



The Enlightenment



A Secular Mini-Journal for Inquiring Minds

Volume 1

Number 4

April 2020

Book Review – By Don Hatch

In Defence of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

By Michel Onfray.

The title and subtitle say it all. This 219-page book is a treatise defending non-belief in God while criticizing monotheism. It is sort of a companion to Christopher Hitchens' book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

After a brief Preface and a short Introduction, the book is divided into four parts, with each part containing three chapters, further divided into from five to twelve subchapters. The four parts are:

- Part One: Atheology
- Part Two: Monotheism
- Part Three: Christianity
- Part Four: Theocracy

Part One is entitled *Atheology*. This word is not in the dictionary. It was coined by French author Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and used in his *Summa Atheologia*, an antithesis to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Onfray points out that the word atheist is often regarded as a pejorative and a better word for non-believers is required. Atheologist (opposite of theologian) has not caught on, and he suggests freethinker might be a better word, but again this designation has not seen widespread use. Onfray states, "we possess no positive term to describe the man who does not worship phantoms of the imagination. We must therefore make do with *atheist*."

In the second chapter of Part One, Onfray goes on a search for the first atheist. One might be tempted to bestow this honour on Epicurus, sometimes referred to as the first humanist, but Epicurus did not entirely rule out the existence of gods. Instead, he said if gods do exist, they have no influence on events on earth. Onfray credits French Abbé Jean Meslier (1664-1729) as being the first real atheist. In his *Testament* published shortly after his death, Meslier affirms that God does not exist, Christianity is a hoax or fraud, and Jesus was an impostor. The second atheist mentioned is French philosophe Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), author of *Christianity Unveiled* and *System of Nature* where he caustically derides Christianity. Onfray does not mention Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1777), an avowed atheist who preceded Meslier.

Many of the other Enlightenment philosophers were Deists who were anti-religious, but believed God started the universe and then left. (Some of the Founding Fathers of the U.S. were also deists and insisted on separation of church and state in the American Constitution).

In the third chapter of Part One, Onfray comments on the shortcomings of monotheistic religions and suggests the time has come “to formulate a new ethic and produce conditions for a true post-Christian morality less obsessed with death and an afterlife and centered on the here and now and love of life.”

Part Two dwells on a few specific shortcomings of monotheism. “It seeks to promote self hatred to the detriment of the body, to discredit the intelligence, to despise the flesh, and to prize everything that stands in the way of a gratified subjectivity.” Knowledge, except what was in the holy books, was to be ignored. Any books (scrolls) considered to be pagan were destroyed as libraries were burned. In the process, valuable philosophical and other classic writings were lost. (Fortunately, many were preserved by Arabs and monks, and were rediscovered during the Renaissance.) The Catholic suppression of science and the democracy of the Greeks for one thousand years that impeded the forward march of Western civilization is mentioned, as is the absurdity of the Catholic eucharist, wherein the body of Christ is incorporated into the host and his blood into the wine. And we must not omit the cruelty of the Crusades, inquisitions, and burnings at the stake for blasphemy and witchcraft sanctioned by the Catholic Church.

Chapter 3 of Part Two comments on the absurdity of an afterlife. By aiming for paradise, we lose sight of our life on earth, being unable to live this terrestrial life to the fullest. In addition, the three monotheisms reject homosexuals, abortion, and planned parenthood.

Before moving on to Part Three, I have to mention that much of copy in the paragraphs below dealing with Part Three, express my own thoughts on Christianity, and include details that Onfray does not mention in his book. It is hoped these additions will be helpful.

The topic for Part Three is Christianity, a religion based on one individual, Jesus of Nazareth who became known as Jesus-the-Christ, son of God, born of a virgin, formed a band of followers, upset the Jewish authorities in the Temple, was crucified, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, and will return at some time in the future to set up God’s kingdom on earth. And to top all this off, the shedding of Jesus’ blood on the cross brings about the atonement of the sins of believers and an everlasting life in an idyllic heaven after death. All this is stated in the creeds repeated every Sunday in some Christian Churches.

