

ADDITIONAL PRAISE FOR *ENDURING DIVINE ABSENCE*

“Joseph Minich’s *Enduring Divine Absence* is a marvelous essay that deals with the underappreciated temptation or *psychological* pull of atheism, the *feeling* that atheism is still somehow plausible even for believers who are aware of atheism’s intellectual problems. Minich thoughtfully analyzes this temptation, beginning with accurately and sympathetically explaining what it actually feels like (and I would know). He then gives insightful suggestions on some of its main causes, and ends by helpfully offering practical advice for those who feel it (who are more numerous than most of us realize). Again, Minich clearly understands those who are tempted in this way, gently assuring them that it is an entirely understandable feeling, but without going so far as to make doubt a positive, Promethean virtue that’s necessary for “the journey of faith.” I recommend this book to those who have nagging doubts about God’s existence or have been surprised by the sting of an objection to Christianity. I greatly benefited from it.”

—Mitch Stokes, Senior Fellow of Philosophy, New Saint Andrews College.

DAVENANT ENGAGEMENTS seek to creatively and critically apply the received wisdom of our historic Protestant tradition to modern intellectual and cultural challenges that we face in the twenty-first century.

ENDURING DIVINE ABSENCE

The Challenge of Modern Atheism

BY JOSEPH MINICH

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For Samuel and Sam

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PREFACE

THIS LITTLE book has three origins. First, the content herein was initially delivered as a series of lectures in November of 2016 at Rochester Reformed Presbyterian Church in New York via the invitation of my dear friend, Rev. Patrick Stefan. My wife and I spent a wonderful weekend with his family (and his church's guests) as we pored over this material—followed by fine wine and intimate fellowship. This origin accounts for the conversational tone which survives the modification of the manuscript to be more fitted to the written rather than to the spoken word. In any case, I am profoundly grateful to Patrick for pulling this material out of me, as well as for his continued friendship and support.

Second, and more personally, this material was birthed in my (continued!) attempt to reflect upon, exegete, and cope with my own lifelong struggle with Christian belief—whether birthed in critical reflection or crisis. What is offered here is not in the spirit of recommending or justifying some parody of my individual psychology. Rather, I offer this in the hope that my own intellectual and spiritual path toward a deeper settledness of soul might aid some fellow pilgrim on the

journey to Zion. I hope to expand upon many of these points in my forthcoming (Lord willing) doctoral dissertation in the Humanities at The University of Texas at Dallas.

Third (and finally), the most proximate origin of this volume is the kind solicitation of another dear friend, Dr. Brad Littlejohn, who had done me a great honor by making the publication of this volume possible—and a greater honor still in being excited about it. I am so thankful for Brad’s work, as well as the work of The Davenant Institute more generally—both the urgent and useful material that it produces on behalf of Christ’s kingdom, but (more personally) for giving utterance to a person whose musings might otherwise have never seen the light of day.

As these words are published, I am particularly thankful to the Reformed Irenics group for constant intellectual and spiritual stimulation. Without them, this book would either be non-existent or much inferior. I am also grateful for the years-long friendship of two atheist friends, David Kotler and Merriman Zajac, who have challenged me and shaped my approach to this topic. Finally, without the formatting and editorial help of Dan Kemp, Onsi Kamel, Jonathan Roberts, and Josiah Roberts, this essay would be significantly less readable. I am grateful for their labors.

I dedicate this work to two persons. The first, Dr. Samuel Tullock, mentored and encouraged a young freshman to navigate through his doubts without fear—but rather with simple faith in reality and in the God who grounds it. The second is my son Sam—who has expressed primal philosophical and spiritual doubts since

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he was six. He is now eleven. I hope this volume will bless both of them. If these musings, by God's grace, aid any soul in finding a greater orientation in the gravity of our great God, I will have more than all the reward I could wish for.

