

Book Review

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004): 306 pp.

This book is a survey of the intellectual history of atheism in the world of Western ideas. The author's thesis is that atheism as an "empire of the mind" has passed its zenith and is in a state of rapid decline as a satisfying intellectual understanding of reality. McGrath at one time considered himself a hard-core atheist but came to embrace Christianity. He describes himself "as a wounded yet still respectful lover of the great revolt against God" (p. 175).

Summary

The first line of the book reads, "The remarkable rise and subsequent decline of atheism is framed by two pivotal events, separated by precisely two hundred years: the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and that of the Berlin Wall in 1989" (p. 1). Indeed, McGrath puts forward a compelling argument that the "high noon" or "golden age" of atheism began with the French Revolution and set with the collapse of Soviet communism.

McGrath traces the intellectual foundations of atheism in modern Europe to the ideas of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. He also outlines the alleged "warfare" between science and religion "that has come to dominate the corporate consciousness of Western culture" (p. 79). Atheists would like to view science (Darwinian evolution, in particular) as the Prometheus that delivers humanity from the primitive clutches of religion. McGrath undermines the myth by arguing that science and faith are not incompatible, albeit "the stereotype of the necessarily atheist scientist lingers on in Western culture at the dawn of the third millennium" (p. 111).

McGrath places a good bit of the blame for atheism's rise in the Western world on the shoulder of the Christian church itself for its "failure of religious imagination" (p. 113), particularly during the Victorian era. He traces the rise of "intentional atheism" in the mystical romantic poets like Percy Shelley and the novelist George Elliot (Mary Ann Evans). The alleged weakness of Christianity in this era led intellectuals to see it as unappealing and spent. From here McGrath moves on to trace "the death of God" in the West from the novels of Dostoyevsky, to the philosophy of Nietzsche, to the plays of Camus, to the "suicide" of liberal Christianity, as exemplified in Thomas J. J. Altizer's death of God theology and best remembered by the October 22, 1965 *Time* magazine cover which pronounced, "God is dead." In its typical quest to be relevant, adapting itself to the spirit of the modern age, liberal Christianity embraced the godlessness of culture but found its secular "manifesto" turn into a "suicide note" (p. 164). The apex of atheism in the West came in its institution in the atheistic communist state following the Russian revolution of 1917. The atheistic state would attempt to eliminate belief in God both intellectually and culturally. Many, like Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, believed that the world would fast become a "secular city."

The collapse of faith and the triumph of atheism, however, did not happen as some expected. Having traced the rise of atheism, McGrath turns to outline its contemporary decline. He begins with a narrative testimony of his own exodus from atheism as a university student (pp. 175-79). McGrath argues that “it is increasingly recognized that philosophical argument about the existence of God has ground to a halt” (p. 179). The best the skeptic can do with the God question is plead agnosticism. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly evident that, “The belief that there is no God is just as much a matter of faith as the belief that there is a God” (p. 180). The arguments against God’s existence are just as circular as the Thomistic ones presented in favor of God’s existence. Furthermore, in the post-World War era McGrath claims that Christian thinkers and writers like G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers and Flannery O’Connor have brought about “something of a re-birth of the ‘baptized imagination’” which makes contemporary atheism appear unimaginative and uninteresting in comparison (p. 186). He also notes that “interest in religion has grown globally since the high-water mark of secularism in the 1970s, even in the heartlands of the West” (p. 190), seen in everything from recent Star Trek episodes to the international explosion of Pentecostalism.

McGrath points out the rise of atheism during the modern era but anticipates its decline in the post-modern era. He describes postmodernism as “a cultural mood that celebrates diversity and seeks to undermine those who offer rigid, restrictive, and oppressive views of the world” (p. 227). Far from favoring atheism, this works against it, since atheism tends to be “strident” contending that “Belief in God is evil, and must be eliminated” (p. 229). Atheism is intolerant. An interesting and effective illustration of the disarray and weakness of contemporary atheism is offered by McGrath in the sad narrative of American atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair and the ironic anecdote that her son William became a Christian (see pp. 238-56). Atheism is no longer seen as a liberator of the human mind but as an oppressor.

He concludes that the abiding influence of atheism may be the fact that it unwittingly aided in the reformation of Christianity:

The rise of atheism in the West was undoubtedly a protest against a corrupted and complacent church; yet paradoxically, it has energized Christianity to reform itself, in ways that seriously erode the credibility of those earlier criticisms. Where atheism criticizes, wise Christians move to reform their ways (p. 277).

McGrath concludes by noting that atheism is “in something of a twilight zone” (p. 279); however, in the book’s final words, he asks: “But is this the twilight of a sun that has sunk beneath the horizon, to be followed by the darkness and coldness of the night? Or is it the twilight of a rising sun, which will bring a new day of new hope, new possibilities—and new influences? We shall have to wait and see” (p. 279). The implication is that the future of atheism, in part, depends on the nature of religion (Christianity in particular). Repressive religion will evoke the resurrection of atheism; tolerant religion will keep it in the dark.

Reflections

McGrath is to be commended for this helpful survey of the intellectual history of atheism in Western culture. His analysis of the current crisis within atheism and its precipitous contemporary decline is compelling. This work places the “new atheism” currently being promoted by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Will Harris in proper perspective. This book makes their attack on faith appear to be less the battle cry of a resurgent movement and more the last gasps of a failed cause.

There are several aspects of McGrath’s analysis, however, that conservative evangelicals will find less than attractive.

First, McGrath argues that Protestantism is in part responsible for the rise of atheism. In developing this supposed link between the Reformation and atheism, he accuses the leading reformers like Zwingli and Calvin of divorcing the sacred from the secular (p. 200). He suggests that the reformation’s emphasis on the sovereignty (distance) of God and its emphasis on preaching and teaching, including its stark architecture, engendered atheism. For McGrath, Protestantism “has impoverished the Christian imagination, and by doing so, made atheism appear imaginatively attractive” (p. 206). On the other hand, McGrath is free in his praise of Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy, which he argues more successfully combine the sacred and secular, promote dynamic experiential faith, and, thus, resist atheism. McGrath is critical of any form of Protestantism “that is obsessed by theological correctness” or that commends “a purely ‘text-centered’ understanding of the Christian faith, seeing preaching as nothing more than teaching the contents of the Bible and spirituality as a deepened understanding and internalization of its message” (p. 213). This might make one “rigorously grounded in theological principles” yet fail in leading to “an encounter with the living God” (pp. 213-14). McGrath’s reasoning on this point is questionable. First, his argument that doctrinal precision and “text-centered” Christian faith somehow results in a less vibrant encounter with God is open to serious question. For a counter argument, just examine the rich experiential faith of the Puritans. Second, he does not examine the dangers of a lack of confessional precision, particularly in some Pentecostal circles.

Second, McGrath at points advocates a level of tolerance within Christianity—in the name of staving off atheism—that would permit compromise of a firm stand for Biblical truth. As one example, McGrath argues that Christians should not strongly contend for the Biblical doctrine of eternal damnation: “Christian apologists cannot hope simply to assert such doctrines as eternal damnation and expect Western culture to nod approvingly” (p. 275). Should we not, however, proclaim Biblical truth, whether the world approves of it or not? Will not the gospel always be offensive to the unregenerate? Along these lines, one might ask if McGrath’s analysis of the rise and fall of atheism is based more on sociology or the history of ideas than theology. Is the existence of atheism a result of human intellectual activity alone, or is it also rooted in the humanity’s sinful rejection of God’s sovereignty (see Psalms 14, 53)? Is atheism a reflection of the head or the heart?

Jeffrey T. Riddle, Charlottesville, Virginia