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CHEERFUL HERESY IS STILL...HERETICAL

a book review of

Finding God in the Waves: Why I Left My Faith and Found It Again through Science

by Mike McHargue

(Convergent Books, 2016)

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“Heresy” is a scary word. Say it out loud a few times, and the images and associations the word brings to mind aren’t exactly comforting. Perhaps for that reason, in our era of nonjudgmental safe spaces, unconditional lifestyle affirmations, and unreflective cultural relativism, we hear almost nothing about heresy, and equally little about its logical opposite, orthodoxy. Calling any view “heretical” seems a harsh judgment, and who are we to judge?

But the history of Christianity has been defined by the mortal threat of heresy. When one recites the Nicene Creed (AD 325), an action rarely if ever performed in evangelical megachurches, one expresses the hard-won propositional content of the Christian faith, defined over against the wide range of possible — but nonetheless erroneous — theologies, which challenged early Christians. A theology in which Jesus is a created being (Arianism), for instance, is a heresy. Sorry about that, but if Jesus were created, He is not God. A theology in which physical matter is evil (Gnosticism) is a heresy. In short, Christianity is not compatible with all possibilities, because it makes a big (as in, *total*) difference to the truth claims of Christianity if, for example, Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead. Christianity would simply not exist today if the apostles

and church fathers had been “nonjudgmental” about propositional logic, statements of historical fact, and condemnations of falsehood.

Finding God in the Waves (hereafter, *Waves*) is a nonjudgmental book, which its author, Mike McHargue (better known as “Science Mike”), takes to be a good thing, all in all. McHargue is a self-educated science popularizer and speaker who hosts two podcasts, *Ask Science Mike* and *The Liturgists*, where he seeks to reconcile science and faith.

Waves opens by recounting McHargue’s difficult childhood, when he was ostracized for his chubby lack of athleticism and general geekdom, a painful rejection he mitigated by burrowing into computers, and conversations with God, alone in the woods at the edge of the school playground. It’s a story any lonely Christian nerd will know all too well. McHargue outgrew his geekiness, however, by gaining lean height in adolescence, joining a rock band, mastering technology and science, and finding a girlfriend, Jenny, who later became his wife. But his personal odyssey was only just beginning.

Unexpectedly, McHargue’s father announced that after thirty years of marriage, he was leaving McHargue’s mother for another woman. In trying to counsel his father, McHargue began an intensive study of the Bible. This, along with reading atheist books such as Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, destroyed McHargue’s childhood Southern Baptist faith. McHargue identifies “science” as the chief battering ram in this process, although (as I explain below), a better name for this faithdestroyer would be philosophical materialism.

McHargue eventually realized that he was not only no longer a Christian but also wasn’t even a theist. For two years, while still attending church with his family, McHargue kept his atheism a secret. Finally, he told his wife, who told his mother.

The Road to Another God. The next chapter of McHargue’s story is quite dramatic, and *Waves* tells it compellingly. Invited to attend a private spiritual retreat led by the former Mars Hill pastor Rob Bell, McHargue finds himself welcomed despite his atheism, and his skeptical criticisms of Christianity are listened to with genuine compassion. He then undergoes a powerful mystical experience on a California beach — the “waves” of the book’s title — and starts a long journey back to God.

Except “back” isn’t the correct adverb here, not by a long shot. Nor, for that matter, is “God” the correct proper noun, at least as Christians historically have understood what that name means. McHargue decides that he must construct a new faith for himself that makes sense first on scientific grounds. This is so that when (for instance) he says, “I believe in God,” the meaning he assigns to “God” is fully consistent

with, and indeed derives from, a scientific understanding of the universe. Thus, when McHargue writes in the subtitle of *Waves* that the book describes “how I lost my faith and found it again through science,” what he finds “again” was *not* what he lost after reading *The God Delusion*. In no sense did McHargue return to Christianity. Rather, he found, or constructed for himself, another God entirely.

Because this point is so critical to understanding McHargue’s project, we should consider a helpful analogy. Imagine a married couple who go through an exceedingly painful breakup that leads to divorce. Years pass, they move to different cities, and then one day they happen to run into each other at a resort. To the surprise of both, their love is rekindled, and they end up marrying again. In this hypothetical episode, the man and woman really do *go back* to each other and regain their lost love. But we can tell the story another way. Same couple, same divorce — but no chance meeting this time; each remarries another person. It would be flat-out false to say they went “back” to each other, because they didn’t.

