Critically analyse the historical development of atheism in the west and assess the effectiveness of some of the differing theological responses.

By Martin Stokley

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Introduction
A recent estimate suggested that there are approximately 500-750 million self-confessed atheists in the world.¹ In this essay we shall seek to analyse the development of atheism in the west and discuss three contemporary responses to atheism. Firstly, we show the complexity of defining atheism. Secondly, we discuss the ideas of some key figures in the intellectual development of atheism. Thirdly, we discuss the socio-political and ecclesiastical reasons for the development of atheism. Fourthly, we mention two theological factors which led to the rise of atheism. From this we conclude that the factors leading to atheism are many and a truly effective response to atheism must encompass responding to all these factors. Finally, we assess the effectiveness of the responses of McGrath, Fergusson and Jüngel. Jüngel’s response to atheism leads us to conclude that in addition to responding to the factors that led to the rise of atheism, any effective response must necessarily include the proclamation of the gospel.

Defining atheism
The term ‘atheism’ has developed in meaning over the history of its use. The Greeks first discussed the idea as the denial of a specific god.² At the time, atheism as the disavowal of all gods was rare. In the early Christian period shows development as the word ‘atheist’ became a term for discrediting your opponents in arguments by accusing heresy. Christians both received and perpetuated this way of using the term.³ After this the concept of atheism did not develop greatly until the dawning of modernity around the sixteenth century. Berman distinguishes three types of atheism in the modern period.⁴ Firstly, there is ‘practical atheism’ which describes someone who professes a belief in God but who lives as if God does not exist. Secondly, there is ‘unthinking atheism’ which is not based on a well thought out philosophy but on emotion, pride, hedonism etc. Thirdly, there is ‘speculative atheism’ or philosophical atheism which is a considered belief, using logic and reason. Hyman notes that this type of atheism is interrelated to theism:

“... our understanding of atheism can be straightforward and unambiguous only if our definition of theism is straightforward and unambiguous. For atheism defines itself in terms of that which it is denying.”⁵

He goes on to say that atheism will always be a rejection of a specific theism, a different understanding of God will lead to a different understanding of atheism.⁶

In this essay we shall concentrate on the historical development of speculative or philosophical atheism. In the west philosophical atheism began by predominantly focussing on the disavowal of the Judeo-Christian religions but grew to encompass the disavowal of all religions.

For the sake of completeness we note the distinction between atheism and agnosticism. This term was coined by Huxley in the nineteenth century and refers to the belief that we cannot know if God exists because of the limitation of reason or evidence.⁷ Fergusson comments that the term is

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3. Ibid., pp.20-22
5. Hyman, G., “Atheism in Modern History”, p.28
6. Ibid., pp.28-29
problematic because “… strong agnosticism tends to merge with a practical atheism whereby the concept of God becomes redundant in explaining or expressing features of the world and human existence.”

Agnosticism becomes virtually indistinguishable from atheism.

**Key figures in the intellectual development of atheism**

From the classical period to the sixteenth century the issue of atheism is absent from western culture apart from use of the term as an accusation of heresy. Progressing from the sixteenth century to the present day numerous people furthered the intellectual development of atheism. Here we shall focus on seven key figures – Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Feuerbach, Marx and Freud – whose writings had a greater impact than others.

**Descartes**

Descartes (1596-1650) is generally regarded as having set in motion the developments of modernity. Seeking to protect God from disbelief Descartes tried to show that the concept of God was a universal truth which could be philosophically demonstrated with absolute certainty. Descartes rejected revelation as the ground for theological thinking. This was in contrast to the general theological method of earlier times which saw human reason as being limited and needing to be supplemented by revelation if divine truth was to be known. Descartes’ rejection of revelation was based, according to Hyman, in his desire to find a solution to the problem of religious conflict at the time of the reformation by developing “… a universal epistemological method that would yield universal assent”. In other words, Descartes sought to move beyond the conflicts of doctrine which were based on revelation by seeking to find a universally agreed truth of God through reason. The problem was that as McGrath notes:

“To his critics, Descartes merely managed to show that, by his own criteria, God’s existence seemed rather unlikely.”

