

Western Atheism: A Guide For the Perplexed

Thursday 4 October 2018, by [SHARMA Arvind](#) (Date first published: 17 September 2018).

John Gray's new book explores seven types of non-belief in a creator-god but ignores ideas about atheism in India, China and the east.

The modern world is nothing if not plural in the number of possible world views it offers in terms of religions, creeds and ideologies. The profusion can be quite perplexing, even bewildering. And atheism too is an important component of the cocktail.

The book under review - John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism* - acts like a 'guide to the perplexed' in the modern Western world by bestowing the same kind of critical attention to atheism as theologians do to theism, and historians of religion do to the world religions.

In doing so, it identifies seven types of atheism: (1) new atheism, or an atheism which is simply interested in discrediting religion; (2) 'secular atheism', better described as secular humanism, which seeks salvation of the world within the world through progress; (3) 'scientific atheism', which turns science into a religion - a category in which the author includes 'evolutionary humanism, Mesmerism, dialectical materialism, and contemporary transhumanism'; (4) 'political atheism', a category in which fall what the author considers to be modern political religions such as Jacobinism, Communism, Nazism and contemporary evangelical liberalism; (5) 'antitheistic atheism' or misotheism, the kind of atheism characterized by hatred of God of such people as Marquis de Sade, Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov (in a famous novel) and William Empson; (6) 'non-humanistic atheism', of the kind associated with the positions of George Santayana and Joseph Conrad who rejected the idea of a creator God but did not go on to cultivate benevolence towards humanity, so characteristic of secular atheism; and (7) mystical atheism, associated with the names of Schopenhauer, Spinoza, and the Russian thinker Leo Shestov. The author states his position in relation to these seven types candidly; he is repelled (his word) by the first five but feels drawn to the last two.

The seminal insight of the book, in the Western context, is that according "contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means". The author returns to the point again and again so that this insight enables us to examine both religion and atheism in tandem. It is thus an admirable book on atheism in the Western world and is strewn with nuggets such as:

- "Scientific inquiry answers a demand for explanation. The practice of religion expresses a need for meaning...";
- "The human mind is programmed for survival, not truth";
- "Science can never close the gap between fact and value";
- "The fundamental conflict in ethics is not between self-interest and general welfare but between general welfare and desires of the moment";
- "It is not only the assertion that 'moral' values must take precedence over all others that has been inherited from Christianity. So has the belief that all human beings must live by the same morality";
- "... beliefs that have depended on falsehood *need not* themselves be false";

- “Some values may be humanly universal – being tortured or persecuted is bad for all human beings. But universal values do not make a *universal morality*, for these values often conflict with each other”;
- “Liberal societies are not templates of a universal political order but instances of a particular form of life. Yet liberals persist in imagining that only ignorance prevents their gospel from being accepted by all of humankind – a vision inherited from Christianity”;
- “Causing others to suffer could produce an excitement far beyond any achieved through mere debauchery”;
- “Prayer is no less natural than sex, virtue as much as vice”;
- “Continuing progress is possible only in technology and the mechanical arts. Progress in this sense may well accelerate as the quality of civilisation declines”;
- “Any prospect of a worthwhile life without illusions might itself be an illusion”;
- “If Nietzsche shouted the death of God from the rooftops, Arthur Schopenhauer gave the Deity a quiet burial”;
- “The liberated individual entered into a realm where the will is silent”;
- “Human life... is purposeless striving... But from another point of view this aimless world is pure play”;
- “If the human mind mirrors the cosmos, it may be because they are both fundamentally chaotic”; and so on.

Its provocative ideas and brilliant summaries notwithstanding, the book is bound by a limitation; its scope is limited to the West. The author does touch on Buddhism and even Sankhya but only as they have implications for the West; he does not cover Asian ideas of atheism alongside the Western. Neither Confucianism nor Daoism are hung up on a creator god and thus seem to demand attention, if atheism is defined as “the idea of the absence of a creator-god”. Similarly, in Hindu theism, the relation between the universe and the ultimate reality is posited as ontological rather than cosmological.

The concept of atheism also needs to be refined further in relation to Indian religions. In this context it is best to speak of the nontheism of Buddhism (which denies a creator god but not gods as such), and the transtheism of Advaita Vedanta (which accepts a God-like reality but denies it the status of the ultimate reality). In fact, the discussion in this book is perhaps better understood if we invoke some other categories related to the idea of God, such as transcendence and immanence. God is understood as transcendent in the Abrahamic traditions. God no doubt creates the universe but also transcends it; in the Hindu traditions, god is considered both transcendent and immanent – God ‘creates’ the universe and transcends it but also pervades it, just as the number seven transcends the number five but also contains it.

The many atheisms described in the book are really cases of denying the transcendence of god as the ultimate reality and identifying ultimate reality with something immanent in the universe. This enables one to see the atheisms of the West in an even broader light than when described as crypto-monotheisms.

One may conclude the discussion of such a heavy topic on a lighter note. Could one not think of something which is best called ‘devout agnosticism’ as a solution to rampant atheism in the West, if atheism is perceived as a problem? Such would be the situation if one prayed to a God, whose existence had been bracketed by one.

Crying for help from such a God in an emergency, is like crying for help in a less dire situation in which one shouts for help without knowing whether there is any one within earshot. Even the communists in Kerala might have found this possibility useful if the torrential rains filled them with the ‘fear of God’.

Arvind Sharma is Birks Professor in Comparative Religion, School of Religious Studies, McGill University, CA.

Arvind Sharma

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/books/western-atheism-a-guide-for-the-perplexed>