

BOOK REVIEW

of

Benjamin Wiker,

10 Books That Screwed Up The World: And 5 Others That Didn't Help,

Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2008.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

It used to be that the great books of western civilization were considered to be essential study for any liberal education. Probably most colleges and universities no longer have a list of great books, due in part to our lack of clarity these days as to just which books should be on such a list. About the only common university courses now are two in English and one on public speaking. Beyond that, two students graduating from the same university may have no subjects in common unless they happen to have the same major. This is unfortunate on several levels. For one, students pick up a great deal of knowledge, actually assumptions, sometimes referred to as common knowledge, from our culture that go uninvestigated, and therefore assumed without critical evaluation. As Benjamin Wiker points out, some of the “great” books are great due to influence, but are actually quite negative in the effects of that influence. That’s the subject of this very provocative book. Wiker reviews 15 books that, in his opinion, screwed up the world; he considers them “great,” but in a negative way. Of course, his selection of 15 books is very selective and subjective and many would disagree with his list, and probably many more would disagree with his analysis. You may be familiar with Wiker from his earlier book, *Moral Darwinism*, or from *A Meaningful World* (coauthored with Jonathan Witt).

The book has an introduction, fifteen chapters, and an afterword. In the following list the chapter titles are book titles. For clarity, I have added in parentheses the author name and date of publication for those books. Introduction: Ideas Have Consequences, Part I: Preliminary Screw-Ups, Chapter One, *The Prince* (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1513), Chapter Two, *Discourse on Method* (René Descartes, 1637), Chapter Three, *Leviathan* (Thomas Hobbes, 1651), Chapter Four, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1755), Part II: Ten Big Screw-Ups, Chapter Five, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848), Chapter Six, *Utilitarianism* (John Stuart Mill, 1863), Chapter Seven, *The Descent of Man* (Charles Darwin, 1871), Chapter Eight, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1886), Chapter Nine, *The State and Revolution* (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 1917), Chapter Ten, *The Pivot of Civilization* (Margaret Sanger, 1922), Chapter Eleven, *Mein Kampf* (Adolf Hitler, 1925), Chapter Twelve, *The Future of an Illusion* (Sigmund Freud, 1927), Chapter Thirteen, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Margaret Mead, 1928), Chapter Fourteen, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Alfred Kinsey, 1948), Part III: Dishonorable Mention, Chapter Fifteen, *The Feminine Mystique* (Betty Friedan, 1963), Afterword: A Conclusive Outline of Sanity.

The topics covered in Wiker’s 15 books include politics, philosophy, ethics, psychology, evolution, human sexuality, religion, and sociology. Wiker’s approach is to show how these books are interrelated and build upon one another. One of the themes is that most of the authors were openly and self-proclaimed atheists (Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Engels, Mill, Nietzsche, Lenin, Sanger, Freud, Kinsey, Friedan). Others among the authors covered were probably atheists but perhaps not openly (Machiavelli (he was, well, Machiavellian), Darwin (questionable, but apparently), Hitler (Machiavellian), Mead). The remaining author was religious, but denied certain important Christian doctrines such as the reality of sin (Descartes). According to Wiker, all of the authors reviewed deny sin. In the concluding chapter, Wiker writes “By following the trajectory of these books that screwed up the world, we can wonder whether the advance of ‘science’ over theology is an unmitigated good, and whether it is really progress. Perhaps it is bringing us to a new age of technological barbarism, wherein humanity becomes ever more religiously obsessed with health and sexual pleasure as pseudo-gods, sacrificing anything and everything to these twin deities. . . . If the books we’ve covered offer an image of insanity, then perhaps by reversing the image and holding it up to a different light we can recover some outline of sanity. Perhaps we are not merely animals as Darwin would have it, but something more than animals. Perhaps we are not ghosts in machines, as Descartes would have it, but some other strange and glorious creature, something godlike but with two feet on the ground. Yet, being something godlike, we are not, as Nietzsche would have it, gods ourselves, but something far less, a faint but glowing resemblance to Someone else infinitely more resplendent.” No one can deny the power and influence of these books. What is a bit of a mystery, however, is how these books become so influential in the Christian West. Why has the Christian voice been so muted? There has been a significant Christian response to atheistic evolution. But what this book clearly points out and elaborates on is that atheistic evolution is only one secular theory that tends to undermine Christianity, and a number of these books were published prior to Darwin’s well-known publications. Perhaps now, in recent years, the Christian community has regained its commitment, which it clearly had in the first few centuries of the Christian era, to challenge the erroneous ideas of the surrounding culture. To that end, this book is highly recommended.