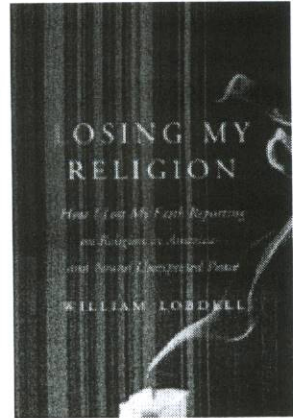


William Lobdell, *Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America - and Found Unexpected Peace*. New York, NY. HarperCollins, 2009. 291 pages with index. \$25.99, hardback. ISBN: 978-0-06-162681-4



The current religious landscape, in our comfortable western hemisphere, is sadly riddled by not only unfortunate potholes, but also by gaping chasms large enough to swallow a dump truck. This allows those who critique current formulations of Christianity an incredible amount of latitude.

One of the most recent critics is William Lobdell. He is an engaging, award winning, religious writer for the *Los Angeles Times* who is now a popular blogger, speaker, college lecturer and media consultant for those favoring an Atheistic worldview. In this book, his religious autobiography, he takes a wide sampling of religious hypocrites and concludes with a summary dismissal of theism generally and the God of Christianity specifically.

Lobdell was raised as a reluctant, yet dutiful Episcopalian. He became particularly disillusioned, as many teenagers do, at about seventeen years of age, and left the church altogether. At age twenty-two, he married his childhood sweetheart and five years later sought a divorce, but not before getting a girlfriend pregnant. He then shares with the reader how he regrets cheating on this pregnant girlfriend, but marries her after his child was born and his first divorce finalized. By twenty-eight, because of this behavior, he reports being thoroughly disgusted with his life.

At the suggestion of a friend he decided to attend a mega-church, driven by “felt-needs” and a theatrically polished leadership style. According to Lobdell, the church offered a Christianity promoting an unconditional love from God and a life style that promised the better things in life, which he reports he clearly lacked. This eventually culminates with a “conversion” experience while at a Christian men’s retreat. He reports having had a tingling warm sensation across his chest and an emotional encounter with others who “congratulated me on making the best decision of my life, one that would have eternal consequences.”

Lobdell’s career in journalism had begun, years prior, back in the 80’s. His career took a huge leap forward with a position at the *Los Angeles Times*, eventually landing him a religion column. This leads him into investigative contact with Evangelical mega-church pastors, best-selling religious authors, televangelists, Mormons and a host of others. Following a disillusioned decade in the Evangelical community he gave serious consideration to membership in the Roman Catholic Church. Over time his investigative reporting of Catholic priest’s pedophilia finally brings him to a rejection of all things religious. This “coming out of the closet,” as he describes it, came in the form of writing in the *Los Angeles Times* describing his own fifteen-plus years’ adventure into and out of Christianity.

Lobdell’s repetitive theme, his epistemic mantra, is that he has experienced the broad spectrum of Christendom. He felt the pain people have experienced within its boundaries, seeing the corruption and duplicitous behavior and this, brought the unavoidable conclusion that there is no Christian God. Throughout Lobdell’s book he reiterates his integrity, as an investigative reporter,

and his extreme attempt to be personally honest above all else. Following his exodus from things religious, his self-professed “savior” becomes radio talk show host Howard Stern, of shock jock fame.

Where does one begin to critique this well written and yet seductive literary work? We should not be flippantly dismissive when issues of various forms of abuse, duplicity and disappointment surface. If people are of incredible worth and issues of Truth are vitally important, then Lobdell and others with similar experiences are in need of serious answers to their serious questions. Lobdell's book raises many important questions and I suggest a few answers to four of them:

1. Does the weight or breadth of experience by itself necessarily provide sufficient reason for determining what is true? Our experiences should not be ignored, but they need to have their proper place in the order of determining what is true. One needs to start with truth, truth that is held together by specific stated propositions. No doubt our emotional reaction counts, but only as it submits itself to that which is true. It is neither the intellect nor experience alone, but intellect and experience *properly* related. An excellent book addressing postmodern views of truth compared with the historic Christian perspective on truth is *Truth Decay* by Dr. Doug Groothuis.
2. Isn't sincerity a test for truth? Adolph Hitler was sincere. It is possible to be sincere yet mistaken. Furthermore, who or what is to mediate between differing sincerely-held beliefs? Popular vote? As history has shown, the majority vote sometimes can be very wrong. The presence of a greater power? That certainly wasn't advantageous for those negatively affected by Hitler.
3. Do behavioral inconsistencies, in *our* perspective of what is Christian, invalidate Christian belief as a whole? Consistency is an important determinate for truth, but in itself it is not sufficient. Even if every professing believer Lobdell met in Christian churches were flaming hypocrites that would not show that the historic Truth of the Gospel was invalid. Rather, it would confirm what the Bible says about hypocrites. Inconsistent believers or mere professors of belief invalidate their profession, not the content believed. Jesus made this clear enough when he said that “by their fruits you will know them.” He did not say, by their profession you will know them.
4. Is not what is subjectively true to us and our immediate community all that truly matters? In telling his story, Lobdell centers on his feelings, his personal perception of reality and on the importance of how it relates to his journalistic community. The authenticity of the biblical documents and the historicity of 2000+ years of the positive effects of Christianity on humankind are not seriously considered. These facts are ignored by Lobdell. In this, he is guilty of selective citing of his sources.

If he is going to legitimately dismiss Christianity he needs to make valid arguments. He fails to do this. We have all had bad experiences and disappointments within religious environments. The apostle Paul had plenty of bad religious experiences and disappointments, but this had no bearing on the truth of his beliefs and what he taught. In actual fact, Paul contends that they had just the opposite effect on him and by implication for us as well (Rom. 8:35-39).

This book reflects both well-articulated and also implied questions that are present in the minds of both believers and non-believers. Lobdell does us a service in clearly identifying these

concerns and experiences. That said, Christianity has nothing to fear from Lobdell's arbitrary assertions and unwarranted conclusions. Open and honest dialogue can be incredibly helpful for our minds as well as our souls.

Books such as *SoulCraft: How God Shapes Us Through Relationships* by Douglas D. Webster; *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience* by Ranald Macaulay & Jerram Barrs; *True Spirituality* by Francis Schaeffer and *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen have provided considerable assistance to those struggling with issues of religious disillusionment and disappointment. Additionally, it is certainly not the case that the Bible has nothing to say on these topics. Much within the Bible speaks directly to the topic of abusive religion. As even Lobdell points out in chapter 10, *Millstones Around Their Necks*, Jesus had plenty to say about the religious abuse of others. The Bible provides us legitimate hope that religious abuse will be brought to light (II Tim. 3:1-9) and restoration from the hands of religious abusers and charlatans is not only possible, but assured (I Tim.4:1-16).

No matter how large the proverbial potholes are in our religious landscape, they need to be thoughtfully filled *and* the result must be existentially satisfying. Similarly, it is absolutely true that religious abuse and disappointment should be identified and addressed. Merely promoting our personal life-experiences and a self-avowed earnest integrity do not assist us in our search for an authentic relationship with the God of the Bible.

Finally, if the God of the Bible exists at all, He must necessarily be more than a "religious" addition to a secular humanistic understanding of experience. The God of the Bible requires that we intellectually *and* emotively relate to Him, on His terms, rather than insisting that He comply with our dictates and feelings. It is only then, that religious abuse, disappointment and disillusionment can be fully understood and authentic healing can begin to take place. In varying degrees, don't we all need to attend to these matters?

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