After faith

By Valerie Weaver-Zercher in the September 8, 2009 issue

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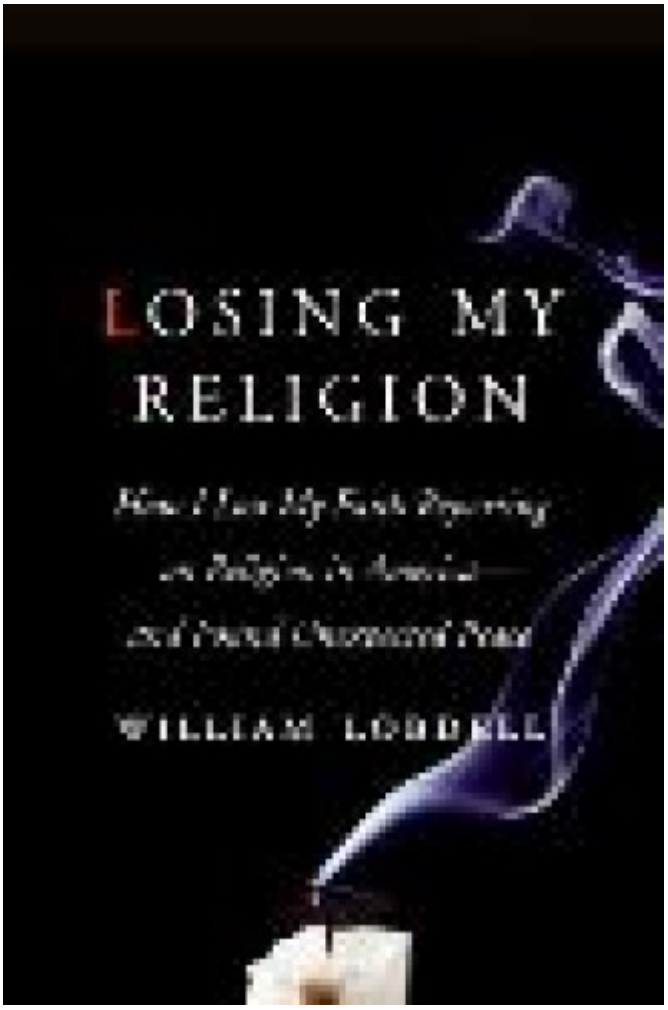

Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America-—and Found Unexpected Peace

William Lobdell
Collins

Either you don’t believe in God or you’re a dope.” This is how *Newsweek*'s Lisa Miller sums up the thinking of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. And despite the fact that 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, Miller writes, plenty of us seem to enjoy the new atheists’ “books and telegenic bombast so much that we don’t mind their low opinion of us.”

Former religion reporter William Lobdell’s deconversion narrative, *Losing My Religion* , refrains from both bombast and suggestions of dopiness. By his very choice of genre—memoir rather than apologia—Lobdell enters a different territory of the new atheism, one already inhabited by several other counter conversion narrators, including John Loftus, who wrote *Why I Became an Atheist*: *A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Prometheus, 2008), and Dan Barker, author of *Godless*: *How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists* (Ulysses, 2008). Lobdell is careful to distinguish himself from Hitchens and his truculent allies: “Their disbelief has a religious quality to it that I’m not ready to take on,” he writes. He calls himself a “reluctant atheist” and a “skeptical deist.” “With all that has happened to me,” Lobdell says, “I don’t feel qualified to judge anyone else.”

“All that has happened” includes, most notably, Lobdell’s eight-year tenure on the religion beat of the *Los Angeles Times* during the breaking of the Cath olic clergy sex abuse scandal. Lob dell had begun religion reporting as a newly minted evangelical after a nominally Episcopal childhood and agnostic young adulthood. After accepting Christ at a men’s retreat and beginning to attend a megachurch, Lobdell prayed for a religion-writing job. When he convinced editors at the *L.A*. *Times* to let him write a religion column, and when he subsequently was added to the religion beat, Lobdell attributed both achievements to the hand of God. “I needed only to produce solid journalism about faith in America, and I would be fulfilling God’s call *and* my career ambitions,” he writes.

Then a colleague of Lobdell’s passed him some documents about a priest named Michael Harris who was named in a clergy sex abuse lawsuit. Lobdell set aside the papers for a while, distracted by other, more inspiring stories of religion, and returned to them only months later when a settlement in the Harris case was announced. It was the first of more than $1 billion worth of settlements with victims of clergy sex abuse across the nation. Lobdell became convinced that as chilling as the pedophile priests’ actions were, the real story lay in the bishops’ cover-ups of the felonies, their quiet transfers of accused clergy to new and unsuspecting

parishes, and the Catholic Church's revictimization of the victims.