How can any intelligent person believe this fiction? It’s hard to fathom, but nevertheless, today over two billion adherents profess to believe these fabrications. Yes, fabrications indeed, because all gods and religions are human inventions. Surely the time is ripe for more secularization in the world!

Onfray rightly points out that there is scant historical evidence that Jesus ever existed. Certainly, the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ described above could never have existed. He had to have been invented. But who was the inventor? For an answer I suggest we look to Jean Meslier’s *Testament*, wherein he states that Jesus of Nazareth was a fully human person and a clever impostor who convinced a small band of followers that he was the promised Messiah. The Jewish authorities in the Temple reasoned that this cult was a threat, and arranged to have Jesus put to death. That should have been the end of the Jesus story because after Jesus’ death, the disciples, led by Jesus’ half-brother James and Peter, were unable to convince a significant

number of fellow Jews to become a follower of the Jesus cult which later died out. It was not Jesus, but the apostle Paul who founded Christianity.

Saul of Tarsus was a Jewish Pharisee who participated in the persecution of the followers of Jesus. One day on the road to Damascus he was blinded by an intense light and heard the voice of Jesus telling him to preach the gospel to all nations. After this conversion he became known as Paul and set out to successfully establish a number of Christian Churches in the eastern Mediterranean basin, despite being persecuted, beaten, and spending time in jail.

But what really happened to cause Paul to have an epiphany on the Damascus road and why was he so fervent to take Jesus' message to the gentiles? Onfray, who calls Paul "sick, misogynistic and masochistic," postulates that Paul suffered from various medical conditions. He described the Damascus road episode as a hysterical conversion (others have said it could have been an epileptic fit). Regarding Paul's "thorn in the flesh," Onfray offers over fifteen possible ailments that it could have been. But I think he misses the most probable cause: Paul was a homosexual. No less a person than Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, who has written numerous books on progressive Christianity, puts this possibility forward in his book *Rescuing the Bible from the Fundamentalists*.

It all makes sense. Paul knew that according to Jewish law homosexuals were to be stoned to death. Paul knew the disciples and obviously picked up on their message that Jesus was the son of God (Romans 1:4), that through the grace of Jesus it was no longer necessary to abide by all the 613 Jewish laws listed in the Torah, and that salvation and redemption are received through faith (Romans 1:17). This revelation resulted in Paul setting out to convert gentiles from "pagans" to what became Christianity. He wrote his Epistles to the various churches containing instructions on righteous Christian living. Despite some degree of persecution of Christians, the Christian Churches survived. Then, on October 28, 312, Christianity started on the road to becoming the religion of the Western world.

Chapter 3 of Part Three is entitled "The Totalitarian Christian State." It's about the Roman Emperor Constantine declaring and establishing Christianity as the official religion of the vast Roman empire. The story or legend goes like this. In October of the year 312, Constantine was preparing for battle against his rival Maxentius at Milvian bridge. The day or night before the battle was to occur, Constantine reputedly saw a sign or had a vision that he would win the battle if he fought under the sign of the Christian cross. He won the battle and after a time, Christianity became established throughout the empire and eventually throughout the Western world. Onfray calls this a disaster, naming it Constantine's "coup d'état." He criticizes the Catholic Church for holding back the growth of science and democracy for a thousand years, and describes the atrocities the Church committed while filling their coffers. He points out that Christianity, based on supernatural beliefs, would not exist were it not for the reputed vision the apostle Paul had on the Damascus road, and the reputed vision Constantine had at Milvian bridge. If these visions actually did occur, then Christianity is not built on a rock, but on the shiftest of shifting sands. Onfray is no fan of Christianity and is convinced it has done more harm than good. (I have often thought that if emperor Marcus Aurelius' common-sense book *Meditations*, had become the Bible of the Western world, rather than the Old and New Testaments, Western civilization would have advanced much faster. Unfortunately, this did not happen).

