

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Faith and Unbelief*

Faith and Unbelief by Stephen Bullivant. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012

Peter Admirand*

Believers and so-called nonbelievers inevitably do not see eye-to-eye. This is neither surprising nor unwarranted. What is surprising (if not distressing) is the level of distaste and disrespect sometimes levied between the groups. Fortunately, Steven Bullivant's *Faith and Unbelief* is a theological work which is open and respectful of atheist arguments and positions. In this regard it joins a number of other recent books seeking to be judicious, gentle, and fair, from atheist Philip Kitcher's *Life after Faith*, to theologian Phil Ryan's *After the New Atheist Debate*, not to mention *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, jointly edited by Bullivant and Michael Ruse, an atheist philosopher.

Faith and Unbelief is part of Canterbury Press's *Faith Going Deeper Series*, which presents core Christian themes and issues in a lively, readable, and expert fashion. In this work, Bullivant highlights theist-atheist dialogue and presents, primarily to a Christian audience, the views and critiques of many atheists. In general, atheists and other nonbelievers will also find much of this fair and stimulating, though the closing chapter on evangelization might undo some of this good will.

The book consists of six chapters, as well as an introduction and an afterword. Chapter 1 acknowledges the fraught ambiguity and historically scant evidence of atheists prior to our contemporary age. Christians were called "atheists" in the Roman context, for example, not because they did not believe in God, but because they refused to worship the Roman gods. Bullivant also rightly delves into the mystical and apophatic traditions within Christianity to highlight periods of spiritual abandonment and isolation – the dark night of the soul – experienced by John of the Cross and Mother Teresa. It is a core reminder of the fluidity of much faith and unbelief and accentuates how doubt factors on all sides.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of reasons to disbelieve, and again Bullivant arranges his material in a clear and compelling fashion. Key reasons include the problem of evil and gratuitous suffering, complicated Christian doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the expanding purview of science. Bullivant acknowledges these serious challenges, especially the problem of evil. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* makes an inevitable appearance here: a good example of a theist presenting

a near-perfect case for an atheist's unbelief. Bullivant's tone is measured and humble as theists should be in any discussion of gratuitous evil, but he also remains hopeful because of his Christological belief, which points to Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of afterlife healing and justice.

Chapter 3 asks if the spread of atheism is the fault of theists. In this sense, Bullivant is right to highlight how religious hypocrisy has played – and continues to play – a compelling role for many to reject religious belief and belonging. From the 16th century witness of Bartolomé de las Casas to the daily stories of militant Muslim fundamentalists and the Catholic Church's cover-ups of sexual abuse cases, such hypocrisy is not in short supply. Bullivant also draws upon Augustine and Aquinas to remind Christians against a failure to listen to non-Christian views which may bear important and correct insights on passages of Scripture not related to core moral or doctrinal issues. Thirdly, he examines the state of Christian disunity. It is, indeed, difficult to promote Christianity as peaceful and coherent with a historical record of Christian in-fighting, schisms, and violence (from the wars of religion to WWI; for the latter, see Philip Jenkins's *The Great and Holy War*).

Up to this point atheists and other nonbelievers would find much to agree with Bullivant, but the final chapters reinforce the theist/atheist divide, though in an amicable and respectful manner. Chapter Four's title: "*Can Atheists be Saved?*" is no doubt a presumptuous question, albeit one relevant to many Christian readers. Bullivant's approach is to take a middle ground by emphasizing his belief in Christ as savior while providing ample space for what it means to be saved. Thus, he wants to avoid making Christ irrelevant so that belief does not matter but also wants to avoid triumphalist language that claims "all non-Christians are damned!" (p. 94). We are thus reminded of the term "inculpable ignorance" and how that term can apply, not only to Native Americans in 1491, but contemporary people today whose only interaction with Christians or Christianity has been negative. Bullivant also examines the question of implicit faith: is an atheist dedicated to good works an anonymous or implicit Christian? He also assesses whether people need to be baptised to be saved and what of those who were baptised and have since rejected theism? Lastly, Bullivant touches upon universal salvation, the idea that every person, ultimately, will be saved.

* Mater Dei Institute, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
peter.admirand@dcu.ie

The final chapter on evangelization, or the new evangelization, will inevitably spark much discomfort in nonbelievers (perhaps even in believers, too). Bullivant, always aiming to be reasonable, tries to present evangelization's best face. He does not deny past failures in evangelizing and highlights how living out one's beliefs and witnessing to one's faith are crucial components. He contends the Church exists to evangelize, echoing the language of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, most notably (or infamously), the 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus*. Like that declaration, he does not sufficiently connect these ideas to Jewish-Christian dialogue. For example, do Jews, already in covenant with God, need Christ for salvation? Outside the Abrahamic faiths, does the Dalai Lama, for example, explicitly need Christ for his salvation? Here a deeper sense of what

it means to be made in the image and likeness of God may provide more hopeful responses. Ultimately, as a theologian, I remain on the fence. In *God is Red*, Chinese dissident and atheist Liao Yiwu provides haunting testimonies of Christians persecuted in Maoist China. There evangelization to restore the unfairly tarnished and persecuted Christian message seems just. But should – and is – evangelization the essence of the Church? Here I would side with many of my atheist, let alone Jewish or Muslim dialogue partners, and contend otherwise. We are called to serve and to love and here Christians can claim no unique or superior status over those of other faiths or of none.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Admirand, P 2015 Review of *Faith and Unbelief*. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 4: 6, pp. 1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.ay>

Published: 28 July 2015

Copyright: © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.



Secularism and Nonreligion is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 