Int J Philos Relig (2013) 73:77–80
DOI 10.1007/s11153-012-9391-0

BOOK REVIEW

Gavin Hyman: A Short History of Atheism

London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2010, xx and 212 pp $85.00 (hb), $25.00 (pb)

Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk (eds.): 50 Voices of disbelief: why we are atheists

Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, ix and 346 pp, $94.95 (hb), $29.95 (pb)

Herbert Berg

Received: 18 December 2012 / Accepted: 21 December 2012 / Published online: 9 January 2013
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The new atheists triggered a renewed debate about atheism in the public sphere. In its immediate wake, books were published that either reacted against Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens, et al in a kneejerk fashion, or seemed to jump on their bandwagon. Gavin Hyman's *A Short History of Atheism* and Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk's *50 Voices of Disbelief* are examples of a second generation of books now appearing that are more thoughtful reactions, some of which are positive and others negative, to this renewed interest in atheism.

Hyman seeks to bring to general readers a more sophisticated understanding of both atheism and theism, one that is largely absent from the public debate dominated by the New Atheists. Despite the title of his book, Hyman presents more of a short genealogy than a short history in the sense that he wants to show that the "natural" or "universal" conception of God used by both atheists and theists is historical and contingent. He argues that the rise of atheism and modernity are closely connected, since both hold that the truths of the world are discovered through human rational, experiential, and experimental capacities. Modernity is "an atheistic edifice" (p. 18), which therefore ultimately gives the upper hand to atheism. However, modernity also left its mark on theism, and so atheism merely rejects a modern and narrow conception of God. It has very little to say about pre-modern and more importantly post-modern theism. Although he defers a definitive statement until his final chapter, it is clear that for Hyman, the end of modernity spells the end for modern atheism, and so he comes close to offering a post-modern (or even pre-modern) defense of theism.

It is in this context that he traces the antecedents for the gradual rise of atheism. These antecedents include Descartes' rationalism and Locke's empiricism, both of

H. Berg (✉)
University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 South College Road,
Wilmington, NC 28403, USA
e-mail: bergh@uncw.edu

which “transplant a theological concept into fundamentally a-theological frameworks, however much the architects of those frameworks were unaware of the fact” (p. 31). The conception of God thus produced stands in marked contrast to that of the pre-modern Aquinas. The roots of atheism therefore lie in Christian theology itself. The latter abandoned Aquinas’ transcendence of God, which makes all language applied to God highly provisional and qualified, in favor of the certain knowledge demanded by Duns Scotus (though Hyman traces it back to Averroism of the 1250s). As a result, God became an empirical reality, a worldly and anthropomorphic God, susceptible to a modern atheistic attack. Modern theism and modern atheism, therefore, share a common definition of God and a common epistemology. Atheism may for Hyman be a “negative and parasitic” term (p. 4) and a rejection of a specific form of theism, but, by embracing modernity, theism handed it the epistemological advantage.

Hyman then examines how this advantage played out in the rise of biblical criticism, the rise of science and its conflict with religion, and the problem of evil. Scriptural truths came to be equated with literal history; the methodological and qualitative distinction between theological and scientific discourses were erased; and an anthropomorphic conception of God led to a false problem based on an inadequate understanding of God and the role of philosophy in relation to God. For Hyman, biblical criticism, science, and the problem of evil thus challenged *only* the modern understanding of God and religion. Believing that he has shown that the main arguments of atheists, particularly those of the New Atheists, are based on a false understanding of God, Hyman then offers the possibility of other forms of Christian theism, seemingly by picking from the handful of theologians who interpret Christian doctrines non-literally, non-objectively. He hopes thus to recover a non-modern conception of God. Hyman is right to assume that most atheists would see this kind of God as “empty and vacuous” (p. 182) and unintelligible and meaningless. He sees Nietzsche as not only heralding the end of modernity, but also the end of the modern form of atheism that is so intimately connected to it. That is, after modernity, the discussions between theists and atheists can no longer revolve around the existence of God. For Hyman, these post-modern atheists would simply regard a God beyond or without being who does not exist but bestows existence, as having no sense.

