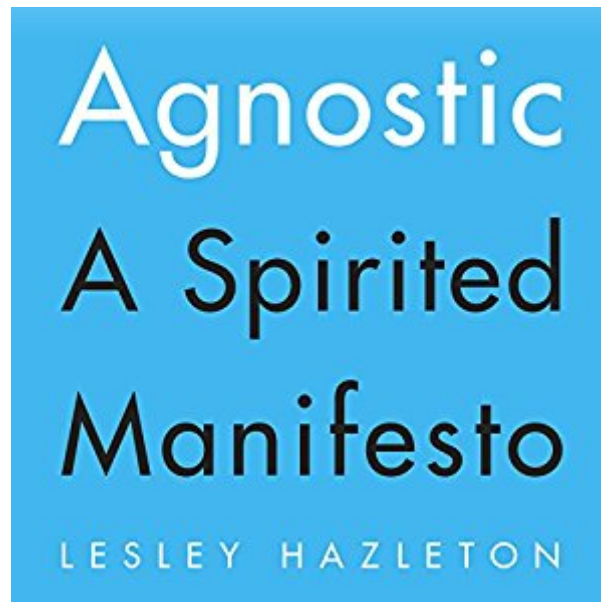




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# Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto



## Synopsis

A widely admired writer on religion celebrates agnosticism as the most vibrant and engaging - and, ultimately, the most honest - stance toward the mysteries of existence. One in four Americans rejects any affiliation with organized religion, and nearly half of those under 30 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

Do you believe in God, yes or no? If someone were to ask me what my spiritual beliefs are in a question like this, it would be impossible to answer. Yet statistics that come from such simplistic, religious polls are often used to reflect what populations believe about the existence of God. Lesley

Hazleton has written a thoughtful, respectful book that articulates a perspective other than a binary answer to that question. This is not a book written to convince you to believe one way or another. You will not find answers that eradicate your spiritual doubt nor require you to reject all of your spiritual beliefs. Rather, the author poetically describes the joy that can be embraced in the mysteries and possibilities of not knowing. Critics who hold polarized views on the existence of a religious God may find that they are cut from the same cloth. This book wonderfully represents possibilities for the rest of us who can't answer a solid yes or no to that question.

We read this book in a group that I attend and it was a great source of discussion about important themes within our faith community. I want to read other books that she has written. She writes very well and is very thoughtful and funny. A thought provoking book.

If I were to be totally truthful with myself, I would identify as an agnostic. I was when I was in college, and tried to change my beliefs for my wife, who is religious, but I never really believed any of the material I was presented with to read. This book spoke to my beliefs. It identifies what an agnostic is and how they view the world around them. It was well written, easy to read and thoughtful. I would recommend it to any person who has doubts about their religious beliefs and especially those that identify as "spiritual but no religious" as I have done for a number of years.

Lesley Hazleton makes a clear differentiation between "Atheist" and "Agnostic," and the more I read the more I understood that my spiritual belief system has a name. I am an Agnostic, and this is news to me. She makes Agnosticism vibrant and alive, embracing the unknown with openness and wonder. I found this a rare, life-changing book that's quite accessible, non-judgmental and open-hearted. Highly recommended.

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. Michael Krasny's *Agnostic Envy* (see my review) blends his personal search with a survey of agnosticism as it has emerged in Western thought, but it too aims at that history of ideas audience. Hazleton does not shy away from learning, but she emphasizes the numinous as seen in the natural. Perusing the writings of William James and of Albert Einstein side by side, Hazleton witnesses the juncture of the paths of these two pioneers, the psychologist and the physicist. They both open themselves to mystery and ambiguity. This common search unites believers with skeptics and with atheists. Citing Ernest Becker, she asks that we "be recognized as an object of primary value in the universe" rather than as its paragons or pawns. This humanistic foundation inspires Hazleton's quest. She critiques platitudes from fellow seekers. Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* seems a "just-so story" where we live in a universe God designed for us. She rejects any predetermined divine purpose for humanity. She also turns away from any reduction of the complex human struggle to "meaning" alone. Drawing from her climbs up Mt. Sinai and Mt. Rainier, she regards the ascent itself as a fitting reminder of our own significance as pitted against the cosmos. She reminds readers that romanticism aside, mountains themselves lack any inherent meaning. They are simply part of the patterns we project upon our surroundings to invest them and ourselves with more weight than they truly merit. On flat land, Hazleton reflects upon a provocative Silicon Valley futurist, Peter Thiel. She links his transhumanist exhortations to those of the early Church Fathers. He boasts that "if people think they are going to die," that this is "demotivating." (Recall the parody of Thiel on the series *Silicon Valley*.) Immortality, naturally, then motivates. Hazleton fears this optimism. If mortality is but an enemy to be overcome, a technical problem merely waiting for a (non-)killer app, what does this portend? She prefers solace not from the standard consolation given to a mourner in Judaism, "I wish you long life," but its opposite. One life is plenty, she avers. She does not yearn for any eternal sustenance. After her stint in Jerusalem, she tires of walls. She welcomes gates, for they open up to that mixture of infinity and finitude upon

this earth that humans can only claim to possess for a brief span. Rooted in the soil, she affirms its universal appeal to all humans, free of denomination or affiliation. For Hazleton, and an increasing number of contemporary sympathizers, this is enough to live with, at last.

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