



## **Agnostic – A Spirited Manifesto**

Lesley Hazleton – Riverhead Books (April 5, 2016)

ISBN - 978-1594634130

For more information: <http://www.accidentaltheologist.com/>

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### **Chapter 1 - BEYOND EITHER/OR**

There are some four hundred houseboats in Seattle. Many, like mine, are little more than shacks on rafts, but this may be the only one with a mezuzah at its entrance. If I were religious, the small cylindrical amulet would hold a miniature scroll inscribed with the Shema, the Jewish equivalent of the Lord's Prayer or the Islamic Shahada. But mine doesn't, partly because the scroll kept falling out when I put the mezuzah up on the doorpost, and partly because I don't believe a word of the prayer anyway. I'm not sure what happened to it. I may have thrown it out in a tough-minded moment, or it may be squirreled away at the bottom of a drawer somewhere. No matter. Most of the time I don't even notice the mezuzah, and neither does anyone else. But I know it's there, and that does matter.

Yet why should it? I am firmly agnostic, and haven't been to a synagogue service in years. Decades, in fact. So is the mezuzah an empty sentimental gesture on my part, or does the word hypocrisy apply? Could I be in denial: a closet theist, or a more deeply closeted atheist? Or am I just a timid fence-sitter, a spineless creature trying to have it both ways, afraid to commit herself one way or the other?

And there's the problem -- right there in that phrase "one way or the other." It sees the world in binary terms: yes or no, this side or that. It insists that I can be either agnostic or Jewish but not both, even though both are integral parts of this multi-faceted life that is mine, as integral as being a writer, a psychologist, a feminist, all the many aspects of

this particular person I am. All are part of the way I experience the world, and myself in it. Take any one of these aspects away, and I'd be someone else.

To be agnostic is to love this kind of paradox. Not to skirt it, nor merely to tolerate it, but to actively revel in it. The agnostic stance defies artificial straight lines such as that drawn between belief and unbelief, and shakes off the insistence that it come down on one side or the other. It is free-spirited, thoughtful, and independent-minded – not at all the wishy-washy I-don't-knowness that hard-core atheists accuse it of being. In fact the mocking tone of such accusations reveals the limitations of dogmatic atheism. There's a bullying aspect to it, a kind of schoolyard taunting of agnostics as "lacking the courage of their convictions" – a phrase that raises the question of what exactly conviction has to do with courage. It's easy to forget that the inability to muster the honesty of the three simple words "I don't know" only leads to a radical dishonesty. The least we have come to expect is that someone be able to bullshit their way out of not knowing something, which is why the first thing taught in media training (a term that always makes me think of obedience training for dogs) is how to evade a difficult question and maintain the tattered illusion of mastery.

I stand tall in my agnosticism, because the essence of it is not merely not-knowing, but something far more challenging and infinitely more intriguing: the magnificent oxymoron inherent in the concept of unknowability. This is the acknowledgment that not everything may be knowable, and that not all questions have definitive answers – certainly not ones so crudely put as that of the existence or non-existence of God. At its best, however, agnosticism goes further: it takes a spirited delight in not knowing. And this delight is no boorish disdain for knowledge and intellect. Rather, it's a recognition that we need room for mystery, for the imagination, for things sensed but not proven, intuited but not defined – room in which to explore and entertain possibilities instead of heading straight for a safe seat at one end or the other of a falsely created spectrum.

What's been missing is a strong, sophisticated agnosticism that does not simply avoid thinking about the issues, nor sit back with a helpless shrug, but actively explores the paradoxes and possibilities inherent in the vast and varied universe of faith-belief-meaning-mystery-existence. That's my purpose here. I want to explore unanswerable

questions with an open mind instead of approaching them with dismissive derision or with the solemn piety of timid steps and bowed head -- to get beyond old, worn-out categories and arrive at an agnostic stance of intellectual and emotional integrity, fully engaged with this strange yet absorbing business of existence in the world.

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I have been agnostic for almost as long as I can remember. The only Jew in an English convent school, I grew up with competing claims on what was presumably my soul, reciting one grace-before-meals in the convent and another at home, and wishing I had to do neither. The school chapel was redolent with the smell of stale incense, the local Orthodox synagogue with the equally stale scent of Chanel No. 5 on the fox stole of my mother's neighbor in the women's balcony, where I'd pass the time by trying to outstare its beady eye. Home offered the comfort of chopped liver, school the temptation of pork -- and the disappointment when, half-convinced that the infamous bolt from the blue would strike, I finally dared take a bite, only to find that it tasted like boiled chicken. How could something forbidden be so bland?

