Steven Pinker Calls Belief in Afterlife a 'Malignant Delusion'. He Is Wrong

By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 26, 2020

Research shows that religious belief is good for the individual and for society. However, Steven Pinker recently claimed that belief in an afterlife, particularly by evangelicals, is a "malignant delusion." This is a rare misstep from a public intellectual who really ought to know better.

I like Steven Pinker. He has no idea who I am, though I once met him and forced him to take a picture with me. How could I not? He's got fantastic hair. But his awe-inspiring lion's mane isn't the only reason I like him.

I genuinely believe that Dr. Pinker's contributions to our national dialogue have been outstanding. One of his main theses, to which I wholeheartedly subscribe, is that life is getting better and better. Even though the media focuses almost exclusively on negativity -- death, wars, crime, famine, disease -- objective measures demonstrate that the overall quality of life for humanity is better now than it has ever been. (Well, at least that was true prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.) Dr. Pinker insists on drawing conclusions that are based on evidence, even if it bucks the conventional wisdom. That's precisely what we do here at ACSH.
Belief in an afterlife is a malignant delusion, since it devalues actual lives and discourages action that would make them longer, safer, and happier. Exhibit A: What’s really behind Republicans wanting a swift reopening? Evangelicals.

Research published in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* shows that "doctors who described themselves as non-religious were more likely than others to report having given continuous deep sedation until death" and "having taken decisions they expected or partly intended to end life." Yikes. One could easily expect the exact opposite. If a doctor believes in the
afterlife, perhaps he wouldn't be so worried if a patient made the transition sooner rather than later. But, counterintuitively, that's not what the researchers discovered. It was the non-religious doctors who took actions to end lives.

On second thought, maybe it isn't quite so counterintuitive. Have you ever noticed how many hospitals are named for Catholic saints? That's because religious people in general, and Catholics in particular, have an obligation to tend to the sick and dying. During the plagues of antiquity [5], Christians famously put their own lives on the line in order to care for the stricken.

Simply put, Dr. Pinker's claims are demonstrably wrong. Let's hope he comes around to accepting this evidence-based worldview.

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