



## Elitist Atheist Warren A. Smith Makes A-List-Who's Who in Hell

by Frank DiGiacomo

**Warren Allen Smith** stood in his cramped Greenwich Village studio apartment and recalled the time he scared the heck out of Gore Vidal. It was 1995, Mr. **Smith** said, and Mr. Vidal was making an appearance at Barnes & Noble on Union Square. After waiting in line to meet the author of Myra Breckenridge and Live from Golgotha, Mr. **Smith** made his move.

"I went up to him and said, 'Hey, you and I are in love with the same man!' And I was serious." Mr. **Smith**, who says he's 77 though his book has him born in 1921, crinkled his eyes and flashed a sly smile. He wore stylish neo-retro half-rim glasses and, from the neck up, looked like a well-kept Buck Henry. Neck down, he was channeling Ed Grimley, his dark work pants riding high on a reddish-orange, plaid-patterned work shirt. Hanging from a bookshelf behind him was a sash that read "Stonewall Veteran." Next to the window was a telescope pointed, he had said earlier, at the Archives building, where Monica Lewinsky now lives.

"The publisher's representative came running over and all these people were staring at me, wondering 'Is he going to pull out something?'" Instead, Mr. **Smith** popped the name of his and Mr. Vidal's mutual crush: "Lucretius." The Roman poet and philosopher who wrote "Nothing can be created out of nothing" and "So much wrong could religion induce," and whom Mr. Vidal has cited as an influence.

"He loved it," Mr. **Smith** said of Mr. Vidal's reaction. And the smile on Mr. **Smith**'s face said that he loved it, too. He had raised a ruckus, gotten some attention.

Mr. **Smith** should have all the attention he wants once the God-fearing folk of this country and their well-funded organizations get wind of his life's work.

Ever since he received a fateful letter from Magic Mountain author Thomas Mann in 1948, Mr. **Smith** has toiled away here in the heart of Sodom, compiling reams of research on the people who, like himself, either don't believe in God, question

God's existence, or, at very least, are skeptical of all organized religions. The first 50 years or so of Mr. **Smith's** research constituted a labor of love, of the nontheistic variety, but after getting a computer around 1990, Mr. **Smith** began to think that maybe he had a book.

Lyle Stuart, longtime nonbeliever and notoriously anti-establishment owner of Barricade Books, agreed, and on July 10 his imprint published Mr. **Smith's** 1,237-page tome, *Who's Who in Hell: A Handbook and International Directory for Humanists, Freethinkers, Naturalists, Rationalists and Non-Theists*. The book's list price is \$125, which may come as a relief to believers. Then again, Amazon.com is selling it for \$100.

The entries in Mr. **Smith's** encyclopedia-like book, which are a mixture of names and subjects such as "Unitarianism" and "Atheism," appear in a series of font styles and sizes. They are arranged alphabetically, each new section topped with a flame-licked letter. As he writes on the Contents page, "the contents of most interest to freethinkers is in bold face and size 10 font," "that which is of marginal interest to freethinkers is in smaller size 9 font," and "other items of related interest but better researched elsewhere, are in size 7 font."

"The size of the entries is not an indication of a person's or a subject's importance," writes Mr. **Smith**.

Hence, the writer Christopher Hitchens, who is identified as a "non-theist," gets the boldface, big-type treatment, while, on the same page, Adolf Hitler appears in miniscule type.

"He was a Catholic," Mr. **Smith** said with a Cheshire grin.

So who else resides in Mr. **Smith's** Hell ?

More than 10,000 names, according to the author's count, including Manhattan director Woody Allen, a self-described agnostic with "one foot in atheism," according to his entry; humorist Steve Allen; billionaire **Warren** Buffett, agnostic; Microsoft's Bill Gates; The Silver Chalice co-star Paul Newman; Die Hard franchise Bruce Willis; The Perfect Storm heartthrob George Clooney—doesn't believe in Heaven and Hell, not sure if he believes in God; artists Lucian Freud, "not a believer in the various organized religions"; Frida Kahlo, atheist; Matisse; astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble; writers Samuel Clemens, Charles Dickens, Tony Kushner, Camille Paglia, atheist; Joyce Carol Oates; Harold Pinter; Will Self; Mr. Vidal; H.G. Wells; New York Times owner Arthur Ochs (Punch) Sulzberger Jr.; Simpsons creator Matt Groening, agnostic; columnists Russell Baker, skeptic, Molly Ivins, non-theist; musicians Billy Joel, atheist; Michael Stipe, doesn't believe in God; Barry Manilow, who once when asked if he believed

in God, replied, "Yes. His name is Clive Davis, and he's the head of my record company"; radio talk-show host Howard Stern; director Nora Ephron, who is included, not because she's responsible for *You've Got Mail*, but because, according to *Who's Who in Hell*, she told the *Daily News* in 1997 that she was not a believer in God "in a formal sense."

