

SEVEN ATHEISMS



Andrew Walker

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**Exploring the varieties of
atheism in John Gray's book
Seven Types of Atheism**

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Introduction

John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism* (Allen Lane, 2018) is an important book for both religious and non-religious readers. John Gray, who describes himself as an atheist, is nevertheless critical of most versions of atheism.

His attitude to atheism is the same as his attitude to certain types of religion. This attitude is predicated upon Gray's conviction that human beings are intrinsically dissatisfied and unpredictable creatures who can never get along with each other for any length of time. His view is based on a reading of human nature that sails close to the wind of the Christian concept of original sin, and is out of step with most modern forms of atheism.

In particular, Gray is allergic to any forms of cultural progress in human behaviour especially if they are couched in positivistic or evolutionary terms.

ATHEISM 1

19th century atheism

Gray sets out his stall in his first chapter, 'The New Atheism: A Nineteenth-century Orthodoxy'. In this chapter, we get a less than positive reaction to the Enlightenment. He observes that evolutionary (and sometimes revolutionary) grand theories became all the rage in the 19th century, leading to a view in which humanity as a collectivity replaces God, but like the Christian God is seen to be the author of perfectionism on earth.

In 1890, James George Frazer (1854-1941) published *The Golden Bough*, which followed the French philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in dividing the world into three periods of human thought. The first was theological or religious, which Frazer saw as a form of primitive science; the second was metaphysical or philosophical; and the third and final evolutionary stage in human thought was the positive or scientific.

Two things stand out about this view. The first is that all 19th century evolutionary ideas reach their perfection with the emergence of the theories propagated by the grand theorists. This holds for Marxism, *laissez-faire* capitalism and scientific positivism. The second feature of 19th century forms of atheism is that in the West the theories are as dogmatic and controlling as religions, but they also take many of their tenets from Christianity. Secular theorists borrowed the idea of evolving into a perfect state from the myth of Christian perfection: the kingdom of God is replaced by the republic of humanity.

Gray tells us that the new atheisms of the Victorian age were mainly reactions against monotheism, and especially Christianity. While he admits that atheism is a nuanced concept, he feels that a definition of atheism, for

the West at least, would be the absence of a creator God. Gray does not want to lay claim to any religion or identify himself with any of his seven types of atheism, but what he does say is that there has never been a secular age, and that atheisms typically feed off the tenets of the religion they seek to replace.

Secular thinkers from Karl Marx (1818-83), Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Comte were all convinced that scientific atheism would replace religious belief. As scientific method became more central to human understanding, God would gradually be replaced. Indeed, many modern atheists hold that the creator God has been shrinking as a metaphysical reality, and has become the God of the gaps. When all the gaps in what we know are filled by scientific knowledge, there will be no more need for a God.

ATHEISM 2

Secular humanism

Gray's second type of atheism (in his chapter two: 'Secular Humanism, A Sacred Relic') really shows the shortcomings of much atheistic thought – although frankly I think atheisms one and two are cut from the same cloth. Gray believes that Christianity is a mixture of Hebrew and Greek thought (and it's hard to disagree with that), but he argues that Christianity as we now understand it was invented in the first and fourth centuries by St Paul and St Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

Gray also picks up the theme of the medieval Neoplatonic mystics that God needed human beings to know himself. Christian orthodoxy taught that God was absolute and self-sufficient. The creation of the cosmos (visible and invisible) was due to a natural outflow of God's inner communion: an overflow of good will, a largesse of love. But Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and other medieval mystics believed that creation was a necessity for God: he needed creation as a mirror of self-realization. Such a view is probably most clearly set out in the early Protestant era by the Lutheran Jacob Boehme (1575-1624).

This understanding of God as coming to self-realization became one of the sources for the modern belief that humanity comes to know itself through history. This holds for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's dialectic of world-spirit and Marx's humanism, though for Hegel (1770-1831) his philosophy itself was the synthesis of the dialectic of world and spirit. Marx's system was awaiting a future time when communism would become the crowning glory of human development. For both, however, a belief in a self-realizing God was replaced by a self-deifying humanity.

