



Why You Won't Go To Hell

Benjamin Vande Weerdhof Andrews

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This spirited book that defends reason and rejects the supernatural stands to suit the audiences of Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

"We can be good without God," Benjamin Vande Weerdhof Andrews declares in his first book, *Why You Won't Go to Hell*. Andrews's answer to the title's implied question is that hell doesn't exist, nor does heaven or any other supernatural realm. In his well-structured argument, Andrews prizes empirical thinking, rejects some central claims of Christianity and other religions, and affirms the possibility of godless morality.

Andrews moved from the Netherlands to Canada as a young man. He was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church but now considers himself a nonbeliever. A retired high school teacher, he started a website exploring issues of reason and religion to encourage "closet nonbelievers" to actively question received knowledge. Using Occam's razor, he argues that we must reject the notion of the supernatural. All experience has a natural basis; religion arose at the start of human society as a means of explaining things we don't understand, a role that science now fills.

Andrews's central thesis is that religion doesn't evolve to keep pace with society, and, in that sense—unlike science—it holds humanity back. However, he concedes that religion has accomplished some good things, such as establishing moral guidelines for sexuality. A few blanket statements do not reflect that sense of fairness, though, like "when was the last time that religion built an airplane or a church designed a cell phone?" Such instances employ shaky paradigms and seem to expect religions to answer inappropriate sets of questions. The book also fails to acknowledge the diversity of opinions even within religions.

Nevertheless, the author's points are well worth considering. He suggests credible natural explanations for supposedly supernatural phenomena. Religious visions might be caused by epilepsy; answered prayers could simply be coincidence. However, there are also a few instances of inaccuracy, such as a reference to one of the Ten Commandments as a "prayer." The text also includes occasional typos, odd wording, and repetition.

The book's tone is too often defensive, often in response to included website comments. Although the comments and replies add an interesting back-and-forth element, these passages, along with quotes from Wikipedia and other authors, could be shortened. By contrast, two stand-out chapters set up theoretical debates between believer and atheist positions and natural and supernatural outlooks. Here, the dialogic format works much better.

Ultimately, this could be an inspirational book for atheists or believers, prompting both groups to question their assumptions and be willing to say "I don't know." Whether the author's conclusion that "when the brain dies, awareness dies" is correct or not, his carpe-diem message is something anyone can benefit from. Readers of Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens will be particularly drawn to the book, but others should take a chance on it too.

REBECCA FOSTER (December 7, 2015)

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