
IN REVIEW

Why Athens Executed Socrates *A Manual for Creating Atheists*

by Peter Boghossian

reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

Peter Boghossian, a philosophy professor at Portland State University, has penned a book entitled *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (Pitchstone, 2013). The book has been well-received in secular humanist circles; less so in theist circles. Boghossian's aim is to pick up where the "Four Horsemen" of New Atheism – Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris – leave off. Rather than try to win over those who are not committed to a nontheist approach, Boghossian seeks to provide tools nontheists can use to engage the average "theist on the street," in hopes that the foundation of that person's theism will be shaken and eventually crumble. *A Manual for Creating Atheists* is, then, a book of nontheist apologetics – arguments made to defend one's beliefs and to convince others of those beliefs.

Boghossian starts by rooting the apologist's method in a particular definition of *faith*: pretending, in the absence of competent evidence, to know something one does not know. He bases this definition, in large part, on an interpretation of Hebrews 11:1, which states that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." ("Conviction" is sometimes translated as "evidence.").

Boghossian aims to turn nontheists into "Street Epistemologists." An epistemologist studies the philosophical nature of knowledge. Boghossian's Street Epistemologist inquires into how people know what they think they know. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is portrayed as an inveterate asker of questions who

tried to lay bare how Athenians claimed to know their world and what actions were right. Socrates revealed how ungrounded the beliefs of his contemporaries were, and Boghossian wants to allow nontheists to reveal similar flaws in the beliefs of theists.

Boghossian suggests that the Street Epistemologist not debate facts. When presented with evidence that contradicts a belief, the person on the other side of a debate may shut out contrary evidence and disregard the merits of opposing views. The discussion ends in a stalemate. Instead, Boghossian suggests his Street Epistemologists attack *how* a theist claims to know a belief is true. This is not a process of debate or pointing out contradictions – at least, not at first. Instead, the Street Epistemologist should remain open, acknowledge when she does not know something, and be gently persistent in asking questions to elicit how and why someone has faith. The goal of this process is for the Street Epistemologist to help a theist reflect upon the shaken foundations of faith and then turn toward nontheist identification and community. But Boghossian is quick to warn that the Street Epistemologist should not expect success in the form of a "conversion," and should not expect any gratitude.

The book includes a fairly thorough and readable catalog of the types of arguments

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theists advance in support of faith, along with rhetorical moves the Street Epistemologist can make to lay bare each argument's epistemic problems. None of this tries to prove a point – say, that there is no God. Instead, the purpose is to demonstrate the lack of real evidence supporting the theist's beliefs.

The goal, then, is less creating atheists than helping theists find more rational, evidence-based ways of understanding the world. By laying bare the faulty assumptions of theism, Boghossian wants theists to reach nontheist conclusions on their own. (I leave it to the reader to decide whether this gives the lie to the title of the book.)

Judging from reactions in theist circles – and especially in evangelical Christian circles – I worry about the book's real usefulness. Three particular weaknesses stand out. First, Boghossian seems unable to teach (or indeed even employ) the gentleness he preaches. Second, though Boghossian insists his approach can work with theists of any sort, it would seem to work best on a less-educated mainline or evangelical Christian. Wrapped up in this is a third problem Boghossian likely did not anticipate: a relative lack of usefulness of his method in addressing nonhumanist American Jews.

First, as to gentleness. Boghossian says the Street Epistemologist should be genuinely curious and nonconfrontational, make ample use of pregnant pauses to allow an interlocutor to “get there” on her or his own, and lend support to those whose foundations she has shaken. But his sample dialogues lean toward the pugnacious and condescending. He readily pushes beyond “I'm curious – how do you know?” into “How can you believe that!” Evangelical Christian reviewers have largely dismissed Boghossian's approach as more New Atheist hostility. And one has to concede that

the reviewers have a point. It is, after all, precisely because Socrates was so annoying that the Athenian leadership wanted him dead.

