Thought in a post-God world

Sweeping "Age of Atheists" surveys the ideas of 130 years of "brave souls."

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The Age of Atheists

How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God

By Peter Watson

Simon & Schuster. 640 pp. $35.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

In several books, especially The Blind Watchmaker (1986) and The God Delusion (2006), biologist Richard Dawkins maintained that Charles Darwin "made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."

The "very proper purging of the saccharine false purposes" of religion, Dawkins insisted, need not produce pessimism or despair. After all, individuals do not really tie their hopes "to the ultimate fate of the cosmos anyway." Their lives are ruled "by all sorts of closer, warmer, human ambitions and perceptions."

Dawkins is not alone, of course, in trying to find meaning in a secular world. In The Age of Atheists, Peter Watson, a journalist (and the author of The Great Divide: Nature and Human Nature in the Old World and the New; Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention From Fire to Freud; and The Modern Mind), surveys, and celebrates, the "brave souls" in the United States and Europe who devoted their creative energies to identifying ways to "live on with self-reliance, invention, hope, wit, and enthusiasm" in the 130 years since Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead."
For his "master narrative," Watson examines the ideas of dozens and dozens of novelists, poets, painters, psychologists, and philosophers. The same people who rejected the supernatural, he points out, were often acutely aware of the limitations of a scientific worldview. Although he acknowledges that some atheistic ideas were "woolly, incoherent, even absurd," Watson argues that many were prescient, bold, and bracing.

In a world "no longer illumined by God," he writes, "all attempts to reduce its infinite variety to concepts, ideas or essences, whether religious or scientific, whether they involve 'the soul,' or 'nature,' or 'particles,' or 'the afterlife,' diminish the actual variety of reality which is part, and maybe the biggest part, or even the whole of its meaning."

Instead, Watson endorses the phenomenological approach, which accepts that there is no "big answer" to the meaning of life, understands existence as "an inexhaustible number of individual experiences" - Marcel Proust's "moments bienheureux," James Joyce's "living down to fact," Robert Lowell's "bolts of clarification," Seamus Heaney's "momentary stays against confusion" - and appreciates their individuality, immediacy, and intensity.

Sweeping, informative, and provocative, The Age of Atheists is, at times, superficial. Instead of a close reading of the work of his subjects, Watson often summarizes the analysis of others. He rarely identifies holes or inconsistencies in the arguments of his subjects. And precision and clarity are casualties of what sometimes seems like a forced march from thinker to thinker.

For example, Watson deems the executions of Nazi collaborators Vidkun Quisling and Pierre Laval evidence for the prevalence of pessimism in Europe in 1945. More important, he does not explain what he or his intellectuals mean when they claim that "there is no reality"; that "the world is not rational, but inexhaustible"; that "the only 'final' state is self-understanding"; that "we cannot avoid having a central standpoint"; that even with the claim that an aim of life is to surpass oneself "no generalizations are possible"; that artists encounter the resistance of the world "and produce change through action"; and that freedom, and happiness, involve acts that lead to consequences.

Nonetheless, The Age of Atheists largely accomplishes its aim: to share with readers more than a century of creative thinking about a world in which God is conceived of as our creation. And to get us to consider the propositions that we should seek a direction and shed our anxiety about a destination; explore the universe "both to enjoy the experience and observe ourselves experiencing it"; and understand that evolution, as much or more than religion, encourages our responsibility to ourselves and our duty to respect others.
In modern societies, Watson claims, it's easier to be secular than religious. He may be right. As the philosopher Jurgen Habermas has emphasized, however, we have not yet mastered the dynamics of modernity and many of us feel it is "spinning out of control."

For this reason, among others, religion retains its appeal. For this reason as well, try as we might, it isn't easy, even if you're convinced that "meaning" is an oppressive illusion, to rejoice that "life is its own answer."

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