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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* by Michael J. Buckley

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Source: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Jul., 1991), pp. 440-442

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1204580>

Accessed: 28-10-2022 15:48 UTC

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on the things of this world. Yet they construct a visible church that they cherish and value along with the elements of human community and fellowship that accompany it.

The latter is completely understandable from a Durkheimian perspective. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Experience* (New York, 1915), Durkheim argues that religion emerges from social experience, functioning to preserve and support society. Rather than being normative, as Durkheim suggests, this act of sacralizing the world is viewed as idolatry, proof of human fallenness by the Primitives. Doctrine warns against it, but doctrine also informs them that they will fall prey to it. It will happen, but it ought not to.

Max Weber was more interested than Durkheim in the acting subject and the role of doctrine in the individual's life. In fact his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985) is an extended analysis of how the individual deals with the uncertainty created by the doctrine of predestination. The Primitives, however, do not overcome this insecurity through a Weberian striving for success, nor do they act as consistently as a Weberian typology based on doctrine might suggest. Although perhaps they do since their doctrine itself suggests that they will fail to do so.

Within the conflict between a valued community and a doctrine that relativizes all human institutions, Tyson and Peacock discover that the Primitive Baptists come to their own solution. The solution reached by the Primitives is to affirm the very ambiguity and paradoxicalness of the situation itself, to understand their doctrinally structured universe, where each is a lonely sojourner in a fallen world, as being a shared experience.

Beyond the significance of analyzing sociological theories within the context of a case study, Tyson and Peacock bring ethnography into the American religious context. It is this that students of religion need to learn. Too often ethnography has been left to anthropologists and sociologists, who fail to provide a suitable religious/faith context to their work. They provide interesting and exciting material but fail (generally) to place the material within the circle of faith. Students of religion need to adopt the method and form but provide it with the missing element. This Tyson and Peacock have done.

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BUCKLEY, MICHAEL J., S.J. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987. viii+445 pp.

Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* is a big book with bold claims about the relationship between theology and philosophy. Buckley's central claim is a causal one: the rise of atheism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was largely due to Christian theologians who defended the faith not by appealing to the distinctive characteristics of the faith but by appealing to philosophy. This causal claim is supplemented by a normative one: Christian theologians should not have done this then, he claims, nor should they do it now. Buckley draws his support from a detailed historical account; I shall first look at that account and then scrutinize the causal and historical theses in turn.

The historical account—There are eight major players—four of them theologians—in the drama, who can be paired off as follows. Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne were theologians who started things off badly around the turn of the seventeenth century. Sensing the increasing influence of ancient

atheistic arguments, they attempted to meet the philosophical objections philosophically rather than with a presentation of the revelation of God through Christ. The next pair are Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton—not theologians, so not really culpable. But the way each newly defined his field of inquiry and the role each assigned to God in that field of inquiry set the stage for the chief culprits. These were Nicolas Malebranche and Samuel Clarke, the two most prominent theologians of their day. Malebranche adapted Descartes's views and Clarke adapted Newton's as they attempted to meet the philosophical arguments of the atheists head-on, abandoning the person and experience of Christ in the process. Atheists Denis Diderot and Paul-Henri d'Holbach then entered the scene and turned the theologians' arguments against them, thereby pulling up the curtain on the age of atheism.

It is here, as an expositor of history, that Buckley is at his best. Hundreds of learned pages detail the views of these eight. It is puzzling, however, why he focuses on these exclusively. The primary worry is not Buckley's exclusion of the other influential theists (of one sort or the other) of the era—say, Bayle, Spinoza, Hobbes, Butler, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume; Buckley is not writing an encyclopedia, after all, and he says enough so that we can figure out for ourselves why he deems them unimportant. The primary worry, rather, is Buckley's exclusion of any theologian of that era who did respond to unbelief by appealing to Christ rather than philosophy. Surely there were many—from Calvin and his followers to William Law to Pascal. Buckley may think that such theologians were not really a part of the debate between atheism and theism. But if not, the reason may be that to answer a philosophical objection by an appeal to Christ *ipso facto* removes one from the debate. This bears directly on Buckley's thesis, and is thus a serious omission.

