A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

PHILOSOPHERS WITHOUT REASON

a book review of

Philosophers without gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life

by Louise M. Antony, ed.

(Oxford University Press, 2007)

The professional philosophers writing in the anthology, Philosophers without gods reject religious belief and attempt to justify their secular outlook and existence through narrative and argument. Some are well known (such as Daniel Dennett, Simon Blackburn, and David Lewis), others are not. Their approaches differ, but their message is roughly the same: we need not trouble ourselves with God anymore; the secular life can be satisfying. Some writers focus their rejection on Judaism, others on Christianity; they give no attention to other religions. Some essays are rather triumphant in their atheism, such as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s chapter, “Overcoming Christianity.” Some are matter-of-fact about atheism, such as Richard Feldman’s “Reasonable Religious Disagreement.” Others are more wistful, realizing that the loss of God cannot be fully compensated by the secular life, such as David Owen’s “Disenchantment.” Some historical background is in order before examining the contents of this challenging work.

A Complicated Relationship. Philosophy and theism have had a long and vexed relationship historically. In the medieval period, for example, philosophy was deemed the handmaiden to theology, with Thomas Aquinas the towering figure. In the post-Enlightenment period, however, especially in the first five or six decades of the twentieth century in America, philosophy often was seen as the enemy of belief in God, rendering religious faith mere belief without rational warrant. During this time, logical positivists such as Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick argued that theological affirmations were not even false, they were meaningless: the statement “God exists,” since it does not refer to anything scientifically verifiable or anything true by definition (such as “a triangle has three sides”), is without meaning, akin to “blue ideas sleep furiously.” Deft philosophers, however, discovered that the philosophy of logical positivism cast a long and negative shadow: it was self-refuting. The claim that nothing is meaningful unless it is true by definition or empirically verifiable is itself neither true by definition nor empirically verifiable. As such, it must be false.1 Logical positivism is thus in no position to veto theological statements as meaningless.

Even if we play the positivist’s game, however, we will find that logic and evidence for God’s existence is forthcoming. I cannot argue the case here, but if the ontological argument for God succeeds, the statement “God exists” is necessarily true—true in the same way as “all triangles have three sides” is true.2 There is also strong scientific evidence that God better explains the origination, macroscopic fine-tuning, and particular organisms of the universe than does atheism (or nontheistic religious explanations).3

Not long after the demise of logical positivism, a renaissance arose in Christian philosophy, led by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. These philosophers began to argue
rigorously for the truth and rationality of Christianity. This movement, ironically, employed the tools of analytic philosophy, which previously had been used to try to discredit theism. (Analytic philosophy is a method or style of philosophy that prizes clarity and precision, paying careful attention to argument forms and developing them with great sophistication.)

This method was first employed by people like Bertrand Russell (an atheist), largely in the philosophy of language. But the early proponents of analytic philosophy ignored or tried to refute larger metaphysical claims. Plantinga, Swinburne, and others, however, used this powerful method precisely in defense of metaphysical claims concerning the existence of God, the soul, and other topics bearing on Christian theism. A key achievement was Plantinga’s rebuttal to the logical problem of evil. This problem professes that it is logically impossible to square God’s perfect goodness and power with the existence of any evil. Through careful analysis, Plantinga showed that this argument fails. Since then, few antitheistic philosophers have even attempted to resurrect this argument against theism.

The last several decades have witnessed an explosion of Christian philosophers engaged in philosophy at the highest levels. Plantinga has given the presidential address of the American Philosophical Association. Scholarly societies such as The Society of Christian Philosophers and The Evangelical Philosophical Society have become much respected, as have their academic journals. Two volumes, Philosophers Who Believe (InterVarsity Press, 1993) and God and the Philosophers (Oxford University Press, 1995), have featured essays by noteworthy philosophers as they reflect on how their religious faith shapes their philosophizing.

