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The End of Faith? On the Future of Atheism

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Ronald Aronson offers an interesting review essay in the current issue of *BookForum*. The topic is atheism and Aronson thinks that “it is irreligion, and not religion, that is on the defensive today.” Nearly forty years after *TIME*’s famous cover that asked, “Is God Dead?,” a majority of Americans claim to believe in God.

His review essay, “Faith No More?,” considers books by atheists and by contemporary critics of atheism, including Alister McGrath. Aronson provides an interesting introduction to Michel Onfray, a younger French thinker counted among the group Aronson calls the “new atheists.” Onfray, whose major work on atheism remains untranslated from the French, argues that European atheists (and especially the French) made the mistake of retaining far too much of the basically Christian worldview that shaped the Western mind. As Aronson explains, “Even today, [Onfray] argues, France’s official secularism remains underpinned by the same Christian values and ethics that have made hell of the world. The alternative would be a truly democratic and post-Christian morality that would fully free people from religion by beginning from the fact that this is our only world. A secular ethics, pragmatic and utilitarian, would truly pursue what he calls the ‘hedonist contract’—the greatest good of the greatest number.”

Aronson’s most interesting argument concerns why atheism has fallen on hard times. He suggests that the older atheism — the atheism that seemed to be on the ascent in the nineteenth century — was basically optimistic and hopeful. Not so with the more modern versions of atheism, he acknowledges. “Classical atheists tended to be optimistic about the world’s future,” he explains, “and their imaginations were indeed stirred by science and technology and the potential for human progress.”

But: It’s safe to say that the future didn’t turn out as anyone expected. Scientific and technological progress has been relentless, but its promises of liberation have gone flat. Few still believe that their children’s world will be better than theirs. We live after Marxism, after progress, after the Holocaust—and few imaginations are stirred, few hopes raised by our world’s long-range tendencies. Indeed, the opposite is happening as terrorism becomes the West’s main preoccupation. In countries like the United States, Britain, and France, there has been a turning away from improving societies and toward improving the self.

On this terrain, it is no surprise that belief in God has been revived, although it is most curious that among industrialized societies the renewed religious energy centers on the United States and is far less widespread in equally developed Europe. I suspect that even Marx or Freud would see little reason to conclude that religion’s consoling force might be dispensed with anytime soon. At stake, then, is far more than a conflict between belief and disbelief, but the kind of world in which a religious or a secular worldview flourishes. Where secular hope is in the ascendancy, as during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it seems as if the belief in human capacity and the here and now will be strong; where fear and pessimism increase, as they have so far in the twenty-first century, humans may increasingly look to God, to their souls, and to a future beyond this life.

Aronson thinks that atheism may yet emerge as a powerful intellectual force once again. But where will it ground any sense of hope? He leaves that question unanswered.

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