

Equal Time for Freethought
Interview with Robert M. Price, author of *The Reason Driven Life: What am I Here on Earth For?* by Neil J. Murphy

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Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

Barry F. Seidman: Pastor Rick Warren's book, [*The Purpose Driven Life*](#), has been both a commercially successful bestseller and a widely influential book in the Christian community. As a rejoinder to the fundamentalist assumptions of Warren's book, Robert Price, a biblical scholar, and a member of the Jesus Seminar, and a former liberal Baptist pastor, has mimicked the 40-chapter structure of Warren's book, offering a point/counterpoint approach, which emphasizes the importance of reason in understanding life's realities, as opposed to Warren's devotional perspective. We will be speaking with Dr. Price in just a moment. In the meantime, my co-host this evening, Neil Murphy, will introduce you to Dr. Price's résumé.

Neil J. Murphy: Thank you very much, Barry.

Robert M. Price is professor of theology and scriptural studies at the [Johnnie Coleman Theological Seminary](#), as well as Professor of Biblical Criticism at the [Center for Inquiry Institute](#). He is a fellow of both the [Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion](#) and the [Jesus Seminar](#). In addition, he is the editor of the [Journal of Higher Criticism](#) and the author of [Beyond Born Again](#), [The Widow Traditions in Luke-Acts](#), [Deconstructing Jesus](#), [The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man](#), [The Da Vinci Fraud](#), and [The Pre-Nicene New Testament](#). And he joins us today for our interview on Equal Time for Freethought to discuss his new book, [The Reason Driven Life: What am I Here on Earth For?](#)

Neil J. Murphy: Bob Price, welcome to Equal Time for Freethought!

Robert M. Price: It's quite an honor to be here, and I'm so happy to be back on!

Neil J. Murphy: Thank you for coming on as always. What exactly was your motivation for writing this book?

Robert M. Price: Well, I had been approached by students and relatives who said, "Oh, you gotta read *The Purpose Driven Life*", and they figured it would cure me of my unwholesome agnosticism and such. And I thought at first, "Well, maybe there's something new about this," and I took a look at it, and I thought, "What on Earth!?!". It's just the same claptrap, the same pablum, I had heard, back when I first got into fundamentalism in the mid-sixties. It was just the same devotional pap. And I thought, "What audience can be excited about this?" I mean, the people who were fundamentalists already, they must know this like the back of their hand. And who else is going to be taken in by it? So it suddenly dawned on me one day: maybe it would be good to have a kind of a counter-book so that when somebody said, "Oh, how'd ya like to read *The Purpose Driven Life*? You'll really get a lot outta it!" you can say, "Well, I'll make you a deal: I will read it if you will read *The Reason Driven Life*."

Neil J. Murphy: Yes, so it's a good counter for those who want to approach you with religious literature: "Here's a reason-based alternative." I'm curious to know: what, exactly, does Rick Warren propose as the purpose driven life, and what do you see that makes it untenable or even dangerous?

Robert M. Price: Well it really, as Paul Tillich said, it offers a kind of religious fixation. Well, lucky for Tillich, he didn't live long enough to see this. I don't mean he actually commented on it, but as he would have said, and did say on other things, that this kind of religious focus just short-changes the rest of the human personality. It's just too narrow an integration point, and you're gonna have to suppress most of the rest of your life to do what Warren calls for, which is to simply becoming a praying and bible-reading and evangelizing machine. That is the purpose. God wants you to be a kind of a religious Amway salesman, peddling the gospel of salvation. And I know I tend to use sarcastic invective, but it's actually quite apt. Because Amway is just patterned on the kind of personal evangelism that this promotes. This approach where you're supposed to say, "Well, I'm just being casual and friendly here, but I'd like to talk to you about your eternal destiny. Because if I don't, I'm going to hell and you're going to hell!" And it's just this weird, cringingly grotesque way of relating to yourself and others, and God, if there were one.

Neil J. Murphy: So it almost sounds like a Ponzi scheme for the pious.

Robert M. Price: Yes, and there are other ways of being a fundamentalist even, much less religious. But to say, as he does. I mean, it's no accident that the guy is a pastor of this ultra-mega-humongous church. And he's got a huge institution. It's almost exactly like *The True Believer*, with Eric Hoffer. And so he says your goal is to be another brick in the wall of First Warren Church. You should see what you can do to advance your church's goal of evangelizing everybody, including evangelistic spamming to people, sending them gospel email whether they want it or not. Just utterly oblivious.

