

## Review Article

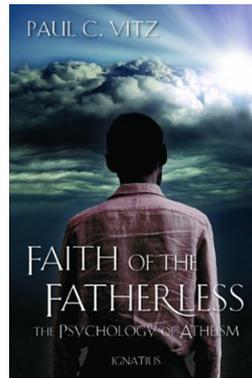
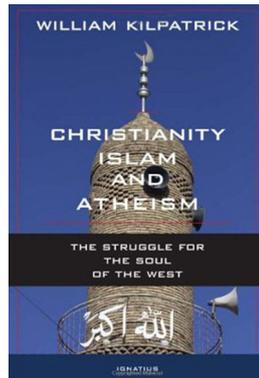
P.H. Brazier

William Kilpatrick. *Christianity, Islam and Atheism. The Struggle for the Soul of the West*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012. hb. xiv, 316. ISBN: 978-1-58617-696-9. £18.99, \$24.95

Paul C. Vitz. *Faith of the Fatherless. The Psychology of Atheism*, 2nd Edition, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2013. pp. xviii, 214. ISBN: 978-1-58617-687-7. £11.08, \$17.95.

### KEYWORDS:

| religion | multi-faith perspective | atheism | politics | truth | multiculturalism |



As a noun, religion<sup>1</sup> is often taken to mean belief in and acknowledgement of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or the “gods,” and therefore a particular system of faith and worship, of belief and ethics, often pursued with commitment and devotion. But religion does not necessarily imply belief in God, or the “gods.” There is in effect no generally agreed definition of religion. Indeed, according to some post-modern psychologists religion is often taken to mean an obsession (so, is lifestyle-driven OCD a religion?—or does it take the place of authentic religion?). The term is used with widely different meanings. The Roman writer Cicero defined *religio* as the giving of proper honour, respect and reverence to the divine, by which he meant the

“gods.”<sup>2</sup> According to Cicero such “religion” was a dutiful honouring, as distinct from a superstition, an empty fear of the “gods.”<sup>3</sup> Cicero’s definition implies an object—but this object may only be in the mind of the believer. In addition, religion may embrace non-theistic belief systems from Buddhism to Marxism, or from football to popular culture, all of which exhibit the characteristics often associated with objectively theistic religions. Perhaps any philosophy of life that exhibits a world view of sorts and that embraces some notion of right and wrong is in some way implicitly religious, whether a “god” or the God is acknowledged or not. Genuine religion—which is the foundation

1 From the Middle English, originally in the sense life under monastic vows, derived from Old French, and from Latin, *religion* implied obligation and reverence.

2 Cicero, *The Nature of the gods*, 2.3.8. See also, Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, Vol. IV, 2.53.161. *Religio, religionis*, reverence and obligation, sanction and worship, rite and religion.

3 *Ibid.*, 1.4.2.

of these two books by William Kilpatrick and Paul C. Vitz—is defined and measured by two actual events: first, the Fall into original sin by humanity, and second the Christ event, the Cross-Resurrection-Ascension. If we believe we live in an age when religion in the West is now obsolete and done away with we are wrong: specific anti-religion movements (as in Soviet Russia; or manifested today in certain aspects of Western liberalism) merely replace one religion with another. Humanity cannot stop being religious; people believe themselves to be irreligious or anti-religion, but that is in itself a form of religion. For example, Sjoerd L. Bonting notes how the sociologist William S. Bainbridge, in the context of “the New Paradigm in the sociology of religion states that ‘religion is an inevitable feature of all human societies and that secularization merely weakens old religious movements to the advantage of new ones rather than marking the triumph of science over religion.’”<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

Published by the US West Coast Roman Catholic publisher Ignatius Press William Kilpatrick and Paul C. Vitz’s work is underpinned by a recognition of this crisis of definition in post-modern Western society, what one reviewer on the back cover of Kilpatrick’s volume terms, “the politically correct miasma of unreality that envelops and explains us.”<sup>5</sup> William Kilpatrick, in *Christianity, Islam and Atheism. The Struggle for the Soul of the West*, explains how a multicultural and, what he terms, a common-ground approach to Islam won’t

work. Why?—Because Islam is in essence a religion of conquest and subjugation. When Western governments seek to protect Islam one pertinent question is rarely raised—which Islam is to be protected? The Islam subscribed to by millions of Muslims across the Middle East, the traditional and historic Islam exercised in demonstration, violence, bombings, and military subjugation, or is it the Islam which is a projection of a Western liberal fantasy about religion, where religion is privatised, and of no discernable threat or contradiction to the political *status quo*. Many people in the West led by liberal academics find Islam, its religious traditions, and its pro-active “military” adventurism representative of a religion that is unpalatable; therefore—at the dictates of Western governments—Islam is redefined to make it palatable to Western liberalism. This is done in particular when it conflicts with a belief in multiculturalism, which is rooted in a doctrine of Indifferentism. Western liberal society believes it can champion a multicultural approach to Islam, and that Muslims will sit quietly and happily alongside people of other faith, or no faith, without harming them. Such Islamic religious “aggressivism,” as Kilpatrick terms it, contradicts the foundation of Western liberal society. But Islam is also perceived to be a threat to the Gospel. By comparison the Gospel and the atonement that issues from Christ’s sacrifice merely needs to be preached in freedom: people can choose to respond, or not, the responsibility belongs to them. If Islam—in Kilpatrick’s estimation—is an antagonistic, belligerent, and proselytising religion, he is also critical of the newly aggressive atheism,<sup>6</sup> a