Descartes succeeded not in proving the absolute certainty of the existence of God but in opening the door to disproving the existence of God. Later atheist arguments then drew on the work of Descartes and his followers. Descartes’ turn to reason becomes the seedbed which, in conjunction with other forces, allows the future development of atheism.

**Locke**

Locke (1632-1704) rejected Descartes work, arguing that knowledge was to be grounded not in reason but in the empirical data we receive from our senses. He believed in the possibility of the God but now he argued for the existence of God not from reason but based on empirical data. For him the concept of God was derived from empirical data by projecting this data onto the metaphysical. Hyman rightly comments that this opened the concept of God for further attack as a
consistent empiricism would prohibit a concept of God as complex as the one of Christian theology.\textsuperscript{17}

**Hume**

Hume (1711-1776) took Locke’s empiricism to its logical conclusion and said that it was impossible to have knowledge of something if it was not based on sense data.\textsuperscript{18} Hume rejected any attempt to prove God’s existence, but we should probably call Hume an agnostic because, although he only accepted that which was based on sense data as knowledge, he was open-minded about all other possibilities. Christianity was a matter of faith and not knowledge.\textsuperscript{19} It is still debated as to where Hume stood on the question of God.\textsuperscript{20}

**Kant**

Kant (1724-1804) responded to Hume by critiquing the limits of reason. He distinguished between different types of reason: pure reason (the foundation for science), practical (moral) reason, \textit{a priori} (concepts prior to experience and not learned), \textit{a posteriori} (concepts learned from experience).\textsuperscript{21}

For Kant we can know nothing about things in themselves, only our perceptions of things.\textsuperscript{22} This meant truth became subjective and we have no access to an objective world.\textsuperscript{23} God also becomes an \textit{a priori} concept and beyond the limits of ordinary reason.\textsuperscript{24} The consequence of which is that a gulf between science and religion opens up as religious claims do not belong to the realm of facts, science or history and this leads to a move towards a deistic concept of God.\textsuperscript{25}

The turn to reason by Descartes and the turn to empiricism by Locke and Hume, followed by the developments of Kant ultimately led to greater questions regarding the existence of God. This philosophical context allowed atheism to become an acceptable intellectual position. Diderot (1713-1784) in mid-eighteenth century France is generally considered the first philosopher to openly define themselves as atheist and he did this by furthering the ideas of Descartes.\textsuperscript{26} Diderot’s confession of atheism however did not spread rapidly at this time. McGrath points to Feuerbach, Marx and Freud as three intellectual giants whose ideas led to a growth and persistence of atheism which was not previously seen.\textsuperscript{27}

**Feuerbach**

Feuerbach (1804-1872) argued God was a projection of human longings for immortality and meaning.\textsuperscript{28} Religion then becomes not revelation, but a set of human ideas which tell us about

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.35  \\
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.35  \\
\textsuperscript{19} Gaarder, J., \textit{Sophie’s World}, p.227-228  \\
\textsuperscript{20} Fergusson, D., \textit{Faith and its Critics: A Conversation}, p.22  \\
\textsuperscript{21} See Wilson, J. E., \textit{Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition}, pp.28-29,31-32  \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.29  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Hicks, p., \textit{Evangelicals and Truth: A creative proposal for a postmodern age}, p.30  \\
\textsuperscript{24} Wilson, J. E., \textit{Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition}, pp.30-31; Kant did allow a ‘higher’ type of reason, different from ordinary scientific reason, which does enable us to have knowledge of God. However, ordinary reason and this higher type of reason do not interact and there is no integration of truth. See Hicks, P., \textit{Evangelicals and Truth: A creative proposal for a postmodern age}, pp.30-31  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Hicks, P., \textit{Evangelicals and Truth: A creative proposal for a postmodern age}, pp.31-32  \\
\textsuperscript{26} Hyman, G., “Atheism in Modern History”, p.30  \\
\textsuperscript{27} McGrath, A., \textit{The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World}, p.47  \\
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.57
\end{flushleft}
humanity and not the divine. It is a form of anthropology which alienates us from ourselves. Feuerbach after removing religion then espouses a form of humanism or concern for humanity. Critics of Feuerbach pointed out that his argument was circular in that he presupposes atheism. Also if the concept of god was wish fulfilment, could not the concept of no-god also be wish fulfilment? McGrath comments that these criticisms were disregarded and Feuerbach’s work was eagerly devoured. A reason possibly being found in Clayton’s comment:

“Although Feuerbach failed to make the case that theology can be nothing more than anthropology, he did accurately portray what theology in fact became in the modern period.”

