



Book Review

The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief by James Spiegel, Moody Publishers, 2010.

The recent flood of publications and campaigns against the belief that there is a God has brought on a counter-tsunami of material from religious publishers. This book is part of that wave.

James Spiegel is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the evangelical Taylor University in Indiana, USA. He looks at why people believe what they believe—which sheds some light on theists and atheists alike. But his particular focus is on the moral and psychological basis for the beliefs of atheists: their denial of God's existence in spite of overwhelming reasons to believe. He sums this up thus:

'The descent into atheism is caused by a complex of moral-psychological factors, not a perceived lack of evidence for God's existence. The atheist wilfully rejects God, though this is precipitated by immoral indulgences and typically a broken relationship with his or her father. Thus, the choice of the atheistic paradigm is motivated by non-rational factors, some of which are psychological and some of which are moral in nature.'

Whilst the book brings helpful insights to this topic, it's not a ground-breaker. If you know what God's Word teaches about why people reject submission to God or even deny his existence, then Spiegel's book isn't going to rock your world.

But the book does substantiate and illustrate the truth that 'lack of evidence is not the atheist's problem'. Instead, the atheist chooses to 'subjugate his quest for truth to his personal desires'. Spiegel says, 'My thesis is...that religious scepticism is, at bottom, a moral problem'. Further on he says 'atheism is the product of moral corruption'.

Spiegel knows very well that his thesis 'will likely draw the ire of many people'. It isn't hard to see why. Professing atheists declare that their belief that there is no God is based on reasoning from the evidence (or lack thereof) for there being a Creator. Their position, they maintain, is the rational and reasonable one, for the evidence is on their side.

But Spiegel says, 'Atheists are cognitively handicapped' and that they 'are unable (or unwilling) to perceive how their view actually undermines rationality itself'. He says: 'It is just an ironic fact that they have analysed religious believers in terms that actually apply to them.'

He uses philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn's concept of the paradigm, 'that scientists do not observe the world objectively but always interpret what they see in light of the scientific theory to which they are committed'. Spiegel invokes Kuhn and other respected authorities to support his thesis that atheism is not the product of evidence, but of preference. 'People are inclined to believe according to their desires; we tend to believe what we want to be true.'

The book doesn't give space to exploring how this applies to theists; that is not within the book's scope. However, it probably would have strengthened Spiegel's thesis had he addressed the obvious objection which atheists would raise in response to this claim ('Theists want to believe there is a God').

Further on he says, 'Those who see the world through the lens of a false or distorting paradigm suffer from what I call paradigm-induced blindness. Their theoretical framework prevents them from seeing the truth, even when it is right in front of them.' This truth is as evident today as it was in Jesus' day. It can even manifest itself among those professing to serve God today. So this isn't just something applicable to atheists; it's a helpful reminder to each of us to watch our life and doctrine closely.

Oddly enough, Spiegel's own Calvinistic paradigm shows through when he suggests the direct influence of the Holy Spirit upon a person is needed to enlighten them to the truth of God's existence. Spiegel also speaks dismissively of 'relatively peripheral doctrinal matters such as...baptism... [and] the question as to exactly who is saved'. His own argumentation is a demonstration of how we are all prone to view things in terms of our own paradigm, and this is what every truth seeker must overcome in seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

His claim that a broken relationship with one's father is a significant factor in atheistic beliefs lacks extensive supporting evidence. But he does cite enough cases to make us wonder. His statement elsewhere that 'the question of evolution is actually irrelevant to the debate about God's existence' probably overstates his point, but his point is a good one: 'Life cannot have started at all without a creator'.

Within the book, Spiegel's five chapters cover:

- Atheistic arguments, errors and insights
- The irrationality of atheism
- The causes of atheism
- The obstinacy of atheism
- The blessings of theism

This book does highlight the grim reality that evidences are rarely going to make atheists see the light and change. Nevertheless, evidences do serve an important role in assuring Christians that faith in our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ is reasonable and rational. This is why the book will do more good for believers in God, than for those who are in denial. □

'I am no postmodernist, and frankly consider the postmodern denial of objective truth to be incoherent.'
James Spiegel