A Life of Chance Encounters

Bernard Schweizer on misotheism, rebellion, and happy coincidences.

By MEREL VAN BEEREN



Bernard Schweizer at Junior's in Brooklyn – photo by Merel van Beeren.

BERNARD SCHWEIZER does not hate God. Because really, how could someone hate a fictional character? A secular humanist himself, Schweizer stumbled across a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked in science and daily life: believers who hate God, but cannot give up on His existence. Unable to find an accurate word for it, he coined the term 'misotheism' – hatred of God. It became the subject of his book *Hating God: the Untold Story of Misotheism*, an analysis of the subject through six authors and their literary works.

"Literature is this great reserve for rebels. That's where those who have no other place to act out their rebellion go."

The Swiss-born Schweizer, 49, is a professor of English at Long Island University (LIU) in Brooklyn. He is a meticulous scholar and a well-prepared teacher, but his work and personal life are mostly based on serendipitous events. He grew up in Switzerland, the younger son of a Swiss Protestant watchmaker father and a

Dutch Catholic mother, and traveled to the United States in the early 1990s, following the love of his life. He first encountered the unfamiliar phenomenon of misotheism while reading a work by Rebecca West, a 20th century British author, and Philip Pullman's famous fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The combination of the intense hatred he found in or between the lines fascinated him, and when his research led him to find more examples, he was soon hooked by these rebels against God.

Apart from devoting chapters to West, who was a journalist, travel writer, and intellectual, and Pullman, a best-selling fantasy author and also writer of a fictional biography of Jesus, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, one of the other authors Schweizer focuses on is Elie Wiesel. The famous chronicler of the Holocaust experience, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, felt a deep anger at God after the traumatizing events of the Second World War. However, Schweizer admits, "Wiesel's antagonistic religiosity, his blaspheming attacks against God, and his doubts about divine treachery and malevolence gradually weakened as he grew older."

The history of misotheism links today's authors to the likes of Epicurus, Karl Marx, and even the biblical Book of Job. Though the phenomenon is present in many parts of life, "language is indeed the misotheist's greatest trump, his source of power over the gods and his claim to ultimate autonomy," Schweizer writes, and thus, he argues, best described by looking at literature.

SCHWEIZER WENT TO SUNDAY SCHOOL as a child, and was even confirmed at the age of 14, but "it never caught on." Rebellion wasn't necessary – his father's faith had its ups and downs, and his mother had higher esteem for moral behavior than for religion in general. "She tells people sometimes that she has two atheist sons who are better Christians than most Christians," Schweizer said. Having first worked as a druggist's apprentice, the path his parents set out for him, Schweizer changed course and went on to pursue a regular high school diploma instead. After graduation, he felt lost and opted for the one thing that he felt would be able to sort him out: travel.

Having just disembarked from the Trans-Siberian Railway, Schweizer and his travel companion found themselves in an overcrowded bus in Beijing, not having a clue where to go next. With the help of a young Chinese woman, they managed to get an affordable hotel. Soon after, Schweizer fell ill, and it was almost a week later that he was finally able to go out again. Picking one of the least crowded tourist attractions, an ancient observatory somewhere in the city, the boys bumped into the same woman again. "Only then, the second time around, did we exchange information," he said, smiling. "A stroke of luck."

Dr. Liang Schweizer, a scientist at Bristol-Myers Squibb, vividly remembers the day she first met her husband on that crowded bus. "He seemed shy, and had a limited knowledge of English, but looked very trustworthy."

After they had spent a Christmas together in Switzerland, Liang gave him an ultimatum: if he wanted to be with her, he was going to have to move the United States, where she was a graduate student at the time. Schweizer obeyed. They've been married for twenty years now, and have a 17-year-old daughter.

ANOTHER CHANCE ENCOUNTER was his introduction to Rebecca West, the focus of the largest part of his life's work. Writing his dissertation at Duke University about British travel writing in the 1930s, he focused on writers like Graham Greene and George Orwell, but felt like he needed an additional author. His boss at his work-study program happened to have read *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941) by Rebecca West, a travel book about Yugoslavia, and suggested it to Schweizer. West's work appealed straight away, mostly because of its eclecticism. "She's always kind of shape-shifting. One minute she's a a historian, then she's a philosopher, the next she's a polemicist."