4 Sjoerd. L. Bonting, “Theological Implications of Possible Extraterrestrial Life.” *Zygon*, 38.3 (2003) pp. 587-602, see, p. 600, quoting from William S. Bainbridge “Extra-Terrestrial Tales.” *Science*, 279.5351 (Jan. 30, 1998), p. 671.

5 Robert Spencer.

6 In particular, the so-called New Atheists, the scientist Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens (who describes himself as an ‘anti-theist’), the philosopher A.C. Grayling, the journalist-writer Sam Harris, the novelist Martin Amis and the author and screen writer Ian McEwan, amongst many others., often seen as media celebrities.

confrontational atheism that attacks the Church and Christianity specifically, but also religious belief generally. Kilpatrick notes pertinently that the civil liberties that define the West, in particular in Europe and the United States, issue from Christian civilization, built on the freedom Christ's sacrifice buys us: to believe, or not. Therefore, a central thesis to Kilpatrick's studied and considered volume is that—in his words—a strong and vibrant Christianity is necessary to stand and defend against a resurgent traditional Islam that for many seeks the conversion of the West, or its destruction if it will not submit. An Iranian-Muslim convert to Biblical Christianity that I have known for more than 30 years commented how Islam and Christianity are in many ways opposites. Not only does Islam deny the divinity of Jesus, but the two religions differ in many fundamental aspects of religious ethics: both the Koran and the Hadith advocate the judicious killing and enslavement of non-Muslims, Jesus asks us to love our enemies; Mohammad asked his followers to kill the infidels, while Jesus turned the other cheek and questioned those who were about to stone the woman taken in adultery; Mohammad sanctioned the cutting-off of the hands and feet of prisoners; Jesus asks us to forgive, forgive again and keep forgiving—to be reconciled at all costs, not wage war to defend and promote our little religious empires.

So, what exactly does Kilpatrick say and how does he structure his work? The book is in five parts, eighteen chapters in all. Opening with, "Part One, The Islamic Threat" Kilpatrick examines the state of Western irreligiosity: "the crisis of faith": when threatened by Islam Western liberal intellectuals oddly stoke-up their criticism of Christianity (the media's love-affair with the New Atheists). Kilpatrick sees confused Christians as aiding and abetting

this marginalization of the Christian basis of Western societies (p. 14f.). Kilpatrick then considers the "Islamization of the world," whereby the perpetual aim of Muslims is to submit the world to their religion, to Mohammed's agenda. Therefore Kilpatrick asks whether the West fully understands the threat, whilst the general populace hide in celebrity culture and consumer goods, and, for example, the British Labour government bans the pairing of the word "Muslim" with "terrorism" (p. 17): multi-culturalism must tolerate all religions and cultures (with the exception, one may conclude of Western, Caucasian, Christian culture and religion). Kilpatrick therefore sees a cover-up in the West which suppresses and denies the Church (a cover-up defined in neo-gnostic terms—i.e. The da Vinci Code), whilst censoring any criticism of Islam: "Secular militants are acting as though Christians are a threat to our culture . . . The multicultural elites want to silence not only Christians but also any who question the politically correct view of Islam." (pp. 48 & 49.) Kilpatrick therefore examines the prosecution of Christians for preaching the gospel and the legal attempts to protect Islam from criticism by Christians. Thus we move to "Part Two. Islam's Enablers." For example, "Secularists—lights out for the Enlightenment": without its Christian foundations the Enlightenment and all its freedoms are lost, asserts Kilpatrick's. This is demonstrated by Kilpatrick examining cases of secular humanist atheists—not Christians—in the West who criticize the brutality of Islam, and are then prosecuted, persecuted, by their governments for anti-Islamic activity (p. 53f.). So, asks Kilpatrick, what role do self-confessed atheists have in the spiritual and intellectual road map that is the West today and how does their legacy compare with the perceived threat of the Church? The answer is obvious when

one considers the millions killed during the twentieth century for ideological reasons, from the Gulags to abortion clinics, often by well-meaning self-identified liberals (p. 59f.). What exactly do the New Atheists intend to replace the presence of Christianity in Europe with is a pertinent question raised. Kilpatrick's critique then shifts to multiculturalism: multicultural openness is answered by Muslim assertiveness. It is from this point on that we find Kilpatrick's central thesis:

Why doesn't multiculturalism work? The answer is that multiculturalism is essentially a form of relativism in which morality is relative to culture. The corresponding belief is that the members of one culture have no right to make judgments about the rightness or wrongness of another culture's traditions or practices. Thus, even common sense observations about group behaviour can leave one open to charges of racism, homophobia, or Islamophobia . . . Pope Benedict's phrase "dictatorship of relativism" is an apt description of these attempts to control thought and speech in the name of tolerance. (p. 78.)