Marx, similarly to the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), saw God as a projection of human wishes and desires. Marx, therefore, was not only atheistic in his repudiation of God as an ontological being, but also in his view that history owes more to Plato than Jewish messianic religion. Nevertheless, Marx did have a messianic and apocalyptic side to his system. Gray offers us a view of Marx's translation of Jewish religion into his secular categories with a telling quote from Bertrand Russell (1872-1970):

Yahweh – Dialectical Materialism

The Messiah – Marx

The Elect – The Proletariat

The Church – The Communist Party

The Second Coming – The Revolution

Hell – Punishment of the Capitalists

The Millennium – The Communist Commonwealth

Russell himself was a rationalist as well as an atheist, but for him, logic had a deeply mystical side; he was also wary of political doctrines of progress. His realization that atheistic communism had led to the Soviet gulags made him suspicious of Bolshevism. (The British left wing intelligentsia never really knew what to make of him.)

Gray sees evolutionary atheism and the belief in inevitable progress as an unwitting spin off from the mystical writers of the middle ages (which is why he adds the words 'sacred relic' to the title of this chapter). He thinks that the stress on progress in this form of atheism is based on ideology or wish-fulfilment, rather than on empirical evidence. The chapter is a timely reminder that the populist philosopher Hans Rosling (1948-2017) is in the philosophical tradition that things are improving, based on various indices of happiness. His final book was entitled, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About The World – And Why Things Are Better Than You Think*.

Gray does not deny that there have been real improvements – in health and labour saving devices, to take just two examples – but he insists this is not evidence of a deifying humanity, or proof that the contemporary world is a better place than the 19th century, when religion held sway in the public

square. He points out that it was the success of scientific and technological know-how that led to this optimism. He argues, convincingly in my opinion, that it was the triumph of the scientific world-view that enabled human beings to kill each other more efficiently and on a scale unknown to earlier generations.

Gray's critique of 19th century positivism takes in the views of John Stuart Mill (1806-73). Mill fits in with evolutionary secularism because he was a passionate supporter of Comte in his earlier years before he became, in the words of Gladstone, 'the saint of rationalism'. Today we think of Mill as the father of liberalism, but Gray does not want us to forget that Utilitarianism, which was created by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and sanctified by Mill, was, in fact, like most of 19th century atheism, extremely illiberal.

Gray ends the second of his atheisms with a look at several thinkers not usually associated with secular humanism and atheism. Perhaps it is a surprise to find Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) here. Neglected as he is by English speaking philosophers, Nietzsche was not in fact the forerunner of Fascism he is so often said to be; he was certainly no anti-semitic.

Nietzsche's influence can be found on most modern types of atheism. He lived frugally and moved around Europe as an itinerant scholar. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor, but grew to hate Christianity. Nevertheless, he was convinced that humanity needed redemption, and he bemoaned the passing of Christianity, because without some notion of a godlike figure he was afraid humankind would decline into nihilism (that is, believing in nothing). Nietzsche had difficulty in believing in truth claims of any kind, and yet he dreaded chaos without a compulsory common morality.

His solution, which Gray finds laughable, was in his concept of *Übermensch*, or superior being. Some Nazis tried to link this sense of a superman to Hitler as the Führer, but Nazism is more of a scientific racism than anything Nietzsche concocted.

Gray closes this long section of the book by examining the atheism of Ayn Rand (1905-82). Rand, a marginal figure even in her lifetime, was a right-wing individualist who thought altruism (a word invented by Comte) was the greatest evil. Born in Russia, she moved to America and was the leader of what was in effect a cult. She is included presumably because she believed

that reason, in the context of *laissez-faire* capitalism, leads to unfettered individualism, in a final victory for progress. She had no time for group loyalty or interest in the welfare of others.

A curious snippet of information about her demonstrates her lasting legacy of selfishness. Gray tells us that her amorality was an influence in the establishment of the Republican Tea Party in the 21st century.

ATHEISM 3

Science as religion

If Gray's chapter two is rather scrappy and confusing, chapter three, 'A Strange Faith in Science', is a model of concise and focused history. Gray highlights faith in science itself as a religion, and I found it a more disturbing atheism than the first two.

In 1899, German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) published his book *The Riddle of the Universe*. Deeply hostile to monotheistic beliefs, Haeckel replaces religion with science, and expounds his new religion of science, which he calls Monism. This usurpation of God with a method of enquiry was clearly a category mistake; it certainly was not the disinterested, value-free rationality it was cracked up to be. Monism included a scientific anthropology, which divided humanity into a hierarchy of racial groups, with white Europeans at the top.