Neil J. Murphy: And unfortunately, there's no pop-up blocker in this case.

I'm just curious: I wanna briefly touch on some of the points you raise in your book, because you have a lot of things you talk about. I wanna kinda hit and run here. You describe Rick Warren's book as "warmed-over, stale fundamentalism." What is it in Warren's writings that demonstrates this point?

Robert M. Price: Well, everything! There is *nothing*, at all, new. Somebody just told me in an email yesterday that Jimmy Swaggart was criticizing Warren for some other reason. I'd love to know what, because it's just the same old stuff that all of them always preach! Jesus Christ died so you could be saved, but of course, that's not really gonna work until you start this tea party relationship with Jesus as your imaginary playmate, and if you don't, by the way, you're gonna fry eternally in hell! I mean, they all know this, and the idea that, "Hey, you should read the Bible and seek God's will and witness to people": yeah, haven't fundamentalists been saying this the whole time there have been fundamentalists? "God is always listening to you, and cares about you": yeah, they always say that too. Where's anything at all new?!? Not that you have to say something new, which would be good, but this is promoted as if it's the latest thing. I just am amazed anyone can view it that way!

Neil J. Murphy: So it sounds like what you're saying is that this book is written for those who already converted.

Robert M. Price: Yes, it must be. Well, kinda half the time, it behaves as if it's an evangelistic tract, and you've never heard this, and yet it's very clear it's gonna ring true to the faithful. It's preaching to the choir, I would imagine.

Neil J. Murphy: Do you think that Warren's book is the case of responding to genuine and legitimate feelings of, let's say, a lack of purpose in life, but yet proposes dangerous and counterproductive solutions?

Robert M. Price: Well yeah, all religions propose that there must be a capital-P Problem. And there needs to be, so that they can then promote their capital-S Solution. Like Tom Skinner, the evangelist, once said, "If Christ is the answer, what's the question?" Well, there has to *be* a big question. So they say, "Your life, you may not know it, is meaningless, and I will give you a meaning. You can exist to be a living evangelistic tract, just a witnessing machine." So I'm not sure if people start out thinking that they have meaningless lives. He has to tell them that their lives are meaningless, because then he can replace whatever it was with the meaning. And if they accept it, I think it is very repressive and self-denigrating. You're told to believe you have no real potential. God loves you despite your utter lack of worthiness, though he may endow you with "[unintelligible] for the kingdom," to chalkboard evangelistic things for kids or whatever. But it's all religion, all the time. Nothing but. And this is supposed to give you the meaning of life. As it does, as any adolescent Baptist knows. For a while there, that is very exciting. Let's organize and do all this stuff, let's have concerts, kids. But after you grow up — if you ever do, many people don't — you realize that there's gotta be. And even if Jesus Christ did die for my sins, there's gotta be more to human life than this!

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah. We had on recently the directors and creators of the film [*Jesus Camp*](#), which I'm sure you're probably aware of.

Robert M. Price: I've not seen it yet, but I've heard about it. It sounds kinda weird.

Neil J. Murphy: Well, the *Jesus Camp* movie was an exposé about these fundamentalist religious camps. And I think it speaks to the point you were making, that there's this kind of 24-hour alternative universe that they're in, where they're constantly being fed, as you said, all religion, all the time. And it would seem to stunt a person's growth, not only in figuring out their own life path, but also in just the very notion of questioning itself.

Robert M. Price: Yep. You've got to pass through that, and hopefully stay in it: have a questioning-authority attitude or you can never grow up, morally or intellectually or any other way. It's ironic that in one area, they say you have responsibility. They say, "God has no grandchildren, so *you've* gotta be born again." Well all right, but doesn't that mean you just can't accept secondhand answers about life either? You've got to have your own answers, you can't just swallow prepackaged catechism and never have any mature judgment. I mean, there are very few objective criteria for verifying or falsifying the worldview based on unseen realities, as they claim there is. Well one of them has to be: if this religion is

followed, does it stunt moral growth? If it does, it just can't be true! And this does!

Neil J. Murphy: And immoral, you could make the argument too.

Robert M. Price: Yeah. If you say, "Well, I should decide what is right. Oh, but gee, maybe I better not because if I got it wrong by mistake, I'd be going down the coal chute to hell. Well, I'll just do what I'm told." As, of course, you'd be wise to, if hell was the alternative.

