

# RELATIONSHIPS

## Do children need God to grow up and become moral adults?

By ROY RIVENBURG  
© Los Angeles Times

The God Problem started nagging at Gregory and Sandra Weber on June 12, 1990.

Until then, religion hadn't really been an issue. The couple lived and worked in Davis, a Northern California town that he describes as "the antithesis of the Bible Belt."

But early that morning, Alissa Weber came into the world. And her parents, who don't believe in a deity, unexpectedly found themselves in a spiritual dilemma.

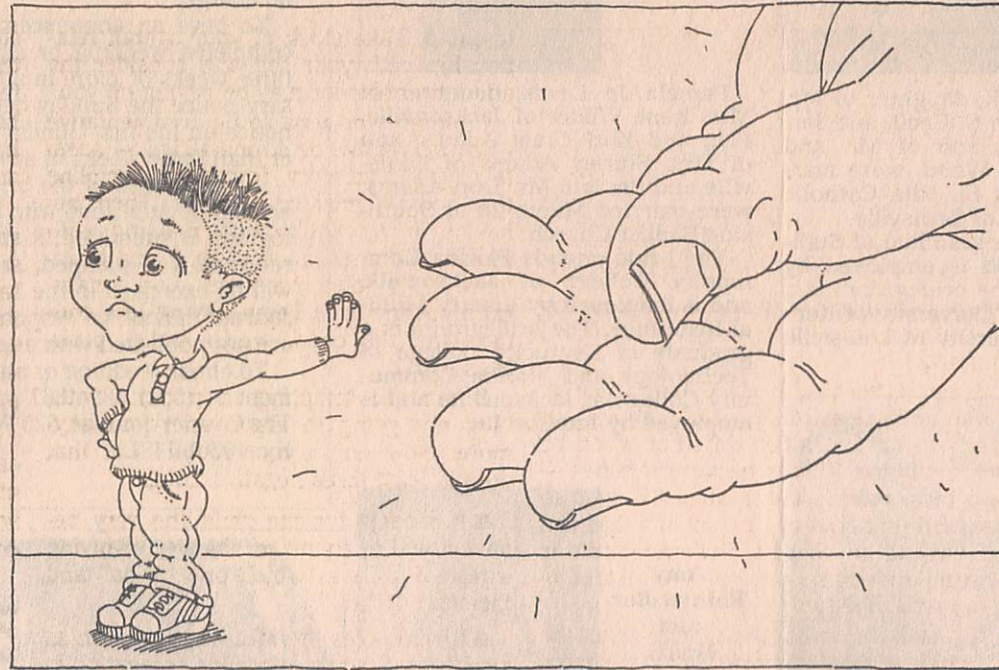
How would they answer questions about life after death, good and evil, and the origins of the universe? How would they instill a moral and ethical code without a God to reinforce it? And how could they avoid a spiritual vacuum that might leave their daughter susceptible to some future cult leader like David Koresh?

Such puzzles are faced by millions of Americans — non-believers and agnostics. And many, like the Webers, seem uncertain how to proceed.

Religious authorities warn that raising kids without God is a prescription for trouble. Others say it can be pulled off quite successfully.

Nobody says it's easy. Among the most teacherous undertakings, not surprisingly, teaching a child to be good. "Children are not born to cooperation or sacrifice but to the rawest self-interest," author Martha Fay says in her new book, "Do Children Need Religion?" (Her answer: No.)

In working against such instincts, some atheists decide that, yes, their offspring do need God. They drop the kids off at Sun-



STAFF ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE COVINGTON

day school each week or — in some instances — they join the church or temple until the youngsters get older.

But other non-believing parents, including Fay, an ex-Catholic, work to implant values and ethics without religion. They rely on everything from secularized Ten Commandments to the forces of nature.

Atheist Mona Field of Los Angeles, for instance, teaches her two daughters a moral standard "based on what is good for people." In practical terms, it's simply a non-religious version of the Golden Rule:

"We don't treat people in ways we wouldn't want to be treated ... no lying, cheating, hitting."

The girls are also told they "have a responsibility to help others (and) make a difference for people who are less fortunate."

But what's the motivation for such altruism, if not spiritual? "I can't explain it," says Field, who also grew up without religion. "It probably has to do with (my ancestors') Jewish heritage. ... I was raised that way. It was just the right thing to do, so you did it."

Field's daughter, Tania Verafield, 10, offers her own analysis: "I like to be good because then my parents praise me. That's my motive."

To reinforce such feelings, Field involves the family in political and environmental causes.

"We think (the idea of) God is kind of silly, but we have an alternative. We believe in people and the power of nature — earthquakes and storms — and we have to respect and protect the Earth."

Does it work?

Fay — backed by some psychologists — says yes. The most critical factor influencing a child's moral development is the example set by his or her parents: "Children don't need religion. They need parents with strong moral convictions," she says.

But other observers argue that morality without God is empty. "It becomes purely subjective," says Dennis Prager, a radio talk-show host, author and activist on religious and ethical matters. "What I say is good is good for me, and what Hitler says is good is good for him."

The views of Prager, who is Jewish, are echoed by Christian and Islamic leaders.

"Without God, morality becomes very pragmatic and relative," says Maher Hathout, chairman of the Islamic Center of Southern California. "You can do things today and deny them tomorrow, based on what is popular or what benefits you personally. With God, there's a stable, fixed yardstick that makes a person accountable."

Buddhists, on the other hand, don't worship a deity, but do believe in karma, which suggests that good or bad behavior will produce like effects in this life or the

next. Their children are taught to adhere to guidelines set down by the Buddha in order to receive karmic rewards.

"I do believe children need to be shown a path to follow, but they don't need to believe in God," says the Rev. Sarika Dharma of the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles.

Prager concedes that individual parents have successfully reared moral children without religion but insists that such efforts have been catastrophic for society at large. Anyone who thinks otherwise isn't paying attention to what's going on, he says. "The decline of religion and the ... decline in values are directly related. ... Kids cheat more, they steal more, they curse more."

When Prager polls high school seniors on whether they would rescue their dog or a stranger if both were drowning, two-thirds pick the pet.

"Atheists have tremendous faith in human nature," he says. "After Auschwitz and the Gulag, I don't."

But religion's moral track record — from the Crusades to apartheid — isn't unblemished. Political science professor Glenn Tinder of the University of Massachusetts acknowledges that it took the Enlightenment, a secular movement, to bring about ideals that Christians "often shamefully neglected or denied."

And Michael S. Josephson, president of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, says a new survey of 9,000 young adults shows that, although highly religious people lie, cheat and steal less than other people, the difference is "not very much. ... I think the churches and synagogues are going to be disappointed when we publish the numbers."