Two major religions seemed to be battling for possession of me, making me wonder how it could make any difference what one stoop-shouldered adolescent believed. Yet while logic seemed to dictate that I would walk away from all things remotely religious as soon as I emerged from childhood, that didn't happen. Instead, I compounded my involvement by going to Jerusalem for two weeks and staying for thirteen years. I stayed at first because I was twenty and in love with a classically wrong guy, and then because by the time I'd come to my senses and fallen out of love, I'd already told my university in England to give my research grant to someone else. This was, by any rational measure, a terrible decision, and I have never regretted it.

It was still possible then for a political innocent to romanticize Jerusalem. Mysticism seemed to shimmer in the air. Jewish and Christian and Muslim legends piled on top of one another, laying claim to the same limestone hills and making it easy to imagine that this provincial city had a cosmopolitan soul. I treasured the famous medieval map showing a three-petaled universe with Jerusalem at its hub, and honed my skills in the

Center of the World pool hall hidden deep in the alleys of the Old City, not yet aware that thinking of yourself as the center of the world might itself be a sure sign of provincialism. But where the sacred and the profane once seemed to rub shoulders with entrancing ease, they became increasingly indistinguishable. Jerusalem brought me into the vast and volatile arena in which politics and religion intersect, and as I explored that arena as both a psychologist and a journalist, what I'd thought of as a mysteriously God-haunted city became a city with too much God and not enough humanity.

Three wars later, I moved to Manhattan and then, with the offer of the houseboat, to Seattle. And yet Jerusalem came with me. As the millennium turned, I'd rise every morning to cormorants diving in the mist over Lake Union and sit down at my desk to the deserts of the Middle East, half the world and half of history away. I wrote about Mary in Galilee, Elijah in Gilead, Muhammad in Mecca, and through them, traced the roots of the Big Three monotheisms in the ancient and ongoing search for political and social justice. And I began to blog as an "accidental theologian," describing my posts as "an agnostic eye on religion, politics, and existence," and hoping thus to cover a multitude of sins.

Yet even as I used the word religion, something in me shrank from it, not least because it is so bound up in its origins: the Latin *religare*, to be tied down or constricted. It was no accident that agnostics, unconfined by imposed definitions, were originally called free-thinkers. Religion seemed an insufficient shorthand for the vast matrix of meaning and experience that it claims to address -- a single lens through which to view the multiple facets of what philosopher-psychologist William James called "the varieties of religious experience."

I felt as though I were forging my own exploration of those varieties when I was asked to speak at seemingly unlikely forums for an agnostic: in churches, mosques, and synagogues. "What am I doing here?" I'd think as I stepped in front of the altar. "How on earth did this happen?" Yet people nodded in recognition as I talked about the dismal reduction of mystery to a dead-end yes-or-no proposition. They acknowledged a disconnect between what they sensed on the one hand and the demand for belief on

the other. Longing for something more than the stark duality of belief/unbelief, they were increasingly impatient with the theist-atheist debate that had produced so much hot air over the previous decade or so. Those involved in that debate seemed increasingly trapped in their own neatly defined binary terms: either/or, true or false. Working with an out-dated grab-bag of assertions, they'd reduced complexity to a single dimension, with the result that the entire issue had become peculiarly over-determined, in much the same way, say, that New Year's Eve is over-determined -- a single evening too often doomed to disappointment by the sheer weight of expectation vested in it.

I wanted to get beyond the stale tropes of that debate, to rise above its simplistic dichotomies and establish room to breathe, to dance with ideas instead of trying to confine them into conceptual straight-jackets. And in this, I was far from alone.

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The most respected polls on faith and belief are run by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which has been taking the pulse of both the American and the international soul, as it were, since 2001. In brief, which is how the Pew results are usually reported, it looks as though we are stuck in a religious time warp. As defined in conventional terms, the United States is apparently as deeply religious a country as when it was founded. Just over two-thirds of Americans say they believe in God. When the question is expanded to "God or a higher power," as in the competing Gallup poll, that figure rises to 77%. And if America seems God-obsessed, Europe appears equally so, with 70% of respondents avowing belief.

