

## The Atheist with a Soul

*36 Arguments for the Existence of God* shows there is something to be gained by delving into the rudiments and accoutrements of religion even if you think they're basically bogus.

NATHAN SCHNEIDER | February 26, 2010 | web only



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What is it like to be a New Atheist -- one of those irascible preachers of reason, those "militant" purveyors of populist non-belief like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens? Most people don't bother to ask, because they think they already know. Either it's a depraved and pathetic existence, buoyed (especially in the notorious case of Hitchens) only by excessive drink or else suffused in a nearly mystical state that frees one (as it seemingly does Dawkins) enough from dogmatic noise to revel fully in the grandeur of the scientific imagination. Either way, it's an inhuman caricature.

Few are better placed to set the record straight than Princeton-trained philosopher and novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, whose new novel tells the story of a suddenly rich and famous "atheist with a soul," a psychologist of religion named Cass Seltzer. In the years since Dawkins' *The God Delusion* set the tone for allegedly soulless atheism, writers including Ronald Aronson (*Living Without God*) and Greg Epstein (*Good Without God*) have scrambled the epithet Goldstein grants Cass. But Goldstein's credentials to speak -- through her character -- for the New Atheist soul are particularly strong. She's a friend of Dawkins, an advisory board member of Sam Harris' Reason Project, and the wife of Steven Pinker, the New Atheists' go-to evolutionary psychologist. Like him, she has a post at Harvard. Best of all, she's a genius -- at least according to the venerable MacArthur Foundation, which awarded her its "genius grant" in 1996. This should be a particularly important distinction among New Atheists, because what drives everyone crazy is how annoyingly brilliant they all seem to think they are.

The world that Goldstein gives us in *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* is full of geniuses -- with the possible exception of Cass, our mild-mannered, Prius-driving, self-doubting protagonist. Their personal crises take on theoretical proportions, and they communicate with each other, regardless of the subject of conversation, in technical terminology that Goldstein thankfully explains to us. They're also beautiful to boot. We meet Lucinda Mandelbaum, the game-theory wielding psychologist; Sy Auerbach, a thinly veiled facsimile of the New Atheists' star literary agent, John Brockman; and the frenetic, age-defying anthropologist Roz Margolis. In Cass' past, there is the Harold Bloom-ian professor Jonas Elijah Klapper; Gideon Raven, the permanent grad student turned intellectual-at-large; and little Azarya, a mathematical prodigy and heir to a Hasidic dynasty along the Hudson.

The narrator is so at home in this engrossing academic playground, where everybody has a theory and every building has a Jewish name, that it is hard to draw the line between Goldstein herself and her satire. In elegant and often hysterical prose (especially when you get the references), no character fails to run up against the limits of brilliance, revealing a mere human being shriveling behind the glow. The "goddess of game theory" twice messes up her rational-choice gambit for academic advancement, for instance, and Roz goes astray on a quixotic search for immortality by science. This world's inhabitants, ultimately, experience sensations one might expect in the ensouled: love, loss, compromise, and hope.

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As the story opens, Cass has just written a book, *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*, which represents a counterfactual exercise in more ways than one. With its laminated foil jacket, it is evidently the anti-*God Delusion*; unlike Dawkins' similarly dressed, real-life best seller, it offers a sympathetic psychological account of religiosity, even while lending no credence to its actual, propositional truth. Hence the second counterfactual -- that there could be psychological truth to be found even in falsehoods. For good measure, Cass includes an appendix at the end that lists 36 arguments for the existence of God -- each accompanied by a corresponding refutation. This, it turns out, is what captures people's attention more than anything else, making Cass an academic celebrity.

Goldstein takes us back into Cass' graduate student days, where we learn how his atheism got this mysterious "soul" in the first place. The storytelling and dialogue are at their strongest from about the halfway point on, as we delve into the universe of Klapper's autocratic classroom on the one hand and

the fictional Valdener Hasidic community on the other.

Klapper's mission as the sole member of Frankfurter University's department of "Faith, Literature and Values" is precisely soul-making, crafting "the theory you shall pull bloody from the afterbirth of your own self." He's the humanist that the scientific New Atheists love to decry: "I've always experienced mathematics as a personal affront," he declares. But Klapper is also the riveting, towering figure who draws Cass away from his pre-med track into a mad dash for the meaning of life. In the classroom, Goldstein's Klapper is convincing and sometimes even insightful in his nonsense. Outside, he charmingly falls apart, as when he tries to find mystical insights in the Hasidic rabbi's talk about Pell grants.

What distinguishes Goldstein (and her Cass) from the general run of New Atheists is the extent to which she knows, and even enjoys, the intricacies of religious life and experience. (She grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community, though not a Hasidic one, and turned away from it.) She takes us through the wilds of medieval Kabbalism and potato kugel. The Valdeners come across as a pathetic lot in the end but nevertheless possess a vivacious kind of life inaccessible to the theoreticians along the Charles. From among them comes Azarya, the young son of the rabbi whom Roz and Cass desperately try to rescue from a world of enforced ignorance and deliver to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where his talent can be properly nourished. Azarya is wonderfully wise as well as clever, and he feels the pull of his community, its history, and the love that its members express for him in ecstatic rituals. Of course -- he's a genius, after all -- he doesn't believe in a lick of the doctrine, but he feels its power nevertheless. Cass watches on, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Goldstein's account of this religious universe, compared to the treatments of the earlier New Atheists, shows there is something to be gained by delving into the rudiments and accoutrements of religion even if you think they're basically bogus. The New Atheists are right that they shouldn't be required to sympathize with the religions they deny if they don't want to -- unless, I would suggest, they hope to reach the people who live by them.

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After the storytelling is over, Goldstein does us the questionable favor of providing the appendix to Cass' *Varieties*: 36 arguments for God, refuted one by one. Given one or two paragraphs for each claim, her reasoning depends on paltry simplifications that do no justice to centuries of rich philosophical debate. It is a rehearsal that captures what makes the New Atheist account of religion often fall so flat: the distillation of it all to abstract propositions, tone-deaf to the performances that make the propositions actually matter.

Through Cass, she expresses healthy ambivalence toward the appendix. He is once encouraged to make the appendix the book and the book the appendix; we can certainly be grateful that neither he nor Goldstein -- in a Nabokovian turn -- took that advice. Despite all the attention his appendix gets, Cass insists that it was "only an appendix, and that it had little to do with the text." His book argued, after all, that religion tells us more about human nature than about the existence of God. The appendix is for real, but what precedes it purposefully undermines its logic. This evokes the magnificent tension between reason and embodied life laced throughout Goldstein's recent nonfiction work, *Betraying Spinoza*; the "betrayal" is her search for the man behind the intricate proofs, a man who claimed that proofs are the only truth one should need.

If she is anything, as she would be the first to admit, Goldstein is ultimately a Spinozist. In *36 Arguments*, genius means having access to the realm of pure reason, and a religious life can only be possible, as she puts it on the last page, once "genius has been laid aside." So it must be in this all-too-human world. The vast majority of people don't know any better or don't bother trying to, and those who do know can't seem to live up to what they know anyway.

Even as Goldstein settles for such condescension-in-good-conscience toward religiosity, she leaves us with a way to think about what having a soul might actually mean, a way fit even for a New Atheist: not to be a fallen creature made in the image of God but, despite all the genius a mind can muster, to be a finite, often-irrational being and, in the course of an examined life, to discover that this is so.



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