The religion being rejected was in fact a human construction which echoed Feuerbach’s arguments and this is why Feuerbach was so well received.

Marx

Marx (1818-1883) proposed the idea that it was economic and social conditions that determined people’s thoughts and the idea of God was a way of coping with deprivation in society. For Marx religion helps keep people trapped in deprivation and stops them transforming their situation. This means that “the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of society.” Marx thought if you could change the social or economic conditions you could eradicate the need for God. His approach compares to Feuerbach’s as God becomes a projection of human concerns. Again for Marx there is the problem of circularity and it is also possible to argue atheism is a projection of the economic and social conditions of the rich. Marx’s ideas only later gained significant influence in the twentieth century through the rise of communism.

Freud

Freud (1856-1939) is the last of our key figures in the development of atheism in the west. Freud developed psychoanalysis, a ‘science’ of the mind, but also had an interest in philosophy and religion. Freud again was influenced by the ideas of Feuerbach and he grounded the projection of God in the deepest longings of the unconscious. The concept of god is essentially an exalted concept of father from our childhood which is projected outwards. God becomes the source of the security that we looked for in our childhood (from our fathers) and still look for unconsciously today. Freud’s theory however faces the same problems as Feuerbach’s and Marx’s. The popularity of

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29 Ibid., p.58
30 Degenaar, J., “Atheism”, pp.9-10
31 Ibid., p.10
33 Ibid., p.59
34 Clayton, P., “Why Theism Must Evolve in the Age of Science”, p.25
35 McGrath, A., The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World, p.63
36 Ibid., pp.64-67
37 Degenaar, J., “Atheism”, p.11
39 i.e. We do not need anyone else because we have all we need.
40 Here we acknowledge the problems of calling Freud’s theories scientific.
41 McGrath, A., The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World, p.69
42 Ibid., p.74
Freud’s psychoanalysis helped to propel his ideas about religion into the public consciousness.\(^{43}\)
Freud essentially packaged Feuerbach’s ideas in a popular way whilst grounding it in ‘science’.

**Ecclesiastical and socio-political factors in the development of atheism**

So far we have concentrated on the intellectual developments from the sixteenth century onwards that led to the development of atheism. Fergusson comments that the tendency amongst theologians is to identify one key figure that distorted theological ideas and then drove western intellectual thought down the road towards atheism because of this distortion.\(^{44}\) However, as Fergusson points out that no thinker originates ideas in a theological, philosophical or historical vacuum, they are indebted to their contexts, and this means that we can never explain the origin of ideas as being due to one simple cause or person.\(^{45}\) Hyman in his sketch of ‘Atheism in Modern History’ seems to fall foul of Fergusson’s criticism in that he ably sketches the intellectual development of atheism seeking to lay the blame at the door of Duns Scotus and also the developments of Descartes (see below), however he does not consider the ecclesiastical and socio-political causes that fed into the development of atheism. McGrath in *The Twilight of Atheism* helpfully draws out these ecclesiastical and socio-political influences and we draw on his analysis here.

Throughout the rise of atheism from the sixteenth century we find a critique of the power and corruption of the church and the political order. The intertwining of church and state led to a relationship where each sought to bolster the other up. Claims that the church was seeking to legitimate the old order (which was now considered as wanting) led people to believe the church was holding back progress in the socio-political and intellectual spheres.\(^{46}\) Church wealth and oppression of people was also being questioned.\(^{47}\) McGrath comments:

> “Paradoxically, the historical origins of modern atheism lie primarily in an extended criticism of the power and status of the church, rather than in any asserted attraction of a godless world.”\(^{48}\)

Overcoming the power and influence of the state Catholic church was achieved either through military means (King Frances I of France), through removing its political authority (Henry VIII in England) or through attacking its ideas.\(^{49}\) The English 1689 Act of Toleration allowed religious alternatives to the Church of England in a bid avoid religious conflict and there was thus a move away from the state imposing specific religious beliefs on people.\(^{50}\) Socio-political forces enabled atheism to move closer as a possibility in society.