Nobody seems to ask what is meant by such statements, however. Consider: a stranger calls you on the phone, says she's conducting a survey, and asks if you believe in God. You can answer only yes or no, since don't-knows don't count. And consider too that if you simply hang up, as you're likely to do if you consider this an absurdly simplistic question, you don't count either. So let's assume for the sake of argument that the question intrigues you enough to stay on the line. Yet you may not be quite sure. On the one hand, you don't think of yourself as a believer, not in the usual sense of the word, which defines you as religious. On the other, while you may

half-admit this to yourself, saying so out loud to a complete stranger over the phone is something else. Will you be struck by that bolt from the blue if you come out and say no? Is it really any surprise that a certain portion of those still on the line will play it safe and say yes?

There's a similar vagueness when respondents are asked about their religious affiliation. What exactly does that mean? Am I affiliated or unaffiliated -- or do I count twice, once as a Jew and once as an agnostic? I'm not the only one in such an affiliative quandary. It turns out that over 70 percent of people in England identify as Christian, but since less than 10 percent go to church with any regularity, this apparently means only that they're not Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or any other readily available religious category. A diminishing few may pop in for a nostalgic Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, or to light a candle for somebody who's died, but that's about it. Does simply having a Christmas tree define you as Christian, then? Or exclaiming "Jesus!" in exasperation (which would make me a Christian)? Or crossing your fingers in superstitious acknowledgment of the cross on Calvary?

The only thing that seems clear from the polls is that there is a lot of outmoded thinking about religion. Indeed the real question might be if there's any substantial meaning to a term so broad that it covers everything from militant fundamentalism to cultural tradition to an undefined sense of spirituality. Certainly that is the question asked implicitly by those who stubbornly resist categorization and insist on answering "nothing in particular" when asked what religion they are.

One in four Americans now rejects the traditional pollster categories, and this group trends young. More than a third of those under thirty say they are unaffiliated -- a proportion that increases with each new poll, giving rise to much gray-bearded concern about millennials losing their way. "Moral compasses" are often invoked, as though religion always points north. It doesn't seem to have occurred to the graybeards that religion and morality are not synonymous -- or that ruthless minds can turn them into opposites. Nor does it occur to them that younger people may be deliberately looking in a different direction, and doing so in such numbers they they've forced the pollsters to include a new category, "spiritual but not religious." Close to 40 percent of younger

Americans now describe themselves this way, confounding conservatives hewing to obey-God's-law legalism.

“Spiritual but not religious” is an expression of a very human yearning for an opening of mind and heart – a sense of soul and spirit that enhances day-to-day experience instead of tamping it down and channeling it into the narrow confines of stick-and-carrot orthodoxy. It's a rejection of traditional tenets and pieties, of doctrine and dogma and judgment. It resists the usual attempts to pigeonhole, saying “Spare me your labels.” It is, at heart, agnostic.

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Like so many others, I am tired of stale assumptions -- of the demand that I choose sides as though this were some sort of schoolyard game, and of others trying to convince me. In fact I am tired of conviction, and of the preaching and scolding of those who claim a comfortable perch from which to preen their righteous feathers, whether religious or irreligious. Conviction is not only to be convinced; it's also to be convicted, like a prisoner in his cell. It is to close one's mind, to nail oneself down beyond a shadow of doubt – a turn of phrase that sees doubt as a threat, some darkness lurking in your peripheral vision like an intruder to be vanquished instead of as a partner to curiosity and a prerequisite to real thought.

I see no reason to accept the terms of those who would confine me to some kind of intellectual or spiritual no-man's-land (or in my case, presumably, no-woman's-land). For years, their books piled up on my floor, a verbal minefield of impassioned arguments mistaking conviction for evidence, intensity for fact -- so many books that they weighed down the houseboat, making the raft ride low in the water. Not for nothing are tomes called weighty. The nether reaches of philosophy and theology are thickets of near-impenetrable prose, but I persisted nonetheless, only to deepen the feeling that I was witnessing the most sophisticated minds perform extraordinary contortions in order to answer questions that by definition have no answer.

I found myself grumbling like crazy in the margins of these books -- railing at assertions presented as axiomatic, at the piling up of things-taken-for-granted, at received wisdom

presented as fact. Penciled question marks proliferated, often turning into scrawled *No's* of exasperation and then into scribbled rebuttals along the tops or the bottoms of the pages. I was arguing with saints and sages, holding running conversations with men dead for centuries as though they could talk back to me.

The 'new atheists' – I rattle off the most prominent with the mnemonic H2D2 (Harris, Hitchens, Dawkins, and Dennett) – were certainly more readable, favoring polemic over philosophy. But their contemptuous tone made it clear that even the most determined rationalists can lose their balance and allow wittily phrased generalizations to stand in for clarity of thought. Like Christopher Hitchens, one can certainly point to all the horrors done in the name of religion – God knows there's a long blood-soaked history of them. But to then argue as he did that religion itself is evil is deeply illogical. You could as well point to all the horrors committed in the name of love, and then claim that love itself is evil.

