

## BOOK REVIEW

***Seven Types of Atheism***

by John Gray

New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, 170 pages

John Gray is a prolific writer, a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, and was erstwhile professor of politics at Oxford, visiting professor at Harvard and Yale, and professor of European thought at the London School of Economics. This short volume is so elegantly argued as to tempt a reader to highlight much of it, and to return to it again and again. The author identifies seven types of atheism, devoting one chapter to each: new atheism, secular humanism, science-religion, political religion, God-hatred, the unsentimental atheisms of George Santayana and Joseph Conrad, and mystical atheism.

Gray argues in his first chapter that the so-called “new atheisms” of the nineteenth century, marked by fierce squabbles between science and religion, were misleading on two counts: they were neither *new* nor, on close examination, strictly *atheist*. According to Gray, the debate between science and religion was a result of confusing *myths* with *theories*. “Religion is no more a primitive type of science than is art or poetry,” he notes, explaining: “Scientific inquiry answers a demand for explanation. The practice of religion expresses a need for meaning, which would remain unsatisfied even if everything could be explained” (12). Because science is unable to close the gap between facts and values (21), twentieth century populations were ravaged by horrific violence and genocide “in the service of secular faiths” (23).

The second chapter deals with secular humanism, described by Gray as “a hollowed-out version of the Christian belief in salvation in history” (7). “The widespread belief that humans are gradually improving is the central article of faith of modern humanism,” he says (24). The doctrine of progress, for long couched in the self-justifying imperial language of “civilization” (but in our time more commonly referred to as “development”), is tangible expression of the doctrine of human progress. This doctrine, Gray argues, can be traced to a shift in Christian thinking about the future—from the dire apocalypticism characterizing the first fifteen centuries of its existence, to the post-Reformation idea that, with the passage of time and the energetic efforts of enlightened believers, evil would gradually subside and Jesus would return to rule the world. “Emptied of its transcendental content, this Christian myth is the source of ... the idea that human life can be gradually improved .... cumulatively and permanently” (26). In this chapter, the writings of Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ayn Rand are used in service to Gray’s argument.

In his third chapter, Gray reflects on the twentieth century's "strange faith in science" – a faith that produced the false equation of evolution with progress and the racist ideologies that infect our social arrangements and political institutions. Faith in progress remains implicit in the creeds of modern secular thinkers, he notes, but "If progress means a 'more advanced' version of the human species, how do we know what is more or less advanced?" (65). Is progress simply the capacity to make Nature serve human ends? We are increasingly aware that such power ultimately manifests itself as the power of a select few over other human beings (66), and, even more distressing, in the degradation and perhaps irreversible and ultimately fatal exploitation of our vulnerable planet. Human beings as gods—even scientific human beings—are at least as inadequate as the gods they displace.

"Modern political religions, from Jacobinism through communism and Nazism to contemporary evangelical liberalism" (7) are the subject of Gray's fourth chapter. Christian religious readers will likely find this chapter— "Atheism, Gnosticism and Modern Political Religion" (71)—among the most convincing in the book, and will find themselves offered a fresh perspective on familiar territory. What Gray intimates throughout the book he here develops in a way that will resonate with believers. "The belief that we live in a secular age is an illusion" he argues. "If it means only that the power of the Christian churches has declined in many western countries, it is a description of fact. But secular thought"—here Gray references Jan Bockelson's Münster, Jacobinism, Bolshevism, Nazism, and Evangelical Liberalism—"is mostly composed of repressed religion" (72).

"God-Haters"—the subject of Gray's fifth chapter—such as the Marquis de Sade and William Empson, and their secular ideological counterparts Russian Nihilists and Marxists and Chinese Maoists seemed absorbed by the problem of evil, at its core a distinctively Christian way of understanding. Suffering, if inevitable, is at least infused with moral significance. Gray is evidently an admirer of William Empson, who wrestled with this conundrum throughout his life. A contemporary of George Orwell, Empson understood that "If the Christian universe is a vast torture-chamber, it is also a universe in which human suffering has moral significance.... Christianity answered a need ancient polytheism could not satisfy: it gave misery meaning and value. By taking suffering out of the realm of blind chance, Christianity imposed a responsibility on those who inflicted it" (123).

The last two chapters are stand-alone gems, in some ways at odds with the general thesis of the book. "George Santayana, an Atheist who Loved Religion" is Gray's exemplar of "Atheism without Progress." "Santayana," Gray notes, "dismissed any idea that civilization was improving.... [arguing that] Everything in this world ... is a progress towards death" (129). Although religion was natural to human beings, there was nothing inevitable about the kind of religion that a human being might adopt. This chapter concludes with a short essay on Joseph Conrad, whose confrontation with the terrible savagery of Leopold's civilizing mission in the Congo resulted in his utter rejection of the Victorian idea of progress. "Man", Conrad wrote, "is

a wicked animal. His wickedness has to be organized ... Society is essentially criminal – otherwise it would not exist” (136). The final chapter, “The Atheism of Silence”, describes “The mystical atheism of Arthur Schopenhauer” (142). Schopenhauer was deeply and articulately antagonistic to religion in general, and to Christianity in particular. He rejected the notion that history has any metaphysical meaning at all, or that human beings are somehow advancing. Gray concludes with a brief discussion of the negative theologies of Benedict Spinoza and Lev Shestov, showing how difficult it is to distinguish these from atheism.

Is it possible for atheists to expunge subliminal monotheism from their models of human meaning? Gray does not think so. Genuine abolition must, he argues, “begin by questioning the prevailing faith in humanity,” a singularity that is not likely to be jettisoned by contemporary atheists any time soon (157). As Gray explains, “Only by immersing themselves in such nonsense can they make sense of their own lives. Without it, they face panic and despair.... [Thus] Contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means.... But there is no need for panic or despair.... A godless world is as mysterious as one suffused with divinity, and the difference between the two may be less than you think” (158).

It turns out to be exasperatingly difficult for “modern” (westernized) human beings to live without monotheism. The three existential questions to which every human must find an answer continue to be: Who am I? Who is God? What does that mean?

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