The French revolution (1789) is a good example of the intertwining of ecclesiastical and socio-political factors in the development of atheism. Leading up to the revolution there was growing

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\(^{43}\) *Ibid.*, p.76

\(^{44}\) Fergusson, D., *Faith and its Critics: A Conversation*, pp.28-29

\(^{45}\) *Ibid.*, p.29

\(^{46}\) McGrath, A., *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, p.10

\(^{47}\) *Ibid.*, pp.10-11

\(^{48}\) *Ibid.*, p.11

\(^{49}\) *Ibid.*, p.11

\(^{50}\) *Ibid.*, pp.13-15
resentment towards the monarchy and the church.\textsuperscript{51} We also see in France at that time punitive taxation, resentment of the spending of the monarchy, famine, a failed economy, a rise in Deistic and atheistic beliefs, and the corruption of the church which supported the state.\textsuperscript{52} The Church was also seen actively supporting foreign intervention and domestic resistance against the revolution.\textsuperscript{53} In an effort to quash resistance to the revolution, areas of France were forcibly dechristianized.\textsuperscript{54} Eventually the revolution was overturned by Napoleon and Catholicism restored.\textsuperscript{55} The French revolution was essentially the first experiment with an atheistic state and it sent shockwaves reverberating around Europe as atheism became a conceivable option in the minds of people.\textsuperscript{56} The reaction of the church was varied, some clergy saw the revolution as divine reformation of the church and others saw it as God’s judgement on the church.\textsuperscript{57}

We also see socio-political and some ecclesiastical influences in the development of atheism in the times of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. Feuerbach was born into a Germany which desired social change. There were problems of unemployment, nepotism in finding work in church and civil jobs, poverty, hunger and the church supporting the old order.\textsuperscript{58} McGrath comments that Marx’s \textit{Communist Manifesto} “reflected rather than precipitated the revolutionary fervour of its time”.\textsuperscript{59} Freud influenced by the continuing rising tide of a scientific culture sought to find a scientific reason for belief in God.

We have seen that the rise of atheism was not solely a movement of intellectual origins, but it was also affected by socio-political and ecclesiastical factors as well. We also note here the possibility of social factors holding back the rise of atheism so it did not reach its climax till nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Berman points out that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a tendency to deny that true speculative atheism existed whilst at the same time seeking to oppose it.\textsuperscript{60} This denial Berman asserts hindered the emergence of atheism.\textsuperscript{61} We can accept the thrust of Berman’s conclusions whilst criticising his use of the Freudian terms repression and suppression to explain it.\textsuperscript{62} In other words a social mood that tended to deny of the existence atheism in society led to a hindering of the rise of atheism.

\textbf{Theological factors in the development of atheism}

We have looked at the intellectual, socio-political and ecclesiastical factors in the rise of atheism, however some people also point to theological developments in Christianity. We shall examine two of those possible developments here.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{51} Ibid., p.21
\bibitem{52} Ibid., pp.22-26, 29-30
\bibitem{53} Ibid., p.41
\bibitem{54} Ibid., p.41
\bibitem{55} Ibid., p.46
\bibitem{56} Ibid., p.22
\bibitem{57} Ibid., pp.26-37
\bibitem{58} Ibid., pp.52,55
\bibitem{59} Ibid., p.62
\bibitem{60} Berman, D., \textit{A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell}, pp.2-6
\bibitem{61} Ibid., p.42
\bibitem{62} The term repression has generally fallen into disrepute in modern scientific psychology. See Myers, D.G, \textit{Psychology}, pp.604-605, 609
\end{thebibliography}
Hyman argues that “modern atheism rejected a modern God.” This modern metaphysical picture of god based on natural theology lost a qualitative concept of the transcendence of God and also the concept of analogical language about God. This led to God becoming located in the world, which in turn led to God become increasingly unknowable and a reflection of human ideas. Hyman locates the beginning of the journey down this path with Duns Scotus and his stress on univocal language about God. Scotus’ ideas allowed the development of the modern metaphysical conception of God and consequently atheism. Although these theological developments were necessary for the development of atheism we would not want to say that they were sufficient, other factors needed to coalesce to guarantee the development of atheism. In contrast to Hyman, McGrath argues that atheism took root due to theological developments in the protestant reformation. The reformation lost the idea that a believer could have a direct experience of God. God’s revelation of himself became located solely in the Bible which was explained through preaching. The Lord’s Supper become symbolic under Zwingli and the removal of religious images from the church meant that God became absent. Protestantism became spiritually dry with God being seen as increasingly unattractive and unnecessary in daily life. The theological developments of the Reformation therefore helped to propel forward the development of atheism. However, not all is bad as McGrath suggests the rise of Pietism and experiential religion (eg. Pentecostalism) hindered the rise of atheism. Pietism enabled criticism of the church whilst valuing faith and Pentecostalism emphasised the direct experience of God in contrast to the spiritual dryness of reformation theology. Both movements helped hold back the rising tide of atheism.