One can understand the appearance of Philosophers without gods better against this backdrop. The book presents an alternative to the autobiographical volumes on faith and philosophy. Perhaps the emergence of the high decibel “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens also contributes to the reason for this volume’s production. Books on unbelief are hot commodities, selling quickly. Philosophers without gods, however, while unified and insistent in its rejection of theism, is not vitriolic in tone, unlike the evangelists of the new atheism, who—with the exception of Daniel Dennett—are not philosophers.

Journeys. The first section of the book, “Journeys,” recounts stories of losing faith or of never having faith in God. These accounts are varied and resist easy distillation, but one theme that recurs is the inadequacy of fideism in addressing the questions of an intellectually curious soul. Fideism is the belief that matters of religious belief are exempted from the need of rational support, that faith and reason are enemies. Several writers recount that their honest questions and doubts about Christianity were met with reproach. They were expected simply to believe or to not think about their concerns. Instead of having their intellects engaged by thoughtful believers, they were treated as though something was wrong with them because they were thinkers—not that they were bad thinkers, but that they were thinkers at all.

Daniel Dennett highlights the malady of fideism in his chapter about his thankfulness in recovering from a medical emergency. As an atheist, he cannot be thankful to God, nor is he grateful to his religious friends who prayed for him. He is thankful, rather, to the doctors and others who attended him, because they possessed the requisite knowledge to save his life. He contrasts this hard-earned medical knowledge with mere religious belief, which seems to require no intellectual diligence to secure and is subject to no rational critique or refinement; it is only a matter of blind faith. In his view there are no religious experts who actually know the truth of their claims. Dennett agrees with the other contributors that religious claims ought not and cannot hide in the subjective world of values and lifestyles. Religions make truth claims that need rational support if they are to be believed as true. Dennett and others are right on this.

Many Christians believe Christianity to be true for insufficient reasons, or for no reasons, but such fideism is not the epistemology of religious belief (i.e., the means of knowing belief to be true) given in the Bible itself. Jesus Himself was a kind of philosopher who engaged in smart and spirited debate on the deepest issues of His day. The Apostle Paul took on the best philosophical minds in Athens and never succumbed to fideism (Acts 17:16–34). One could go on, but let it suffice to say that the challenges that volumes such as Philosophers without gods make to the truth and rationality of Christianity require a
reasoned response that values and defends Christianity as a knowledge tradition. Christianity is a tradition of faith, creeds, confessions, and behaviors, but the cognitive substance of Christianity ought to be believed, confessed, and lived only because it is true and rational and pertinent to all of life. Simply affirming Christian faith without argument will not move the content of Christian belief into the realm of knowledge (which is justified true belief). For that to occur, it is incumbent that Christians offer the world the knowledge of God based on sufficient reasons.

One reason for religious belief that is often given and just as often ridiculed by philosophers is Pascal’s wager. Daniel Garber’s chapter, “Religio Philosophi,” takes up this issue. In a nutshell, the wager argues that given what one has to gain by believing in God (heaven) and what one has to lose by not believing (the loss of heaven—hell), one is justified in pursuing religious belief. This is true even if one is uncertain about the objective existence of God; although one cannot make oneself believe as a sheer act of will, there are religious activities that can induce belief over time. Given the prudential outcomes of one’s belief or unbelief—heaven or hell—it makes sense to participate in these belief-inducing activities in the hope that faith will emerge. Garber illustrates several mistakes that are typical of critics like him. Once these errors are addressed, however, the case for Christian commitment is strengthened.

Garber admits that he was somewhat attracted to Pascal’s insightful account of the human condition without God and has been tempted to pursue belief as Pascal recommended. Garber nonetheless resisted this temptation, since such a religious belief would not be properly justified; it would only be the result of religious brainwashing. This critique is common, but it is wrongheaded for two reasons.

First, Pascal gave various arguments for the intellectual respectability of Christianity, the most powerful of which (to my mind) is his anthropological argument. He argues that no secular philosophy or religion except Christianity adequately explains the greatness and misery of humans. This is because Christianity uniquely accounts for our greatness through the doctrine of divine creation. We bear the image of God. Christianity also explains our faults through the doctrine of the fall, by which humans have been deposed from their original state of harmony with God and others. Pascal also marshals arguments from religious experience, miracles, prophecy, and so on. The wager should be viewed in light of these arguments; thus it should not be viewed as a blind leap toward God strictly for a possible payoff. One can be motivated to pursue Christianity by the evidence and through prudential factors as well.

