

A Superb Defense of Atheism

A Book Review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity, by John W. Loftus (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2012, ISBN 978-1-59012-592-4) 428 pp. Paper \$21.00

John W. Loftus, a former Christian minister, demolishes some of the best defenses of theism imaginable. Like former preacher and superb debater Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and many other former preachers, Loftus struggled with the fact that he was losing faith. However, he felt intellectually compelled and morally obligated to follow the evidence where it led.

This book is reminiscent of other excellent books on atheism such as *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, by Michael Martin, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, by George Smith, and *The Atheist Debater's Handbook*, by B.C. Johnson. Loftus is well-read in atheist philosophy, Christian apologetics, the historicity of Jesus, the history of the Bible, the works of other New Atheists, etc.

On the problem of evil (or suffering), Loftus quotes atheist debater Corey Washington as follows: "...if God is omnibenevolent, God will not have any more harm in this world than is necessary for accomplishing greater goods." However, even this contention does not seem to adequately address what theists are arguing. They are arguing that God is *perfectly* good – not merely very good, amazingly good, spectacularly good, etc. If God is perfectly good, he could not ever be ultimately responsible for any harm or evil whatsoever, no matter how seemingly small. To talk of God permitting suffering or evil for supposedly higher goods is to talk of a God that cannot be perfectly good, because no harm or evil whatsoever can come from that which is perfectly good, for any reason or extenuating circumstance. There seems to be no other major thinker – including Loftus – that has taken theists to account on this problem. Perfectly good beings – by definition – simply cannot permit suffering or evil to exist for any reason.

Loftus brilliantly demolishes the free will defense. He writes:

The giver of a gift is blameworthy if he gives gifts to those whom he knows will terribly abuse those gifts. Any mother who gives a razor blade to a two-year old is culpable if that child hurts himself or others with it. Good mothers give their children more and more freedom to do what they want so long as they are responsible with their freedom. And if children abuse the freedom, their mothers will discipline them by taking away their opportunities to make choices. It's that simple.

Similarly, a sensible, humane God would not give human beings the "gift" of free will knowing full well that it would inevitably lead to slavery, genocide, torture, rape, sexual abuse, White supremacy, sexism, etc. To do so would only mean that he prizes free will over the safety and welfare of the earthly children he professes to love. That does not make for a very good parent, heavenly or otherwise.

The author also exposes the cowardly double standards that many theists embrace when trying to rationalize their faith. For example, God apparently believes that free will is among the highest goods. Yet Loftus writes:

If free will has such an intrinsic value to God and is such a good thing, then why is it we don't hold it to be so valuable in our own human societies? According to [A.M. Weisberger on p. 64 of his book *Suffering Belief*]: "We do not normally hold freedom to be intrinsically valuable, as evidenced in the willingness we show to limit our freedom to achieve goods, and especially when such freedom gives rise to suffering. . . . The prevention of heinous crimes, even if such prevention limits another's exercise of free will, improves the world."

Indeed, we think nothing of limiting the free will of would-be murderers, rapists, child abusers, arsonists, etc. Yet theists try to defend the idea that it is somehow wonderful that God does not do likewise. It seems that we human beings are better than the God that we are expected to worship.

Loftus does an excellent job of addressing some of the strongest arguments of the slick talking Christian apologist William Lane Craig. Craig goes so far as to argue that Israelites were morally justified in slaughtering men, women, toddlers and infants because the command to do so supposedly came from God. However, any such slaughter not condoned by God, Craig deems morally unacceptable. For Craig, divine might makes right, and Loftus shows how ridiculous such a view is.

Loftus also does a fantastic job demolishing the design argument, ontological arguments, cosmological arguments, etc. Theists can run from Loftus' intellect, but they cannot hide. This book belongs on the book shelf of every serious atheist thinker.