The Harris case dealt Lobdell's personal faith what he calls a "spiritual body blow." At first, he writes, he believed that his faith could be neatly cordoned off from the horrors of abuse and ecclesial hypocrisy that he was reporting on at work. For a while he convinced himself that his investigative reporting was a way of building up the church—of helping to "uncover the infection and promote the healing." But the deeper he got into the story, the more difficult it became to square the sins of the church with his image of a loving and powerful God. "I couldn't get the victims' stories or the bishops' lies—many of them written on their own stationery, undeniable and permanent—out of my head," he writes. "Like a homicide detective, I had seen too much."

The irony is that just as Lobdell was beginning to report on the sex abuse scandal, he was taking catechism classes in his local parish and preparing to join the Catholic Church. His wife, who had been raised Catholic, missed the ritual and formality of mass, so they had left the megachurch, attended a Presbyterian church for awhile, and finally landed in a Catholic parish. One week before Lobdell was to complete the rite of initiation into the church, after agonizing over his burgeoning doubts, he broke the news to his wife and his sponsor that he could not in good conscience join a church that had betrayed so many.

Lobdell depicts the ebbing of his faith as inevitable, something that he could not control or choose to fight. Many people assume that Christians-turned-agnostics make a conscious decision to leave the faith, but he insists that in his case that's simply not true. "As deeply as I missed my faith, as hard as I tried to keep it, my head could not command my gut. I know now that it was wishful thinking, not truth," he writes. "I just didn't believe in God anymore, despite my best attempts to hold on to my beliefs. Faith can't be willed into existence. There's no faking it if you're honest about the state of your soul."

Lobdell is to be commended for his forthright account of a journey from faith to doubt to loss of faith, one that is surprisingly free of bitterness and cheap shots. His tone is so magnanimous, in fact, that his book received back-cover endorsements not only from Hitchens but also from John Huffman, chair of the *Christianity Today* board: "I respect Bill for his honest reporting of his odyssey to this point," Huffman writes, "and pray that someday there may be a future book, just as honest, with a grace-filled conclusion."

Many Christians—myself included—can identify with Lobdell even if our own spiritual path managed to wind into a circular loop of return. The erosion of faith at the hands of rationality is a modern story—not a postmodern one—that is at least as old as the Enlightenment. It is unfortunate that Lobdell could not arrive at a more imaginative, more nuanced and less binary response to theodicy and a corrupt church than his decision to "stop wrestling with the mysteries of Christianity."

Lobdell is a better journalist than a memoirist. The quality of his prose is patchy, and the sections of personal narrative, especially those that describe his initial conversion, at times read like pages from a Christian romance novel:

> When I repeated the line "I invite Jesus into my heart," I experienced what I can only call a vision. Time slowed. In my mind's eye, my heart opened into halves, and a warm, glowing light flowed right in. As my heart melted back together, it remained illuminated with a soft light from the inside.

Such limp writing may simply be an indicator of Lobdell's inability to inhabit the memory of his initial faith commitments; by the time he writes about such emotion-drenched epiphanies, he no longer believes in the God whose presence he was convinced he felt. Or it may be a reflection of the fact that journalists in general, as Lobdell admits, "are not good at revealing ourselves." But when Lobdell writes about his work as a reporter—conducting interviews with clergy sex abuse survivors, composing riffs on faith healer Benny Hinn and having conversations with ex-Mormons, for example—he settles into the third-person, journalistic voice in which he is obviously most at home, and his writing snaps back to life.

In his epilogue, Lobdell uses the words of a Mormon speaker, Clifton Jolley, to lob a final "Huh?" at religious belief. Lobdell had reported on DNA studies that call into question the Mormon belief that American Indians are descendants of Hebrew peoples. As a panelist responding to a talk Lobdell delivered at a Mormon conference, Jolley launched into a tirade in which he made a statement that Lobdell considers ridiculous: "After we have been defeated and all our stories proven untrue," Jolley said, "we will perhaps come to know the more important reason and the only question that ever is—not whether the stories are true, but whether we are true to our stories." Lobdell finds Jolley's assertion indicative of the pathetic quality of religious apologetics. "What did that *mean*?" he asks the reader incredulously.

If it is possible to set aside the bizarre nature of Jolley's other remarks, I find Jolley's point about being true to our stories illuminating. What Lobdell misses in his

dismissal of Jolley’s cryptic claim—and of faith in general—is that everyone is true to some story, whether or not it is the story of faith. They may be true to the story that consumption satisfies desire, or that achievement is the measure of a person’s worth, or that war makes peace, or that the material world is all there is. Such stories also command allegiance, regardless of their verifiability or veracity. Fidelity to a farfetched story does not mean that Christians are wishful thinkers, as Lobdell (kindly) suggests and as Hitchens (less kindly) proclaims. It simply means that we acknowledge the story that we have chosen to honor, rather than claiming that we don’t have one.