

Book Review  
By  
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*There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind.* By Anthony Flew; with Roy Abraham Varghese. New York: HarperOne Publisher, 2007, 222 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-06-133529-7.

Anthony Flew, one of the world's most renowned atheists, relates his personal journey from atheism to theism in this revealing book.

Flew makes the journey to theism from the vantage point of **natural theology** not special revelation though he seems open to more investigation of the divine origin of the Bible.

Anthony Flew was arguably the best known atheist in the English speaking world prior to his announcement in 2004 that he now accepts the existence of God.

The basic design of the book includes a Preface written by Roy Abraham Varghese consisting of twenty-four pages. An introduction follows the preface. Then, the book is divided into two parts. In Part One, Flew gives the details of the personal background of his life and his denial of the divine. Part Two develops the logical journey Flew takes to belief in God. The book concludes with two appendices. Appendix A explores the "New Atheism" and is written by Roy Abraham Varghese. Appendix B explores the self-revelation of God in Human History and is written by N.T. Wright. The last section of the book contains notes on the various chapters.

In Chapter one, Flew reveals how he became an atheist. Flew was not always an atheist. He was born and raised in a home that believed in Jesus Christ. His father was a Methodist minister. He grew up in England. He was influenced by the travels of his family that brought him into contact with the twin evils of anti-Semitism and totalitarianism (p. 14). In the face of such evils, he had a difficult time believing in an all-good, all-powerful God. He had a disconnect from his father in respect to his father's religious views. He never connected with Cambridge. By the time he was in the twelfth grade, he was arguing against the idea of a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good. By the time he reached his fifteenth birthday, he rejected the thesis that the universe was created by an all-good, all-powerful God (p. 15). Flew admits that he never felt a strong attachment to the faith of his fathers (including his own father). Perhaps this is a clue as to why he rejected faith in God. The disconnect in father-son relationships can result in rebellion against the faith and values of the father. Flew remarks, "For the sake of domestic peace and, in particular, in order to spare my father, I tried for as long as I could to conceal from everyone at home my irreligious conversion. I succeeded in this, as far as I know, for a good many years" (p. 16). By the age of twenty-three, Flew was both an atheist and a mortalist (disbeliever in life after death).

Flew reveals that his studies at Oxford University had a profound impact on his early thought. He was a graduate student under Gilbert Ryle. Ryle had the practice of responding directly, person to person, to any objection made to any of his philosophical contentions. Flew believed that Ryle was following the Socratic principle, "We must follow the argument wherever it leads." Flew also embraced this principle and attempted to follow it through his entire life.

This principle guided the Socratic Club at Oxford which formed a forum for lively debates between Christians and atheists. C. S. Lewis was president of the Socratic Club from 1942 to 1954.

The first and only paper that Flew wrote for the Socratic Club was “Theology and Falsification,” a refutation of the Ayerian heresy of logical positivism—the contention that all religious propositions are without cognitive significance (p. 24). Flew would go on to publish 35 volumes on a variety of philosophical topics (p. 32).

Flew met Annis Donnison at Oxford and later married her.

Chapter two, “Where The Evidence Leads,” focuses on Flew’s intellectual development. As a young man, Flew was a professing Communist and remained a left-wing socialist until the early 1950’s. He developed an interest in parapsychology through the influence of the writings of C. E. M. Joad. His first book was on parapsychology written in 1953.

At Oxford, Flew continued to gain philosophical insights that would guide his thinking for the rest of his life. One of the most important was in the area of linguistics. Flew states, “...we must become constantly and crisply conscious of how all philosophy (insofar as philosophy is a conceptual inquiry) must be concerned with correct verbal usage” (p. 38). He recognized that “we can have no access to concepts except through the study of linguistic usage and, hence, the use of those words through which these concepts are expressed” (p. 38).

Flew continues to show the progress of his atheistic thought by reviewing the purposes for which he wrote, *Theology and Falsification*, *God and Philosophy*, and *The Presumption of Atheism*. In the latter part of this chapter, Flew indicates two areas in which he made significant changes in his views. The first is the awareness that Hume was utterly wrong to maintain that we have no experience, and hence no genuine ideas, of making things happen and of preventing things from happening, of physical necessity and of physical impossibility. Hume was wrong to reject causation. The second change of mind regards human free will. Flew now believes that people make free choices and that these choices are not physically caused (p. 59-60). His notion of compatibilism was false. He defines compatibilism on page 59. Flew’s defection from compatibilism is “fully as radical as my change on the question of God” (p. 64).

Chapter three is titled, “Atheism Calmly Considered.” Flew defended and debated the atheistic position. The only two debates in which Flew appeared as one of two protagonists were held in 1976 and 1998. In 1976, Flew met Thomas Warren of Denton, Texas. The debate drew crowds of five to seven thousand. In 1998, Flew met William Lane Craig in Madison, Wisconsin which drew a crowd of about four thousand. The debate with Warren ended in a stalemate according to Flew. The debate with Craig was notable. Flew thought that an important part of the debate was Craig’s rejection of traditional predestinarian ideas and his defense of libertarian free will (p. 73). The last of Flew’s public debates was held at New York University in 2004. At the outset of this debate, Flew announced that he accepted the existence of a God. Flew admits to being influenced by the work and reasoning of Gerald Schroeder who completely annihilated the *monkey theorem*. Schroeder demonstrated that you will never get a Shakespearean sonnet by chance. If a single sonnet cannot be produced by chance, then the more elaborate feat of the origin of life could not have been achieved by chance (p. 75-78).