I:
INTRODUCTORY REFLECTIONS

THIS MODEST essay attempts to address the problem of the *temptation* of atheism. This is to be distinguished from several other ways of approaching the question of atheism as a theist generally or as a Christian specifically. My intent here is not, as such, to argue for the existence of God or to refute atheism. More importantly, my main inquiry is not just a question about or an analysis of *atheists*. I am most immediately interested in why those who are *not* atheists can still nevertheless understand why it is that atheism might be plausible to someone. Let us clarify this. There are plenty of persons who are persuaded for all sorts of rational reasons that God exists or that atheism is not just wrong, but deeply and philosophically incoherent. I count myself among their number. And yet these same persons might confess to you that the atheist vision of an apathetic universe, of a cosmos which reduces to impersonal forces, (etc.) nevertheless retains some psychological pull and continues to resurface as an intellectual item which “must be dealt with” throughout their lives. If you do not recognize yourself in this sort of experience, then this essay will possibly be less interesting for you—something

like a museum exhibit of interesting (or at least pitiable) people. For the rest of us poor souls, I'd like to move even more narrowly within the larger question of atheistic plausibility, and do so initially by telling a story—a tempting vice which I promise not to overly indulge.

I could tell a lot of stories which highlight how this issue has come home for me personally, but I think one in particular exposes my own (and I suspect our) vulnerability. I worked in Rockville, Maryland at the time, and I was driving home listening to NPR (because, of course, that's supposed to make you a smart person). In any case, the radio show I found myself listening to highlighted a story about an “agnostic” or “atheist” Jr. High camp—an apparent twenty-first century parody of our more beloved Bible camps. As this story unfolded, an NPR journalist interviewed one of the camp's attendees, a bright-sounding young lady of 12 or 13 years. After a little bit of back and forth with the interviewer, this young woman was afforded the opportunity to present one of her skeptical missiles and it went something like this (I'm paraphrasing, mind you):

You know, God could totally get rid of all atheism if He'd just show up. I mean, think of it. How hard would it be for the Almighty to peel back the clouds every day at 3:00 PM for 'God time' and say, 'Hey, guys. Here I am. See ya.' If he did that? No atheism. So why doesn't he if we're supposed to believe in Him?

It is perhaps unadvisable, wanting to seem intelligent to my readers, to admit that the juvenile musings of a 12-

year-old girl at agnostic camp actually made me feel a bit dumb—like Moses turning his staff into a serpent and then being at least slightly shown up by Pharaoh’s wizards. But advisability be damned. I was hit—a seminary student who did nothing but think about religion and atheism schooled by a 12-year-old at atheist camp on the radio.

Of course, the story didn’t end there. My world didn’t come “colliding down.” I had all the typical intellectual and not-so-intellectual reactions (ranging from reasons why I knew God existed to more self-assuring reactions that ‘of course’ such reasoning was juvenile). But the point of this story is not to dwell upon my own psychology. It is rather to highlight where I suspect a lot of us are at. I suspect that this little dart hits a lot of us in the gut, and what I want to explore in this little piece is *why* that is. Specifically, and we could explore the topic in many ways, but specifically, why does divine absence bother us precisely in relationship to *this* question (of God’s existence)? Why does the fact that God does not show up in a certain concrete manner have any relevance for the question of His existence? That we don’t see Him when we pray, that He often seems distant, that sometimes our prayers bounce off the ceiling, and especially for suffering people, that sometimes we can beg for Him to just “show Himself” to us, and He doesn’t—all of this causes us to *feel* or at least be tempted to feel that maybe His non-existence is the most “natural” inference. Sometimes the universe, our experiences—let’s get concrete—our marriages, our relationships, (etc.) feel as though they are lived out in the face of a deafening divine silence, and *therefore* a divine vacuum—all reduced to an indifferent cosmos (deaf to our prayers, joys, and pains). I say “sometimes.” This could all,

of course, be qualified. But my goal here is to acknowledge and (like the Psalmist) give utterance to those moments when it is *barely* qualified, those moments where belief even in the basic notion that God *is* at all feels difficult—and feels difficult for precisely these reasons.

I will make one final preliminary comment, and then give a broad outline of the material I plan to cover. That final preliminary comment is this: We need to recognize the distinctively historical character of the problem as I have stated it. Persons have always struggled with divine absence in various forms, and there is a significant degree of continuity between the Psalmist's "Where are you, God?" and our own struggles with atheism. But there is also a significant difference. To wit, neither the Psalmist, the Ancient Near Eastern pagan, medieval Catholic, nor the ancient starving Chinese peasant thought that their unanswered cries to the silent sky had any relevance to the question of whether God exists or not. That God existed was an obvious truth written into the fabric of basic phenomenological and social experience. Charles Taylor helps us to understand the significance of the modern condition in his magisterial *A Secular Age*.¹ Taylor argues that the Middle Ages, for instance, represent a moment in which disbelief in God was simply not plausible. It is not that one could not ask the question of whether God existed or not *technically*, as Thomas Aquinas does in his *Summa Theologica*. But it is that no-one's belief in God was suspended atop understanding Thomas' arguments. Even if his arguments were all refuted, it was still "obvious" (in some very relevant sense) that God existed. What has

