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The fear of atheism was one of the dominant themes in early modern thought, and many scholars have sought to understand it, either in monographs dealing with specific thinkers or groups of thinkers, or in articles which address the phenomenon as a whole. Yet hitherto there has not been a book-length study devoted specifically to the phenomenon of ‘anti-atheism’ from the Tudor period to the early eighteenth century, and it is this that Kenneth Sheppard seeks to provide in the volume under review.

After an introduction surveying the topic in hand and dealing with the existing historiography, chapter 1 points to the concern with ‘practical’ atheism which came to the fore in the post-Reformation period, going on to illustrate the anxiety about the ‘speculative’ atheism with which the ‘practical’ variety was supposed to have had a symbiotic relationship, fuelled in part by the legacy of pagan antiquity and in part by the rise of heterodox philosophies in the early modern period itself. Chapter 2 presents the ‘confutation’ of atheist ideas in which authors engaged as a rhetorical form, which helps us to understand the genre; various contributions are analysed from the late sixteenth century onwards, including a lengthy exposition of a classic anti-atheist sermon preached in 1664 by John Tillotson. Chapters 3 and 4 deal specifically with the legacies of Epicurus and Plato, the first focussing particularly on Walter Charleton, the second on the Cambridge Platonists. After an interlude in the form of a reprint of the author’s article on the English reception of the case of the apostate, Francis Spira, originally published in The Seventeenth Century in 2012, we have a chapter on the theme of the religious foundations of political society and the supposed threat posed by atheism. The final two chapters consider the way in which the literature concerning atheism changed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Chapter 7 deals with the increasing stress on a ‘hedonist psychology’ as a response to the atheist threat; chapter 8, after a section on the newly overt radicalism represented by Charles Blount, offers an account of the thinkers who, it is claimed, reshaped the way in which the subject was approached: Locke, Bayle, Shaftesbury, and Mandeville (with a digression on Sir Richard Blackmore). Locke’s appeal to natural reason in preference to more traditional arguments; Bayle’s assertion of the possibility of virtuous atheists; Shaftesbury’s aspiration to polite critical reflection in contrast to the bigotry that had often characterised earlier apologetics; and Mandeville’s development of such ideas to see the zealous protagonists of
religion as more dangerous than the supposed atheists themselves: these, in combination, are seen to reflect the dawning of a new age.

Throughout, the book offers quite lucid expositions of the ideas of the thinkers involved, and readers will find it helpful for that. It is perhaps slightly predictable in its choice of subject matter — almost as if the author had done a word-search for titles containing the word ‘atheism’ in Early English Books Online and worked his way through them. It thus fails to engage either with livelier examples of the anti-atheist genre from the earlier part of the period such as Jeremy Corderoy’s dialogue, *A Warning to Worldlings* (1608), or with material that survives in forms other than contemporary printed books, as with Robert Boyle’s voluminous manuscript writings on the subject, published by J.J. MacIntosh in his *Boyle on Atheism* of 2005 (as it is, we get a treatment of Boyle based solely on a selection of his printed works). Though a tokenistic attempt is made to illustrate a more popular dimension in chapter 2, mainly through attention to a single broadside on the subject (with a slight echo in the Spira material in chapter 5), in general the treatment is very much of a solemn canon of learned, mainly clerical, authors. It should be added that little is done to explore the nature of the irreligious tendencies that caused concern and their symbiosis with the polemical literature here surveyed, while the anti-atheist authors themselves are often not very fully contextualised.

At the start of the account of each thinker or each specific theme that is dealt with, we are offered a listing of the existing secondary literature on the subject, which is usually fairly comprehensive, though there are occasional lapses. After this, we are generally treated simply to a summary of the arguments of the contemporary work(s) in question, and there is little interchange with existing scholarship. (Rather oddly, the one exception is John Redwood, whose flawed survey, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion* (1976) is cited more than any other modern authority, almost as if Sheppard has been ‘tracking’ the work in some way.) The effect of this general failure to engage with recent discussions of authors and themes is, at times, to give a sense of *déjà vu* to the book’s exposition, especially with canonical writers like Ralph Cudworth, whose *True Intellectual System of the Universe* is here laboriously summarised as if it might be as unfamiliar to the reader as some of the more obscure works that are dealt with.

A perhaps more serious problem which the author does not satisfactorily resolve concerns the relationship between English authors and their continental counterparts. For some reason, Pierre Bayle is unique among the latter in getting a section to himself as if he were an English writer. On the other hand, in the case of Pierre Gassendi and his attempted rehabilitation of Epicurus, his work is merely alluded to prior to a lengthy account of Walter Charleton’s *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charlttoniana* (1654), which is effectively treated