John R. Shook. *Systematic Atheology: Atheism's Reasoning with Theology*. Routledge 2018. 322 pp. $128.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138079984); $39.96 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367667320).

Glancing at its intriguing title, prospective readers of this book may wonder what is contained within it. 'Systematic Theology' is a well-established academic discipline, still recognized at least among some in educated circles today. But the term 'atheology' hardly denotes a familiar domain of study, even less so when modified by the word 'systematic,' despite the fact that the former dates to the seventeenth century (57-8). Early in the preface, the author does provide the rather oblique statement that 'atheology is concerned with gods and whether any god is real enough to make a difference to anything else' (vii). That at least indicates a path forward. But then, what is understood by the term 'god'? Parenthetically, it is worth mentioning at the outset that the author uses 'god' in the lower case when no specific deity is in view, such as, for example, the Christian God (viii). But the question remains. Nowhere within the first few pages does one find even a provisional definition of 'god'.

Perhaps this is deliberate. From Shook's perspective, detailed in the opening chapter 'The Overture' (1-8), atheism's stance against theology concerning the existence of god derives its cogency from demonstrating theology's violation of one or more of 'three logical rules', which include 'disagreement, contradiction, and opposition.' It is significant for the author that disputes over the nature and character of the divine have always existed within and between religions. But if the existence of god is self-evident, then presumably there should be neither disagreements within a religion, nor rivalries between them.

Shook asks whether theology fares any better when it turns from defending the claims of particular religious traditions to appealing to 'independent grounds' on which the believer and unbeliever alike may see evidence for the case that god exists. Theology encounters problems there too. First, among theologians there is no agreement on just how these grounds support the case. Second, the atheist can make a case just as convincing that no connection exists. He may say, for example, that there is just not enough order in the world to attribute it to a god. And in any case what point is there in invoking 'god' as an explanation for phenomena when nature 'as it is' suffices? And for theologians to retreat behind all phenomena and postulate god as their ultimate ground is to indulge in obscurantism. In this case 'atheology can only assume that theology would be wiser to focus on its own capacity for gaining reasonable support for independent grounds' (8).

True to its meaning, the 'Overture' gives the reader a foretaste of what is to come in subsequent chapters. Now Shook is in a position to give a more precise definition to the words of which the title is composed: 'Atheology is the exploration and justification of atheism' (9). More explicitly, it is the task of atheology to (1) clarify atheistic beliefs; (2) analyze and criticize theological views that defend the conviction that god exists; and (3) marshal arguments for the atheist stance that it is 'unreasonable for anyone to think that a god is real' (9). The task of 'systematic' atheology, then, is to 'organize the…challenges to theism,' and then to conclude on the basis of their cogency that entertaining belief in gods has nothing to do with being 'a reasonable

and well-informed person, a moral member of society, and a responsible citizen' (9).

To each of these attributes of someone who refuses to entertain belief in gods there correspond four methods that systematic atheology has at its disposal. First, it may develop its positions by appeal to the rules of reason. Second, it may construct its proposals with the support of the findings of contemporary science. Third, it can demonstrate that theistic belief poses a threat to sound morality. Fourth, it can show how theistic belief disrupts stable political arrangements and thereby threatens justice and order.

The execution of these methods in turn produces four distinct branches of atheology, which Shook identifies as rationalist, scientific, moral, and civil, respectively. Each of these has its counterpart in revealed, natural, moral and civil theology. To each of these branches, Shook devotes a separate chapter (chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 resp.). The practitioner may presumably deploy any one of them in the service of what Shook calls 'pedagogical' and 'practical' aims. The first concerns itself with instructing children and young adults in secular and scientific worldviews from which religion has been expurgated. The second is designed for adults who want to understand their secularity, find answers to life's big questions without recourse to religion, and to defend their stance against religious opponents. For 'philosophical' aims, however, the practitioner will marshal all four of them in the interest of developing 'sophisticated' arguments to show how 'nothing godly is to be taken as real' (55). The purpose of systematic atheology is to fortify atheism's defenders, as well as to elevate the intellectual character and the philosophical sophistication of future debates (37).

In this book, Shook has carried out a formidable undertaking. Noteworthy for this reviewer are the extensive and well-annotated historical chapters in which the author demonstrates convincingly that 'atheology' has a long and distinguished intellectual legacy (67-133). These chapters serve effectively as a foundation on which Shook constructs his own atheology. Readers who assumed that atheism, as a principled stance, is a product of Enlightenment modernity, when humankind emancipated itself from its self-imposed tutelage to received dogma to the use of its own reason, to paraphrase Kant (1724-1804), will be intrigued to learn that atheism predates the Enlightenment by more than two millennia. Atheism is attested in the ancient world from Egypt and Persia to India and China. In the classical Greco-Roman era, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Epicurus (341-271 BCE), Cicero (106-43 BCE), and Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE), among others, mapped a clear course for the emergence of the naturalistic atheologies of the Renaissance era, so that by already the late 1500s, educated Europeans could read about people who did not believe in any god and learn about worldviews in which there is no place for gods.

But even as one must commend Shook for the careful research that undergirds these historical chapters, one must regret that he did not take the same pains with conceptions of deity found in the world's religions. Shook rather dismissively makes the claim that conceptions of deity vary so widely across them, that it is impossible to speak of a consensus. For Shook the putative differences in conceptions among the religions concerning deity, the notions of an afterlife, and moral standards for their adherents, constitute a strong case for atheism, as we have already mentioned. But nowhere does he provide evidence that the differences between these conceptions

are so vast that the atheist is justified in drawing the conclusion that the differences prove or suggest that there can be no self-consistent deity to which the various conceptions point. For the sake of clarity here, it would have been helpful if Shook had provided a taxonomy by which to distinguish between religious phenomena and religions. To be sure, religious phenomena are multifarious. But whether or not any or all of these phenomena are characteristic of each of the world's religions is an assumption that must be tested and confirmed by research into the particular religion at issue. Space must be allowed to let the particular religions give their own account of themselves. This is the approach adopted in interfaith dialogue, in which it is as common for co-religionists to stress the similarities among the world's major religions as their differences. Indeed, at least since the promulgation by the Roman Catholic Church of its decree on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*) at the Second Vatican Council (1965), theologians and students of comparative religions have been sensitive to these similarities.

This flaw notwithstanding, Shook provides in this book a rigorously argued 'systematic atheology' that will repay careful study. It will especially be of interest to philosophers of religion, students of intellectual history, and apologists for the world's major religions who wish to allow space for atheists to give their own account of themselves.

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