Colin Howson, *Objecting to God*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 220 pp.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first part, comprising the opening two chapters, is a diatribe against religion, religious institutions, individual faith, and the concept of God. The following five chapters critically discuss some of the traditional arguments for God's existence, argue for his non-existence, mostly by showing that the concept of God is useless for sciences, culture, ethics and aesthetics.

The first part is reminiscent of Richard Dawkins in both content and style. There is a lot of anger, resentment and blindness to any positive role religion might have played in human evolution and civilization. To Howson's mind, religions are totalitarian, anti-individualistic systems of ideas in which human beings unquestioningly, without a trace of doubt, slavishly believe. This view is supported by many well-known examples of religious fundamentalism. Of course, Islamic terrorism is most prominent, without ever suggesting that a great majority of sunni and shia leaders openly and repeatedly distance themselves from such activities, while the leading Muslim intellectuals publicly voice their accusations of the activities of a handful of extremists like Bin Laden. On page 9, Howson writes: "The same uncompromising message is conveyed on the numerous jihadist websites urging believers everywhere to enlist in the war against the enemies of Allah, with the Koran and hadiths cited in support". Howson is right that Islamic fundamentalists call for Holy war, but he makes no difference between the Greater Jihad and the Lesser Jihad. The latter is the war against infidels, but the Koran gives it a subordinate role in relation to former, the internal war of the soul against her bad affections. Distorted religious views and practices can hardly serve as a model for a balanced critique of religion.

Howson's attitude to Christianity is no less severe. Predictably, there are repeated references to the cases of paedophilia in the Catholic priesthood and the shady way the Church dealt with these cases. No doubt these are heinous actions and attempts to cover them up are no less wicked. But again, these are aberrations, not norms. A large number of priests are normal human beings, not bloodthirsty child molesters. Missionaries in the Third world countries, Theresian sisters, scholastic philosophers and mystics of the present and past give a different picture of Christianity, much richer and kinder than the one Howson is determined to paint.

"God will tolerate no disobedience or any challenge to, or even doubt about, his authority," Howson writes on p. 6. However, what about Au-

gustine's *ego sum dubitans*? Or mystics such as St. Theresa of Avila who permanently reviewed her emotions and faith in God? Or, more recently, Mother Theresa, who openly admitted that she was going to lose her faith in God? There is a passage in the *Talmud*, for instance, in which God expresses satisfaction with the rabbis who defeated Him in discussion, indicating that God wants people to question their views.

One of Howson's main arguments against Abrahamic religions is their attitude towards women. He cites at length cases of abuse of women under Shari'ah law and of their degradation in the Bible, but conveniently passes over the crucial role of women in these religions. Think of the role of woman in the Jewish Shabbat, of Jesus' commitment to women (Mary Magdalene was the first person who saw resurrected Jesus), of the roles of Aisha and Khadijah, Mohammed's wives, and of Fatima, Rashidun Ali's wife, in Islam. It is ironic that in place of religious morality, Howson invokes the Greek eudaimonistic ethics, forgetting that its proponents hardly had a more refined attitude toward women, slaves and barbarians.

In the second chapter, Howson criticizes Gould's notion of "non-overlapping magisteria". He finds it a disingenuous excuse for religion. "True, we are witnessing an evolving religion, stressing increasingly its sacramental and numinous aspects and moving further away from what might be even remotely testable claims about reality," claims Howson (40), but one wonders if that is entirely fair. Many religious people flee from rational explication of their faith, but that does not make faith untenable or unfounded. Many authors writing on science and religion plausibly argue in favour of compatibility of religious truth and scientific theories. Insisting that a majority of believers take the creation story literally is just plain wrong. Bible has been read at different levels – literal, anagogic, mystic, allegoric, numeric and so on – and one wonders why Howson does not take that into account.

The second part of the book is different and philosophically more interesting. At the beginning of the third chapter, Howson provides a discussion of Pascal's wager. First, he shows that Pascal's pragmatic argument fails because arbitrary religious beliefs cannot serve to make mathematical inferences concerning future benefits. Second, utility theories in modern probability mathematics are limited to a finite value in order to avoid inconsistency. The only complaint is that Howson fails to mention a disturbing consequence of Pascal's argument, namely that atheists, even if they live virtuously and consistently perform good deeds, would be doomed to eternal torment.