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, this sort of sounds like a 21st century equivalent of Pascal's Wager. In other words, if you're religious, you're basically covered no matter what, and if you're nonreligious, you can never be saved or redeemed no matter what because you didn't believe in the first place.

Robert M. Price: Yes, though of course it's more complicated than that. I mean, you're quite right, that is what they're saying. But they don't seem to realize, you know, there's a lot of possible horses in the race! It's not just belief and unbelief. Should I be a Jehovah's Witness? A Muslim? A Buddhist? I mean, it's not just this or that. And they don't really give you any guidance on how to make a choice, even if they can persuade you to believe you must make one. Well, what do I do, eeny meeny miney moe? "Oh no, oh no, it's just us." The whole thing is completely circular and just irresponsible.

Neil J. Murphy: You make the argument in your book, and it seems to be a central theme, that Warren's notion of a personal relationship with Jesus, and this evangelical belief in a personal relationship, has no Biblical basis whatsoever. Talk about Warren's claim of a personal relationship.

Robert M. Price: Yeah, it's amazing how they believe that the Bible exists for no other reason than to get people saved, which is tantamount to a personal relationship with Christ. Something that as far as I can see, is never even mentioned in the New Testament. I mean, you wouldn't expect it from the Old. But where does anybody, where does Paul, where does Jesus, where does anyone say this? It's just not there.

Neil J. Murphy: Bob, I just wanna cut you off. I wanna jump in here, because I'm curious to know, if there's no Biblical basis for this, then where does this come from?

Robert M. Price: It comes from 17th century Lutheran pietism. Their orthodoxy, their theology had got to be a dreary matter of rote memorization and getting the right answers in the catechism. And several people — Count Zinzendorf, Tersteegen, and several writers who were very, very sharp people. They said, "Y'know, if this means nothing, if it's not a heartwarming, living faith—" In one of their writings, they say that "the sensitive Christian imagines his Savior looking on everything he does. And if he sins, there's the pain in the eyes of the Savior." And I don't know when they began taking this literally, but it was pretty quick. And it was not just a mind game. They began to say, "Yes, Jesus is there waiting to talk with me every day and I don't wanna make him feel bad by ignoring him, and I'll grow cold spiritually if I don't have a little talk with Jesus, and I'll feel these vague impressions that he's leading me or something." And it comes from this attempt by the Lutherans to have a living

faith. And I can commend them on that. But it became an imaginary friend mind game that all these conservative Protestants have elevated to the very criterion of salvation.

Their poor Roman Catholic friend says, "Hey look, I believe in Jesus Christ, I'm going to heaven because of His forgiveness, I thank God for that."

"Oh, but that's not good enough! Do you have a little talk with Jesus every day?"

"Well, what are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, you're going to hell."

It's like these nutty Pentecostals — not that all of them are, but those who are — who say, "You gotta speak in tongues, or you're going to hell!" Well, wait just a minute! I can see how this may be exciting for you, but how dare you! You're practically starting a new religion based on this. And it's worked! All these charismatic and fundamentalist Christians are all about personal relationship with Jesus, and what I call an imaginary playmate.

Neil J. Murphy: Bob, I wanna move away from a critique of Warren's principles to some positive principles that you talk about in your book. What do you feel — besides the obvious, reason — what do you think constitutes the reason driven life? And what *are* we here on Earth for?

Robert M. Price: Well, I believe Aristotle and Socrates were right. And when you say "What is the good life?" you say, "Well, what really is the thing humans specialize in?" Just like a good knife is a sharp knife, and cuts; a good pen is a pen with ink that doesn't clog, so you can write with it. A good person does what humans can do, and so everything we do must be done rationally. But every individual has certain talents. And we ought to seek a fulfilling life of using our talents. And every human being loves to have friends and to be a friend, so for our own interest, that's what we ought to do. Everybody wants to have peace and security, so we ought to work toward that. All these things are the good life, and it doesn't take any revelation to see that. And I think an important principle is positive thinking. You should not fixate on failures of the past, but realize, rationally, that the future and the past aren't the same thing. You're a growing person; you'll have new opportunities; you'll be a new person. So the future should be full of hope. And you're the only one who decides what the meaning of your life is. It must be in the eye of the beholder, and you're the only relevant beholder. So I believe Nietzsche was right, too: *you* are the creator. There's no other god who simply hands you a prewritten script. I think human beings are, as Nietzsche says, the real gods. *We* have the divinity, to create our lives and the meaning of them. And that's an open future full of exciting things.

