



STATEMENT DA-248

BOOK REVIEW

THE ATHEIST SYNDROME: A Psychopathology of Unbelief

by John F. Koster

"The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" So wrote David in diagnosing the problem of unbelief three thousand years ago.

But is foolishness the only problem? Might it not be compounded by something else, something over which the skeptic has no control? John Koster thinks so. And he tries, in *The Atheist Syndrome*, to establish his case.

Koster's thesis is that the major proponents of atheism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all have suffered from a form of mental illness that he dubs "the atheist syndrome." Applying Freudian psychoanalysis to the likes of Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud himself, Koster concludes that their fear of domineering and abusive fathers transformed itself into hatred of the God their fathers represented to them. That hatred led to an irrational rejection of biblical truth and an embracing of falsehood — whether scientific materialism, occultism, or delusions of grandeur.

Koster further argues that their obsessive hatred was not limited to their fathers and God: self-hatred emerged when these brilliant men recognized in themselves what they hated in their fathers. Then came clinical depression, sexual perversion, psychogenic diseases, and ultimate collapse.

Christians who are tired of seeing the faith bashed by devotees of evolutionism, scientific humanism, nihilism, and Freudianism will not be able to help finding Koster's analysis appealing. Clarence Darrow, Adolf Hitler, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus all seem to wither under his gaze. In the final analysis, the thesis might be right.

Unfortunately, Koster fails to *prove* his point in this book. The argument is simply too laden with logical fallacies, evidential gaps, and systematic inconsistency.

The proposed syndrome and its symptoms, for instance, are so loosely defined as to be nearly impossible to identify with certainty. As Koster describes them, underlying causes of the syndrome are ambiguous, inconsistent, and — in some case histories — simply missing. In the best cases (Darwin, Nietzsche, and Robert Ingersoll), the underlying causes are weakly substantiated; in most, hardly at all; and in one (Karl Marx) they are so contrary to the theory that Koster has to suggest that we "turn the atheist syndrome on its head" (p. 161) — which ultimately looks like little more than abandoning the theory altogether.

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Not only are the causes and symptoms not found consistently in the case histories Koster presents, they also are not reliable predictors of the syndrome even where they are found — and the causes' absence is no guarantee that the symptoms will be absent as well. Most sons of abusive, domineering fathers don't turn out to be atheists and don't develop the clinical depression and self-destructive psychogenic diseases that are part of the syndrome; some sons of loving, kind fathers do. Many (perhaps most) atheists never develop the clinical depression and psychogenic diseases that are key symptoms of the syndrome; some theists do. In short, the hypothesis is a case of hasty generalization based on faulty induction from insufficient sampling.

More deadly to the hypothesis is its self-defeating foundation. The hypothesis *assumes* the theory of Freudian psychoanalysis, complete with hereditary and environmental determinism. Yet, in picking Freud apart, Koster debunks this theory, showing that — in its allegiance to naturalistic evolutionism — it misreads the nature of man. Hence, Koster is stuck wielding a weapon he himself argues is useless.

The Atheist Syndrome, despite these weaknesses, is loaded with damning information about the famous (or infamous) people it analyzes. Much of that information can be of use in undercutting their credibility, so long as we don't assume that the mental illness charge (except in Nietzsche's case, where the mental illness is more likely attributable to syphilis than to the syndrome Koster describes) can be made to stick without far more proof than we find here. It's about time the heroes of secular humanism got cut down to size, and within limits Koster does a good job of cutting them down. Readers who can distinguish the good information from the often faulty arguments based on it will profit from the book. But if the faulty arguments gain vogue in Christian circles, it won't be long before sharp critics point them out and damage Christian credibility.

The logical flaws in Koster's argument don't mean his conclusion cannot be right. Perhaps it is or perhaps it's very nearly right. A more thorough critique of these men, taking into account the lines of analysis Koster suggests, might avoid the logical pitfalls and deal a crushing blow to these enemies of the faith.

Meanwhile, Koster does tell us enough about these champions of atheism to prove them prime examples of David's ages-old judgment: atheism appeals only to fools.

— *Reviewed by E. Calvin Beisner*

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