

Sightings 10/15/07

Atlas Shrugged at Fifty
-- Martin E. Marty

W. C. Fields, as previously noted in *Sightings*, once announced that he'd spent years studying the Bible, looking for a loophole. For fifty years Christians and other leaders have been reading the Bible looking for one line in it that might justify the popular philosophy of Ayn Rand, whose novel *Atlas Shrugged* is still selling 150,000 copies a year, fifty years after its initial publication. Despite her philosophy's frontal attack on selflessness, generosity, community-mindedness, and similar merits, Rand has made her mark in a civilization considered to have been deeply influenced by the Judeo-Christian worldview that values such virtues.

In my Oxford edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, pages 862 to 1237 are "The Prophetical Books;" pages one through 159 in the New Testament are "The Narrative Books"—the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. With the epistles, pages 208 through 387, it all comes to over 2,000 columns. Every line in them is challenged, countered, and dismissed by the 1,168 pages of *Atlas Shrugged*. In October 10th's *Wall Street Journal*, Randian or Randite David Kelley celebrates and expounds the book: "It's had a special appeal for people in business. The reasons, at least on the surface, are obvious enough."

In *Atlas Shrugged* and the rest of the Rand corpus, business people "are not the exploiters but the exploited, victims of parasites and predators...No wonder it has such enthusiastic fans in the upper echelons of business." Why? Rand's "how-to-abolish-God-and-soul-book" is a "moral defense of business and capitalism," writes advocate Kelley.

Disclaimer: *Sightings* is not to be ideological. Its mission is to frame issues in the religion-and-culture nexus. Its authors don't like to "preach to the choir," and don't even know who's in the choir. These Monday columns are not anti-capitalist, anti-business, anti-"upper echelons of business," and are no more critical of those echelons than of non-capitalists, academics, religious leaders, and their author himself. Yet pure-form Rand forces a question as to whether her "moral defense" is any less inimical to religious faith than Nietzsche's.

Does any prophetic religious text, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and more, for all the apparent ambiguities in each and for all their celebrations of the individual in all her dignity and all his worth (as in "the image of God"), not preach that humans are social beings, that they are to be humane to others, and are to put the interests of others ahead of their own, for the common good? As for Rand, condensed by Kelley? Quotations from him and her will speak for themselves.

Kelley describes Rand as "notorious as the advocate of 'the Virtue of selfishness,' as she titled a later work." Her "defense of the pursuit of self-interest and her critique of self-sacrifice as a moral standard, is at the heart of the novel." She parts with Adam Smith and theorists of capitalism who are troubled, and are thus in range of being humane, by "cutting the Gordian knot...by denying that the pursuit of self-interest is a vice." For her, capitalism is a "system that regards every individual as an end in himself. That includes the right to live *for* himself, a right that does not depend on benefits to others," not even through trade. Kelley approves when the hero of *Atlas Shrugged* says, "I work for nothing but my own profit." Here endeth the lesson.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.