Many Christians have gone through a spiritual wilderness so bleak and so dry and for so long that their faith dwindles seemingly to nonexistence. But God draws them back to Himself, and they joyfully rediscover their love for Him.

That is not McHargue’s story of return, and he knows it. The “God” that McHargue formulates for himself after his mystical beach experience isn’t remotely close to the biblical God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but, as McHargue writes, “I didn’t care” (p. 149). Science ultimately determines the shape of reality, so any God must fit within that picture: “Cosmology gave me an understanding of God that could pass my own skepticism. This was the God of Einstein, a God who can be found in the orderly, elegant mechanics of the cosmos. I was under no illusions that this God was close to anything resembling Christian orthodoxy — in fact, I knew this idea of God was decidedly heretical to many Christians” (149). Here is how McHargue now defines “God”: “God is *at least* the set of forces that created and sustain the universe” (150, emphasis in original). Let’s substitute that definition of “God” into John 1:1, replacing the personal Logos (the “Word”), which yields this result: “In the beginning was the set of forces that created the universe, and they were with the set of forces that created the universe, and they were the set of forces that created the universe.” No atheist could possibly complain about that version of the Gospel of John — which for McHargue, I fear, is precisely the point.

No One Can Serve Two Masters. Every Christian doctrine undergoes McHargue’s “science is the boss now” redefinition program. Take Jesus, for example: “Jesus is *at least* a man so connected to God that He was called the Son of God” (201, emphasis in

original). Well, did the man Jesus rise from the dead on the third day? McHargue can't say — "I don't know for sure whether Jesus rose from the dead" (202), he admits — but that historical claim, at the center of Christian faith for two millennia, doesn't matter in the end: "You can be skeptical about the Resurrection of Jesus and still have an encounter with Jesus that's life-changing. Experiments verify this: In brain scans, many Christians show the characteristic brain activity of people who view the world as basically safe....Jesus lives in my anterior cingulate cortex, the seat of compassion" (201). Brain scans? The anterior cingulate cortex? "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14 NIV). There is no need to consult neuroscience on this one.

McHargue and I have never met, but if I could treat him to a couple of beers and a long conversation, I'd ask about his understanding of "science." I love science as much as McHargue professes to, but I don't grant it the epistemic (knowledge-determining) authority that he does, because he and I assign different senses to the word. "Science" for me is a useful but fallible instrument whose history is marked by one crashed theory after another. The whole of reality, however, extends far beyond what our fallible scientific theories tell us. Thank God (literally) for that.

Or, to put the same point another way, what McHargue calls science is actually better named "philosophical materialism" or "naturalism" — a dictatorial (i.e., intellectually and spiritually totalitarian) philosophy that sets itself up against the kingdom of God. Naturalism — the primacy of matter and energy, not mind or spirit — is not content to capture the origin of the universe, or galaxies, or the sun and Earth, or life and organisms: it wants *everything* under its sway, including your first-person consciousness, your moral sense, and indeed your religious or spiritual experiences, whatever they may be. *Waves* is a perfect, tragic example of what happens to one's spiritual life once naturalism takes over. All truth claims must be made subordinate to, and rendered in terms of, its authority. And because no one can serve two masters, the soul disappears, as does God Himself, eventually.

So, if McHargue and I could talk, I'd show him the healthy disrespect I've developed for science, by which I mean that science — as useful an instrument as humans ever have discovered for understanding and controlling nature — nonetheless must know its demonstrably imperfect place in the whole of reality. We could start by taking apart evolutionary theory, for instance, and in so doing, we would discover jointly that the strength he ascribes to that theory as science (Latin *scientia*: knowledge) is much better seen as the illegitimate philosophical power grab of naturalism. Maybe McHargue is happy with his new boss, however. I know that I wouldn't be.

But let me end on an optimistic note. "My sheep hear My voice," says Jesus, "and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27–28 NASB). Although not all

Christians agree with me here, I believe that if McHargue was known by God before his journey into atheism, God knows him still, and will never let him go. And that means that McHargue's spiritual odyssey must continue until he finds his place truly back in the flock of his Shepherd. *Waves* would then represent only a confused middle chapter in a long, *long* story, with the thrilling finish yet to come. —*Paul Nelson*

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