
Gavin Hyman’s *A Short History of Atheism* engages with atheism in *modern Europe* rather than atheism generally. But Hyman’s book is not primarily about twenty-first century New or Neo-Atheist “fundamentalisms” (pp. xiii–xiv), nor only about following the development of atheism as a historical phenomenon. Despite his title, Hyman is also intent on probing atheism theologically.

Hyman pens a foreword, introduction, and eight concise chapters for “general readers and students, rather than academic specialists” (p. ix). Nevertheless, *A Short History of Atheism* may be best suited for audiences who possess the relevant scholarly vocabulary. Hyman capably organizes his book around topical and historical themes. He compares early twenty-first century surges of interest in atheism with fascination for religious fundamentalisms and their purveyors.

In his first two chapters, Hyman praises previous treatments by Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and Michael J. Buckley (*At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Yale University Press, 1987), drawing on both to situate modern atheism as a reaction to or inadvertent manifestation of European Christianity. Hyman sees Denis Diderot as a pioneer among modern atheists, and Enlightenment Christians such as Descartes and Newton unwittingly informing or laying groundwork for modern atheists’ criticisms of Christianity.

Hyman next proposes that the god modern atheism rejects is an amalgamation of Aquinas’ ‘negative theology’ (explaining who or what is God by asserting what God is not), and Kant’s construal of God as “unknowable in rational terms […]. Insofar as God can be known at all, this is only at the level of practical knowledge, by means of regulative ideals” (p. 61).

In his fourth chapter, “The Theological Origins of Modern Atheism,” Hyman purports that this “unknowable” God, or a God known only *via negativa*, was “vulnerable to atheistic attack” (p. 62) and easily ridiculed as subjective projection or wishful thinking by the likes of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. This vulnerability materialized in modern theology when “God’s *ontological* transcendence became an *epistemological* transcendence” (pp. 70, 191), even though God being or possessing transcendence did not *ipso facto* require God must be utterly unknowable to God’s creatures.

Chapter 5, “Atheism and the Rise of Biblical Criticism,” surveys nineteenth-century “higher criticism,” which claimed to “treat the Bible in the same manner as any other object of scholarly inquiry” (p. 91). ‘Higher critical’ methods were subsequently employed to undermine traditional historical and theological beliefs about the Bible and its authors, and were combined with vociferous condemnations against ‘literal’ plain or common sense readings of the Bible. Modern atheists
proclaimed the ‘higher’ wave of biblical scholarship demonstrated why and how many biblical narratives could not be true or good.

Hyman also outlines historic and contemporary dissent to these modern atheist assessments. For example, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams declared that even “literal” readings could accommodate “a plurality of [textual] genres [...] it is the failure to see and to develop this insight that has led to those narrow and sterile definitions of the literal sense against which recent hermeneutics has so sharply reacted” (pp. 99, 195). Hyman adds that, historically, “Literal reading of scripture is attentive to the genres of metaphor, allegory and typology within it, and by no means entails that its narratives are historical descriptions.” For the Bible’s defenders, “more nuanced readings of scripture are more theologically rewarding and revealing, and are more in line with the orthodox tradition itself” (p. 100). Therefore, abandoning crass literal readings of Scripture passages that in context do not lend themselves to literal (nor in some cases, historical) interpretations need not entail unbelief according to myriads of religious believers who have recognized varied literary genres in their holy scriptures for millennia, and who promote cognizance of context and genre as crucial to a robust hermeneutics enriching theology, literary comprehension, and religious faith.

Chapter six, “Atheism and the Rise of Science,” concentrates on modern atheists championing Darwin as threatening to theistic belief, a phenomenon that Hyman appears to depict as perplexing. One reason for perplexity is that religious believers initially and continually have held or promoted a vast range of attitudes about Darwin. Darwin’s friend Asa Gray, for instance, was Darwin’s most vocal American supporter and a devout Christian who was “head of the Herbarium at Harvard” (p. 112). Modern atheism succeeded by building a constituency who saw Darwin as somehow refuting the book of Genesis, and science in general as challenging “theistic accounts of truth” (p. 107). Hyman argues that modern atheist polemics exhibited unsavory sensationalism and aroused consternation by Archbishop John Habgood and others who avowed that theology and science, “should never have been fighting in the first place” (pp. 122, 196).

Chapter 7, “Atheism, Evil, and Suffering,” explores the third volley modern atheism launched against religion: Why does an all good, all powerful God permit a seemingly unjust world? Devastating World Wars and natural disasters are and were especially disillusioning.

After having looked at theodicies evoking evil or suffering as catalyzing personal or corporate growth and maturity (Irenaeus, John Hick), as compatible with free will (Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne), or as the simple absence of good, Hyman identifies “the interpretation of God’s omnipotence and goodness that is central and at issue here” (p. 140, italics in original). Some modern believers also deemed appealing to mystery appropriate (e.g. “My Ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts, saith the Lord,” Isaiah 55:8, *King James Version*, p. 143).