Such attitudes were not uncommon in intellectual circles. Julian Huxley (1887-1975), the grandson of Thomas Huxley (1825-95), who had defended Charles Darwin's (1809-82) theory of natural selection so tenaciously, published in 1931 a paper which described the negro as a primitive form of *Homo Sapiens*, which, he explained, was why the negro lagged behind the Mongolian and caucasian peoples in both body and mind.

Rationalists often held to a belief in eugenics as a means of eradicating inferior humans from the human family. HG Wells (1866-1941) of all people saw the birth of a new world overseen by a scientific elite. In his book *Anticipations*, he thought that people who were 'black and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow were inefficient... I take it that they will have to go... it is their portion to die out and disappear.'

Today we can see how Wells and Huxley were sailing close to the Nazi ideology of Aryan superiority, but from the date of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Darwin's theory was misunderstood and misused. He was blamed for undercutting true religion by claiming natural selection would leave the world in a state of perfection. But this was never a feature of Darwin's theory. It was the neo-Darwinists who caused the trouble.

It was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the doyen of *laissez-faire* capitalism, who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest', and not Darwin. When evolution is taken out of its rightful scientific framework, it causes mayhem. Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) and Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), for example, were two Italian social scientists whose theories of elites were highly beneficial to Mussolini and Italian fascism. But Gray does not let the left wing escape scot free. In 1935, Beatrice Webb (1858-1943) published a book on Soviet Russia in which she argued that Stalin's Russia was the next stage in evolution.

Gray really surprised me by providing evidence that ranking humanity into hierarchies and deeply antisemitic attitudes formed an essential part of the Enlightenment project. David Hume (1711-76) claimed that negroes were different and inferior to caucasian people, and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) followed Hume in claiming that no African had ever added anything to the world by way of art or intellectual innovation.

Voltaire (1694-1778) possibly the most brilliant man of his time, called the Jews 'a small, ignorant, crude people', and said that 'they made usury a sacred duty'. Voltaire was an atheist, and probably so too was Hume. However, it was not atheism *per se* that made science into a religion. What we can say is that atheism gained respectability when it aligned itself to science.

Comte, the father of atheistic positivism, founded the religion of humanity, which had all the trappings of religion including saints (especially women) and a church year which celebrated proto positivists.

Gray chooses to focus on mesmerism as his case study of an irrational pseudo-science hiding under the cloak of scientific respectability. A German doctor, Franz Mesmer (1734-1815) claimed to have found a new form of universal energy, which he called animal magnetism. Mesmerism

did eventually pay off in medical circles in the development of hypnosis, but more so in the field of entertainment as a staple of Victorian stage magicians and mind readers. Its fatal flaw as a scientific theory is that there was absolutely no evidence of the energy called animal magnetism. What mesmerism did do was to find its way into the English language as the verb 'mesmerise', a word that means to entrance, absorb, or captivate.

Mesmerism also played a role in adding legitimacy to the idea that science was a spiritual word that could be incorporated into new religions. Christian Science, which was founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) is a clear example, because although it shows a similar orientation to illness as mesmerism, it is neither Christian nor science; it owes more to gnosticism and the metaphysics of the American spiritual teacher Phineas Quimby (1802-66).

Gray subjects this third type of atheism to the criticism that evolution, when it jumps the biological ship, swims in murky waters and leads to unacceptable ethical findings. It is a shock to discover that the great philosophers of the Enlightenment were already thinking of evolution in terms of a doctrine of progress based on incipient racism.

Gray praises CS Lewis (1898-1963) for seeing that evolutionary optimism leads not to perfection but to the 'abolition of man'. Not that it would have bothered Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) who was quite prepared to throw Russians to the metaphorical lions if it was necessary for the new man to emerge under communism. Gray notices that the evolutionary theme has now moved on and left Trotsky's new man behind: we are now looking at the creation of bionic man, the transhuman evolution of man and machine. Or as futurologist Ray Kurzweil (1948-) puts it in the title of his 2005 book, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*.

ATHEISM 4

Modern political religion

Gray begins his fourth type, in a chapter called 'Atheism, Gnosticism and Modern Political Religion', by repeating what is almost a mantra in his work: there never was a secular age, because secular alternatives to belief in a supreme being were little more than repressed religion.

In the event, it is the religious millennial precursors of atheistic political religion that have had the greatest impact for, as Gray knows only too well, ancient gnosticism believed that only those in the know (picture a man tapping the side of his nose with his forefinger) could lead humankind to true reality. What Gray is trying to do with this fourth type of atheism is to show that not all progress was due to an evolutionary model.

