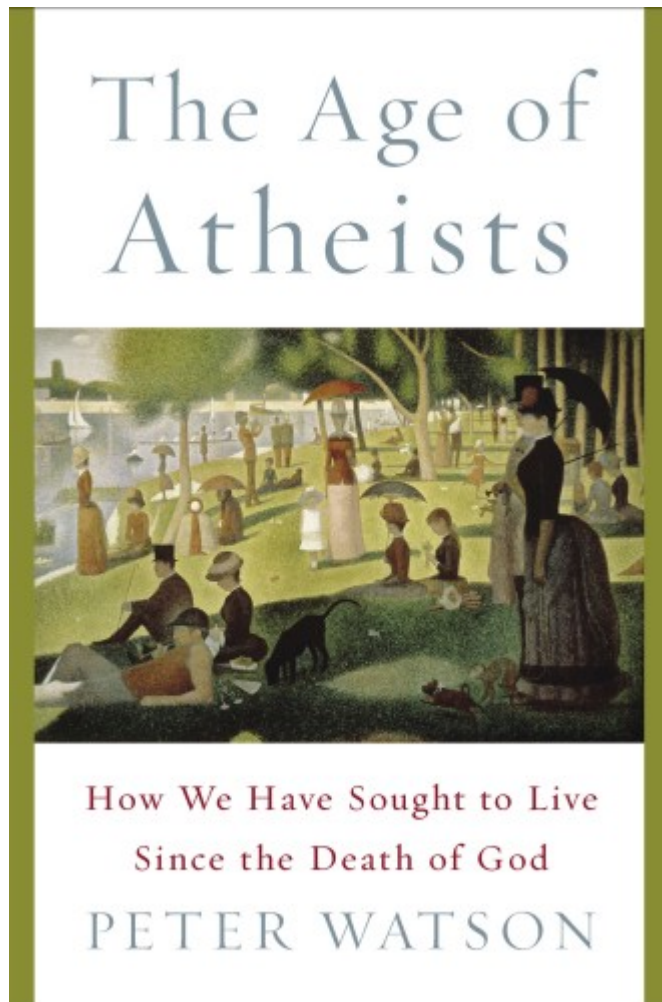


Cloud of skeptics

by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Age of Atheists

By Peter Watson
Simon & Schuster

Atheism has a long history going back to the Greeks. Classical Stoicism allowed that there are gods but contended that a wise person need pay them no heed. Leaders of the French Enlightenment considered God beneath rational consideration. And so

on. Why, then, does Peter Watson begin “the age of atheism” in 1883, when Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead?

Jean-Paul Sartre offers an answer. Previous atheistic thinkers had said that “nothing will be changed if God does not exist; we shall rediscover the same norms of honesty, progress and humanity.” Post-Nietzschean atheists are not so optimistic. Sartre “finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him finding values in an intelligible heaven. . . . It is nowhere written that ‘the good’ exists.” Watson’s age of atheists is a new era for humanity, a time without “an intelligible heaven,” when not only is God dead, but humanism is in jeopardy.

The Age of Atheists sketches in the lives and thoughts of an overflowing array of scientists, poets, artists, and philosophers, all of whom offer ways of coping with the death of God. Watson includes famously influential atheists like Marx and Freud, tragic atheists like Sartre and Kafka, proselytizing atheists like Richard Dawkins, poetic atheists like Paul Valéry and Wallace Stevens, and nostalgic atheists like Jürgen Habermas and Ronald Dworkin, who want to resuscitate religion minus its supernatural trappings. Even Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* is included in the godless canon. Watson made his own position clear in a BBC broadcast: “The biggest mistake in the history of civilization was ethical monotheism.”

The book jacket describes Watson as an intellectual historian. He qualifies for that characterization as the author of books like *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud* and *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20th Century*, but the *Guardian* was more to the point when it called him “a journalist of historic industry.” The 37-page index of *The Age of Atheists* testifies to industry, and the text is more superlative journalism than historical analysis.

Despite the pungency of various quotes and positions, it is difficult to get a clear picture of atheism in *The Age of Atheists*. The most universal sense of it on display is the rejection of religious institutions. Thinkers in this camp see churches as power structures that impose religious systems offering “a false sense of the size of life” to believers. Watson properly notes that a similar complaint can be made about a modern antireligious movement like doctrinaire communism. He suggests that what atheists have in common is rejection of anything supernatural. In sum: life is too rich and various to fit any constrictive ideology, and certainly there is no transcendent “overbearing benchmark by which the world may be judged.” We have to settle for Valéry’s “*minutes heureuses*” or Stevens’s “particulars.”

