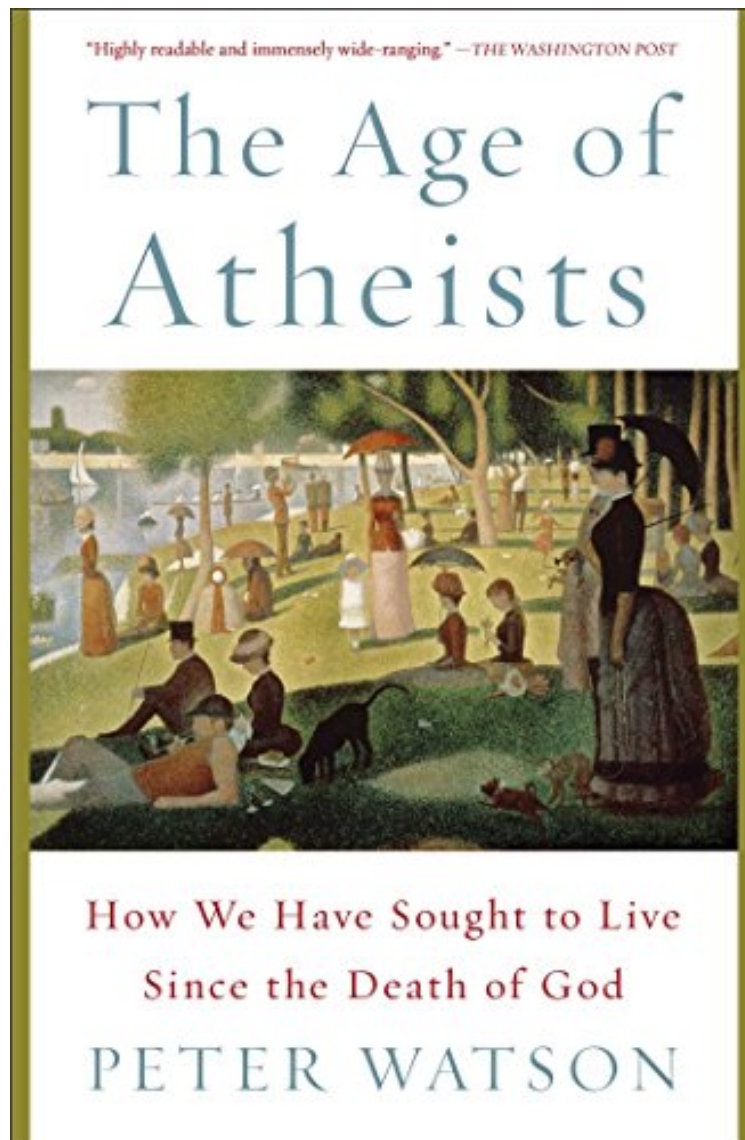


[Free read ebook] The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God

The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God

Peter Watson

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Peter Watson : The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Disappointing Work By An Otherwise Fine Writer By GDP Peter Watson has authored several very good books, including the brilliant 'German Genius' and the impressive 'Ideas'. Both