Though a member of Duke's Ph.D. program in English, he finished his dissertation at the University of Zürich. Still in Switzerland, he applied for a grant to write and do research about the female epic in literature, of which Rebecca West would be the center. The grant provided him with the opportunity to devote two whole years to the project, and to work with a huge pile of unedited material that she had left behind. "It was brilliant, but completely messy and uneditable," said Schweizer.

Thanks to Schweizer's hard work, that messy pile would finally become *Survivors in Mexico*, a travel memoir and history of Mexico. "I was astonished that someone could put together, more or less, an incomplete book," said Carl Rollyson, biographer of Rebecca West, and the first president of the Rebecca West Society, founded by Schweizer in 2003, the same year *Survivors* finally came out.

Helen Atkinson, a Scottish-born writer and the great-niece of Rebecca West, concurs. "Bernard did a flat-out jaw-dropping job of taking the literary equivalent of a tangled ball of knitting and making my great aunt's unfinished book about Mexico into a readable manuscript." Atkinson became co-executor of Rebecca West's literary estate and became involved with the creation of the society. Starting in Schweizer's house, he catered the first conference himself, and has slowly made the society bigger and more widely known.

AS A PROFESSOR at LIU, Schweizer currently teaches three different classes. They cover composition and overviews of both American and European literature, but he personally specializes in British literature of the 20th and 21st centuries. "The Happiness Problem," Schweizer's freshman composition class, is host to a very mixed group of students. Some sit back in silence, while others are eager to be called on. The sometimes uncomfortable atmosphere in the classroom is lightened by Schweizer's goofy enthusiasm. Walking to the

classroom, he shows me around LIU's English department, pointing out the bookcases he donated once – now jokingly referred to as the "Schweizer Schelves."

An important factor in Schweizer's work is the internet. Apart from having checked his sales statistics on Amazon almost religiously for a while, he believes the online audience is important to improve access to academic knowledge. He launched a website to accompany the publication of Hating God and has been blogging about the subject regularly since; he also writes frequently at Religion Dispatches, and had a piece featured on CNN.com's Belief Blog. "Blogging brings academics back to a larger audience, and helps them find their voice, a little more popular sort of voice," Schweizer said, dismissing the time when writing obscurely was a badge of honor.

More importantly, the internet was what led him to realize the importance of studying misotheism. In 2001, a Google-search for the term gave him no returns. By 2007, Wikipedia devoted a page to the phenomenon, which set the record straight: Schweizer did not coin the term misotheism. It was already used by 19th century author Thomas De Quincey, and appeared in the 1913 Webster's dictionary, but in no subsequent edition.

Despite this discovery, Schweizer remains fascinated, and perhaps even because of it. Today, the same Google-search elicits over 18,000 results. Interest in misotheism is, apparently, booming. Besides that, he has a tremendous respect for misotheistic writers who were – or are – genuinely upset with a God that puts the world through so much hardship. They were often unaware of their own struggle or had to hide their anger from a hostile world. "I admire the fact that they are great humanists and artists and use their inspiration to create great works. This kind of rebellion is an engine of their creative imagination."

Hating God has had mixed reviews. Sealy Gilles, Schweizer's supervisor at LIU, admires the fact that it crosses religious and cultural boundaries. "It deals with a 'hot' topic in a 'cool' way!' Gilles wrote to me in an e-mail. Yvonne Zipp at the online Washington Post, however, was unconvinced of the novelty of the subject, and writes that "Schweizer's insistence that his work is groundbreaking gets tiring." Jake Meador in a review for Books and Culture believes the book is "burdened by an overblown thesis," and states that the phenomenon of misotheism "is hardly an anonymous, unknown tradition in Western literature. "If it were, one would expect Schweizer to find far more obscure writers to develop his case."

While Schweizer agrees that the phenomenon is not new, he does maintain that its story is, in fact, untold. "Misotheism hides in plain sight. People tend not to see what they don't have a name for, so misotheism often doesn't register for what it is."

Schweizer is sure that he will continue to work on the subject of misotheism, though for now, he'll work on atheism: Oxford University Press has invited him to write the entry on religion in the Oxford Handbook of Atheism.

"But I'll try not to insist too much on doing groundbreaking work anymore, because apparently that ticks people off!" he said, laughing, while finishing his apple pie.

"Hating God" was published by Oxford University Press in December 2010.