It was Christianity in particular which claimed the world would end with apocalyptic suddenness. Even the great Irenaeus (c.130-c.202) believed in a literal millennium of 1,000 years, in which Christ would reign with the saints. He also expected that Christ would return soon. Millennialism, as it was known in the early church, became less pressing as time went on, because Christ, it would seem, chose not to return. As the centuries passed, people's expectations dwindled.

In the 5th century, Augustine taught that the millennium was not to be taken literally. His view prevailed in the West, although it was seriously challenged in the late middle ages by the apocalyptic visions following the tragic events of the black death. Millenarian sects became a craze in the 14th century when the 'black plague', as it was often called, was responsible for the death of at least a quarter of the population of Europe. Gray, who greatly admires the anthropological work of Norman Cohn (1915-2007),

especially his book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (first published in 1957), realizes that progress through cataclysm was an alternative to evolution. Ancient gnosticism would never accept that perfection could happen in the material world: the way of salvation was to escape from it.

Gray takes issue with Eric Voegelin (1901-85) over the role gnosticism played in orthodox Christianity, but following Cohn, he sees the role it played in mystical cults on the edges of Christendom. He passes over Cohn's earlier millennial sects (such as the flagellants, who rose in response to the black death) and chooses instead one of Cohn's more modern examples of millennial sects: the Anabaptists.

In time, the Anabaptists turned into pious peacemakers and principled communities, but the same can not be said of the events that occurred in Münster, in 1534. In that year, John of Leiden (1509-36) declared himself king of the city and established a theocracy. Münster was already a virtually communist city when Leiden became its self-proclaimed prophet and king, but he turned the city and its surrounding areas into a slave state for women, as not only were all goods held in common, but wives also.

What followed was not merely bizarre, but also sinister. The story told in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, could almost be seen as a retelling of the Münster theocracy, projected into the future. The theocracy lasted for a decade, until John of Leiden was captured and executed, but Gray sees Münster as the precursor of modern political religion.

The first truly political religion was the Jacobinian wing of the French Revolution. The Jacobins were a radical society that promoted freedom, liberty and fraternity, but in practice initiated the reign of terror in which thousands of common people died. The Jacobins tended towards atheism, but some accepted deism. What they had in common with the Münster Anabaptists was the conviction that the old order was dead and that they represented the 'new man'.

The Bolsheviks of the Russian revolution, unlike the Jacobins, were unswervingly atheist, but like the Münster Anabaptists believed they were a new and final order. And just as the Jacobins followed Maximilien Robespierre (1758-94) in his belief that 'pity was a crime', so Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) would have no truck with tolerance or compromise with people

who opposed him. Curiously, Lenin was not cremated or even buried, but embalmed. Gray argues that the Communist Party helped to keep the revolution alive by publicly displaying Lenin's body as if he was sleeping. He also argues that the Bolsheviks hoped that new breakthroughs in science would resurrect their leader from the dead.

Gray could hardly leave the Nazis out of a millennial chapter on modern political movements. I found his observation that the Third Reich had a precursor in the 12th century Christian theologian, Joachim of Fiore (c.1135-1202), perfectly plausible. Joachim divided history into three ages, ending with a perfect society on earth. The link is plausible not least because the Anabaptists picked up the teachings of Joachim, and of course we all know that the Nazi regime was meant to last a thousand years.

The final part of the fourth type of atheism is what Gray calls evangelical liberalism. John Locke (1632-1704) is probably the father of modern liberalism, but his views were entirely derived from monotheism. He believed that humans have the capacity to be free because God made us this way. John Stuart Mill, in his extended essay, 'On Liberty', goes deeper into individual freedom, but in a later essay reveals he is an atheist. Gray argues that Mill's beliefs are secularized versions of monotheistic millenarianism.

All these secularized versions of Christianity fall down on the fact that they insist that history has an inbuilt *telos*, or purpose. Teleology has a habit of reading history in terms of the end times, or of human perfection, and it surfaces in modern thinkers. Francis Fukuyama (1952-) and his 1992 book, *The End of History and The Last Man*, is a classic case of teleology. It is an ode to the triumph of capitalist and liberal values over Marxist Communism. But Gray, like CS Lewis, does not believe in theories of history or progress; instead, he says, some things get better, and some things get worse. The future is a chimera. We imagine we can predict the future, but if history teaches us anything with certainty, it is that we can't.