Part Four is entitled *Theocracy*. "Every theocracy is a denial of democracy. Even better: the smallest hint of theocracy neutralizes the very essence of democracy," says Onfray. He is particularly critical of Islam and Islamic theocracies such as Iran. Citing Islam as a religion established by the sword and continuing to be

violent with modern jihads, he notes that in the Koran, “nearly two hundred and fifty versus – of the six thousand two hundred and thirty-four of the book – justify and legitimize holy war, jihad. Enough to drown the handful of very inoffensive phrases recommending tolerance, respect for one’s neighbor, magnanimity or nonrecourse to violence in questions of religion.” He describes Islam as an anachronism in today’s modern world and it is badly in need of reform.

He blames Judaism as the source of monotheism, later leading to Christianity and Islam. He claims that a secular atheistic society would be preferable to what we have today in the West. He seems to ignore the fact that in most Western democratic societies that separate church and state, Christianity is gradually fading away and secularism is the norm. When Jean Meslier’s *Testament* became available in English in 2009, in which he postulates that Christianity is a fraud or a hoax and that Jesus was an imposter, Onfray stated: “Meslier leaves behind him a philosophical work that one can, without risk of exaggeration, compare to a bomb. Indeed, the *Testament* is a time bomb and may bring a rapid end to Christianity.”

But this time bomb has never exploded. Instead, as mentioned above, Christianity is just slowly fading away as main line Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic, are losing members and adherents, resulting in more and more church closures. Fewer and fewer people, especially the young, seem to care much anymore about faith in the supernatural. Instead, they are concerned with the considerable challenges of getting an education, establishing a career, raising a family, and enjoying non-religious activities.

Onfray seems to be naïve about the reality existing today. Throughout the book he has nothing good to say about Christianity or monotheism in general. Nevertheless, in the West, Christianity has had some positive attributes as well as the bad ones he mentions. Many adherents have received comfort from their Christian beliefs and have enjoyed the social aspects of belonging to a Christian congregation. Some have looked to the New Testament as a source of morality. Christianity has inspired great architecture and great music. And many congregations have outreach activities for the purpose of helping the needy.

But times are changing. As Onfray says, it is time to abandon beliefs in the supernatural and live secular lives, realizing that this life is all there is, and abandon belief in some form of afterlife. Agreed, but for some reason, Onfray fails to recognize that this is a gradual process. The bombshell he predicted has not exploded and likely never will.

I am glad I read this book, but it would have been easier to do a review if it had an index. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight the following:

- In the introduction Onfray states, “Atheism is not therapy but restored mental health.” I can relate to this. For decades I was having doubts about what I was brought up to believe as a nominal Christian. Then, shortly after turning 60, I read about the Jesus Seminar. This group of progressive theologians was claiming that Jesus was fully human and not supernatural in any way. I began looking into this a bit further and became a non-believer. This brought about a welcome sense of relief and great peace of mind, or “restored mental health.”
- Onfray is a fan of the Enlightenment and promotes Enlightenment values when he says, “We must subscribe to the Enlightenment project, which remains as viable as ever. It aims to lift man out of his infantile condition and set his feet on the path to adulthood.”

- He also states that it is most unfortunate that monotheism ever came about. Despite claiming to be about brotherly love, it has brought about much violence and suffering. Christianity – Catholicism in particular – held back the progress of Western society for one thousand years by repressing the development of democracy and science.
- Monotheism’s emphasis on some form of life after death, with after-death rewards for the faithful, prevents people from getting the most out of this life on earth.
- Onfray abhors Islam, claiming it to be a backward religion condoning violent jihad and refusing to move into the modern world. He does not mention it, but the world population of Muslims has increased from 68.5 million in 1945 to 1.7 billion in 2019. This is alarming at a time when world population should be leveling out or decreasing. Muslims are furthering the advance of Islam by having large families. Not good.

