



## Reviews



**John Hughes, ed., *The Unknown God: Responses to the New Atheists* (London: SCM Press, 2013), pp. xiv + 106. £12.99**

The term ‘New Atheism’ came into popular usage in 2006, and refers to a confrontational repudiation of religion in the name of science, reason and moral progress. Although some of the public intellectuals in the movement – such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens – were longstanding critics of religion, the publishing sensation to which they contributed was a post-9/11 phenomenon: private pieties had become a public menace and had to be confronted. Intellectually, there is little new in these lines of attack. The greatest novelty lies in the proselytising and polemical tone, and the dissemination of arguments through the full range of contemporary media. Responses to the New Atheism have included dialogical engagement (exemplified by David Fergusson) and erudite vituperation (exemplified by Terry Eagleton). This book is a welcome collection of writings which brings together those different styles, and those particular authors, within a single volume.

*The Unknown God: Responses to the New Atheists* is a collection of nine ‘sermons’ divided into five themes. According to the editor, John Hughes, the sermon ‘probably’ constitutes ‘the true “front line” of theology’ (p. xi). This may be true, but some of the most interesting pieces are those which play fast and loose with the form. The original setting was Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge in 2011. Hughes acknowledges that not all the invitees were able to deliver their sermons, and there is an obvious imbalance in the formats: short pieces unencumbered by any scholarly apparatus, and longer essays (including one with over thirty footnotes). Christian denominations are well represented, but given that some of the most vitriolic criticism from the New Atheists has been directed at Islam and the Hebrew Bible, the absence of Muslim and Jewish voices is regrettable. I recommend the book for the general reader, ministers and anyone involved in preaching.

The first theme, Faith and Reason, begins with Eagleton on “Faith, Knowledge, and Terror”. Eagleton covers all three issues, but in less than five pages the treatment is inevitably cursory. He opens with the thought that, ‘One reason why a dialogue between faith and atheism is so hard is that they are not really the same kind of thing’ (p. 4). However it is not clear who, among the New Atheists, this difficult dialogue would be with. The conceptual oppositions in the New Atheist literature are usually between ‘faith and *reason*’, or ‘faith and *evidence*’, with atheism the irresistible conclusion of cognitive practises purged of the bad habits of faith. As Eagleton’s piece unfolds, a more constructive Kierkegaardian argument emerges for faith as ‘a species of love’ (p. 6). The political dimension of Eagleton’s piece is the most potent, targeted on the New Atheism as a misguided reaction in the West to religious fundamentalism ‘at just the moment when it has itself, so to speak, spiritually disarmed’ (p. 7). The companion piece, provided by Fergusson, conforms to the conventions of a sermon, complete with contemporary references. Fergusson draws plausible parallels between the macho, adversarial culture of British politics and polemical discourse on religion. He warns Christians against fighting fire with fire: they are charged with correcting opponents ‘with gentleness and courtesy’ (p. 13, quoting 2 Tim 2:25). This is laudable, but the example set elsewhere in the Pauline epistles could easily inspire an excoriating response to religious opponents.

The second theme concerns Darwin and Dawkins. The piece by Timothy Jenkins stands apart from other contributions with its concrete focus on *The God Delusion*, which he attempts to locate as a genre of literature, while analysing the methodology underpinning its construction. Anyone who has read Dawkins will recognise an ‘autodidact’ at work (p. 18). On the question of genre, Jenkins’s thesis is more provocative, characterising the work as a secular theodicy: ‘an account of good and evil, and of man’s well-being and woe’, comparable to ‘mesmerism, spiritualism, spiritual healing and phrenology’, with their shared reliance on insights from the natural sciences (p. 24). One certainly finds New Atheist literature in the Mind, Body and Spirit section of books stores, alongside works which would repel the prophets of a godless utopia: such is the ironic fate

of populist ‘consciousness raising’ books designed to change the zeitgeist. (Consciousness raising is a reoccurring theme throughout *The God Delusion*.)

One suggestion by Jenkins which would need qualification is Dawkins’s affinity with Friedrich Nietzsche. Both do try to dispel ‘debilitating illusions’ (p. 22), but whereas Dawkins is on record as a ‘cultural Christian’, for Nietzsche cultural Christianity is part of the problem to be overcome: atheism should change almost everything, including our attitudes to the values of truth and reason so revered by the New Atheists. The tension between the latter’s professed materialism and the values they avow is explored by Conor Cunningham. Cunningham is correct to point out the extent to which many common human intuitions have been destabilised by reductive materialism: for instance that the human mind is able to disclose objective truths about the world, or that moral judgements have objective status. Given the reproductive imperatives driving our physical and psychological adaption, this raises the question of ‘what relation truth has with biological fitness’, and on one radical view of evolutionary naturalism ‘the intrinsic content of belief is irrelevant’ (p. 37), rendering much of our mental lives epiphenomenal. In Cunningham’s version of Darwinism, intuitive phenomena such as minds, free will, and moral values emerge as causally significant. This will be welcome news to many, but how does it work as a response to the New Atheists? Some of the humanists among their number may feel that, on this non-reductive view, they can have their cake and eat it.