The coming of the age of atheism in the twentieth century

Our look at the development of atheism has led us to examine the intellectual, theological, socio-political and ecclesiastical factors in the rise of atheism. All along we have been hinting at our conclusion that it is impossible to tie the rise of atheism solely to one of these factors. These factors were not sufficient in themselves to lead to atheism, but together became a mighty force driving western culture down the road towards atheism.

Atheism did not take hold in western society till mid twentieth century and from that point onwards it has become a natural position in popular society. Atheism took so long to take hold because it

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63 Hyman, G., “Atheism in Modern History”, p.37
64 Ibid., pp.37-39
65 Ibid., pp.39-40
66 Duns Scotus (c.1265-1308) argued against equivocity of God-language because it led to a negative theology which ended up leaving us without a concept of God. He also disputed points of Aquinas’ conception of analogical God-language arguing univocal language must precede analogical language. He accepted that language about humans had a different sense from language about God but argued that there still had to be some element of univocity. For Scotus a denial of univocal language about God meant rejecting the medieval project of natural theology which argued from creation towards God. See Broadie, A., “Duns Scotus and William Ockham” in (ed.) Evans, G.R., The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to the theology of the medieval period (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp.250-265
67 Hyman, G., “Atheism in Modern History”, pp.41-43
69 Ibid., pp.203, 207-212
70 Ibid., pp.17, 214-216
was not till the nineteenth century that atheism became a respectable intellectual position. After that it only took someone like Freud to popularise atheistic ideas in wider culture.

The twentieth century saw a rise in publications and personalities arguing against religion and for atheism. Three notable figures are Bertrand Russell	extsuperscript{73}, Christopher Hitchens	extsuperscript{74} and Richard Dawkins	extsuperscript{75}. Berman comments regarding Russell that he “... is content to attack arguments for God’s existence rather than producing pro-atheistic arguments”	extsuperscript{76}. Russell was less ‘evangelical’ in his atheism in contrast to the later Dawkins and Hitchens who are more fundamentalistic and polemical. Dawkins, being a scientist himself, especially tends to see science as the only valid source of knowledge. Hitchens and Dawkins are part of a movement which has been termed ‘The new atheists’. 	extsuperscript{77}

**Contemporary responses to atheism**

Response to atheism from Christianity varies. Peterson argues that we should not automatically dismiss the arguments of those from the new atheist movement because they have captured a cultural mood and in engaging with them we may find areas where religious scholarship is weak or needs developing.	extsuperscript{78} Others attack the veracity of atheist arguments. To this end there are many Christian theologians who have engaged with the writings of the atheists. We will analyse the effectiveness of the contemporary responses to atheism made by Fergusson, McGrath and Jüngel. Taking account of our analysis above it is right that we expect a full and effective response to atheism should encompass responding to the intellectual, socio-political, ecclesiastical and theological factors which led to atheism’s rise.