Nietzsche is famously pliable, and so to take issue with Hyman’s claim that the New Atheists are not atheistic enough, for they still stand “in the shadow of the Dead God” and his related depiction of Nietzsche as anti-atheist, is not worth the effort. However, Hyman’s use of terms such as God, theism, and theology, when he means the Christian God, Christian theism, and Christian theology is problematic. As several essays in Blackford and Schüklenk’s collection make clear, atheism, at least in this world of pluralism and globalization, is about more than just Christianity. Hyman makes atheism far more monolithic than it is. As a result, his book might be less marketably entitled *A Short Genealogy of Modern Christian Theism and Atheism*. Also, many readers, even most theists, will object to two related conclusions: that “a spiritual reality is not one that can be settled as a matter of fact” (p. 184), and that the end of modernity has brought the end of atheism. In so claiming, Hyman might seem to be echoing A. J. Ayer’s positivistic rule that statements about a transcendent God have no meaning. However, his conclusion is not so sweeping; instead, Hyman

seems to mean that only those statements that atheists might exploit, such as claims about existence, have no meaning. One can only speak of God non-literally and non-objectively.

Blackford and Schüklenk have edited a volume containing fifty scientists, philosophers, science fiction writers, political activists, and public intellectuals, all of whom disbelieve and most of whom describe themselves as atheists. When the editors state that their objective is to have the "Voices of Reason" heard, they certainly seem to confirm Hyman's grand narrative. Moreover, many of these fifty essays refer to the problem of evil, make appeals to proof and evidence, or critique the Bible—though they often do so in delightful ways. And many pay homage to the New Atheists or react to the backlash against them. In so doing, they provide ample examples of Hyman's claim that atheism reacts merely to a limited, modern conception of God.

But contained within several of these essays are a few implicit critiques of Hyman's narrative for atheism. For some, "The road to doubt is paved with a growing sense of implausibility and absurdity, rather than with carefully formulated arguments" (p. 87). A few writers even address the non-anthropomorphic conception of God. Frieder Otto Wolf argues that even the word "unbelief" is a self-subalternization and self-marginalization in that, like atheism, it accepts the existing religious hegemony by reacting to it. However, he would disagree with Hyman's ultimate conclusion that overcoming scientific positivism and a degree of creative appropriation of the cultural heritage does not mean a return to religion or theology. Several essays also stand as counterexamples to Hyman's assumption that atheism is entirely a Western project or Christian phenomenon. There are atheists who come out of Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and African Christianity.

For the most part, this collection of short essays does not contain new arguments but rather old arguments expressed in often interestingly and occasionally radically new ways. For atheists, the book shows that they are not alone and that there are many formulations of atheism and disbelief, some of which even reject the vehemence against religion displayed by the New Atheists. For theists, the book also shows that there is little that unites atheists. They are a diverse group. The main weakness of the collection is the absence of scholars of religion, who are presumably the experts in religion and quite a few of whom are atheists. Had at least one of the editors been a scholar of religion, odd arguments that treat scripture as literal history or see the Jesus of scripture as the historical Jesus could have been avoided. For example, making a distinction between Christianity and the Jesus of the gospels is to make a false distinction. The Jesus of the canonical gospels is a product of an early form of Christianity. Christians may equate Jesus of the gospels with an historical figure, but atheists should not make the same mistake.

What does this second generation mean for the discussion of atheism? Atheists are becoming more vocal. And theists are more sophisticated, perhaps because—as Hyman makes clear—modernity has handed atheists an atheist epistemology. Both of these books, therefore, in very different ways, attempt to lift the discourse beyond the tedious to-and-fro of the old proofs (though many essays within *50 Voices* certainly rehearse them). Hyman's thesis is certainly one which atheists given to debating theists should know. The problem for Hyman's thesis is that the public discourse remains

firmly rooted in modern theism and modern atheism. Some theologians (such as those mentioned by Hyman) and a few atheists (a few of whom appear in Blackford and Schüklenk) might be ready to move to post-modernity, but they are few. Those most committed to the argument for God's existence—theist and atheist alike—have little to gain by this post-modernist maneuver.