Next on Howson's agenda is debunking theistic uses of Bayes's Theorem. As an introduction, Howson refers to the Prosecutor's Fallacy: if the

truth of a hypothesis would make some phenomenon extremely unlikely to be observed, then the observation of that phenomenon makes the hypothesis correspondingly unlikely to be true. In other words, if the occurrence of event E is assigned a very small probability by hypothesis H, then the occurrence of E implies a correspondingly small probability of H. So if H assigns to event E a much smaller probability than H', then the probability of H, given the occurrence of E, must be correspondingly smaller than that of H'. What Howson says is that there are four logical rules that are used to justify the preceding statements: (1) logically equivalent propositions have the same probability; (2) the probability of a necessary truth is 1 and the probability of a necessary falsehood is 0; (3) if A and B are two propositions which cannot both be true, then the probability that either A is true or B is true is the sum of their individual probabilities; (4) the logical equation $B\cdot(B\rightarrow A)\equiv A\cdot B$.

If we denote the probability of hypothesis (H) given evidence (E) as Prob (H │ E) (instead of (E→H)) and the probability of evidence (E) given hypothesis (H) as Prob (E │ H) (in place of (H→E)), then the inserting of the rule of contraposition leads to the identity equation Prob (E │ H)≡Prob (H │ E). Rule (4) gives us the equation Prob (H·E)≡Prob (E)·Prob (H │ E) and Prob (E·H)≡Prob (E │ H)· Prob (H). Since the two equations are equivalent, it implies the first crucial equation: Prob (H │ E)≡Prob(H)·[Prob(E │ H)/ Prob (E)]. It is the Bayes's Theorem equation and it can be expressed as follows: if a hypothesis makes the evidence more likely than it would otherwise have been, then the evidence increases the probability of the hypotheses. The probabilities Prob (E or H) are prior probabilities (probabilities in the light of implicit evidence) and the probabilities Prob (E │ H or H │ E) are posterior probabilities (probabilities in the light of explicit evidence). If we insert the probability equation of "getting a bet" which is odd=p/(1-p) (odd=chance for getting a bet; "p" and "(1–p)" are the probabilities of truth of two opposing propositions), then, when we replace the symbols (let "p" be the probability H in the light of E and "(1–p)" the probability (–H) in the light of E), we have the posterior odd, odd≡Prob (H │ E)/ Prob (–H │ E). When we insert Bayes's equation, it is implied that post odd≡Prob [(H)/Prob (–H)]·{[Prob (E │ H)/Prob (E)]/[Prob (E │ –H)/ Prob (E)]}. The first member of the product is the prior odd, and since Prob (E) truncates, the second part of the product is Bayes's factor λ. Then the given equation is post odd≡ λ·pr odd, and this equation is often called the *odds form of Bayes's theorem*.

With the simple switch of H with H' in the equation, we have the equation Prob (H │ E)/Prob (H' │ E)≡[Prob (E │ H)·Prob (H)]/[Prob (E │ H')·Prob(H')]. The crux of Howson's argument is that theists identify the probability Prob (H │ E) and Prob (E │ H). Let us suppose that H is the

hypothesis for design creation and H' is the hypothesis for materialism. The value probability of E (for instance the evidence of molecular replicators) in the light of the design hypothesis is equal to the value probability of the design hypothesis in the light of the evidence of molecular replicators. This implies, then, that the value probability of the evidence of replicators in the light of materialistic hypothesis is equal to, etc. Furthermore, if the value probability Prob (E | H) is more likely than Prob (E | H'), then the value probability Prob (H | E) is also more likely than Prob (H' | E). Unfortunately for theists and believers, this case is possible only when the values of Prob (E | H) and Prob (H | E) are equal to 0. Very simple arithmetic calculus shows that on the right side of the equation we can have Prob (E | H)>Prob (E | H'), but this fact doesn't imply Prob (H | E)>Prob (H' | E). The value of posterior probabilities depends on the value of prior probabilities Prob (H) and Prob (H'). So, in the end, socially and culturally embedded degree of belief in the inviolability of God's existence blurs even those aspects of human cognition that are based on purely analytical views.

After showing that theists are not able to prove the existence of God by using mathematical theories and calculations of probability, Howson reflects negatively on the classical arguments for God's existence. In the fourth, and partly in the fifth chapter, he deals with the cosmological argument, and he chooses the *kalam* argument. Very briefly, the argument is that whatever has a beginning in time, it must be caused; the universe has a beginning in time, therefore it is caused; and, of course, it is caused by God. Surely, contemporary mathematical theories refute the *kalam's* premises and the conclusion, showing that it is possible to go to infinity of causes and effects. Also, there are views in quantum cosmology that the universe has no beginning and hence needs no cause. As concerns mathematics, there are no objections. As for physics, quantum cosmology theories are notoriously difficult to verify. Howson offers similar objections regarding the Principle of sufficient reason in the fifth chapter, given that the series of contingent beings and sufficient reasons for their existence can go (as above theories claim) to infinity.