The theme on History and Atheism begins with Alister McGrath and an arresting quote from Winston Churchill: ‘The empires of the future will be empires of the mind’ (p. 50). McGrath has the New Atheists in focus, but it is the imperial union of ideas and territory represented by the so-called ‘Islamic State’ which leapt to mind reading this sermon in the years since its composition. McGrath warns against the temptations of a deterministic historicism which suggest an inexorable march to a godless future, invoking Israel’s prophets against imperial certainties. Hughes’s contribution, “Christianity’s Bastard Child”, gives qualified support to the thesis that Christianity

has a special relationship to atheism, with its ‘rejection of idols, the incarnation (God becomes human), and the crucifixion (God dies)’ (p. 59). For Hughes, the atheist option must be taken seriously on theological grounds, for ‘Christians believe that God does not force himself upon us, that he does leave us to respond in faith or not’ (p. 60). Of course not *all* Christians believe this, but Hughes is entitled to nail his colours to the mast.

The final contributor gets a theme to himself. The True Revolution by David Bentley Hart opens with a typically eloquent and avowedly ‘irascible’ repudiation of the New Atheist contribution to intellectual life. He contrasts their ‘timidity’, directed towards ‘bourgeoisie respectability’ (p. 89), with ‘the “atheism” of the early Christians’, which ‘arrived in history as a kind of convulsive disruption *of* history, a subversive rejection of ten thousand immemorial cultic, social, and, philosophical wisdoms’ (pp. 89–90). There is no doubting the chasm in the challenge the two movements posed to their respective cultures; indeed, so great are the differences, one wonders if the juxtaposition is warranted at all.

One frustration readers may have with this collection is the feeling that the central charge of the New Atheists is never met head-on: that there are no good reasons to think God exists, and so much (if not all) of the edifice built around him should be dismantled. Perhaps because there is nothing at all *new* in this charge the contributors felt no need to respond. Any serious response to the challenge of atheism, of whatever vintage, must confront the acute suffering and tragic loss which are characteristic of the human condition. This collection includes sensitive treatments of this with *Suffering and Hope*, the penultimate theme. John Cornwell’s elegant sermon takes as its point of departure the crude media values from which the New Atheism draws, before challenging a popular reductive reading of the theodicy implicit in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Tina Beattie confronts several hard readings from the Bible, which find God or his witnesses in tyrannical mood (Amos 3:1), conspicuous by his absence (Psalm 13), and waging rhetorical war against sexual ‘immorality’ (Ephesians 5:1–17). Beattie does not juxtapose these verses with gentler readings; she teases out the underlying themes and asks what they say to us in a modern setting.

These sermons make for poignant reading in the knowledge that the editor, Revd John Hughes, died in a road traffic accident the year after their publication. At thirty-five years old he was one of the outstanding British theologians of his generation, and served as the Dean of Chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge. His death constitutes another tragic loss to be reckoned with. Judging from Hughes's writings, however, and the trajectory of his life in the church, his own mortality is not something he would count against the God to whom he vowed a life of service.

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**David Andrew Gilland, *Law and Gospel in Emil Brunner's Earlier Dialectical Theology* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, v. 22; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. xiv + 285. £19.99**

From time to time one comes across a published thesis that enthuses the reader in its attention to detail, quality of research data, and insightfulness of argument; in my view, Gilland's *Law and Gospel* is one such book. He offers an intensively examined treatise on the major, but oft overlooked, twentieth-century theologian, Emil Brunner. Early in the introduction Gilland avows, 'I discovered that understanding Brunner's own system of theology, motivations and concerns *on their own terms and in their systematic context* constituted a far more interesting project than once again belabouring the debate with Barth about natural theology' (p. xiii, my emphasis). This fresh focus is good news indeed for Brunner studies!

The book is an exegesis of the key theme of law and gospel in Brunner's early thought, focussing primarily on the period 1914–24, but also ranging up to the publication of *Nature and Grace* in 1934. Gilland does a meticulous job of outlining and evidencing the claim that the law-gospel juxtaposition is a lynchpin of Brunner's overall theology, present from the beginning of his work. The dialectic between law and gospel is not only reflective of Brunner's