

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The Evolution of Atheism*

The Evolution of Atheism, by Stephen LeDrew, OUP, 2015

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The Evolution of Atheism is a timely addition to a growing corpus of scholarly work on contemporary atheism, or what tends to be bracketed under that now-weathered term 'New Atheism'. It is the first book-length, systematic analysis of the New Atheism from a sociological perspective and, as such, an unavoidable reference for future work in this field. Like most firsts, it raises as many questions as it answers.

The title recalls Nick Spencer's 2014 *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* though readers will find something quite different here. Whereas Spencer devotes the bulk of his book to a sequential genealogy of modern atheism, LeDrew has the New Atheists firmly in sight from the outset: 'This book is about the "New Atheism" and its relationship to a movement for secularism that is well over a hundred years old' (p. 1). By taking the New Atheism as a starting point for thinking about secularism rather than an immature latecomer to the game, LeDrew provides an unprecedentedly fine-grained analysis of the tensions crossing through New Atheism and its links to the broader 'secular movement', new and old.

For LeDrew, 'the conflicts of the present are only the most recent manifestation of tensions and debates that have persisted throughout the history of the secular movement' (pp. 3–4). In this sense a more accurate title could have been *The Repetition of Atheism*—which is not to say atheism never changes, only that its changes follow a predictable Babelian pattern of establishment and disunification. This pattern stems from a split between what he calls 'scientific atheism' and 'humanistic atheism' (p. 14), the first of which revolves around issues of knowledge production—religion is the enemy of truth, especially Darwinism—while the second stems from issues of social justice—religion obfuscates human suffering and oppression. LeDrew claims that conflicts within the secular movement, from George Holyoake's spat with Charles Bradlaugh to Paul Kurtz's controversial resignation from the Centre for Inquiry in 2010 recapitulate a timeless split between a rationalistic, libertarian individualism associated with social-Darwinist Herbert Spencer, and a more socially egalitarian strand of atheism indebted to Feuerbach and the masters of suspicion Nietzsche, Freud,

and Marx. According to LeDrew, the sharp differences in motivation underpinning these two atheisms generate a continual fragmentation and diversification of secularity, with some willing to compromise with religion (humanistic atheists) where others pugnaciously stand their ground (scientific atheists). Hence the 'evolution' of atheism—not a teleological movement towards absolute knowledge à la Comte, but a gradual ramification of atheistic thought and identity akin to Darwin's 'radiating bush'.

The radiating bush theory of atheism leads LeDrew to elaborate a complex taxonomy of twenty-first-century secularism divided by fundamentally 'political' differences. These differences may involve divergences in community-building, or 'political identity' strategy (e.g. the 'resistance' strategy of coopting LGBT discourse through calls for atheists to 'come out of the closet' is pitted against the self-assured 'project' identity of a universalising reason), or disagreements over wealth distribution (e.g., Sam Harris's and Paul Kurtz's basic socialism versus Steven Pinker's neo-liberalism). This is essential clarificatory work for anyone still wedded to a homogenous conception of New Atheism and the secular movement, although LeDrew's concern to differentiate various strands of secularism sometimes fades into definitional vagueness (LeDrew draws an analytic distinction between 'New Atheists, secular humanists, and libertarian rationalists', p. 121, but his section on 'The Atheist Right' reveals considerable overlap between these positions).

Two key questions running throughout the book are 'Why here? Why now?', questions first raised by Stephen Bullivant (2010), though likely to dominate scholarly literature on the New Atheism for some time. LeDrew explains the New Atheists' 'staggering success' (p. 38) from the mid-2000s onwards in terms of four factors: 9/11 and the war on terror; the rise of the American Christian Right; sexual abuse scandals in the Church; and 'the generational shift downward in religiosity in America' (it is not entirely clear whether he sees this downward turn as a cause or an effect of the New Atheism; perhaps it is both) (pp. 39–40). Interestingly this list roughly corresponds to, but does not entirely overlap with his interpretation of the New Atheists' own motivations. LeDrew views the New Atheism as 'a product of—and reaction to—three major events or trends: (1) the rise of young-Earth creationism and intelligent design among anti-evolution Christians in the United States, (2) 9/11 and its cultural

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aftershocks, and (3) the influence of relativism in two forms [epistemic relativism and cultural pluralism] falling under the umbrella of “postmodernism” (p. 55).