of those efforts combine a remarkable breadth of knowledge with a nuanced sense of history and an appreciation for the complexity of life and thought. In 'The Age of Atheists' he delivers the breadth of knowledge, but sheds the nuance and objective sensibility. While it is a good survey of the Post-Enlightenment search for meaning in what is, for many, a life without an orthodox God, he appears to reveal a staunch anti-religious bias (which is the significant flaw of this book). In doing so he undermines any appearance of objectivity and forfeits any claim upon thoughtful consideration of the human condition and what exactly atheism is an alternative to. Early in this book he offers up a reading of Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age' and this reading is itself seriously flawed, claiming that Taylor posits, " a fulfilled life - can be achieved only via religion" (p. 6, a footnote directs us to pages 20 and 44 of 'A Secular Age' where that sentiment can't be found). A fairer reading of Taylor might conclude that Taylor writes that for religious-minded souls the ultimate "fullness" of life is achieved through transcendence and is made possible by their relationship with God, while for non-believers the ultimate "fullness" is achieved entirely within an earthly existence. Contrary to Watson's claim, Taylor does not insist "fullness" is only achievable through religion, but rather that supernatural transcendence, or rising above our corporal lives, is. Watson's attitude toward Taylor is fully revealed by following up his convoluted (and intentionally comic) reading of Taylor with a sarcastic dismissal, "Phew" (p. 6). Watson's dismissal of Taylor reflects his dismissal of all religions, which is made obvious by various comments:- "What are we to make of this state of affairs, in which atheism has the better case " over religion with its "manifest horrors and absurdities" (p. 11). Well, it may be possible to make a good case for atheism, but Watson never makes it (and if I'm not mistaken, "manifest horrors" have been committed by atheists, too) and instead assumes the conclusion is a priori. Any consideration of religion must admit to "horrors" performed in its name, but one would also think of the many benefits mankind has reaped from persons inspired by their religion. In Watson's own 'German Genius' he writes admiringly of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, along with about 2,000 Lutheran pastors, organized an alternative church to the Nazi's state church and then he went on to actively participate in resistance efforts (GG, p. 680). He also provides a short account of Albert Schweitzer's life, where his religion inspired him to become a missionary and conducting his life in such a way that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (GG, p. 681). The list could go on and on from other sources see Adam Hochschild's 'Bury the Chains' about religion's influence upon the abolition movement or see Martin Gilbert's 'The Righteous' for examples of moral behavior by religious persons during the Holocaust (or Peter Grose's 'A Good Place to Hide' for that matter) et cetera, et cetera.- " the absurd, tragic and horrific dimensions of recent religious history" (p. 21). It's fair to assume that Watson is referring to terrorism initiated by radical Islamist terrorists, which is "horrific" but not representative of the vast majority of Muslims who peacefully practice their religion. Can all religious persons be condemned for the acts of a few? One expects more than a Donald Trump view of the world from Watson.- And speaking of the absurd, Watson quotes Dewey, " moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsibility to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things." To which Watson appends an apparently personal declarative sentence, "Doing away with religious groupings helps this" (p. 65). So, apparently, diversity is a legitimate goal, as long as it doesn't include anyone who identifies with an organized religion. Really? This antagonistic attitude toward religion goes on and on. You may ask, "What did you expect from a book titled "The Age of Atheists"?" Well, from Peter Watson I expected more, in fact I expected, in his own words, " an extensive survey of the work of those talented people - artists, novelists" et al, "who have embraced atheism, the death of God, and have sought other ways to live, who have discovered or fashioned other forms of meaning in the world" (p. 22). He has delivered on that intention, but he has wrapped it in a cloak of polemic rhetoric void of any appreciation for the multitude of people who derive "fullness" and meaning in their lives through religion (and who do not commit acts of "horror" in the name of their faith). There is no nuance, no appreciation for the complexity and the dilemmas of modern life. One would think that any full appreciation and consideration of atheism would require a thoughtful consideration of its alternative, not quick dismissal. In weighing religion Watson limits religion to its frailties, and doesn't place any of its benefits on the scales. Watson appears so smug of his point of view that he writes, "The overall intellectual trajectory of the long twentieth century, of modernism and postmodernism, has been to reinforce the argument that there is not - there cannot be - any privileged viewpoint from which to look out upon the world" (p. 535), an ironic comment in that he is privileging his own viewpoint over that of others (because, one suspects, he considers his viewpoint to be so obviously "right" with history). It is Watson who sounds "overbearing" to me (see p. 535 for reference). Returning to Taylor, he writes, "We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on" (SA, p. 11). Taylor concedes that those with a different worldview to his can find "fullness". Watson's apparently closed mind betrays no such good will, and serves to highlight the difference between intelligence and wisdom. Self-righteousness is unpleasant in both religious fundamentalists as well as militant atheists, and human empathy is unlikely to flourish under either of those extremes. Perhaps an ideal to aspire to is to hold a viewpoint (maybe even a faith), without succumbing to self-righteousness, and holding to an orthodoxy without succumbing to intolerance. On those terms Taylor succeeds and Watson is left wanting. If you're an unabashed rooter for Watson's home team, you might assign five stars. If you are looking for more, four stars may be generous. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Searching for Meaning By factoid junkie Comprehensive in scope and ambitious in its

aim, I will use this thoughtful book as much for its rich sources as its argument. Watson overturns all stones, even those I reckoned added little to the discussion, in this compendium overview. Man Searching for Meaning would be as descriptive a title as his, even though it would not indicate the two giant sticks he rubs together throughout: religion and secularism. I enjoyed re-reading about thinkers I know and being introduced to those I didn't or knew only by name. It's as if Watson wrote a long series of wikipedia articles about various philosophers, scientists, artists, and theologians - and then wove the articles into a narrative about the search for meaning. It is a buffet that one cannot sample in one sitting. Prepare to have your appetite sated many times. A condensed version of the arc of his argument would be terrific, even if hard to develop. As I read I could imagine nearly any religious or secular person pausing at certain points and exclaiming, "see there - I am right!" Which is one of the things I appreciate about the book. Watson starts with Nietzsche's exclamatory about the death of god. He ends with proposing god is simply an early, and perhaps best retired, method of finding meaning in life. The absence of god doesn't end the search for meaning (nihilism) but stirs our sense of wonder, thinking, improved investigatory tools, and our shared humanity to continue to improve our search. We gain more than we lose in improving our means of understanding. Searching is as profound as finding. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A fairly good overview By Ronald Fernandez This is a good book. Yet historian Watson spreads himself too thin, so that his som of helpful insights are just insufficient. His attempt at synthesing Heidegger is a case in point, where he falls short of and adequate rendition of his basic tthought. Which is to be expected given the breath of his book . Finally, although praiseworthy I feel he fails to undo Taylor's account of the secular age, again because of lack of depth in his argumentation. Anyway, a good overview and a fairly good read.

