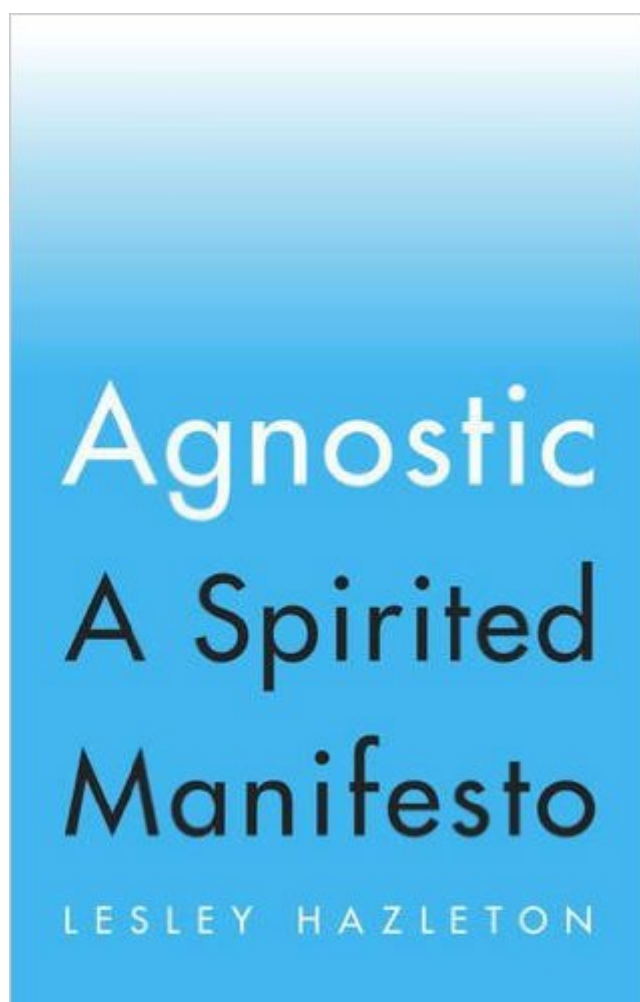


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Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto



Synopsis

A widely admired writer on religion celebrates agnosticism as the most vibrant, engaging—and ultimately the most honest—stance toward the mysteries of existence. One in four Americans reject any affiliation with organized religion, and nearly half of those under thirty describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” But as the airwaves resound with the haranguing of preachers and pundits, who speaks for the millions who find no joy in whittling the wonder of existence to a simple yes/no choice? Lesley Hazleton does. In this provocative, brilliant book, she gives voice to the case for agnosticism, breaks it free of its stereotypes as watered-down atheism or amorphous “seeking,” and celebrates it as a reasoned, revealing, and sustaining stance toward life. Stepping over the lines imposed by rigid conviction, she draws on philosophy, theology, psychology, science, and more to explore, with curiosity and passion, the vital role of mystery in a deceptively information-rich world; to ask what we mean by the search for meaning; to invoke the humbling yet elating perspective of infinity; to challenge received ideas about death; and to reconsider what “the soul” might be. Inspired and inspiring, *Agnostic* recasts the question of belief not as a problem to be solved but as an invitation to an ongoing, open-ended adventure of the mind.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

After a career as a correspondent in Jerusalem, this English journalist continues to investigate where religion, history and politics intersect. Now based in Seattle, she begins this personal account musing about her mezuzah fixed into the threshold of her houseboat. Although the frame remains,

the tiny scroll inside keeps falling out. This symbolizes her predicament. As an agnostic, she wonders if her ancestral ties to Judaism can remain as secure alongside her persistent distrust that the supernatural exists. For support, she turns to the 40% of younger Americans who identify as "spiritual but not religious." In *Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto*, Hazleton explores "the magnificent oxymoron inherent in the concept of unknowability." She resists "the usual attempts to pigeonhole." Rejecting binaries, she denies either yes or no, or right or wrong, dichotomies. Instead, she explores "zones of thought." Her chapters stand as self-contained essays on this open-ended search for meaning. She confirms that doubt is "the heart of the matter," as Graham Greene's novels or John Patrick Shanley's play dramatize. For this humility keeps religion tethered to the human. Banishing doubt, "faith is rendered moot." Without doubt, not faith but "absolute, heartless conviction" remains as a cold, chilly "Truth." Hazleton opts for inquiry rather than dogma. She quotes Emily Dickinson: "I dwell in possibility." Her approach remains easygoing, more than two other recent studies of this stance. Robin Le Poidevin in his *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction* tackles philosophical and theological arguments for and against belief. Aimed at an intellectual readership, his book compresses considerable erudition.

The common thread running throughout this diverse collection of self-contained chapters is perhaps best exposed by the author's observations about mystery and detective stories. Such stories create suspense, interest and excitement precisely because of what is unknown or incomprehensible, such as when a murdered woman is found inside a locked room. When the mystery is solved at the climax of the story, when the reader now knows the answer, the author admits experiencing an anticlimactic feeling. "What kept me reading," Hazleton writes, "was the pleasure of everything not making sense: I took delight in the suspense, and now, faced with the answer to it all, I feel let down, brought back to earth from my escapist enjoyment." Accordingly, the agnostic welcomes and prefers mystery and the unknown over certainty and definitive answers. Perfection, Hazelton says at another point, is "soulless" because it means to finish, which is a "dead end." The agnostic thus brings life and spirit (soul) to issues by exchanging uncertainty and mystery for, in Hazleton's delightful turn of phrase, the "deceptive enchantment of certainty." Agnostics are most often referred to in the context of religious questions (Do you believe in God?) but in these pages the term applies not only to religious questions of faith and belief but to, among others, the uncertainties that motivate scientists, the mysteries surrounding the mathematical concept of infinity, and the incomprehensible size of the universe. Reading the book is an insistent reminder that we know far less than what we think we

know, and many things are unknowable. Accordingly, agnostics can appropriately be described as modern-day iconoclasts. Hazleton writes for a general audience and the book is informed without being pedantic.

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