

Michel Onfray

The atheist manifesto

The case against Christianity, Judaism and Islam

Melbourne University Press, 2007, 219 pp.

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Reviewed by James Garth

I have a confession to make. Immediately after reading *The atheist manifesto* I remarked to my wife that I was sorely tempted to brand it as 'intellectual sewage' and consign it to oblivion on the bookshelf. But, shocked by the astonishing harshness of my own initial assessment, and determined to strive for objectivity (lest my subliminal theistic sympathies be unfairly biasing my critique), I sought out other learned reviews, desperate for some sort of confirmation that *Manifesto* really was as bad as it appeared.

Regrettably, it was. *The Age* was scalding, stating 'It is another deliberately distorted, bile-filled jeremiad' (Zwartz 2007), while *The Sydney Morning Herald* was succinct, labelling it simply as 'a bad, bad book' (Windsor, 2007). This is a shame, since one would be well within reason to expect much, much more from Michel Onfray, lauded as 'France's most popular philosopher' (Melville 2007).

Sadly, *The atheist manifesto* is an exercise in bridge demolition rather than bridge building. Unremittingly polemic in style, unrelentingly caustic in its castigation of monotheism — 'Monotheisms have no love for intelligence, books, knowledge, science' (Onfray p95) — *Manifesto* was quite clearly written 'in a fit of anger' as its author not unashamedly confides (Melville, 2007).

One wonders whether Onfray's palpable anger has been accentuated or diminished in Jeremy Leggatt's florid translation, whose verbose tirades leave no thesaurus page unturned in their quest for the ultimate verbal skewer. Consider these excerpts:

Monotheism loathes intelligence, that sublime gift defined as the art of connecting what at first and for most people seems unconnected.

Onfray 2007 p. 67

Fired by the same inborn death drive, the three monotheisms share a series of identical forms of aversion: hatred of reason and intelligence; hatred of freedom; hatred of all books in the name of one alone; hatred of sexuality, women and pleasure; hatred of the feminine;

hatred of the body, of desires, of drives ... In other words, life crucified and nothingness exalted.

Onfray 2007 p. 67

Monotheism does not really like the rational work of scientists.

Onfray 2007 p. 81

The religions of the book detest women. They admire only mothers and wives.

Onfray 2007 p. 102

And so the tirades continue...

Onfray's philosophical project, dubbed 'atheology', is outlined in the first quarter of the book, and it is an epic and ambitious one indeed. The stakes are high, and no less than the complete establishment of the non-existence of God, the death of the soul and the non-existence of free will shall suffice. Onfray is consistent enough to anchor 'atheology' entirely on atomistic materialism, with the creation of a culture devoted to philosophical hedonism the ultimate vision.

Having enlightened the reader by a revisionist history of atheist thought and after establishing the ground rules of his own project, Onfray proceeds to attempt to demolish the three Abrahamic faiths¹, with a particular focus on Christianity. His deconstruction of the historical Jesus, which occupies about a quarter of the book, can be termed 'radical' at best. In this section, perhaps more than any other, readers will be exasperated by what may be the book's coup de grâce; its utter lack of any references or bibliography. One can only conclude that such a contrivance is for mere convenience, obviating Onfray of the need to intellectually buttress some of his more breathtakingly provocative remarks. Consider the following:

None of the evangelists personally knew the famous Jesus.²

Onfray 2007 p. 78

Nothing of what remains can be trusted. The Christian archives are the result of ideological fabrication... When an anonymous monk ... had before him the *Annals* of Tacitus or Suetonius's *Lives of Twelve Caesars* (and was astonished to find no mention of the story he believed in), he added a passage in his own hand and in all good faith, without shame and without a second thought, without wondering whether he was doing wrong or committing a forgery.

Onfray 2007 p. 117

¹ Of these, Islam probably bears the brunt of the fiercest tirades. As the *New Humanist* wryly notes, Onfray received a death threat for criticizing Islam so he felt he might as well earn his fatwa properly!

² Strangely, Onfray makes no mention whatsoever of John's Gospel, nor makes any attempt to explain it away.

Another improbability: the Crucifixion. History again bears witness: at that time Jews were not crucified but stoned to death.³

Onfray 2007 p. 128

Paul created the world in his own image. A deplorable image, fanatical, moving with a hysteric's irresolution from enemy to enemy — first Christians, then Gentiles — sick, misogynistic, masochistic ... How could we fail to see in our own world a reflection of this portrait of a man so clearly controlled by the death instinct?⁴

Onfray 2007 p. 132

Perhaps we may be witnessing the ultimate in post-modern philosophy, the sort of opinion-as-fact polemicising which one could only imagine would provoke outrage from professionals who still consider research into the historical Jesus as a legitimate scholarly exercise.⁵

In fairness, amidst all of the noise and hubris, some perceptive insights are made. Onfray's tantalising insight — that even the atheistic project itself is grounded upon a thoroughly Judeo-Christian epistemological tradition and moral milieu — seems to me to be a very perceptive one. His examination of the role of human psychology in the hermeneutical analysis (or selective verse 'cherry picking') of the Qur'an is meticulously constructed, and worthy of consideration. And the Preface of *Manifesto* is a beautifully written, subtle, poignant and poetic piece of work — giving the reader scant warning of the intellectual carnage to follow.

In conclusion, *Manifesto* will fail to impress a wide spectrum of its conceivable audience. All but the most obliquely patient of Christians will find it extremely difficult to endure. Scientists hoping to unpack some sort of evidence for Onfray's atomistic, Epicurean worldview will be sorely disappointed, as any mention of universal fine-tuning, the 'new physics', neurological insights into the boundaries of free choice, and so on, are entirely absent from this book. And convinced hedonists would probably be better served spending their \$33 RRP down at the pub.⁶

³ On this matter, Onfray is simply wrong. As John Dickson notes, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus both report an incident where 800 Pharisees were crucified on one day; their wives and children were made to look on. Josephus tells us further that during the siege of Jerusalem in AD70 the Romans crucified 500 Jews a day while sacking the city. Actually, our only archaeological remains of a crucifixion victim - a male heel bone with an 11-centimetre nail still in place - were discovered in a Jewish tomb. This Jew, like Jesus, had been crucified and then properly buried'. (Dickson, 2008)

⁴ Frequently, Paul is derided as 'hysterical'. I urge the casual reader to consult the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for conversion disorder and somatization disorder, to decide for themselves whether or not Onfray's diagnosis is well-founded.

⁵ I have in mind scholars from all persuasions, i.e. secular, Jewish and Christian (e.g. E P Sanders, Geza Vermes, Ben F Meyer), whom I imagine would likely squirm at Onfray's brusque assessments.

⁶ On their way to the pub, those desperate for a dose of theistic criticism could always consult the excellent video podcast of fellow atheist Sam Harris' talk 'Believing the Unbelievable', which airs virtually identical grievances to Onfray's, yet does so in a manner which is open, engaging, civil and conversational.

If you are a militant Wahabbist or a Dark Ages apologist with a penchant for flagellation, then *Manifesto* may cause you to pause and reconsider your worldview. It poses no challenge whatsoever to intellectual theism, whose adherents will most likely find *The atheist manifesto* to be manifestly inadequate.

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