

Liam Jerrold Fraser, *Atheism, Fundamentalism and the Protestant Reformation: Uncovering their Secret Sympathy*

(Cambridge: CUP, 2018), pp. x + 269. £75.00.

Andrew Bowyer

Magdalen College, Oxford University, Oxford (andrew.bowyer@magd.ox.ac.uk)

Fraser constructs an ambitious historical genealogy that places particular features of Protestant hermeneutics at the centre of a lively narrative. He finds evidence to vindicate a widely expressed intuition, namely that proponents of ‘new atheism’ and fundamentalist Protestantism are opposed not only because of their disagreement as to the possibility of God’s existence, but also due to a shared sympathy. When it comes to reading the Bible, they embrace a common hermeneutic and a related conviction as to the way divine activity necessarily disrupts natural causation. Fraser’s conviction is that tracing back to the Reformation roots of this hermeneutical development is essential if contemporary Protestant theologians are to avoid missteps of the past. Indeed, his overall aim is to establish a foundation upon which others are invited to renew the Protestant tradition in the face of resurgent atheism in ways that move beyond fundamentalism and liberalism.

The story Fraser tells in this meticulously researched volume is sweeping, but also grounded in a myriad of primary texts and specialist historical studies. In its efforts to provide an alternative to the hermeneutical norms that dominated the church in western Europe in the seventeenth century, the Protestant reformers based their revolution on the ‘literal, univocal and perspicuous nature of Scripture’ (p. 1). This, when combined with advances in printing technology, allowed for a radical democratisation of the way the Bible was disseminated and read, and also spawned uncontrollable debates about the limits of interpretation and appeals to tradition. Particular difficulties arose whenever reading the scriptures led to departures from Nicene–Constantinopolitan orthodoxy, and whenever competing exegetical perspectives emerged among an increasingly diverse group of magisterial Protestant leaders. Fraser examines how the English Civil War and scientific revolution represented a crisis for literal, univocal and perspicuous readings of the Bible, leaving the Protestant establishment vulnerable to further dissent based on its own hermeneutical logic. Locke is put forward as a pivotal figure within the narrative, turning the sceptical resources of the reformers against the Church of England and resisting its stultifying influence over politics and higher education. This, so the story goes, paved the way for more assertive expressions of dissent in subsequent generations, with Fraser arguing that the ‘phenomenon of nineteenth century atheism should not be understood as arising primarily from irreligious Enlightenment sources ... but from within Protestantism itself’ (p. 88).

Fraser observes that efforts to reinforce the Protestant edifice came in the form of sheer political coercion to ensure conformity to the doctrines of the established church. As this proved increasingly untenable, the emphasis shifted to apologetic strategies that ensured a notion of God remained an indispensable hypothesis within the natural

sciences and to secure the moral order. The edifice finally gave way with Darwin's breakthrough and the impact of historical-critical approaches to the Bible in the nineteenth century. At this point, Fraser's narrative takes another bold turn. Having largely exhausted itself in Britain, the Protestant emphasis on the literal, univocal and perspicuous reading of the Bible migrates to colonial North America. There it combines with Scottish common sense philosophy and becomes the bedrock of a virulent strain of modernist Christian fundamentalism. As it evolves, this movement exploits a carefully calibrated distinction between 'theory' and 'fact', building a parallel quasi-scientific discourse in which divine activity is held to disrupt and substitute for 'natural' causal relations. The last plot twist brings the reader into the very recent past as 'new atheism' is found to share the hermeneutical assumptions of modern fundamentalism. While not putting it in these terms, Fraser describes what René Girard would label 'mimetic contagion', where opponents are steeped in a bitter rivalry over the same 'object' and scapegoats are sought to bring temporary relief. That many fundamentalists and new atheists converge on attacking Islam is not a coincidence from such a perspective.

To be convinced by Fraser's story, one has to be sympathetic to the methodology from the outset and there is a breathlessness to the book as rapid steps are taken across four centuries and two continents. Historians of a reductionist and empiricist bent are always ready to apply the scalpel of suspicion to such projects, tending to see sweeping genealogies as 'ideological'. Perhaps some would suspect a 'secret sympathy' with Hegel here as Fraser goes so far as to categorise new atheism as a 'negative Protestantism' (p. 238), even though he insists that there is nothing necessary about this dialectic (p. 6). Charles Taylor's *Secular Age* and Brad Gregory's *Unintended Reformation* have faced similar attacks and endured. Collingwood is invoked in the opening chapter to assure readers that the gains of the genealogical methodology outweigh the losses, and Fraser seeks to head off at least some potential critics by being upfront in acknowledging the limitations of the methodology and by continuously clarifying the way he limits his genealogy to particular questions of Protestant hermeneutics and notions of divine action. At no point does Fraser deny that these concepts operate within textured forms of life. What results is a lively, readable and compelling narrative that achieves what it sets out to do. The book is well-grounded in historical fact yet, with Collingwood, breaks free of what he labelled the 'scissors and paste' approach to historical method.

doi:10.1017/S0036930619000413

Brian J. Arnold, *Justification in the Second Century*

(Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017; Waco, TX: Baylor, 2018), pp. 236.
\$39.95.

Jane Heath

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Durham (j.m.f.heath@durham.ac.uk)

The Christian doctrine of 'justification', and especially 'justification by faith', is most closely associated with Paul in the first century and Luther in the sixteenth. Its