

Book Review of *A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism: God is Not Dead*, by Peter. S. Williams

According to Peter Williams, God is very much back in the public debate. Therefore, what this book helpfully does is to set out the rise of the 'new atheism' and to examine their arguments and how Christians can respond. If you ever feel unsure of how to answer questions sceptics may have, want to educate yourself or your congregation to be informed about the sorts of debates concerning God prominent in the public square, or find yourself confused by conflicting viewpoints in books and the media, then this book is for you. It is not a particularly light read, covering many different arguments and viewpoints in a short space of time, but it is a very helpful overview and introduction to the themes and ideas each chapter presents.

Initially, Peter Williams begins by setting out the rise of the 'new atheists' and explains how many philosophers are now accepting belief in God again. He suggests that theism has actually made impressive advances in Britain since the mid-20th Century, despite the attempts of the Dawkins contingent wishing to make belief in God socially unacceptable. As such, there is hope for positive engagement and discussion about God in the public square, and subsequent chapters set out common objections and questions about religion, offering convincing arguments for how we can respond.

Questions addressed include, *Is faith the root of all evil? Does science explain everything?* and *Is religion nothing but a short of a sandwich?* – in other words, is religion just a mental disorder, nothing more than a projection in the mind? In response to these, Williams considers the relationship between faith and reason and how this is often misunderstood by atheists, who often assume faith is totally irrational. In relation to science, he asks the key question, 'Exactly which traditional religious convictions fail to stand up under the scrutiny of precisely which scientific theories?' and considers how science may be able to address questions such as how the universe began, it cannot answer questions about *why* it exists. Neither can science answer questions of beauty, truth and goodness. Williams quotes Dr Fraser Watts, a reader in theology and science, who states, "I do not know of any research that conflicts with religion. The problem comes from the ideological position, held by a minority of scientists, that science is the only valid form of knowledge and has got all the answers."

In the chapter '*Is religion nothing but a short of a sandwich*', questions addressed include whether religions have just evolved in order to protect themselves? Williams argues that the huge problem of this evolutionary approach to religion is that it ignores the historical nature of religions such as Judaism and Christianity, assuming that no revelation can be genuinely historical. He addresses questions of religious experience, arguing that if God is the creator, then whatever causes an experience of God will ultimately come from God. Finally in this chapter, Williams examines the arguments as to whether there are genetic influence that predispose people to believe, concluding that the evidence around this argument is certainly far from proven and that there is considerable doubt as to whether such a gene exists. What's more, Williams argues that even if it did, it could only predispose us to believe, not telling us what to believe in.

Williams then goes on to explore the question of evidence for God and for the origin of life and the universe, suggesting that Dawkins vastly underestimates the odds against spontaneous generation of life. He then goes on to explore some of the traditional arguments for God, including the cosmological, ontological and moral arguments and critiques Dawkins handling of them. He argues that the new atheists are out of touch with contemporary sophisticated arguments for God's existence and that their arguments tend to be superficial and assertive, rather than offering evidence and proof. In contrast, Williams is impressive in the level of depth and sophistication his arguments go into and the breadth of understanding he demonstrates around the issues.

As a helpful edition, an appendix is included charting the historical evidence for Jesus, exploring the historicity of the gospel accounts, manuscript evidence and dating, how this compares to other ancient literature and examining archaeological discoveries. This certainly helps to demonstrate that Christianity is far from lacking evidence and to claim that it is completely irrational or based on a psychological projection, is to ignore the considerable historical evidence.

The book is quite academic and therefore some prior knowledge, or at the very least, interest in the topics and questions raised, would be an advantage. It is impressive in its detail and research but given that it covers many arguments in a short space of time, as mentioned earlier, it is certainly not a light read. However, each chapter could be used on its own, particularly perhaps if one was preparing a talk or a sermon that covered those particular issues and questions. Given that the questions the book examines are the kinds of questions that are relevant to many people and common questions asked, likely to come up in discussion and evangelism, this book can provide some very thorough grounding to be able to understand and respond to the arguments, and is the sort of book that would likely be useful to refer back to long after it has initially been read. I would thoroughly recommend it as a helpful tool to anyone wishing to educate themselves around these questions. God is back in the public debate – use this book to help you engage in those debates in an informed and well researched way.

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