

BOOK REVIEW

of

Alister McGrath,

The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World,
Doubleday, 2004.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

Many of us do not personally know an atheist, and we may be of the opinion that atheists are in a very small minority, and that therefore while they may be a curiosity they are insignificant. Alister McGrath reminds us that two of the world's largest nations, communist China and the former Soviet Union, were committed to atheism, attempting to put into practice the teachings of Karl Marx. McGrath writes that in 1960 it has been estimated that half the population of the world was nominally atheist. Ideas have consequences. The ideas of Karl Marx in the social and political sphere, of Sigmund Freud in psychology, of Ludwig Feuerbach in philosophy, and of Charles Darwin in evolutionary biology, have had consequences indeed. It is also helpful to keep in mind that atheism has a somewhat broad spectrum of adherents. A small few are evangelical atheists (and that is perhaps what we think of when we think of an atheist), such as Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, and Isaac Asimov. At the other end of the spectrum are those who hold to atheistic views even while perhaps denying that they are an atheist. Perhaps Charles Darwin, mentioned above, would best be placed on this end of the spectrum. He seemed to hold some theistic views to the end, but his teaching on biological evolution as being unguided and without purpose led Charles Hodge to label such teaching atheistic precisely because it was the creation of life without any involvement by God. It has been argued that the reason Darwin's ideas gained wide acceptance was because they were atheistic, and not because of compelling scientific evidence. Some who hold such views may well be theists, as apparently Darwin himself was in some sense, but the views themselves, as Hodge has ably argued, are atheistic. Consistency in one's worldview may be a rare attainment, but we should not confuse one's professed theistic faith with a complete rejection of atheism in practice or certain beliefs. Worse yet, few of us will escape the penetrating gaze of Stephen Charnock in his classic *The Existence and Attributes of God* as he points out how many Christians, at least in part, are practicing atheists by not acknowledging God in all things. In brief, atheism has had a significant impact upon our society and upon each one of us.

Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. He has a PhD in molecular biophysics, and is principal of Oxford University's Wycliffe Hall and director of the Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics. He writes extensively. Several of his recent books are *In the Beginning*, *The Reenchantment of Nature*, *The Journey*, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, and the book we are reviewing here, *The Twilight of Atheism*.

In the prologue to *Dawkins' God*, McGrath describes how, as a high school student, he had embraced atheism. However, in college he began to consider the intellectual basis for atheism and was troubled by the lack of good arguments for it. In brief, he tells of his journey to becoming a Christian. McGrath now claims that atheism, in general, is a religious commitment, and that no compelling evidence has ever been put forth by anyone to justify atheism. What evidence has been offered in support of atheism has not been scientific, but rather philosophical (Feuerbach), social and economic (Marx), and psychological (Freud). A committed atheist does have reasons for holding to his religious beliefs, but those reasons are not conclusions or even implications of scientific data. The common perception that a commitment to science and a commitment to atheism go hand-in-hand is just that, a perception: a perception put forth by articulate promoters of a materialistic worldview.

The book has eleven chapters: 1. The Dawn of the Golden Age of Atheism, 2. The French Revolution, 3. The Intellectual Foundations: Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, 4. Warfare: The Natural Sciences and the Advancement of Atheism, 5. A Failure of the Victorian Crisis of Faith, 6. The Death of God: The Dream of a Godless Culture, 7. The Unexpected Resurgence of Religion, 8. Disconnection from the Sacred: Protestantism and Atheism, 9. Postmodernity: Atheism and Radical Cultural Change, 10. The Atheist's Revolt: Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Others, 11. End of Empire: The Fading Appeal of Atheism.

In brief, modern atheism began with modernity or the enlightenment. Everything was sure, and could be proved by scientific investigation. Faith of all kinds was judged to be superstitious and antiquated. If you wanted to be intelligent, educated, and on the cutting edge of where society was going, then atheism was the worldview to embrace. However, with the collapse of Marxism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and knowledge of atrocities that took place within prior to the collapse, and with the rise of postmodernity with its questioning whether anything can be known for sure and its pointing out the intolerance of atheism, the twilight of atheism has arrived.

Let me close with a brief quotation from McGrath about his own twilight of atheism, having been pursued by Him with Whom we have to do: "Like my fellow countryman C.S. Lewis, I found myself experiencing 'the steady unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.' To cut a long story short, I discovered that I had rejected what I did not really understand, and accepted what I increasingly came to realize was an imaginatively impoverished and emotionally deficient substitute."