Second, because Boghossian's techniques are centered on the epistemology of faith, they seem most keenly attuned to Christians, who form the greatest pool of the religiously faithful in the United States. That approach makes a great deal of sense, of course, given demography. His approach is particularly geared to Christian claims about the literal truth of biblical texts, as he ably notes that Christians will disclaim the literal truth of a text one moment, only to attempt to salvage that text in the next moment. Yet this type of argument is likely to be most effective only with less-educated evangelical Christians. Better-educated evangelicals will have ready rejoinders to Boghossian's approach to scriptural problems, and liberal Christians (not unlike many non-Orthodox Jews) aren't beholden to a single, consistent approach to scriptural interpretation in any event.

That takes us to the third problem, the lack of utility of Boghossian's method in dealing with liberal American Jews. The language of faith and the acceptance of biblical literalism are often lacking in the corners of the Jewish world in which Humanistic Jews dwell in the United States. What becomes of Boghossian's method when so many Jews don't find atheist Judaism all that remarkable? Even liberal Jews who believe in *some* kind of a god don't often hold to the traditional, god-of-history model. Much of our dispute with other Jews is more about practice than about faith, and that seems less prone to the kind of prodding the Street Epistemologist is trained to do.

Will *A Manual for Creating Atheists* create many atheists? I don't think so. Does it give humanists a toolkit to work with? Yes, if we don't let Boghossian's attitude bleed into the tools.

Briefly Speaking *continued from page 2*

“to reject calls to weaken the executive order by providing a special exemption for religiously affiliated contractors” and asked that he rescind an amendment to a previous executive order, which exempted religious organizations that contract with the government from the prohibition against employment discrimination on the basis of religion. Unfortunately, the new executive order, as issued, while expanding antidiscrimination protections long applied to “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” to LGBT workers, left intact a 2002 executive order permitting religious groups to consult their beliefs when hiring and firing for government contracts.

Such religious exemptions, based largely on a broad interpretation of RFRA (the Religious Freedom Restoration Act), permit religious organizations and, since the Hobby Lobby decision, for-profit companies to impose their religious beliefs on employees. SHJ will continue to work, in coalition with like-minded organizations, to eliminate such government-supported exemptions permitting the imposition of one set of religious beliefs on individuals who hold other beliefs.

SHJ Joins Twitter Protest of Hobby Lobby Decision

On August 20, the Society for Humanistic Judaism joined secular and religious organizations in a social media protest aiming to focus attention on restoring

women’s and workers’ religious freedom and reproductive rights following the June 30 Supreme Court ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*. The decision permits private corporations to impose their religious beliefs on employees and deny them access to key health benefits, including birth control, provided by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This decision could ultimately lead employers to deny other employee protections, such as health coverage for vaccines, blood transfusions, or HIV treatment.

The goal of the social media campaign was to raise consciousness as to the need to counteract Hobby Lobby by presenting the differing perspectives of those supporting freedom of religion and equal access to healthcare for women. Passage of the *Protect Women’s Health from Corporate Interference Act* (S 2578/HR 5051), also called the “Not My Boss’s Business” act, would be a first step toward undoing the damage done by the Hobby Lobby decision. The bill not only bans employers from refusing to provide any health coverage – including contraceptive coverage – guaranteed to their employees and dependents under federal law, but also states that no federal law, including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, permits employers to refuse to comply with the ACA requirements.

On August 20, #FixHobbyLobby messages reached more than 1,230,000 Twitter accounts. More than twenty members of Congress participated in this tweet storm – no small feat given that Congress was in recess.

Letters to the Editors

To the Editors:

I recently received my green and white covered *Humanistic Judaism* journal (Winter/Spring 2014). In it there is a fascinating description of “The Pew Study: What Did It Find?” (page 28). For example, “Six in ten Jews in the United States see being Jewish as mainly a matter of culture or ancestry.” The issue also contains book reviews, opinion pieces, poetry, non-fiction, a summary of recent amicus briefs the Society for Humanistic Judaism filed, and contact

information for other Humanistic Jewish congregations, communities, and *havurot*. Enjoy!

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