I thought of those lines from the W.B. Yeats poem 'The Second Coming': "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." Yet both conviction and passionate intensity were on rampant display on my floor, from men -- and they were indeed nearly all men -- who quite evidently considered themselves the best. Far from lacking, conviction was actually the source of their passionate intensity, so much so that another phrase came to mind: Jean-Paul Sartre's existential *mauvaise foi*, the inauthenticity of bad faith.

There came the day when I could no longer stand threading my way through these piles of tomes. I collected cardboard boxes and made a couple of runs to the storage locker. My house rose again in the water, and I sat down to write, similarly unburdened. It was time stop to bring my argument out of the margins and into the center of the page. Time to expand the whole debate -- to raise it up off the floor and perhaps achieve a kind of *dispassionate* intensity. Time, that is, to get beyond either/or, yes-or-no answers, because while such a digital way of thinking may be excellent for computers, it is downright dangerous for human beings. The grim joylessness of fundamentalism is testament to that.



I wanted to bring color to the table -- to explore the richly textured existential terrain in which we really live instead of the narrow black-and-white one in which preachers and pundits have tried to confine us. And I believe most of us are ready for such an exploration. Some may identify as religious, despite their doubts; some as agnostic, even if not quite sure what they mean by this; some as atheist, if with occasional misgivings and fingers crossed behind their backs. But most, I think, will agree that we don't all have to be on exactly the same page, that we have nothing to lose but the false consolation of forced labels, and that it's way past time to approach this whole, complex, often crazed subject of faith-belief-meaning-mystery-existence not as something to be 'solved,' but as an ongoing open-ended adventure of the mind.

Think of this book, then, as an exploration of the agnostic perspective, of the zones of thought that open up once you break free of deceptively neat categorizations, and that then feed back into each other in fresh and hopefully unexpected ways. Each of the following chapters focuses on one such zone. I start by challenging the attempt to corral the sense of what we call the divine and cut it down to human size. From there, I confront the misleading conflation of belief with faith. Looking squarely at how we have idolized certainty and demonized doubt, I highlight the creative value of doubt, without which real faith is impossible. Instead of insisting on a "theory of everything," I consider the vital role of mystery in a deceptively information-rich world; ask what we mean by the search for meaning; question the assumption that we all necessarily fear death and yearn for the cold realm of immortality; and unpack the heady concept of infinity, the humbling yet elating perspective of infinite space and infinite time. And finally, I explore the "we" involved here -- the elusive yet undeniably present phenomenon of consciousness, of the human mind thinking about the fact that it can think at all -- and argue with spirit for a sense of soul, free of such qualifiers as "blessed" and "immortal."

Throughout, what impels me is a desire to rise above the plethora of things-taken-for-granted, to shrug off the multiple tyrannies of the definite article (*the* truth, *the* soul, *the* universe, *the* meaning of life), and to find more honest ways -- both intellectually and emotionally -- to talk about such magnificent intangibles as God, infinity, and consciousness.

To those looking for certainty, such a stance will be nothing short of a nightmare. It embraces both possibility and its correlate, uncertainty. It suspects all absolutes, all simplifications. It refuses the balkanization of thought and steps over the territorial lines between philosophy, psychology, theology, physics, and metaphysics. Instead of either/or, it thinks more in terms of “and” – reason *and* imagination, logic *and* intuition. It takes delight in the play of ideas, and resists all attempts to channel and shoehorn them into the narrow constraints of conviction.

No “answers” here, then. I make no claim to truth, let alone “the Truth,” burdened with that capital letter to give it a kind of unassailable grandeur. There are already far too many people convinced that they are the possessors of such presumptuous truth, and I do not intend to add to their number. Neither do I have any desire to preach, or to convert anyone to agnosticism. In fact I’d take the “ism” out of that word if I could, since the last thing needed is yet another pompously “complete” system of thought and belief demanding adherence to some sort of party line.

So while I offer this book as an agnostic manifesto, I recognize that it’s a strange kind of manifesto indeed -- one that makes no claims to truth, offers no certainties, eschews brashly confident answers to grand existential questions. And if this makes it a peculiarly paradoxical creature, that is exactly what it needs to be, because to be agnostic is to cherish both paradox and conundrum. It is to acknowledge the unknowable and yet explore it at the same time, and to do so with zest, in a celebration not only of the life of the mind, but of life itself.