ATHEISM 5

God-haters

In an interesting but flawed chapter, Gray calls his fifth type of atheism, 'God-haters'. He starts with an ideal candidate, the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), who hated God as the enemy of humanity. De Sade was a complicated supporter of the French Revolution: he was all for orgies, sexual perversion and cruelty (his very name has given rise to the word 'sadism'), but did not approve of capital punishment, unless it was predicated on passion. His hatred of God – his greatest passion – was transferred to nature, which he treated in a monotheistic way. He felt tortured by nature, but accepted his suffering as a state of cruelty he was prepared to endure, because he held that sheer pleasure was nothing but vanity.

It is difficult to sort out de Sade's true beliefs, because he spent his final 10 years in a mental asylum. His writings were in the form of novels or didactic sermons on the necessity of cruelty. His two most well-known works are *Juliette* and *The 120 Days of Sodom*. In these books, it is safe to assume that some of the characters are expressions of de Sade's own beliefs. Juliette, for example, says of her indifference to people suffering under famine, 'If, said I, it is sweet to refuse to be good, it must be heavenly to do evil.'

De Sade turns nature into something that tortures him with all the vigour and strength of a personal God. However, this raises the question of whether hating and rejecting a monotheistic God amounts to atheism or not. The question is not really one to ask of de Sade, but John Gray himself. This becomes much clearer when we are faced with Gray's next example of a God-hater, which is not an historical person, but a character in a book by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81).

Gray gives us a short biography of Dostoevsky and his changing views. He is right in his description of the great novelist's rejection of rationalism, when, in 1848, he was sentenced to death for belonging to a group of radical insurgents but reprieved from execution at the last minute. He is also right in seeing Dostoevsky as an enemy of the Russian nihilists of the 1860s. Unlike most nihilists, the Russian nihilists did not believe in nothing, but passionately refused to accept God or creeds in any form, except to say that humanity was determined by the laws of nature (a view which has echoes of de Sade). They were radical atheists who wished terror on the world.

Dostoevsky, in his novels, *Notes from Underground*, and *Devils*, attacks this extreme anarchy and self-destruction caused by atheism, which led the nihilists to suicide or murder. The irony of the Russian author is that as he moved into his mature phase of writing, which started with these two books, he not only became increasingly conservative, but also reactionary. He was anti-semitic and anti-Western. He was also subject to compulsive behaviour, as his thinly disguised autobiographical novella, *The Gambler*, demonstrates.

Gray is perfectly fair in highlighting the deeply unpleasant side of Dostoevsky, and he is also fair in acknowledging his consistency in opposing serfdom and remaining suspicious of the corrupt aristocratic elite. I think he is more profound in his critique when he tells us that at the heart of Dostoevsky's work is a rejection of theodicy. Theodicy is that part of theology that seeks to justify God's goodness and justice in the face of evil in the world. It has become a major issue in modern Christian apologetics ever since Stalinism, Mao's ruthless terror in China, and the horrors of the Jewish holocaust under the Nazi regime. Process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) take the view that God is not omnipotent and does not have the power to prevent evil.

If God is omnipotent, then there are several routes that have been taken to justify the existence of a good and just God. We can with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) insist that this is the best of all possible worlds, for God is too rational to have created a worse one. Or we could follow Jürgen Moltmann (1926-) and see that God's empathy with us goes so deep that he

suffers with us as well as for us. The idea that suffering is good for us in the long run, or that chastisement of wrongdoers leads to final redemption is problematic; after all, suffering can be caused by moral corruption, but it can also be caused by natural disasters.

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, CS Lewis wrote about his emotional torment and spiritual turmoil when his wife Joy died, after he thought she had been healed of cancer. Lewis is not doubting God's existence, but rather his goodness. He wonders aloud, for example, if God might be a cosmic sadist.

It seems to me that is what Gray finds out about the God-haters. It is not the non-existence of God they are attacking, but the goodness or the nature of God. Perhaps it would have been better if Gray had grouped those writers under the heading of protest atheism.

Indeed, the most famous example of protest atheism is found in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan the rationalist relays to his pious younger brother and novice monk, Alyosha, a story of a young boy who was torn apart by hunting dogs in front of his mother. Then with a deep bitterness, Ivan tells Alyosha, 'It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket.'