Flew not only did battle with theists, he also did battle with other atheists. Flew criticized Richard Dawkins for his selfish-gene theory. He wrote in *Darwinian Evolution* and pointed out that natural selection does not positively produce anything (p. 78). Flew declares, “Genes, as we have seen, do not and cannot necessitate our conduct” (p. 80). He continues, “Nor are they capable of the calculation and understanding required to plot a course of either ruthless selfishness or sacrificial compassion” (p. 80).

In Part II of the book, Flew describes his discovery of the divine. Chapter four is titled, “A Pilgrimage of Reason.” Flew warns against allowing preconceived theories to shape the way

we view evidence. He denounces “dogmatic atheism” expressed in the following sentiments, “We should not ask for an explanation of how it is that the world exists; it is here and that’s all” or “Since we cannot accept a transcendent source of life, we choose to believe the impossible; that life arose spontaneously by chance from matter” or “the laws of physics are ‘lawless laws’ that arise from the void—end of discussion.” (pp. 86-87). Flew does not abandon reason. He concludes this chapter by stating, “...my discovery of the Divine has proceeded on a purely natural level, without any reference to supernatural phenomena. It has been an exercise in what is traditionally called natural theology” (p. 93).

In chapter five, Flew reveals how the laws of nature reveal an intelligent mind. The chapter is titled, “Who Wrote The Laws of Nature?” Flew states, “Although I was once sharply critical of the argument to design, I have since come to see that, when correctly formulated, this argument constitutes a persuasive case for the existence of God” (p. 95). He pursues two areas of study: (1) the question of the origin of the laws of nature; and (2) the question of the origin of life and reproduction (p. 95). He concludes that the observable order in nature argues for design and design argues for the Mind of God.

The sixth chapter is titled, “Did the Universe Know We Were Coming?” Flew opens the chapter with an imaginary experience in a hotel room where every detail of the room fits you perfectly. Your favorite beverages and snacks, your favorite books, your favorite grooming products, your favorite television channel, are all present--a room perfectly fitted for you. With each new discovery, you would believe that the room was designed for you and not a mere coincidence. Flew applies that analogy to our finely tuned universe. The world is a perfect habitat made for man. Every detail provides evidence that someone knew we were coming. In addition, Flew destroys the multiverse view in this chapter.

Chapter seven takes up the question of the origin of life. Flew asks, “How Did Life Go Live?” More probing questions are raised. “How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and “coded chemistry” ? (p. 124). Flew quotes George Wald regarding the origin of life. At one time Wald said, “we choose to believe the impossible: that life arose spontaneously by chance.” Then, Wald, in his later years concluded that a preexisting mind composed a physical universe that breeds life (p. 131). Flew agrees with Wald’s conclusion.

Flew addresses the important question, “Did Something Come From Nothing?” in chapter eight. Flew takes up the cosmological argument for the existence of God. At one time, he rejected this argument. However, since the 1980’s he admits that cosmologists have proven that the universe had a beginning. Now, we must ascertain how it began. Flew concludes by stating his belief that Richard Swinburne’s explanation of the cosmological argument, a C-inductive argument for the existence of God, is right (p. 145).

Chapter nine is simply titled, “Finding Space For God.” Flew takes up the important question of whether or not an incorporeal omnipresent Spirit could exist. He uses the works of two thinkers, Thomas Tracy and Brian Leftow, to show that such a being could exist.

The final chapter in Part II provides some of the conclusions drawn by Flew and his own definition of God. The chapter is titled, “Open To Omnipotence.” Flew states that he has followed three items of evidence in this book, “the laws of nature, life with its teleological organization, and the existence of the universe.” His rational response to this line of argument leads him to accept, “the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being” (p. 155). While he has not fully accepted Christianity, Flew believes that Christianity is the front runner among all of the religions (157).

This intriguing book concludes with two Appendices. In Appendix A, Roy Abraham Varghese writes concerning the New Atheism. In it he states that there are five phenomena that are evident in our immediate experience that can be explained only by the existence of God. They are: (1) the rationality implicit in all our experience of the physical world, (2) life, the capacity to act autonomously, (3) consciousness, the ability to be aware; (4) conceptual thought; the power of articulating and understanding meaningful symbols such as are embedded in language; and (5) the human self, the “center” of consciousness, thought, and action (161-162).

Appendix B, written by N.T. Wright, deals with the reality of the existence of Jesus Christ. Wright develops arguments that show the truthfulness of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Flew states that Wright’s arguments are, “wonderful, absolutely radical, and very powerful” (213).

The final part of the book includes the notes for each chapter.

Anthony Flew’s lifetime pursuit of the knowledge of God is an interesting and intriguing read. For most of his life he denied the existence of God. Later in his life, he reasons his way to accepting God’s existence. As he states, once you accept the existence of God, then the possibility of God revealing Himself through Jesus Christ and special revelation is open for further inquiry.