A Publishers Weekly Best Book of 2014 From one of Englands most distinguished intellectual historians comes an exhilarating ridethat will stand the test of time as a masterful account of (The Boston Globe) one of the Wests most important intellectual movements: Atheism. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche declared that God is dead and ever since tens of thousands of brilliant, courageous, thoughtful individuals have devoted their creative energies to devising ways to live without God with self-reliance, invention, hope, wit, and enthusiasm. Now, for the first time, their story is revealed. A captivating story of contest, failure, and success, The Age of Atheists sweeps up William James and the pragmatists; Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis; Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, and Albert Camus; the poets of World War One and the novelists of World War Two; scientists, from Albert Einstein to Stephen Hawking; and the rise of the new Atheists Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens. This is a story of courage, of the thousands of individuals who, sometimes at great risk, devoted tremendous creative energies to devising ways to fill a godless world with self-reliance, invention, hope, wit, and enthusiasm. Watson explains how atheism has evolved and reveals that the greatest works of art and literature, of science and philosophy of the last century can be traced to the rise of secularism. From Nietzsche to Daniel Dennett, Watsons stirring intellectual history manages to take the revolutionary ideas and big questions of these great minds and movements and explain them, making the connections and concepts simple without being simplistic. The Age of Atheists is highly readable and immensely wide-ranging For anybody who has wondered about the meaning of life an enthralling and mind-expanding experience (The Washington Post).

From Booklist *Starred * As humanity (limited here to Western humanity) was losing the sense of certainty that came with a belief in God, with Nietzsche famously pronouncing His death, what was to fill that spiritual void? This is the enormous question tackled by English intellectual historian Watson. How have thinkers, artists, and others in a secular age sought to anchor humanity in relation to the universe? Watsons breathtakingly vast coverage ranges chronologically from the immediate post-Nietzschean generation to the present, and culturally across an immense canvas, an encyclopedic whos who in twentieth-century arts and sciences (and more) somehow confronting a spiritual vacuum in a period marked by two world wars, the Holocaust, a multitude of other horrors, and the atomic age. American poet Wallace Stevens thought that in an age when God is dead, the arts in general, and poetry in particular, must take over. What was created were not only lasting works of art but also, in aggregate, an antitheology theology. Watsons theme seems to be that an astonishingly broad spectrum of manifestations of the human spirit, in a human community, ground us in a less-certain world. His style, like many of those he discusses, can be recondite, but Watsons encompassing treatment of a difficult subject, in a world growing no less uncertain, is impressive and, ultimately, reassuring. --Mark Levine "Peter Watsons hindsight, foresight and insight into the role atheists play in creating our cultures makes The Age of Atheists a must read. Readers will gain a deeper appreciation of the rich world in which we live." (Charles de Groot, co-chair of The de Groot Foundation) "Peter Watson's book has made the extraordinary leap of assessing each of the 20th century's important secular philosophic traditions. Along the way, as an ultimate reference, he has also given us the intuitive methods and insights of that century's leading poets, painters, musicians and choreographers. Perhaps no one else at this moment has the background for such an adventure. Whether as a guide to the last century's thinkers or as a reference to the insights of its artists, The Age of Atheists is an indispensable map to locate our present." (William Kistler, poet and essayist) "Watson's encompassing treatment of a difficult subject, in a world growing no less uncertain, is impressive and, ultimately, reassuring." (Booklist

(starred))The beauty of this book is Watson's ability to impose order on a riot of ideas even the casual reader will find much to delight and enlighten as Watson elegantly connects the dots from Nietzsche and William James to Bob Dylan and jazz. (Publishers Weekly)"Highly readable and immensely wide-ranging. Peter Watson has produced what is, in every way, a big book, one that bears reading thoughtfully, with a pencil in hand. For anybody who has wondered about the meaning of life, and that pretty much covers everyone past the age of 12, discovering The Age of Atheists will be an enthralling and mindexpanding experience." (Michael Dirda The Washington Post)"A vividly engaging conspectus of the formative ideas of the past century, The Age of Atheists shows how Nietzsche's diagnosis evoked responses in many areas of cultural life, including some surprising parts of the political spectrum." (The New Statesman)"[A]n exhilarating ride through the cerebra of disparate men who have tried to fashion a Godless yet nonetheless ordered and sustaining worldview. It is a topical book, to be sure, but also one that will stand the test of time as a masterful account of its subject." (The Boston Globe)About the Author Peter Watson is an intellectual historian, journalist, and the author of thirteen books, including Convergence; Ideas: A History; The Age of Atheists; The German Genius; The Medici Conspiracy; and The Great Divide. He has written for The Sunday Times, The New York Times, the Observer, and the Spectator. He lives in London.