**David Fergusson**

Fergusson in *Faith and its critics* offers a response to the new atheists. He applies a method of engaging with the atheistic arguments that parallels the scientific method:

“This we are frequently reminded is how science ought to be practised – what is required is a judicious weighing of the evidence, a fair consideration of alternative hypotheses, a willingness to revise and even on occasion abandon deeply held convictions. These are the marks of the scientific spirit which need to be brought to the study of religion.”	extsuperscript{79}

His aim is that a *conversation* can be established between scepticism and faith which involves not simply offense or defence but listening.	extsuperscript{80} Fergusson does not always apply his method systematically and especially may be criticised for side stepping the issue of suffering and evil.	extsuperscript{81} This issue can be highly important for some atheists (eg. protest atheism) and Fergusson makes little attempt to respond to the atheistic arguments. We acknowledge there are no final answers on this

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	extsuperscript{72} Hyman, G., “Atheism in Modern History”, p.31


	extsuperscript{76} Berman, D., *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, p.231

	extsuperscript{77} Peterson, G. R., "Why the new atheism shouldn’t be (completely) dismissed", p.803

	extsuperscript{78} *Ibid.*, p.804

	extsuperscript{79} Fergusson, D., *Faith and its Critics: A Conversation*, p.11


	extsuperscript{81} See his inadequate response in Fergusson, D., *Faith and its Critics: A Conversation*, pp.52-54
issue but some answers are better than others.  

Fergusson sketches the intellectual history of atheism and concludes that basing faith on philosophical reasoning opened faith to being undermined. For him God can only be apprehended by faith and reason is redundant in this regard. He goes on to argue:

“... the truthfulness of a religion is best known in living it. When it enables one to live well, this will be a strong reason for judging that some of its deepest convictions contain a measure of truth.”

The truth of faith is found in whether it helps people live well. Fergusson is a pragmatist because the veracity of faith is found in the question ‘does it work?’ Faith becomes subjective. The difficulty is that atheists could argue that atheism makes some people live well, so using Fergusson’s criteria does this mean we should consider atheism true? Also problematic is the definition of ‘living well’ which he seems to assume is of universal agreement, however any student of ethics knows this is hardly the case. Fergusson ignores the role of revelation which helps provide an answer to the subjectivity of faith. He gives no reason for choosing the faith of one religion above another other than pragmatic or intellectual reasons. Fergusson’s emphasis on applying the scientific method in his engagement with atheistic arguments regarding the existence of God is still too rationalistically based and continues to leave the opportunity for faith to be undermined.

The design argument for God is important for Fergusson. Atheism rejects this because it says that science can give an account of the design of objects in the world. Fergusson agrees partially and argues that religion should accommodate scientific theories of origin. He uses Stephen Jay Gould’s idea of ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ to say that religion and science offer complementary descriptions that are interlinked. This idea of complementary descriptions is a theme that keeps appearing in Fergusson’s response to atheistic arguments on physical evolution, evolutionary psychology of religious behaviour, evolutionary models for the development of morality, and evolutionary ideas of art and beauty. A reductionist approach to the world that reduces everything to scientific explanation cannot provide a complete account of the world for Fergusson. We affirm Fergusson’s approach here. The doctrine of creation enables us to speak of a unity of truth and we would expect different descriptions ultimately to be compatible and not contradictory.

Also important for Fergusson is the call for balance in the arguments of atheists, especially in relation to religious violence, the so called religious resistance to healthcare progress and religious child abuse. He argues that religion is wider than its distortions, the good that religion does needs

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84 Ibid., p.30
85 Ibid., p.37
86 Ibid., pp.43-44
87 Ibid., p.69
88 Ibid., p.79
89 Ibid., p.108
90 Ibid., p.115
91 Ibid., p.91
92 Ibid., Chapter 5
to be acknowledged. Religion is sometimes pathological and he is willing to accept that we may have something learn from the atheists:

“Not all their criticisms are misplaced. We need to recognise the inherent dangers of some mutations of religion, the presence of superstitious elements in much popular piety, and the need for a critical and informed account of our religion. One’s own faith will be chastened and even enriched in this encounter.”  