The problem with a journalistic history has been well stated by Emmanuel Levinas, a thinker who gets short shrift in the text. "The death of man, the death of God (or death to God!): apocalyptic ideas or high-society slogans, . . . manifestations of Parisian taste or distaste, . . . the tyranny of the latest craze, . . . soon reduced to bargain prices." Watson's great assemblage of thinkers all fly the flag of atheism, but they march off in very different directions. Rejection of institutional religion? Habermas and Dworkin remain nostalgic for community; Alain de Botton suggests creating "Agape restaurants" where we can commune with new people.

Of course these new "religions" (or restaurants) would be fully rational, but then there is the problem of *rationality*, a term that is not easily pinned down rationally. Aggressive atheists like Dawkins regard science as the paradigm of rationality, but there are those among Watson's atheistic believers who believe that science also "offers a false sense of the size of life." D. H. Lawrence thought that "in eschewing the irrational," science "was distancing itself from 'life.'"

And do atheists universally reject the supernatural? Sorry to say, but *supernatural* is as slippery as *rational*. First off, to discuss the supernatural, one first has to locate natural. If what is natural is accessed only by natural science, what science cannot know does not exist. The atheistic poets and artists object to the hegemony of science. Natural science is too abstract, fixing nature in fewer and fewer categories. Poets do not talk about nature, they seek to participate in its particulars. Walt Whitman thought that "evolution betrayed 'a want of living glow, fondness, warmth.'" Depending on which nature one fixes upon, one could say either that the poets transcend natural science to focus on the individual flower or that natural science transcends the mere individual blossom in search of the universal form. Something supernatural is going on.

Finally, what should we make of Zarathustra's proclamation? Is the supernatural God, now dead, replaced by the supernatural human?

I do not mean to discount Watson's storyline by asking these questions about atheism. Apocalyptic or mere fashion, atheism is currently very much in the market, whether at a price as high as Nietzsche's or Sartre's or at a bargain price in which religion is replaced without remainder by no-nonsense Darwinism.

If it is difficult to get a clear definition of *atheism*, the same is true for *theism*, and confusion about the latter may be the cause of incoherence in the former. Consider

for a moment the various rationales Watson outlines for rejecting theism. Atheists reject religious institutions. What about theists? Christianity starts with some sort of rejection of Jewish practice, then proceeds through two millennia of internal quarrels and institutional separations. New churches and communions often seek a larger sense of the size of life than was previously available. Luther rejects the constrictions of Catholic mediation, relying instead on God's great justification. One can, of course, reject institutions altogether by referring to oneself as spiritual but not religious and seeking some sort of transcendence—whether deeper insights or higher states of consciousness. Does being spiritual imply anything supernatural?

What might one distill from the complexity, contentions, and confusions of the Christian tradition as a comment on modern atheism as Watson presents it? I would suggest contemplating Walker Percy's claim that "Judaism and Christianity are not members in good standing of the world's great religions." Percy did not intend this as a comment on noble traditions like Buddhism or Vedanta; he wanted to deny that biblical religion constitutes something like a system of ideas, a "philosophy of life."

The underlying assumption of Watson's atheists is that religion offers a system of ideas "from which the world can be judged." But the Bible is not at all like a system of ideas; it is a messy history. In a system of ideas, you don't have to know anything about the author to understand the doctrine. Whereas Plato disappears behind the dialogues, God doesn't just offer ideas about life and disappear. God acts in life and history, spectacularly so in the Christian gospel. Jesus doesn't deliver a truth, Jesus *is* "the way, the truth, and the life." The event of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection is the message. Because of the resurrection, we are not left with a mere set of ideas; we have Jesus alive. From the standpoint of the Bible, a God who just delivered ideas would be as dead and gone as Plato.

Watson's atheists reject the teachings of Christianity, but—to put the issue as radically as possible—there are no teachings of Christianity, there is the Teacher who is life. Fearlessly asserting life over ideology, particulars over doctrine, and freedom over institutions, many of these atheists are closer to biblical reality than their atheistic rhetoric would suggest.