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

changed now is not, Taylor argues, that we can no longer believe in God. We can. We can find reasons for God rationally compelling. But *what it is like* to believe, or the *experience* of believing, is the experience of taking one option among many in respect of the God question. Not believing in God is plausible (i.e. has a pull), or is a “living option” in the taxonomy of William James—even if we reject that option.² This is profoundly important for our analysis. To live in a world in which belief is felt to be one living option among many is simply to live in a world in which an alternative belief is very possibly (at least psychologically) *plausible* to us, or somehow faintly understandable to us, in a way that it simply was not to many of our ancestors.

For our purposes, I will leave aside the question of whether or not there are precedents for the distinctive character of modern atheism in ancient Western philosophy or in other traditions. I would argue that most of the items so-claimed as precedent were front-loaded with metaphysical speculation that most modern atheists in the West would consider, on the face of it, quasi-religious, but this does not necessarily matter for my analysis. We can at least agree that this has not been a living option in recent memory in the West—and that it now is.³

² I borrow this phrase from James’ essay, “The Will to Believe,” originally published in 1896 and preserved in many anthologies of his writing. For James, a “living option” is an option that seems open and vibrant to persons. That is, it is available to them in a way that is not just theoretical, into which category we might put our technical ability to believe in the existence of Thor.

³ On the rise of unbelief in the modern West, see Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), and James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

For all intents and purposes, our problematic is a modern one. To wit, how is it possible that we can both (a) think we have compelling reasons to believe in God, and (b) even find atheism incoherent or obviously false in many ways, and yet (c) still *feel* it to be a living option? Said a little differently, why does it sometimes feel like it takes great *effort* to believe things about reality that are supposed to be obvious—as though we’re holding onto it by an act of will rather than by a passive sense of its obviousness (the way it does not take a great act of will, for instance, to believe that you are reading this essay right now)? And why is the simple fact of divine absence even relevant to such a question—rather than a triviality which is related to other questions (theodicy, personal comfort)? How does it have any relevance for questions concerning God’s being at all?

I aim to get at these questions in three steps. First (in chapter 1), I want to think more carefully about the simple *fact* of this problem, as well as to give a sampling of its inflection from a variety of sources. I would also like to entertain several interpretations of the phenomenon and give reasons why I think they are inadequate. I will then (in chapter 2) explore what is, in my judgment, a more proper historical explanation for and philosophical response to this conundrum. As stated above, my intention is not necessarily apologetical in this essay, but I will find it useful to clarify why someone might find claims for God’s existence to be rationally persuasive and yet juxtapose the rational acceptance of philosophical arguments with the reality that God’s existence has often seemed obvious without understanding them. What is more, it is often *now* not felt to be obvious even *with* them. The effect of this analysis, I would argue, will be deflationary for the atheist

option. By this, I mean that this argument will, I hope, help us to understand both why atheism might feel plausible to us, and why its plausibility might have little to do with its being warranted or true. Finally (in chapter 3), I will ask what a particularly Christian analysis of our situation might be. What should we do now? Should we seek to move back to a situation where this is not a problem at all? Or are there resources within the Christian tradition for offering an alternative response? Indeed, from a Christian perspective, is the current pistic situation more an opportunity than a problem? I will argue that indeed, it is. But all this for later. For now, let's attempt to get inside the problem itself a little more holistically.

II: MODERNITY AND DIVINE ABSENCE

IN THIS chapter, I would like to give a smattering of evidence that divine absence, the simple fact that God's being and activity are not as immediately obvious as the fact that you are reading this right now, is perceived by many moderns to be a problem. And because of this, belief is often portrayed as a matter of great intellectual and spiritual effort, whereas unbelief is tacitly felt to be the default intellectual position once we, to bastardize a Psalm, "cease striving and know that there is no God."

THE BASIC PHENOMENON

A few general observations are in order. In the last century, there have been many books in the philosophical community on themes related to the meaning of "presence" (often the presence of the transcendental) which have an almost sermonic flavor. George Steiner's *Real Presences* is perhaps a key text—reflecting a much

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