Examining Fergusson’s response in the light of the factors leading to atheism we can see that the weight of his response to atheism lies in the intellectual realm. He is strong on emphasising complementary descriptions and the need to intellectually weigh evidence, in fact his response is very rationalistically based. Fergusson does deal with theological issues but tends to only draw on theology in the midst of responding to intellectual arguments. His response is weakest when it comes to the socio-political and ecclesiastical factors which led to rise of atheism. In the chapter called ‘Is religion bad for our health?’ he acknowledges the role of religion in violence, medical ethics and the bad treatment of children as well as the religious and political factors that lead to suicide bombings. However, he does not analyse how cultural movements, economic failure and political power struggles may influence the rise of atheism as we saw they did in the French revolution. Fergusson’s response to atheism is far from a balanced response that includes all the factors which led to the rise in atheism.

**Alister McGrath**

McGrath’s response to atheism is more multifaceted compared to Fergusson’s and examine two of his responses here. Firstly, in *The Dawkins Delusion* McGrath seeks to provide a response to Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* and covers some of the same ground as Fergusson. McGrath does not answer Dawkins’ book point by point but by critically engaging with what he calls ‘representative points’. The thrust of McGrath’s book is to critique the rhetoric and evidence that Dawkins uses to expound his case that God is a delusion. McGrath criticises Dawkins’ use of polemical and ridiculing language, his misuse or selective use of evidence (especially religious sources) in his arguments, his misrepresentation of religion and making generalisations about religion, his reductionism (everything worth saying has to be said by science), his use of evidence that has been discredited and his use of pseudoscience (‘the virus of the mind’ and memes). McGrath is willing to give ground to Dawkins when he perceives truth has been spoken, for example regarding the problem of religious violence. However, he is scathing of Dawkins’ general attempt to show that God is a delusion. He comments:

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93 Ibid., p.145
94 McGrath, A. & Collicutt McGrath, J., *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*, pp.xii-xiii
95 eg. see *ibid.*, pp.2-3
96 eg. see *ibid.*, pp.5-6
97 eg. see *ibid.*, p.11
98 eg. see *ibid.*, pp.14-18
99 eg. see *ibid.*, p.33
100 eg. see *ibid.*, pp.40-45
101 eg. see *ibid.*, p.46
“The God Delusion is a work of theatre, rather than scholarship – a fierce, rhetorical assault on religion, and passionate plea for it to be banished to the lunatic fringes of society, where it can do no harm.”102

McGrath’s response is solely an intellectual response to one specific atheist’s arguments. His major critique of Dawkins’ work is to do with Dawkins’ methods, which in turn allows him to critique the arguments. This book focuses very much on intellectual deconstruction of ideas and we have to say that McGrath is fairly successful in what he does by showing the weaknesses of the arguments. However, we have to question whether a response of this kind would lead an atheist towards faith or whether it would simply just continue the cycle of rational argument and response. This kind of response to atheism is more suited as an apologetical text for those who already have faith and is too rationalistically based to provide a full response that leads people to Christ.

McGrath’s second response to atheism is found in The Twilight of Atheism. Here he seeks to give a balanced view of the factors that led to the rise of atheism and he encompasses the intellectual, socio-political and ecclesiastical factors. For McGrath the present appeal of atheism is culturally bound to the worldview of modernity which emphasises reason.103 The breakdown of modernity and the rise of post-modernism (notwithstanding the problem of definition) therefore lead to the undermining of atheism.104 Modernity and post-modernity are cultural moods which affect belief.105 He argues that under post-modernism and its respect for diversity we see signs in culture of a resurgence of spirituality and signs that atheism is less appealing.106

We affirm McGrath’s exploration of the intellectual, socio-political and ecclesiastical factors that led to the rise of atheism and that he has argued persuasively that the current prevalence of atheism is culturally conditioned. He acknowledges that the church’s faults led to an oppressive collusion between church and state and therefore drove the development of atheism in history. However, we question whether his view that atheism is entering its ‘twilight’ is too premature as Zuckerman actually argues that in some societies atheism is still rising.107 It is also clear in Zuckerman’s article that countries in the west generally classed as having post-modern cultures contain large numbers self-confessed atheists. Is post-modernism really having the effects on atheism that McGrath proclaims? Another problem is that if we want to argue the prevalence of atheism is because of a cultural mood, could not the same argument be applied to the prevalence of religion over the centuries? If we do not move beyond a cultural explanation for atheism, which McGrath sadly does not in this book, and address issues of religious truth then the prevalence of Christianity could also be seen as simply a reflection of a cultural mood. Also problematic is McGrath’s focuses on socio-political and ecclesiastical factors in the past. He does not address whether there are any socio-political and ecclesiastical factors which continue to further atheism today, for example the issue of privilege still given to the church in many western pluralistic societies.