The causal thesis.—Suppose, however, that the historical account is adequate. How exactly did the theologians cause atheism to take hold? Buckley explains it in Hegelian terms. There was a free-floating idea of theism, and the appeal to philosophy injected it with a contradiction between form (theism demonstrated by philosophical arguments) and content (theism demonstrated by the person of Christ). This contradiction inevitably generated the self-alienation of the idea, producing atheism.

It is a major disappointment that Buckley rests so much of his case on a metaphysical mechanism that is itself far more doubtful—not to mention indistinct—than the thesis it is intended to support. And not only is the metaphysics unlikely, so is the logic. Surely there is no contradiction in supposing that a belief's content can be demonstrated in one way (whereby it is explicated) and that its truth can be demonstrated in another (whereby it is justified). I hasten to agree with the general point that certain beliefs, due to their content, cannot be justified by certain strategies; moral principles, for example, cannot be defended by citing the results of a survey. But inept justification is one thing, contradiction quite another.

Buckley, I must stress, may well be right in his broad causal claim: Christian theologians probably did play some causal role in the rise of atheism. But this role can be expressed in non-Hegelian terms that anyone can understand. You can market a product by pointing to independent tests that prove its superiority. Or you can market it by appeal to intangibles like image, loyalty, and nostalgia. But those who depend entirely on the first strategy are bound to lose market share more quickly when the independent tests start to come back negative.

It is a further disappointment that Buckley's positive causal case is not accom-

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panied by a negative one. Sociologists have had much to say about the forces driving the secularization of the era in question. Buckley does not accept their conclusions, yet he does not argue against them, or even acknowledge their existence. The suspicion, thus, is allowed to remain: even if the theologians did play a role, it was a small one. A different strategy by some of the big advertisers might have made a short-term difference in buying patterns; but it seems unlikely, given the many other forces at work, that this would have noticeably affected market share two hundred years later.

The normative thesis.—Buckley never provides a focused argument for his claim that theologians should not appeal to philosophy. Sometimes it seems simply a matter of strategy: such appeals backfire, so do not use them. But why should this matter? For here is another normative claim: theologians should care about truth and should respect those who question the truth of their views; thus, they should deal honestly with objections regardless of the risk.

We can find in Buckley a reply to this: philosophy cannot offer an honest treatment of the objections. Why not? For one thing, philosophy misrepresents Christian theism; the robust God revealed in Jesus is replaced by the faceless God of the philosophers. But the cure for this is not to eschew philosophy; it is to redirect the philosophical arguments toward a correctly represented God. This leaves Buckley one response: the sorts of reasons philosophy can offer are irrelevant to the reasonableness of theism since religious belief is autonomous. For it, preaching is the appropriate debating posture, explication is the way of justifying the position. This view is not without allure, and others besides Buckley have been unable to resist it. Unfortunately, he has not shown us how to answer the serious questions it raises. How does religious belief get its unique status? Why should we not suppose that the theologian's use of "reasonable" and the like is Pickwickian, sealing theologians off from communication with the intellectual community? Why should we suppose, in short, that theological autonomy amounts to anything other than theological autism?

Buckley does not deliver us to the announced destination. But there is impressive scenery along the way, provided by the historical landscape Buckley so ably delineates. For some, that will be enough to make the journey worthwhile.
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SYKES, S. W., ed. *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 171 pp.

BIGGAR, NIGEL, ed. *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth*. Oxford: A. R. Mowbray, 1988. 215 pp. \$25.00 (cloth).

These books, based on English conferences held in honor of the 1986 Barth centennial, both appeal to two famous admonitions about his work: John Baille's remark that we will never advance beyond Barth's teaching "if we attempt to go round it instead of through it" (*The Sense of the Presence of God* [London, 1962], p. 254), and Barth's own repudiation of Barthianism, "I am not a Barthian!" (*Letters 1961–1968* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977], p. 255). But Baille's advice is generally better observed than Barth's warning.

S. W. Sykes's introduction to *Centenary Essays* sets the tone by claiming that Barth is more credible as a theologian today than he was in the fifties or sixties. He attributes this new relevance to the social sciences and their emphasis on how