Second, Garber presents the idea of trying to acquire religious belief through participation in religious services as a kind of brainwashing. This is not necessarily so. In some cases, involvement in certain activities opens our minds to truths not otherwise seen. It might be that emotional factors hinder our beliefs as much as, or more than, rational factors. Engaging in religious practices, then, might help produce openness to religious knowledge that is not possible otherwise. Garber thus rejects a straw man instead of Pascal’s best arguments.

Atheists in a Meaningless World. Christians need to give solid reasons for their Christian beliefs, but they further need to discern the intellectual weaknesses in alternative worldviews. One salient weakness of atheism found repeatedly in this book, especially in the second and final section, “Reflections,” is the problem of meaning (or the meaning of life). According to the Christian worldview, life has objective meaning because the universe is created and directed by an infinite and personal supreme being who grants it meaning and value. Humans, on this view, are made in God’s image and likeness and may know God and fulfill their destinies by rightly responding to God’s overtures, which He has made known in nature, conscience, and Scripture. Every step of history is moving toward its providential fulfillment of justice and peace (Eph. 1:11).

Atheism offers no such framework for meaning, and our authors know it. They realize that any meaning in life must be given by individuals; it cannot be found in the nature of things. This is because atheism is not a teleological worldview in which the world has an intrinsic purpose that includes humans as part of the plan. In the chapter, “Transcendence without God,” Anthony Simon Laden goes to great lengths to argue that atheists can have transcendent experiences without the existence of a transcendent being. For him, transcendence is a quality of well-cultivated subjective experiences. A philosophically focused
atheist, then, can have a transcendent experience of the importance of oppressed or “invisible” people by simply changing his consciousness to attend them in their plight. Laden says that viewing the oppressed in this way “arises from the activity [of attending to them] itself, and not directly from the properties of what is seen” (p. 129). That is, humans are not valuable in themselves because of anything objectively significant in them (such as God’s image), but by attributing value to them subjectively; thus the transcendent experience is nothing but a subjective projection. If this is so, however, there is nothing in this philosophy to stop other subjects—such as racists—from projecting evil qualities on the invisible people. If transcendence is purely subjective, then one could have a transcendent experience by attributing value to Osama bin Laden while withholding value from Martin Luther King. This, however, is absurd. Atheism rips apart the ancient covenant between subjective feeling and objective factuality.

In The Abolition of Man, C. S. Lewis wrote of a view that Christianity has in common with other religions and philosophies: “The doctrine of objective value [is] the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others are really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”12 Humans, he argues, should recognize objective value and respond accordingly. “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.”13

Atheism denies this reality, and so fails as a believable worldview. David Owen’s chapter, “Disenchantment,” all but admits this. He notes that an atheistic understanding of science “threatens to remove the fixed points that are needed to make decision making possible at all,” because “science tells us there is nothing normative about man’s actual needs or his actual situation” (178).

Philosophers without gods does its level best to commend to us a godless world. It raises many challenges—some of which were not addressed here—that Christians should heed. But while these thinkers are intellectually gifted, they are not grateful to God. As such, their intellects are darkened, their arguments fail, and they are left in the end with a foundation of sand (see Rom. 1:18–32; Matt. 7:24–27).

— reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

NOTES

3. For an overview given through interviews with experts, see Lee Strobel, The Case for the Creator (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).
5. Some of the contributions to these volumes are commendable, although some indicate either a subbiblical understanding of Christianity, a lack of ability to integrate Christianity with philosophy, or both. See Douglas Groothuis, “Review of Philosophers Who Believe,” Themelios 20, 3 (May 1995).
8. An excellent treatment of this is found in J. P. Moreland, The Kingdom Triangle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
10. See Groothuis, On Pascal, chap. 10.
13. Ibid., 25. For his argument from the reality of objective value to the existence of God, see C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), Book I.