Neil J. Murphy: Do you think there are any reason-based commandments, so to speak, we should live by? In other words, are there certain principles that you think can guide the reason driven life without reference to the supernatural?

Robert M. Price: Yes. Well, now I have to give credit where it's due. Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian, basically, and he understood that if you wanna see what is naturally the right thing to do, just look at nature and human society. Now, God created that, so God also wants you to do it, but if you're not a theist, as I'm not, you just leave that last part off. You say, "Well yeah, old Tom and Aristotle were right." You approach life with the Golden Mean. The right thing to do is always gonna be between two extremes. And it's up to every individual, in every situation, to decide what that is. So that's leaving the door way open for every individual to make his own decisions, but those are real guidelines that will

never disappoint anybody.

Neil J. Murphy: Your ethos seems to be individualism harmonized with reason. Is that a good, succinct summary of it?

Robert M. Price: Yeah. I admit there's one place where I personally fall short. Is what Walter Rauschenbusch, a great liberal theologian of the early 20th century, called "the voluntary socialization of the soul." He was the founder of the Social Gospel movement. And he said that traditionally, Christianity, like Warren still does, talked about the conversion of the soul. And he says, "Well, fine and good, but you really need to get beyond individualism, and make the goal of all people, their interests, your interests." And I think that that's psychologically and socially sound, and we oughta do that as well. It's not just about me.

Neil J. Murphy: I was thinking about this as you gave that answer, because if you're talking about that one of the highest purposes of the reason driven life is an individual ethos harmonized with reason, do you think, therefore, then, that fear is what really motivates the people who read Warren's book? And that the fear of eternal damnation leads people to think that their purpose is to cover their <bleep>?

Robert M. Price: Well, ultimately, yes, that's why I hammer on that in a few chapters in the book. He tries to gloss over it a little bit, by just saying, "Oh, God loves you and look what he's done to save you." Uh, yeah, Rick, you mean because if you don't follow your line, you're gonna be tortured eternally by this loving God? So I think if you really have to get that off the table, and say, "Look, there's no hell, there's no punishment. There's just potential to be realized or not. There are challenges to be met or not." You can go in the other direction and degrade yourself and become self-loathing, because you're doing destructive things, but you don't have to do that. Just forget the hell thing. If you can't show why something is wrong, there's no reason to think it is.

Neil J. Murphy: Do you think Warren is deceptive in his use of the Bible? I mean, he doesn't seem to be a scholarly theologian in any sense of the word.

Robert M. Price: He's just, I think, opportunistically reading the tradition he received as a fundamentalist back into it regardless of any intent of the writer. He uses this huge raft of bad Bible paraphrases that fundamentalists have done in the last decade, which are all aimed at paraphrasing the text to make it sound like evangelicals wrote it. And so he'll say, "Oh, yeah, we're quoting First John so-and-so here." And I say, "What?!? I've never seen this text!" And I look up the citations and say, "Oh, *that's* what it's supposed to be?!?" So I think he's sort of got a fantasy Bible that just tells him what he wants to hear. So he did get it all from fundamentalism. They sort of squeezed it out of the Bible, that's what he learned, and then they started writing their own Bibles that expressly say it, and that's what he quotes. So I think he's more deceived than deceiving. And I must say that the guy does certainly have a good heart. I mean, he's out there doing stuff I'm sure I'm never gonna wind up doing, like ministering to people with AIDS and other horrible diseases, and giving huge amounts of money to this. I mean, that is great! I gotta commend him. But that doesn't whitewash the unsound nature of what he hands out to individuals.

Neil J. Murphy: We have to wrap this up, unfortunately. So I'm gonna give you the last word. What do you want people to come away with from this book and how can we apply your notion of the reason driven life in our own life?

Robert M. Price: Warren starts out saying, "It's not about you." I say, turn that around. It *is* about you. Before you can help anybody else, you gotta get your own head on straight. And that means, as Heidegger says, *you've* got to look at your limitations, and your abilities, and it's *your* call as to what your life is gonna be about. Don't let Warren assume the voice of God, like the almighty Oz, and start telling you what to do.

Neil J. Murphy: And on that note, I'd like to thank you very much for coming on our show today. Again, the book is called *The Reason Driven Life: What am I Here on Earth For?* And as always, it's a pleasure to have Bob Price on Equal Time for Freethought. Thanks for coming on the show today.

Robert M. Price: Thank you!