The idea that New Atheism is a reaction to pressure from two sides—‘religious fundamentalism’ and postmodern epistemic relativism/pluralistic multiculturalism—is insightful and borne out by ample evidence. LeDrew convincingly argues the New Atheism promotes a politico-scientific ideology inherently averse to difference and totalising in its reach. The question, however, is why this postmodern anxiety seems only to affect New Atheists. Why is this not part of the story behind Bullivant’s ‘Why here? Why now?’ Isn’t a congruence between social anxieties and the New Atheists’ vocalisation of that anxiety intrinsic to their success? How has the ‘failure of the secularization thesis to come to fruition’ (p. 55) contributed to a general unease vis à vis ‘politicised religion’ and a scrabbling search for new ways of articulating religious demands in the public sphere? LeDrew hints at an in-depth analysis but pulls back from the edge.

The methodological ambit is wide, with LeDrew shifting from historical overview to critical theory to physical interviews with non-religious participants. This variety is both a virtue—it is the first time such a rich set of critical tools and data has been brought together in one book—and a source of tensions. A key example is LeDrew’s treatment of New Atheism as an ‘ideology’. His definition combines a generic understanding of ideology as “coherent and relatively stable sets of beliefs and values” that bracket social cognition and provide “schematically organized complexes of representation and attitudes with regard to certain aspects of the social world” with John B. Thompson’s emphasis on asymmetric power as a determinant factor in ideological relations (p. 56). Laying aside the question of whether New Atheism could ever be described as ‘schematically organized’ (to which LeDrew’s own analysis answers ‘no’; it is too unintegrated for that), the reference to Thompson misfires slightly. For Thompson ideology is not simply ‘a means of legitimating the authority of [a] belief system and the group that advances it’. It is, more accurately, ‘meaning in the service of power’ (1990, p. 7)—a hermeneutic definition that carries with it a distinct set of questions and methodological apparatus focused on semantics and microscale discourse analysis.

The split between ‘humanistic’ and ‘scientific atheism’ can also seem artificial. Exactly what makes Freud or Marx less scientific than Darwin or Spencer is unclear—the kind of distinction that is easy to draw in retrospect but would have made no sense to Freud and Marx at

the time. Conversely, it is not clear that scientific atheism ‘concentrates entirely on the conflict between the factual claims of science and religion’ without being ‘influenced by humanistic considerations’ (p. 30). Isn’t the point precisely that for many ‘scientific atheists’ the eventual hegemony of ‘the factual claims of science’ would of itself yield a humanistic outcome? A distinctive feature of the New Atheism—and one shared across the board—is an emphasis on the inseparability of science from humanistic concerns. This humanism may not involve the anti-capitalist, redistributive thrust of left-leaning politics, but it is a humanism nonetheless. The difficulty of pigeonholing thinkers into humanist/scientific atheisms is made particularly clear in LeDrew’s later treatment of Steven Pinker, the archetypal humanist (who won the American Humanist Association’s Humanist of the Year award in 2006), yet one LeDrew files under ‘scientific atheism’. Without taking a stance on what might constitute a ‘true’ humanism, LeDrew is left without a critical lever to deconstruct the conceits of a scientific rhetoric that calls itself humanist but logically endorses the opposite.

The Evolution is an extremely valuable synthesis of existing scholarly work on the New Atheism and its place in the secular movement. It pushes our understanding of this distinctly twenty-first-century phenomenon in new and interesting directions, calling for greater sensitivity to the ‘political ideologies’ underpinning secular discourse, and exposing the close complicity between New Atheist thought and neoconservative, liberal/libertarian capitalism. The unoriginality of New Atheism in the scheme of secular history is less convincing, since cycles never simply repeat; changing context makes sure of that. Perhaps what makes the old wine of New Atheism so interesting is not the wine’s age, but the shape it takes and the thirsts it quenches when syphoned into the new skin of post-9/11 culture. LeDrew’s book is a founding block for future analysis in that direction.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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