Mention is made above of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* and Batille’s *Summa Atheologica*. Summa in Latin means total. Roughly translated, the former is “All you need to know about God,” and the latter is, “All you need to know about Atheism.” Keeping with this vein, I have created a *Summa Secularia* which is all you need to know about secularism and secular societies. This will be presented in a future *Enlightenment*.

Living With a Lesser God, But Working On My Tan

By Duncan Watterworth

My favorite time of the week is Monday, Wednesday, and Friday about 10:35 A.M. I’ve finished my weightlifting class at the YMCA and walked out the east door. Endorphins are flowing. I turn my face to the warmth of the sun. I feel content, blessed, connected.

Maybe it’s a scaled-down sort of worship. After all, the sun is our Creator - supplying energy to the planet to fuel life and evolution.

I know that, as gods go, that distant orb may seem a bit underwhelming. But what else have we got? If you are undecided about gods, I suggest you cut to the chase. Answer this: What do *you* think is the most reliable source of truth, or even Truth? Is it reason, observation, and the scientific method? Or is it faith, dogma, revelation, authority, mysticism, visions, gut feelings, or sacred texts?

Your answer will go a long way toward determining your version of reality, of the workings of the universe, of gods. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously proclaimed in 1882 that “God is dead, and we killed him.” He meant that the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment values of reason and science, would inevitably steamroll religion.

But erudite atheist Christopher Hitchens wrote, “religion is such a part of our human or animal nature that it is actually ineradicable...for as long as we are afraid of death, or the dark.”

As for me, I grew up attending a Baptist church, but abandoned belief in God while in my teens. Lack of evidence. Instead, I’m a fan of the Enlightenment’s reason and scientific method. I think those other alleged

sources of truth are in fact “generators of delusion,” to quote Montreal-born Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker from his book *Enlightenment Now*.

But my transition to a God-free reality was not without aftereffects. Even a non-existent God leaves tracks. “Presumably the loss of [my Christian faith] left a vacancy somewhere inside of me, and may account for my enduring interest in spiritual questions,” wrote scholar, author, and partial Buddhist Robert Wright. That sounds like me.

Beyond that, dropping God has had another lingering effect. Think of teenagers that grow up watching fantastic porn. Aren’t they doomed to feel that their real sex lives seem lackluster, second class? Likewise, Christianity presents a jacked-up reality. Who wouldn’t want a divine purpose, an all-around protector, and then eternal bliss? So now I’m stuck with a sense that my (real) reality is comparatively mundane. I live in the disenchanting aftermath of God porn. It’s a cross I must bear.

Having said all that, it’s important to remember that the investigation of Reality will never be complete. That’s science. And it’s still early days for that investigation, and our species. We must show some humility before the frontiers of human understanding, to again quote Pinker. Especially since we are all prone to arrogant certainty. Anyhow, I live as if there is no God. Or Santa Claus or unicorns.

Looking forward, I would like to explore evolutionary psychology. Do we have primitive, subconscious longings for a father figure, an explainer of natural events, a protector from – in Jordan Peterson’s chilling phrase – the depredations of the infinite? Is that where gods come from?

Or how about scientific investigations for an unknown order or continuity or infrastructure in the earth’s biomass, or the universe at large?

But my clock is running out. I’m doomed to be no more than a sun worshipper, working on my tan. Perhaps in Hell.

Is there a library there?

The Enlightenment was formerly published under the auspices of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA). HALA came to an end on December 31st, 2019, but *The Enlightenment* will continue as an independent publication issued to a select group of readers. Editor and publisher is Don Hatch – dahatch@rogers.com. Past Enlightenment, along with Goldwin Emerson’s *London Free Press* (LFP) articles and a list of topics of past HALA meetings, can be read at humanists-london.org. Future Enlightenment and future LFP articles by Goldwin Emerson will both be available on this site.