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McHargue's "Finding God in the waves: How I lost my faith and found it again through science" (Critical Book Review)

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Critical Reviews



McHargue, M. (2016). *Finding God in the waves: How I lost my faith and found it again through science*. New York: Convergent Books. 274 pp. \$14.00. ISBN 9781101906064

McHargue hosts a weekly podcast called, “Ask Science Mike,” which attempts to answer questions about faith and science. He is also a contributor to “The Liturgists Podcast” with Michael Gungor where various topics are discussed through the lenses of science, art, and faith. In *Finding God in the Waves*, McHargue, or more widely known by the moniker, “Science Mike,” writes a memoir about his reconversion through the most unlikely of evangelists: science. The language of reconversion is important to his story as McHargue notes in chapter 1 that his spiritual journey began as a child in a conservative, Southern Baptist church. However, at an early age he was captivated by science. For McHargue, “It [science] laid bare all mysteries.” Thus, the intersection of faith and science is a consistent theme throughout his story, which culminates in his reconversion from atheism to a form of Christianity that emphasizes science as the main aspect in developing his theological method.

In chapter 2, his parents’ divorce drives McHargue to the Bible to find comfort. However, just the opposite occurs, and instead, the Bible contributes to him becoming an atheist due to what he perceives as overwhelming scientific contradictions found in it. In chapter 3, McHargue moves away from his early adolescent years and notes *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins as a key reference point in his journey, particularly Dawkins’ chapter on prayer (48). At this point in his journey, McHargue sees prayer as imprudent because it does not provide a scenario that can prove it to be false and thus is a fortunate probability for the Christian in that every possible outcome is covered, which reinforces the confidence that prayer is always answered. For McHargue, this means that God does not miraculously answer prayer and that he is merely “ascribing God’s hand to” answered prayer. He relates that this realization made him “feel silly and superstitious.” Later, he devotes an entire chapter to defining prayer in a new way (chapter 11).

Chapter 4 describes a genuine personal account where he struggles to maintain his involvement in the local church while no longer believing in God. Chapter 5 discusses the impact being an atheist has on his relationship with his wife when she finds out that he no longer believes in God. Chapter 6 outlines McHargue’s time at

NASA near Los Angeles. This is an important moment in the book because for the first time, he feels free from his old Southern Baptist identity and instead asserts, “for the first time, I felt that I was able to be myself – my true self. I took off my Christian mask and felt the sunlight on my face.”

In addition to science, chapter 7 describes two encounters with God in Laguna Beach, California that draw McHargue back to the fold, which brings into view an earlier admission concerning his reconversion that “God moved miraculously in my life, and I came back to the fold of the faithful. But it wasn’t by studying sacred scriptures or works of theology. It was through science.” The first miraculous encounter prior to his reconversion occurs in a small setting with Rob Bell at the Eucharist table where McHargue hears what he perceives to be the voice of God. The second miraculous event occurs on the beach as McHargue reflects on hearing the voice of God at the communion table. He begins to pray not the Southern Baptist “sinner’s prayer,” but instead, “God, I don’t know who or what you are... All I know is, I met Jesus tonight.” The moment he utters the word *Jesus*, “the waves rushed toward me. I was standing high up on the beach, 25 feet or more above the waves, but the water still rushed up and over my feet – all the way up to my shins.” He notes the supernatural nature of his encounter with God: “This is the part where I should explain the science of how a sane person can hear an audible voice in a room when no one has spoken. Believe me, I’ve spent a long time researching it, and I would love to explain it. I can’t.” The story of his reconversion consumes the first part of the book (chapters 1–7).

Chapter 8 sets a new tone as the book transitions from its autobiographical nature. The second part of the book is important to McHargue because it reveals what he discovered in his search to “relearn who God is.” Although he identifies coming back to the fold, he does not return to the Southern Baptist church. In fact, he notes that what he has returned to does not intend to be Christian orthodoxy. Thus, the second part of the book (chapters 8–15) is scientific and theological in nature as he provides a series of axioms which highlight how science is able to reconcile the purpose and usefulness for his newly found faith to pray, believe in Jesus, attend church, and read the Bible.

Chapters 9 and 10 built a working axiom that attempts to define God, which focuses upon a “*psychosocial model in human brains that naturally emerges from innate biases*” (p. 165). The result is that when people of faith are centered around a loving God, “it has positive effects on the believer’s emotions and actions.” As a result, God “may be nothing more than a way that human brains interpret reality,” which is a beneficial human experience as it can promote peace and empathy toward others.

In chapter 11, the axiom of prayer is discussed as a form of meditation that develops “healthy brain tissue, lowers stress, and can connect us to God.” McHargue believes that the axiom for prayer is beneficial “to you even if you don’t believe. The practice is what matters. Plenty of skeptics meditate for the mental and physical health benefits.” For McHargue, “It’s [prayer axiom] a life raft for people who can’t get on board with the supernatural claims about God yet still want to be close to God – a state I’m often in.” As a result, it is imperative that someone pray due to the spiritual and physical benefits one sustains.

Chapter 12 describes the axiom concerning Jesus, in which McHargue hopes to openly put aside questions concerning Jesus’ divinity only to say that because “Jesus was so compelling in how he described God that people attributed divinity to him.” In addition, he notes that Jesus was a man “so connected to God that He was called the Son of God, and the largest religious movement in human history is centered around His teaching... following His teachings can promote peace, empathy, and genuine morality.” Thus, all people should pay attention to Jesus and his teachings because encountering Jesus is a life-changing experience.

Chapter 13 discusses an axiom for the church, which includes a “global community of people who choose to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.” The church through its practice is able to improve “people’s lives in real, measurable ways.” The church is inclusive by nature and should make one more like Jesus, and for McHargue, this entails that as one participates in the church they will also become a proponent of peace, empathy, and morality.

Chapter 14 outlines the axiom on the Bible, which he proposes is a book worth reading when one approaches “the Bible via secular scholarship on archaeology and anthropology, not theology.” Thus, the Bible is a collection of books that “chronicle a people’s experiences with, and understanding of, God over more than a thousand years.” Nevertheless, the Bible should be read like any other great piece of ancient literature as one sees “how it contributed to humanity’s growing understanding of the world.”

In chapter 15 McHargue’s “old friend” from California unveils the God of his reconversion and appropriately summarizes the value of this book. He observes, “Admit it, what you believe is a lot more like humanism than Christianity. You’re using ancient language to describe modern ideas and then pretending to be a part of the ancient tradition. But you’re not.” McHargue never dismisses this interpretation and asserts “His [old friend] words rattled around in my head for a few days. He had put his finger on something I’d always feared.” It is important to note that McHargue is not antagonistic toward the Christian faith. There is a genuine sense that he loves the Church and desires to help people “who can’t get on board with the supernatural claims about God yet still want to be close to God.” I believe his

book clearly achieves this purpose in a powerful and entertaining way through story and doctrine (axioms). McHargue does not claim that he intends to return to orthodox Christianity, although he maintains familiar language to that tradition, for example, God, prayer, Jesus, church, and Bible. He employs this language not to be understood supernaturally but rather accepted by means of scientific revelation (p. 74). Scholars and non-scholars alike will want to read this book alongside other works in modern theology as it maintains a similar agenda, which seeks to explain the mysteries of God in mundane rather than supernatural terms. McHargue notes, "It's difficult for science to study God. Science doesn't speak to the supernatural, and most people's ideas about God are decidedly supernatural. Scientists are generally skeptical of phenomena that don't leave behind physical evidence," Whether (or not) one accepts McHargue's conclusion, this book should not be ignored.

Reviewer

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