The most memorable passage of the novel is the story of the Grand Inquisitor, which Aidan tells to Alyosha in the form of a poem or fantasy. Its subject is Jesus, who revisits the world incognito to see how his teachings are spreading. He arrives in Spain during the Inquisition, but is recognised by the Grand Inquisitor, who arrests and subjects him to a diatribe of where he went wrong. He tells Jesus that the wrong he bestowed on humankind was to grant them freedom, but now the Inquisition has corrected his work, because people want bread, not freedom. At the end of the diatribe, the Grand Inquisitor waits for Christ's reply, but Jesus says nothing. Instead, he kisses the old man on his 'aged and bloodless lips'. Dostoevsky tells us that the Grand Inquisitor feels a strange warmth in his heart, and lets Jesus go, but sticks to his ideas.

Gray ends the chapter on God-haters with William Empson (1906-84). Empson believed God was the very Devil, and rejected Christianity, believing that cruelty was the primary evil in the world. He also turned his back on the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism, because Bentham did not

offer any evidence that cruelty was wrong. He argued that Utilitarianism allowed for cruelty to be welcomed as a pleasure, like any other human activity, if it provided happiness for a majority of people.

Empson believed the Christian heaven was based on cruelty. He saw Christianity as evil because God the Father both literally and metaphorically put his Son through Hell to make eternal life possible for a minority. But while Empson saw God the Father as wicked, he still insisted that humankind is intrinsically kind, and that cruelty is an imposition or a trick on human beings. Gray, who clearly admires Empson and his view that Far Eastern polytheism offers a kinder religion than Christianity, nevertheless argues that Empson's ethics are incoherent.

The incoherence of Empson's moral philosophy rests on his thought that evil is not intrinsic to humankind. Instead, he believed that the natural disposition of humankind is kindness. To see cruelty as imposed in some way on human beings is a metaphysical reality that needs no God to explain it. But if evil is understood to be essentially external to basic human nature, then it must rest on some kind of divine agency, says Gray. In short, Empson's atheism is incomplete, if not logically deficient.

Empson's most famous book was his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), and its impact on this book is not only in the title, but also in the ambiguity that is at the heart of Gray's own atheism.

ATHEISM 6

Atheism without progress

Gray has left us in little doubt that he is allergic to doctrines of progress, religious or atheistic, so we can assume he will be happier with his sixth type of atheism, 'Atheism without Progress', which indeed he is. He has chosen one obvious example of this genre, and one surprise. The obvious example is George Santayana (1863-1952), while the surprise is the novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924).

George Santayana was a poet, novelist, and noted wit. Some of his aphorisms have become embedded in the English language, such as: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. He was born in Spain, but received his education in North America. He was associated with the pragmatist school of thought, although he never claimed to be a member of that very American tradition of philosophy. In fact, he rejected American academic life and moved to Europe where he was constantly moving from place to place. Like Nietzsche, he never became attached to any one place, except for the last 10 years of his life, when he moved to the Convent of the Blue Nuns in Rome.

He made no pretence of religious belief, although he described himself as an 'aesthetic Catholic'. In his heyday, he was known for his tailored suits, wit and bonhomie. He saw himself in the materialistic tradition of the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (c.99-c.55 BCE). Like Lucretius, he was a naturalist in the sense that he thought all creativity and animal life was due to nature. But unlike his Latin hero, Santayana did not hold religion in contempt. On the contrary, although he was an atheist, he thought religion was a natural condition of human life. He did not, as a materialist, like

Plato, and thought that his stance on ideal reality was detrimental to the real material world.

Santayana's atheism, was not predicated in any way on a belief in progress. In fact, although he thought mechanical life was always evolving, the same could not be said of civilisations. Gray points out that Santayana was a great admirer of the Hindu school of thought known as *Samkhya*, which separates material, objective reality from the subjectivity of mind.

Gray closes the sixth of his seven types of atheism with a man who viewed human progress as an illusion. Often thought of as a precursor of modernist writing, Joseph Conrad was a man of great talent who had witnessed great cruelty. Born in an aristocratic Polish family in Russian-dominated Ukraine, he moved to France, where he trained as a merchant seaman, working at sea for 20 years. He lived for a time in Britain. English was his third language, and although his accent was so harsh that he was hard to follow in conversation, he wrote with great style and literary aplomb. All his writings were in English, and although he formally remained an alien, he is thought of as an English writer.