102 Ibid., p.64
104 Ibid., p.227
105 Ibid., p.225
106 Ibid., pp.174,191, 227
107 Zuckerman, P., “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns”, p.59
Taking *The Dawkins Delusion* and *The Twilight of Atheism* together as whole, we find that McGrath offers a more balanced engagement with the factors that led to atheism compared with Fergusson. The area where McGrath is weakest in his response is in dealing with the theological factors. He suggests that the reformation theology lacked a theology of the experience of God, however he does not analyse in any great depth movements in the doctrine of God over the centuries that allowed the development of atheist arguments.

Eberhard Jüngel

Eberhard Jüngel (1933-) takes a completely different approach to critiquing atheism compared to Fergusson and McGrath. As a student of Karl Barth he rejects liberal theology and supports the idea that the proper foundation of theology is divine revelation. Jüngel emphasises that God is only truly known through the incarnation and trinity as revealed in Jesus Christ. Revelation being the foundation for knowing God enables Jüngel to critique metaphysical atheism. Jüngel identifies Descartes as the source of modern atheism, commenting that Descartes “proof of the necessity of God is the midwife of modern atheism”. This leads to ‘ascension’, or humanity thinking its way towards God, from which it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that God is not necessary. For him atheism always reacts against a certain type of metaphysical theism. Jüngel’s theology explores how the life and death of Jesus determines our understanding of God. The crucifixion (death of God) becomes the foil of metaphysical theism because the metaphysical concept of God cannot cope with the thought of the perishability of God and yet this is how God has revealed himself. For Jüngel the metaphysical concepts of omnipotence, omniscience etc. need to be understood in the light of the revelation of God on the cross and not defined by philosophy, and this questions the metaphysical concept of God. The effective response to or refutation of atheism is therefore the revealed gospel which shows the fallacies of metaphysical theism.

We can see that Jüngel’s response to atheism is a deeply theological response which focuses on the doctrine of God and is solely directed towards an atheism that is founded on metaphysical reasoning about God. The strength of his approach is that he emphasises the gospel of Christ as the effective response to atheism, which neither of Fergusson or McGrath do. The major weakness of Jüngel’s approach is that he only concentrates on responding to a specific form of metaphysical atheism that rejects a certain concept of God. Whilst the New Atheists, such as Dawkins in *The God delusion*, do consider metaphysical concepts of God they also react against, for example, abuses perpetrated by the church and the violence of scripture. Jüngel’s response has nothing to say against these atheistic arguments and he appears to have no role for apologetics in his response to atheism. His approach

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108 Webster, J., ‘Systematic Theology after Barth’, p.251; Jüngel, E., *God as the mystery of the world: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, p.9

109 Webster, J., ‘Systematic Theology after Barth’, p.251

110 Jüngel, E., *God as the mystery of the world: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, p.19


114 Jüngel, E., *God as the mystery of the world: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, p.203


verges on fideism. Whilst we would affirm Jüngel’s highlighting of the necessity of the proclamation of life and death of Christ as a response to atheism, for a more effective response to atheism it would be necessary to respond to the intellectual, socio-political, ecclesiastical as well as the theological factors which lead to atheism.

**Conclusion**

We have explored the rise of atheism in the west and have seen the rise can be attributed to intellectual, socio-political, ecclesiastical and theological factors. It is our argument that we can only effectively respond to atheism if we respond to all these different factors. We judged that neither Fergusson, McGrath nor Jüngel offered a completely satisfying response to atheism in this regard. However, given the limitations of their individual responses, they do collectively begin to offer a good foundation for a response. Jüngel’s specific approach also reminds us that combating arguments must give way to the presentation of the gospel and therefore any response to atheism should essentially be a clearing of the ground which enables the proclamation of Christ. We have seen that some responses to atheism will be fuller than others, however it is arguable that the only truly effective response to atheism will be at the eschaton with the return of Christ. In the meantime we proclaim the gospel and give the fullest response we can.
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