And there on page 1,026 is an entry for Mr. **Smith**, where he describes himself as a "roué and a sybarite," a signer of both the *Humanist Manifesto II* and the *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, where he recounts how he earned his own place in Hell.

Mr. **Smith** grew up in the tiny town of Minburn, Iowa, where, he told *The Observer*, he played basketball with baseball great Bob Feller and listened to Dutch Reagan calling the play-by-play on the local radio station. He said that his Dad owned a grain elevator and played for the Chicago Cubs farm team. Mr. **Smith** was raised as a Methodist and served as pianist for the local church. "Being a good Methodist, of course, I believed that miracles could occur and God could stop the sun."

But when Mr. **Smith** was in his mid-teens, the Methodist bishop visited to deliver a homily about miracles, and during a post-sermon lunch, he decided to play a prank on the minister's daughter. Mr. **Smith** said that he hid a rubber palpitator under the tablecloth and beneath the young girl's table setting, with the intention of making her bowl of oyster stew move.

"Lo and behold, the Methodist bishop sat there," Mr. **Smith** recalled. "So they were serving oyster stew and I thought what the hell."

Mr. **Smith** looked flummoxed for a moment. "Heck, not hell," he said, then explained that he usually avoided "swear words" because "they're used by the Christian and the Jewish believers."

Then Mr. **Smith** continued with his story: When he squeezed the palpitator bulb, the bowl moved and the soup inside it began to ripple.

The Minburn Methodists were amazed. "They were almost believing that a miracle had occurred. They were waiting for an oyster to show its head or something," Mr. **Smith** said. Eventually the tubing was discovered, and even though the minister's daughter thought it was funny, Mr. **Smith** said, he was ejected from the lunch.

"Then it occurred to me that one should be skeptical about miracles," he said.

And so began Mr. **Smith**'s 50-year journey through "nihilism, agnosticism, deism,

Emersonianism, pantheism, transcendentalism, Unitarian humanism of the John H. Dietrich-Curtis W. Reese vintage, free thought, rationalism, naturalistic humanism" and, most recently, "humanistic naturalism."

Asked to define humanistic naturalism, Mr. **Smith** said, "To me the important thing is the scientific method of reason. I define things using the physical and natural sciences." But, said Mr. **Smith**, "I think it was Emerson who said, 'Speak today what today you think, speak tomorrow what tomorrow you think. Even if it's the opposite of what you think today.' So, yeah, I change my viewpoint every day."

A photographer arrived to take Mr. **Smith**'s picture on the building's roof deck. On the way up in the elevator, the photographer asked Mr. **Smith** if he believes in karma. "That's wishful thinking," he replies. "One of the things about the humanists—we're looking for justice now, because when we die, we become food for the worms."

It's a hard concept to swallow from the roof deck with its spectacular views of Manhattan from a Jane Street perspective. A cool breeze carried the romantic sounds of taxis and buses from the street. "Robert DeNiro used to live next door," he said, pointing to the next penthouse.

Mr. **Smith** looks darned good for a heathen. Though he's nearing 80, he could pass for someone in his early 60's. "I do think I'm a happy person," said Mr. **Smith**. "If you're the member of an organized church group, you really have to have a guilt complex. You have to feel guilty about not loving God enough or not contributing enough money or not contributing enough to society."

Mr. **Smith** first came to New York when he was drafted by the Army and sent here before being shipped off to Europe. He said that on his dog tag, next to the word religion, it read "none."

Released from active duty, he returned to college under the G.I. Bill. He studied philosophy at the University of Chicago and then returned to the University of Northern Iowa to major in English. There, in 1948, he said he founded the first Humanist Club on any college campus.

Mr. **Smith** hitchhiked to Columbia University, where he entered graduate studies and founded a second Humanist Club, of which intellectual John Dewey was the first member. (He still has Dewey's \$1 dues check.) Lionel Trilling was the sponsor of Mr. **Smith**'s master's thesis, which sought to define humanism. Over the course of his research, Mr. **Smith** wrote to Thomas Mann. The reply he received from the author of *Dr. Faustus* was dated Dec. 23, 1948.

"In my opinion, I do not belong to any particular philosophical school, and I gladly leave it to you to classify me," Mr. Mann wrote, noting much later in the letter, "I don't believe that I may call myself a classical humanist. This intellectual form seems hardly possible any longer today. You are familiar with my comments on the subject and know that my hopes are aimed at the development of a new humanism which is no longer purely optimistic, but religiously tinted and deeply experienced in all dark aspects of life, a humanism which derives its pride from the unique and mysterious position of man between nature and mind. As I said before, I leave it to you to put a name to this my proud sympathy for the secret of man." The letter would become the beginning of the paper trail that led to *Who's Who in Hell*.

