

## BOOK REVIEW

## Review: *A Short History of Atheism*

*A Short History of Atheism* by Gavin Hyman, I.B. Taurus, \$21.67 paper, 2012, ISBN: 1848851375 reviewed by Dan Linford

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Gavin Hyman's *A Short History of Atheism* (herein: *SHA*) offers a metanarrative explanation of the theological and philosophical origins of modern atheism. For Hyman, modern atheism is the rejection of a specifically modern God. Because atheism did not exist prior to modernity, and modernity has not fully collapsed, modern atheism is atheism without qualification. Hyman argues that as the medieval period gave way to early modernity, changing conceptions of God led to ontologies incompatible with theism. While Hyman states that his book is not meant to directly attack the arguments produced by atheists, he argues that atheistic arguments are as unstable as the modern theology atheism rejects.

*SHA* contains eight chapters. Hyman discusses God in modernity in the first three chapters. In the fourth, he moves to an explication of the conceptual evolution of theism from the medieval period to early modernity. Afterwards, Hyman devotes chapters to biblical criticism, the rise of modern scientific legitimacy, the problem of evil, and their respective relationships to modern atheism. Finally, he concludes with a chapter length discussion of postmodern theology and the potential demise of atheism with the collapse of modernity.

Hyman distinguishes early modern and medieval theologies. In Thomas Aquinas's prototypically medieval conception of God, terms do not apply the same to creatures as they do to God (univocal predication). Speaking univocally about God and creatures would involve applying created categories to a god that transcends all created categories. Yet the terms that apply to God cannot be divorced from creaturely languages (equivocal predication). If they were, creatures would be incapable of ever speaking about or believing in God. Aquinas's solution was that predication is neither univocal nor equivocal of God and creatures, but analogical.

According to Hyman, Thomistic analogical predication was neglected in early modernity so that God was either spoken of univocally or equivocally. Speaking of God in these two ways renders theism vulnerable to atheistic arguments. For example, univocal predication opens theism to the Problem of Evil: if the term 'good' is applied univocally of

God and creatures, and if humans are obligated to prevent suffering to the degree that they are able, then, a fortiori, so too would a benevolent and omnipotent deity. Yet vast suffering exists in our world, so God, the argument goes, does not. The Problem of Evil dissolves if the term 'good' (and all other terms) mean something different when applied to God than when applied to creatures. God does not have the same kind of moral obligations as creatures because God transcends all creaturely categories including goodness. Univocal predication enables atheistic critiques (e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach): the conceptions of God held by various individuals result from projecting themselves onto the divine and not from some transcendent reality. Equivocal predication opens theism to a different collection of problems. If God is spoken of equivocally then God disappears into Kant's noumena. Agnosticism results.

Hyman states that his account of the history of atheism is not altogether new, but differs from the accounts provided in other histories in significant ways. First, while both Alan Kors's *Atheism in France: 1650–1729* and David Berman's *History of Atheism in Britain* implicate theological changes in early modernity in the development of atheism, neither implicate the neglect of analogy. Indeed, Hyman's focus on analogy in early modernity leaves various historical facts unexplained. For example, seventeenth century France saw a resurgence of Thomism while early modern atheism was at its most vocal in eighteenth century France. Recent work by Richard Muller has shown that reformation theologians throughout Europe debated Thomistic analogy through the end of the seventeenth century. In the 18th century, in the context of debates with freethinkers, George Berkeley (1685–1753) references the still on-going debate over Thomistic analogy. Despite references to Berkeley's comments appearing in other histories of atheism, such as David Berman's, Hyman nowhere references the incident. Second, Hyman does not discuss the way in which eighteenth century critics of religion engaged religious language, despite obvious examples from Thomas Hobbes, Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d'Holbach, and others. For example, D'Holbach argues against one conception of theological analogy that closely parallels an argument considered by Thomas Aquinas, but Hyman fails to discuss this. Similarly, Hyman's discussion of David Hume focuses on Hume's epistemology. However, he does not discuss the use Hume makes of religious language in

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his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. This is peculiar, given Hume's discussion of "anthropomorphic" (univocal) religious language and of Hume's appeal to the debate over theological analogy between William King and Anthony Turner. Also neglected is a discussion of the debate over theological analogy between King and Peter Browne, which continued into the 19th century, made frequent references to Thomas, and interacted with the anglophone Freethought community (e.g. Collins and Hume, among others).

At several points, Hyman mischaracterizes atheism in both its present and historical forms. Hyman opens the first chapter by discussing atheism as a "confession" with various "creeds", characterizing atheism as more organized than it has generally been and through an ethnocentric Christian lens. For academics working on nonreligion and secularism, Hyman's penchant for such locutions will likely appear suspect.

Hyman's book, while highly original, will likely raise doubts of its own.

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