Conrad was an entrepreneur who failed miserably at every venture he took on. Although his writing made him famous, it never ameliorated his financial problems, at great cost to his supportive and forbearing wife. Conrad also suffered injury and shipwreck at sea, incurable gout, and in his later years, deep depression. But what gave him a literary voice and an intellectual reputation was his experience in his final years as a sailor in the rivers of the Congo. He will always be remembered as the author of the novella, *Heart of Darkness*, which was the basis of the 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now*. He saw the terror caused by colonialism at first hand, and it was this experience that made him abandon sailing, and all faith in human progress. Conrad applied his insights into the horrors of Congo colonialism to all of humankind. Gray quotes his letter to a friend in Scotland: 'Man is a wicked animal. His wickedness has to be organised... Society is essentially criminal – otherwise it would not exist.'

Conrad not only characterised Christianity 'an absurd oriental fable', but distrusted all religions. 'I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvellous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural which (take it any way you

like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrications of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living...'

Conrad emerges under Gray's predilections, not only as a man firmly tied to nature as the foundation of all that is, but one who remains cynical about human civilisation, and negative about the role of rationality in ethics. He seems to have no time for self reflection, because he doubts the value of knowledge. For Conrad, the famous line of Socrates, 'Man, know thyself', is a delusion. You can almost feel the relief Gray feels in having disposed of atheism in the form of secular humanism, where humanity, not God, becomes the arbiter of all truth, but in a godlike way.

ATHEISM 7

The atheism of silence

In the seventh form of atheism, Gray presents us with what I think is his closest identification with the seven types, in what he calls 'mystical atheism, the atheism of silence'. It is no surprise that he turns to that critic of the Enlightenment, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who totally rejected the idea of the Christian creator God, and thought of humankind as essentially irrational. Schopenhauer denied any belief in human self-emancipation, and given this fundamental belief, it is not surprising that he despised the philosopher Hegel and his progressive doctrines.

However, Schopenhauer was not totally dismissive of realities that cannot be communicated by words, in which the human will is itself silenced. Music had the effect on Schopenhauer of taking him outside of himself, to a realm of being which was real, but ecstatic. In saying this, Schopenhauer, says Gray, is close to the apophatic theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, or the *via negativa* which characterised the medieval German mystics.

In a telling phrase, Gray says that it is difficult to draw a line between atheism and negative theology. This is the opening salvo in his presentation of two final atheists, Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) and Lev Shestov (1866-1938). Spinoza was an ultra-rationalist who was convinced that the world and all human culture was the way it was because it was subject to necessity. He firmly believed in freedom, but saw it as subservient to necessity. In other words, freedom is an inner reality which consists in accepting that everything in the world is as it must be.

Spinoza is one of the few philosophers who is respected by everyone of note. This not only holds for those thinkers who agreed with him

(Santayana, for example), but also those who radically opposed him. Shestov, for example, welcomed Spinoza as an interlocutor, but violently disagreed with him. Shestov divorced history from meaning, and faith from reason. Nothing in this world, he liked to say, was impossible. He is almost forgotten now, but should be considered as much a Russian precursor of existentialism as Dostoevsky. His influence was considerable: Albert Camus (1913-60) and DH Lawrence (1885-1930) admired him, while the Russian Orthodox thinkers who fled Russia after the 1917 revolution to live in Paris and New York adored him, Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944) in particular.

Influential he may have been, but he had only one student, Benjamin Fondane (1898-1944), who after hiding for most of the Second World War in Paris, was captured and sent to a concentration camp where he was killed. Gray concludes the seventh type of atheism by ending Fondane's story abruptly and without further elucidation. The fact that Shestov is included in this book at all is strange, for he was not an atheist. Admittedly, he did not believe in fate or divine will, but there is no evidence he was not a believer in a Creator God. Like Simone Weil (1909-43), he was officially Jewish by faith, but in actuality more Christian in practice.

Conclusion

Gray's final remarks in his conclusion are more a summary of the book than a programme for a new one. This does not mean his conclusion has no important things to say, even if they are repeating ideas already discussed. So, for example, Gray reminds us again of his *bête noir* – monotheistic religion and its secular counterparts of self-deifying humanity, or progressive humanism.