Around that time, Mr. **Smith** also met a Costa Rican student named Fernando Vargas, who would become his lover and business partner for over 40 years, until Mr. Vargas' death in 1989. "We became lovers from the first week on," said Mr. **Smith**, adding that Mr. Vargas was an atheist as well.

When the 1950's arrived "nobody was out," so to speak, "but there was a subculture here that was wild." Mr. **Smith** and Mr. Vargas were mutually non-monogamous, and Mr. **Smith** ticked off a number of his lovers by religious identification. "There was the Catholic, there was the Baptist, the Santero," he said with a flirtatious look. "One of Luis Buñuel's stars was so attracted to me that he insisted I go to Mexico City with him."

I asked Mr. **Smith** if he thought that his homosexuality had anything to do with his nonbelief. "I've really thought about that," he said, "and I don't honestly think so at all. I was in my late 20's before I really knew I was gay, and by that time, I was already a humanist."

In 1961, Mr. **Smith** and Mr. Vargas opened up an independent recording studio in the Times Square area called the Variety Sound Corporation. Mr. Vargas handled the recording, Mr. **Smith** took care of the accounting. In the more than 20 years that Variety was open, the customers included Liza Minnelli, whom Marvin Hamlisch brought in to record her first demo, Paul Simon, John Guare, Harold Prince, and for 25 years, cosmic jazzbo Sun Ra. Mr. **Smith** also taught high school English in New Canaan, Conn., and at the Bentley School in the city.

Composer David Amram, who recorded the sound cues for Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Festival at Variety, remembered that "when you'd go up there it was sometimes like spending New Year's Eve at a mental institution." But, he added, "**Warren** always had this great professorial Edwardian English gentlemen's calm."

Given the length of Mr. **Smith**'s relationship with Mr. Vargas—a portrait of the two

of them hangs in the humanist's apartment next to drawings by Picasso and Cocteau—I ask him how love fits into his humanistic naturalist world view. Love is not a subject explained by science.

"To me, love is a little difficult to explain," he said. "It must be partly chemical. My present lover and I have just been together for one year and two days. And it didn't start out as love. But it definitely is now. And I'm twice as old.

"Love, to me, consists of a variety of degrees ..." Mr. **Smith** was floundering, and then he changed the subject to sex, which certainly does fall under the natural sciences.

"Love consists sometimes of a preponderance of sex," said Mr. **Smith**. "I mean kinky sex, romantic sex and all different kinds of sex."

In Who's Who's in Hell , Mr. **Smith**'s entry on Napoleon includes information on the French emperor's penis size. In H.G. Wells' entry, one of his paramours refers to him as a "naughty boy-man."

"It's about humanity," said Mr. **Smith**. "To overlook the differences among humans is egregious. I think all these facets of human life should be brought into the open."

I do know that the book can be criticized strongly by the puritans," Mr. **Smith** said. The wind was kicking up now. "They would be aghast at this concept that you could list all these bad people. What I'm trying to say is that these are not bad people. The bad people are the ones who aren't reflective enough to get themselves into this."

When The Observer called Joe Zwillling, the director of communications for the Catholic Archdiocese of New York, to ask if he'd heard of Mr. **Smith**'s book, he replied that he had not.

"I'm not aware of it and, based on your very limited description of it, I'm not sure what its purpose is," Mr. Zwillling said. "If someone writes a book saying that there are people who don't believe in God, I'm not sure that's really news."


So far, Mr. **Smith** said, no one has protested being included in the book. The humorist Steve Allen—a friend of Mr. Stuart's who has never met Mr. **Smith**—has already purchased a copy of the book, and although he hasn't read the entire volume yet, he said that his entry is accurate. "I think it ought to be in everyone's library," Mr. Allen said.

Mr. **Smith** was up on the roof, pointing north again to where the army put him up

before shipping him off to the war in Europe. While he was waiting to leave, Mr. **Smith** remembered going to the Shubert Theater to see Mae West in Catherine Was Great and, after the show, waiting in the rain so he could get her autograph for his father. West, he said, uttered a version of her famous "Come up and see me" line. Mr. **Smith** stood still for a while, just recalling, replaying the highlights of his life.

"So things came together pretty nicely," Mr. **Smith** said, as if it were further proof that people like him—humanists and atheists and free thinkers—were not the scourge of the Western world.

"Maybe," said Mr. **Smith**, holding his arms out and looking skyward with a mysterious smile, "there is a God."

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