# REVIEW ARTICLE

***THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ATHEISM, EDITED BY MICHAEL MARTIN,*** (CAMBRIDGE, UK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007, ISBN 0521603676), 331PP. PAPER, $28.00.

*John Shook*

A Cambridge Companion aims for nothing less than presenting the finest thoughts on a subject. This volume contains chapters by eighteen scholars that largely fulfill this aim. Serious thought about atheism, like atheism itself, has recently exploded. Phil Zuckerman estimates that between 500 and 800 million people are either nonreligious or outright deny God's existence, so atheism now deserves greater attention than ever. Atheists are probably among your friends and neighbors, especially in Western and Central Europe; the countries formerly part of the British Empire such as Canada and Australia; Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus, and other former Soviet states; China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan; and in assorted other countries having sizable atheist populations, including Vietnam, Israel, Iceland, Singapore, and Uruguay.

Although *atheist* remains a dirty word, according to research nonbelievers are nicer people. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi surveyed dozens of research studies and found that the nonreligious are less likely to become criminals, more likely to be educated and hold a good job, more likely to support social justice, less likely to support war, and generally more tolerant and respectful of others. What can be done to protect, if not encourage, the continued growth of this population?

Legal protection of the nonreligious is an obvious start, and Steven Gey describes how most countries that now protect religions from government persecution also protect the nonreligious. Still, too few countries have constitutional provisions recognizing the freedom to be an atheist, and too many countries retain laws criminalizing blasphemy or permitting government support for religion. Gey concludes that the liberties of atheists won't be fully realized until countries are thoroughly secular, erecting neither reli-

gion nor atheism as official creeds. Since the opposite of being religious is simply living without religious beliefs, atheism cannot be categorized as just another sort of religion.

Michael Martin pursues this issue further arguing that an atheist by definition rejects most or all of the beliefs widely regarded as religious. Complicating this point is his admission that many forms of Buddhism, Jainism, and Confucianism don't include those typically religious beliefs either, since they lack creeds about a personal and perfect God that created the universe and supplies moral commandments (basically the Jewish/Christian/Muslim god). Martin decides that these Eastern cases are examples of "atheist religions." A sharp dichotomy separating religion from atheism would be much more convenient, however. Behind this difficulty is the fact that one's definition of *religion* (and thus one's definition of *atheism*) can heavily depend on the sorts of religions that one is most familiar with, or the religions that one wants to oppose. In the history of Western thought about atheism going back to antiquity, recounted in essays by Jan Bremmer and Gavin Hyman, getting accused of atheism was easy: all one had to do was dissent from the local religion. Socrates was accused of atheism because he questioned Athenian gods; early Christians were called atheists because they repudiated the Roman gods; Christian denominations accused each other of atheism; and philosophers were reproached for atheism if they sought a higher vision of divinity using reason and science instead of revelation and traditional authority.

If it is unreasonable to define "religion" using local standards, can some universal definition of religion be established? The social sciences, especially cultural anthropology, have tried to formulate a nonparochial and scientific approach to religion. Leaving aside whether peoples' religious beliefs have any validity, we can try to understand why religious beliefs have been so widespread and resilient.

Stewart Guthrie discusses theories of religion that describe (1) the common core beliefs they share; (2) the social bonds they strengthen; (3) the comforting feelings they arouse; and (4) the intellectual satisfactions they provide. However, all human societies use notions about the universe and humanity's place within it to try to accomplish 2, 3, and 4. Thus, "religion" covers most belief systems, and everybody is religious—even atheists who prescribe to naturalist and secular humanist ideals. To counterbalance this odd result that religion must permanently be everywhere, we might look to option one for aid. However someone looking for the common core beliefs of religions must have already identified which belief systems will count as religions—just as someone trying to specify the traits common to all democracies must first decide which governments initially qualify as democracies. If an anthropologist "discovers" that all religions include beliefs about the supernatural, we should wonder why this anthropologist first ruled out Zen Buddhism, to take one example, as a candidate religion. Guthrie notes that no common core has yet been found to all the belief systems that have ever been called religion, confirming that distilling some basic creed from the

world's religions is a hopeless quest. Even the idea that "there are many paths to the same summit" cannot be maintained, since the world's religions don't agree which spiritual heights need to be climbed. Furthermore, finding the paths to a rational moral life and achieving liberation from ideology require severe questioning of all religions, as David Brink (writing on secular ethics), Christine Overall (writing on feminism), and John Caputo (writing on postmodernism) all make clear.

The central and largest portion of this volume is devoted to whether atheism is intellectually more satisfying than theistic religion. William Lane Craig's essay sketches out several primary arguments for theism from Western theology—arguments skeptically examined in subsequent chapters by nontheists. This lone theist puts up a confident front that these arguments, taken together, add up to reasonable belief in God. Craig, a theist who has survived bruising theological controversies himself, exemplifies the extreme lengths to which a philosophical Christian has to go when he declares that "On the Christian view it is actually a matter of relative indifference to God whether people believe that he exists or not" (p. 71). A God that doesn't care whether people believe in him? The Christians' Jesus would be surprised by this notion, as would the prophets, not to mention Adam and Eve. Although Craig, if correct, has parried the atheist's complaint that a real God would try harder to display his existence, Craig has also inadvertently categorized the atheist as an exemplary Christian. Or perhaps this means that Christian theology has become so disoriented in its quest for rational legitimacy that the Bible is now irrelevant.

The theist may congratulate himself for offering more sophisticated versions of theistic arguments than ever before, but nontheist philosophers have not failed to keep pace. Richard Gale finds flaws in the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and mystical arguments. Keith Parsons defuses Alvin Plantiga's reformed epistemology with the argument that it is viciously circular (curiously, Plantinga's God must ensure that some humans could rationally know of his existence, *contra* Craig). Parsons then counters Richard Swinburne's view that theism passes the scientific tests of being more plausible on available evidence and also being more simple than its competitors. Daniel C. Dennett replies to intelligent-design theories by explaining the simplicity and testability of evolution. Quentin Smith offers how the Kalam cosmological argument for theism can be turned around for a better argument favoring atheism instead. Andrea Weisberger explores how the ample amount of rampant evil in the world raises the odds that the perfect God of theism probably does not exist. The perpetual retort by theists, that we can't be expected to fully conceive the greater good of God's cosmic plan, only draws more attention to the inconceivability of such a perfect God in the first place. Patrick Grim identifies many things that not even God could do (like paint a Picasso) or could know (such as the set of all truths).

Even if religions do help with social relations and emotional guidance, many atheists have found satisfactory alternatives in the naturalistic worldview, secular humanist ethics, and meditation spirituality. However, such

replacements for the religious lifestyle are almost entirely ignored by this *Companion to Atheism*. Evan Fales explains various conceptions of naturalism and physicalism, and David Brink mentions utilitarian and Kantian ethics. Aside from these two essays, there is little discussion of the important question of how atheists can manage to live meaningful and satisfactory lives. Is the nonreligious life really worth living? Can the nonreligious life lead to a morally worthy life? More philosophical inquiry about these questions and related issues should be encouraged.

*Center for Inquiry/Transnational and the University at Buffalo*