The God of Abraham and Moses (the forefathers of the Jewish people, as depicted in the Old Testament) often had to deal with a God who was absent. The same can be said of the monotheistic replacement – humanity. Gray makes it plain that both self-deifying humanity and progressive humanism are in his view imaginary projections of the mind. He also suggests that we should stop seeing atheism and monotheism as opposites, because both atheists and religious people see the world as mysterious, even though religious believers think it is diffused with divinity.

Although I welcome Gray's refusal to see belief and disbelief in God as total opposites, there are a few of Gray's assertions that I find unsatisfactory. Even his definition of atheism as the absence of a Creator God is really designed by him to attack monotheism. He is less concerned with Buddhist explanations of the created order, not least because he can separate the teachings of Buddhists (which are atheistic by monotheistic standards) from their practices.

The split between institutional religion and spirituality is a favourite ploy of modern atheists, allowing them to wear both atheism and spirituality as badges of pride. The overused claim that 'I am not religious in any way, but I

consider myself spiritual', fits that eclectic morass of spirituality that we call New Age. I am not sure that Gray is guilty of this position, because he does not say anywhere (in this book at least) that he finds spirituality and atheism compatible. Having said that, Terry Eagleton has attacked Gray for peddling a mixture of 'nihilism and New Age'.

I have already said enough about Gray's types 1, 2 and 4 not to repeat them again, but I would like to reiterate that his description of type 3 (faith in science) is one of the best in the book, and is clearly recognisable as a type. Type 5 (God-haters) is very well written, and has a great title, but it strikes me that Gray is having his cake and eating it.

The section on de Sade is helpful, because de Sade transmutes God into a very dark view of nature, which makes him formally an atheist, but one who turns a God of love into a godlike reality that is as cruel as de Sade was to his fellow human creatures. But Gray tries to fit Ivan Karamazov (and by implication, Fyodor Dostoevsky) into the role of a God-hater too, and this highlights the trouble with this category. Despite the fact that Gray uses Empson to boost his atheists as God-haters, it does not alter the fact that like CS Lewis in his book, *A Grief Observed*, it is not God that is rejected but a God of love.

Type 6 (atheism without progress), is a turning point in the narrative, because Gray is much more at ease with thinkers who are atheists without trying to convince us that humanity is truly wonderful. Santayana and Conrad both make convincing type 6 figures. Type 7 (the atheism of silence) is excellent, but I don't think, taken as a whole, that mystical silence, ineffability, and apophatic theology amount to Gray's own definition of atheism. It is doubtful whether you could rationally call apophatic language a type of atheism. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), of all modern thinkers, is probably the most interesting user of apophatic language, but the jury is still out as to whether Heidegger was a religious believer, an agnostic or an atheist. It is surprising that Gray does not make more of him than he does. This may well be because Heidegger, if not an enthusiastic Nazi supporter, was at least a compliant participant in many of their practices.

Gray thinks mystical thinking can be literally godless because apophaticism is a language of negation in which you can only say what God is not. But

patristic thought (the thought of the early church fathers) predominantly saw that true knowledge (*gnosis*) of God was only possible via the practice of not knowing (*agnosia*). *Agnosia* does not mean ignorance. Instead, the not knowing is a process of spiritual endeavour that goes beyond information about God gleaned from revelation (that is, the cataphatic or positive affirmation of God through Bible and creed).

Gray seems to have been unduly influenced by the magic number seven. Perhaps Empson's 'seven ambiguities' was the model for this book. It is unlikely that he was consciously influenced by the significance of seven in the Genesis account of creation, given his antipathy to monotheistic thought. Personally, I think he makes out a strong case for five – or at most six – types of atheism. I think his insight into the potential evils of progressive humanism in Marxism and scientific positivism (or scientism) is profound. Ironically, they offer a far greater threat to atheism than religious belief.

Gray is an empiricist and rationalist with a penchant for mystical thought. His brief admiration for Margaret Thatcher and her view that there is no such thing as society (there is very little talk of community or collective ethics in Gray's work) sounds like an unlikely admiration for someone who is at present the lead writer of the left-wing *New Statesman*. But Gray's largely negative response to human progress is basically due to his view of humankind as a squabbling group of animals. Gray does not want to pull the wool over people's eyes and offer an optimistic view of the future, when there is no grounds for optimism.

I believe there are grounds for hope, but hope is a term shunned by Gray. It does not resonate with his definition of atheism as the absence of a creator God. If there is no such God, we are indeed hope-less.

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