflection.

Strongly advised by his father to choose engineering as a career in which work would be widely available, he obtained a bachelor's degree at RPI in 1953 and a master's degree at MIT in 1955. Then he began full-time employment in the burgeoning field of computers, designing them for military applications at Sperry Gyroscope Company and applying them for industrial process control at IBM. Finding the private sector stifling, in 1969 he joined the US agency now called the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). He remained there, as a computer scientist, until retirement in 1996. In the course of his working career, he earned an all but dissertation (ABD) engineering degree from Columbia University and a master's degree in public administration from American University.

NIST scientists consult for other agencies of the federal government, and Saltman was able to carry out valuable research and analysis in the field of computer use in voting technology for the auditing arm of Congress known then as the General Accounting Office. His report, *Effective Use of Computing Technology in Vote-Tallying,* published in 1975, was well received. It was republished

with the designation SP500-30 in 1978 in a series available for referencing. When a private foundation wanted additional work done on the same subject, it gave a grant to NIST for Saltman to continue his research. He authored a second report, *Accuracy, Integrity, and Security in Computerized Vote-Tallying* (SP500-158), in 1988. That report identified difficulties in the use of prescored punch cards as ballots and recommended their replacement. They were used in Florida and in other large states. His warning went unheeded.

A quiet retirement as a volunteer docent at a major city art museum was interrupted by the contentious election for president (Bush versus Gore) in Florida in 2000. His second report was introduced into the record in the Florida lawsuit *Gore v. Harris.* As one of the very few persons to have objective knowledge of the technical issues of the voting system being used, he found himself in demand for the next few years as a speaker, consultant, and expert witness in court cases. He testified to a Congressional committee in connection with debate leading to adoption of the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Urged to write a book about the issue, he did so, but not just about the immediate situation. His capability to think broadly about the interaction of multiple subjects, and to undertake research in a variety of issues by reviewing many available studies, enabled him to write *The History and Politics of Voting Technology,* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2006. This ability has served him well again.

Saltman maintains a strong interest in religions and cultures, both ancient and modern. To satisfy his thirst for knowledge, he has traveled extensively, to many countries in every inhabited continent. Now a widower, he remains in close contact with his three children and his three stepchildren. They have enhanced his life with nine grandchildren.

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ESSENTIAL ASSERTIONS IN THIS BOOK

HUMANITY HAS RESULTED FROM A NATURAL PROCESS that began with the Big Bang 13.73 billion years ago, the formation of the Earth about 4.56 billion years ago, and evolution by natural selection. This view is consistent with atheist thinking, but the author differs on other issues. All humans are members of a single subspecies of social mammals, which has important implications for equality among us and reciprocal duties of each of us toward all others.

The physical laws of the universe are never violated—there are no miracles. Human life as we know it will not end with the coming of a Messiah or a Day of Judgment, but by a natural cosmic occurrence, such as an asteroid impact or aging of the sun, unless willfully destroyed beforehand by our own perverse actions.

The absence of miracles completes the separation of our real world from a possible Spiritual World to which our souls (if they exist) may migrate after death. The existence of souls and a Spiritual World populated by supernatural beings is simply unknowable. This view differs from the assertions of both believers and atheists.

Religion is as old as humanity; there is physical evidence of this in ancient grave artifacts. The fact that humans are mortal is an important source of religious belief; as long as humans continue to die, religion will remain. The call of the New Atheists, i.e., Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, for the end of religion, is futile.

The concept of the "sacred," while employed only in a religious context by theorists such as Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz may be used secularly to define the highest ideals guiding human

actions. Examples of such ideals are: preservation of a livable Earth, assurance of just governance, the active practice of compassion, ending the threat of nuclear weapons, and assuring that life's essentials: food, clothing, shelter, nurturing, companionship, medical care, and education, are available for each of us. A value judgment expressed here is that human life is both sacred and precious. *Sacred Humanism is a rational middle ground between miracle-filled religion and value-free atheism.*

Religion has been responsible for considerable violence from earliest times; humans can take specific actions to minimize it. Separation of church and state must be defended vigilantly; fundamentalists continually try to undermine it. Adherents of each religion should work to eliminate denigrating statements about non-believers in their liturgies and by their leaders.

The New Atheists are incorrect in several assertions about religion. It does not invariably lead to fanaticism, as claimed. Headline-generating terrorism is a very small set compared with the number of worldwide, peaceful religious activities. Members may have joined congregations, not for theological agreement, but for social relationships, or for group solidarity by racial, ethnic, and other minorities. Religion is an important aspect of culture. The desire of Dawkins for all children to be raised in a religion-free environment is a delusion. The claim of Hitchens that male circumcision has no health benefits is incorrect, in light of recent medical findings.

The New Atheists have much in common with religious fundamentalists. Both groups read the Holy Scriptures literally, with no understanding of the interpretations that make them applicable to the present day. The claim by Harris that "Judaism is ridiculous in its literalism" demonstrates total ignorance of that religion.