In the fourth chapter, Howson especially attacks the fine-tuning theory, which is actually a critique of all teleological arguments and arguments from design. He doesn't care to distinguish various forms of such arguments from the past and present, though he does argue that not even the weak anthropic principle, appealed to by his fellow atheists, is necessary for a refutation of fine-tuning arguments for God's existence. Of course, this is supposed to strengthen the atheist position. One interesting point that Howson makes concerns the invariance and complexity of the initial conditions. Namely, using the instance of a bowl of water, Howson shows why the perfect alignment of the conditions of the universe has such a

small probability. Let us suppose that a bowl of water has temperature in the interval between 10 and 90 degrees centigrade. The probability that the water has temperature lower than 50 degrees, is 50%. However, let us suppose that the same object is in the interval between 1/90 and 1/10 degrees; then the probability that the water has temperature above 1/50 degrees is 90%. From this clear example, Howson persuades the reader that, because of the extreme complexity and the many conditions that make our universe, all tuned components have a very low probability of being such as they are, but they are such due solely to the complexity of the universe.

At the end of the fifth chapter, Howson analyses the ontological argument as proposed by Anselm and Descartes. He doesn't mention any other contemporary formulation other than Plantinga's. If he states counterarguments, he refers to Kant or to the intuition that nothing comes out of nothing. In attacking Plantinga's formulation of the ontological argument, Howson refers to Kant's rejection of existence as a predicate, but ignores the distinction between existence and necessary existence. Besides, he thinks that, due to the incompatibility of God's attributes, the concept of God becomes a contradiction like a round triangle.

In the two chapters before last, Howson tries to demonstrate uselessness of God in the areas of ethics, philosophy of mind, mathematics and aesthetics. In ethics, as in science, God is not needed to complement the unknowns in these areas: "To claim therefore, as some do, that some observable phenomenon or other is intrinsically or in principle inexplicable by scientific means seems even less likely to be a profitable undertaking" (136).

Howson indicates three points of morality that need clarification in order to avoid the introduction of the hypothesis of God. First, the fact of altruism. For Howson, evolutionary theories of kin, reciprocal and indirect altruism resolve this problem beyond all doubt. Second, the origins of the prohibitions and restrictive norms. Howson refers here to Hume's utilitarian ethics and its strategy of moral equilibrium (Farmer's dilemma, Grim Trigger, Stag Hunt). For Hume, someone does something for other not out of decency and love, but because he expects some benefit, that is, he wishes that the other reciprocates. Each one of them makes a promise to behave in this way and the failure to keep the promise is sanctioned. Thus, according to Hume's theory, the man is one who creates social values and moral duties exclusively on the basis of human interaction, and restrictive measures are there to secure these values and duties. So the second problematic point is circumvented with the help of Hume's theory. The third and the most embarrassing questions the formation of higher-order moral principles of humanity. This is also dealt with Hume's assistance. Since human beings have compassion for others, recognizing the evil that peo-

ple do to each other awakens empathy for the injured; the observer identifies himself with the sufferer and in some way feels his pain. This creates a sense of moral recognition of others as moral individuals equal to us.

Having shown that God is not needed in ethics, Howson proceeds to argue that God is not needed to explain consciousness either, and for that purpose he relies on functionalist theories and advocates strong AI. Similarly, the aesthetics and artistic sense are reduced to neurophysiological processes. Howson uses data obtained from the neuroscience research which showed that there are centres in the brain that tend to harmony, strive to proportionality, etc. One wonders whether this can be a complete explanation of Bach's musical creations, for instance, even if one agrees that God need not enter the correct explanation.

The final, eighth chapter brings Patrick Grim's argument for logical impossibility of God's omniscience. As Grim points out, if the proposition "1) God doesn't believe that 1) is true" is true, then God doesn't believe it, and since God is omniscient, 1) is false. Hence 1) is false. Hence God believes that 1) is true, and since he is omniscient, 1) must therefore be true. Contradiction. Howson could also have mentioned the lack of God's knowledge of spatiotemporal entities, given that God is unextended and eternal, and so on.

This book is unlikely to change anyone's mind. Atheists will find themes familiar from Dawkins, Stenger and Krauss, with some extra philosophical sophistication and familiarity with the history of philosophy, whereas theists will find the book disappointingly one-sided, despite its evident sophistication and erudition at places. Pantheists, by contrast, will find nothing of interest in this book.

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