

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, eds. *Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by the New Atheists*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010. 304 pp. ISBN 0825436543.

As an attempt to place itself within an often toxic, polarizing debate between conservative evangelical apologetics and “the New Atheists,” this work seeks to articulate a substantive Christian response to popular atheist criticism in the twenty-first century. As the title suggests, the book aims to respond carefully to eighteen popular accusations leveled against evangelical and Christian fundamentalist faith positions in a didactic question-answer format. Questions include more broad and theoretical concerns like, “Is faith irrational?” while also reflecting greater cultural concerns like “Does God intend for us to keep slaves?” Each chapter is bookended with a summative application section entitled “Why It Matters,” where a popular Christian apologist provides a personal, dialectical appraisal meant to augment the evangelical truth position under evaluation. The book culminates in highlighting the veracity of the conservative evangelical truth position among other contemporary religious positions, an offering tangential to the original, stated aim of the work.

In general, the book reflects an unfortunate polarizing trend between conservative evangelical scholarship and the New Atheist camp and an increased militancy regarding the role and purpose of religion in a post-9/11 context. The debate between McDowell, Morrow, and the New Atheists yields a rather passé modernist approach to religious truth, as both sides seek to ground their inquiry in the foundations of modern science and the Cartesian self. Arguments are structured and accusations are made on both sides that rely on a source of authority not agreed

upon, yet neither can escape the esoteric nature of tautological discourse. Thus, the authors' modernist approach necessitates a binary structure to the apologetic argument, culminating in the overused evangelical binarism: "Jesus is either who he claimed to be or he wasn't. It's really that simple" (p. 238).

For many of us it isn't that simple. Instead, most well intentioned Christians—evangelicals included—might lie somewhere in between the fundamentalist approach of McDowell and Morrow and the narrow vision of New Atheists like Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. While most Christians confessionally affirm Jesus "as the Son of God," many might not see the necessity of affirming a literal six-day creation or the narrow exclusivity of biblical Christianity as "the only meaningful and effective worldview" (p. 42). The book simply affirms an exclusionary, modernist (American?) perspective on religious truth, while the "take it or leave it" approach fails to establish a critical point of contact between the two polarized positions.

There are many intrinsic logical flaws in the Christian apologetic tradition that McDowell and Morrow seek to explicate. In the fourth chapter, "Is Darwinian Evolution the Only Game in Town?" the authors highlight the work of Thomas Jefferson as a credible source for theories of intelligent design. The book highlights Jefferson's pro-Intelligent Design tendency based on his evaluation of empirical scientific evidence. Aside from the highly contentious notion that Jefferson was at all an expert in macro-evolutionary biology, the fact remains that Jefferson passed away almost forty years before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. The authors claim Jefferson's view contrasted with Darwin's *Origins*, yet Jefferson was not actually alive at the time of Darwin's writing. Additionally, McDowell and Morrow claim Jeffersonian theories of intelligent design provided a basis for the constitutional protection of individual liberty and the American Declaration of Independence. Such an idealized portrait of Jefferson ignores the reality of his own practice of slave holding, his liberal, deistic, materialist religious beliefs, and his blatant refusal to let non-whites be represented in any formal, constitutional manner.

Highlighting the tendentious example of Jefferson serves no real logical purpose for the book, and is a cheap, simplistic attempt to admix conservative evangelical truth with American modernist identity.

I question the author's notion that theories of intelligent design provide a logical basis for human dignity and equality, and cite their own book itself as evidence. The cultural assumptions endemic to fundamentalist theories of intelligent design are the product of a particularly white, patriarchal approach to religious truth, and consistently fail to incorporate female and majority-world voices to augment their discourse. Of the twenty authors who make a contribution to *Is God Just a Human Invention?* there is no independent female voice represented, and no author of African-American, or Hispanic descent. The supposed causal connection between theories of intelligent design and foundational human dignity has yet to have any real affect on the actual organization of this particular discourse, and remains a significant oversight endemic to the exclusionary vision of the fundamentalist Christian project itself.

While McDowell and Morrow attempt to seek answers against the backdrop of a very particular type of scientific nihilism, the book fails to address the pervasive reality of philosophical nihilism in our contemporary post-modern context. The current post-modern objection to Christian metaphysics has very little to do with whether there was a literal Noah's Ark; instead, we might ask questions regarding the pragmatic value and usefulness of the conservative Christian worldview in a growing, complex network of cultural and civic relationships. Instead of engaging the post-modern critique in a rigorous theoretical fashion, *Is God Just a Human Invention?* simply recapitulates a thoroughly modernist, Western, rationalist, and obsolete approach to Christian apologetics. Ignoring the burning post-modern question makes this book irrelevant beyond the narrow scope of Christian fundamentalism, and simply perpetuates a deepening polarization between conservative Christian faith and the rationalist project.

Of course, we can refuse to be a part of this discourse, and instead might seek to find a point of contact between Christianity

and the atheist position. While God is not just a human invention, God is a human being, and experienced the fullness of human alienation, material/temporal existence, and untimely death. Perhaps highlighting God's full, utter allegiance to and identification with(in) humanity might provide the necessary link between conservative Christianity and modern science. And if our Christian story is at all true, this is a link that has *already happened*.

Bruce Worthington
McMaster Divinity College