



Disbelief 101: A Young Person's Guide to Atheism

S. C. HITCHCOCK

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LESLIE WHITE

See Sharp Press 130 pp. \$9.95

6 x 9 paperback

Reviewed by Marie Alena Castle

Ignore that subtitle that says this book is for young people. It's for everyone! All of the good arguments for atheism are here, concise, witty, factual and devastating.

The author uses a pseudonym at the publisher's insistence because (the publisher says) "S.C. has young children, lives in a particularly religious, intolerant part of Middle America, and has received anonymous death threats after writing letters to the local paper opposing the Iraq war."

So S.C. is lying low here, but in safer publishing circles has won a national award from the Society of Professional Journalists, was published in a journal by the National Council for Social Studies, and his fiction has been published in small literary magazines. He does write well.

Tom Flynn, editor of Free Inquiry magazine, wrote the introduction for this book. He starts it with, "Oh, to have found this book when I was thirteen." Yes, this would impress a teenager—and anyone with an inquiring mind. It might even impress some clergy enough to compel them to look for honest work.

The description of atheism as a religion is priceless. "Imagine if, of all the world's religions, one of them, say some little-known Christian church

buried deep in Alabama, began to work miracles. Let's say that the members of this church, when they prayed and did their rituals, were actually able to heal the sick in high, statistically verifiable percentages. Let's say this church eradicated smallpox, and through its members' prayers sent people halfway across the world in hours, and to the moon in days. Let's say that its ministers were able to stare far out into the cosmos and down at the tiniest particles. There would seem to be nothing, given enough time, that these believers couldn't accomplish through their religion's rituals.

"Wouldn't this little church win converts from all around the world? Wouldn't a religious sect with this kind of real-world power become completely dominant? It would be considered the one true faith. According to those who look at atheism as a belief, there is such a religion. It is called atheism, and it works precisely because it is so different from all of the other religions. Where the other religions assume that there are gods and a spirit world, atheism assumes there are not."

Hitchcock then creates "religious" trappings for atheism: Its ritual is the scientific method; its places of worship are scientific labs, etc. He lists the ways this "religion" has improved life. The reader is left to wonder what god-based religion has ever done for humanity that even comes close.

Every chapter has "Aha!" moments of sudden clarity that hit with a fresh way of looking at the world. On the Survivor Fallacy: "Why is god always communicating with humanity through earthquakes, disease, explosions, and suffering? Hey god! We have email now! You can stop sending your messages via dead children!" On whether the universe had a beginning: Why assume there was ever nothing? "The question of 'why is there something rather than nothing?' answers itself, since it is not possible to ask its opposite."

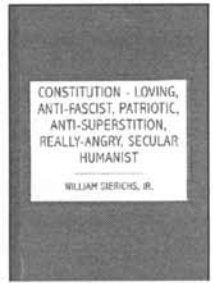
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