Kilpatrick continues,

. . . Because of its inherent divisiveness, the multiculturalist model would eventually fail in any society. But it is particularly fatal to a society that has in its midst an aggressive cultural group that refuses to subscribe to relativism. By neglecting to stand up for their own values, traditions, and religious heritage—indeed, by denigrating them—European countries left themselves almost defenceless against a resurgent Islam. Islam's success in Europe has been built in large part on European self-doubt. (p. 78f.)

Therefore this section concludes with a critique of "Christian enablers." Many Christians—castigated by the New Atheists who argued that

the Church wants to impose its creed on Western society—echo the tolerance of multicultural relativism and are therefore, to Kilpatrick, enablers (p. 94f.). The remaining sections and chapters fill out the detail: questioning the Quran; what we make of Jesus, as compared to Mohammad; the Western cultural wars, as compared to "the terror war"; the warrior code endemic to humanity; the ensuing cold war with Islam; ultimately, the war of ideas: what, therefore, should Christians do?

Without qualification this is an excellent book that reveals the socio-political chaos that underpins the West. Translate that chaos into religious terms and you have violence and intimidation meted out on Christians, not only by aggressive Muslims, but also by successive Western governments. Should this not be standard reading for students in schools, as part of multi-faith religious education lessons (a curriculum that excised the Bible in many schools years ago)? Kilpatrick's book should be subject to wider reading in the academy and in government circles but it won't be. If there is perhaps one criticism it is Kilpatrick's referencing. Examples given by him are referenced to blogs and similar subjective sources rather than to newspapers, journals, and academic studies. One is forced to ask whether blogs and social media are as trustworthy as the official media (newspapers, reports, etc.), particularly given that the social media revolution is defined by self-opinionated gossiping? A keyword that is marginalized in Kilpatrick's volume evident in the human generated, socio-cultural, religio-political landscape, of the West—a word that might help explain so much that Kilpatrick rightly criticizes—is "freemasonry," in particular the relationship between liberal-agitprop groups (in particular gay rights groups, feminist

caucuses), say, in Britain, and political parties and governments (dominated by freemasonry) of all persuasions. Freemasonry and Islam are very similar “religions,” based on a human-generated mono-“god” that is believed to sit back and bequeath power and authority to the ruling elite, to rule in tyranny—or so the elites will secretly believe from their Feuerbachian projection.

\* \* \*

Paul C. Vitz focuses in his study on a particular psychology relating to the so-called New Atheists. In *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, he does not try to sidestep the culturally specific and relativistic observations of Sigmund Freud, but starts with the projection theory of religion. If the opinion of psychoanalysts that belief in God issues from a projected desire for security, where does this leave the atheism of so many confident intellectuals in the West? Vitz argues that such psychoanalysis provides a much more sound explanation of atheism than it does of religious belief. To do this Vitz implicitly uses a technique used by C. S. Lewis in the mid-twentieth century: turning the hermeneutic of suspicion on the sceptics themselves. (Lewis used this against the de-mythologizing methods of sceptical New Testament scholars: could they stand up to their own rigorous deconstruction?—The answer was no.) The central thesis to Vitz’s study is that disappointment in an individual’s father—through death, violence, absence, abuse, mere distance—*frequently* leads to a rejection of God (issuing implicitly from the Christian triune concept of God). Vitz takes great pains to present and analyse the biographies of *celebrity* atheists from the last four hundred years to explain and justify this defective father theory of atheism.

Why celebrity atheists? Because all the names, from the inception of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment on (often, but not always, issuing from the Romantic hedonistic cult of the wealthy individual), read like a “who’s-who” of intellectuals and artists whose influence on ideas and society, and thereby the herd of ordinary people, was immense.

Therefore this is a book that constitutes a survey—biographical and intellectual—of *influential* atheists from around 1600, which demonstrates a “defective father proposition,” and a consistent explanation of the intense atheism of influential thinkers. Importantly, these thinkers are *self-confessed atheists* who, for whatever reason, were formed (for better or worse) by the prevailing Christian culture, which they chose to reject (in varying degrees). Perhaps one question that issues from reading Vitz’s analysis is, ‘Which gods did these people reject?’ Vitz does balance this study of self-confessed atheists with evidence from a theistic control group: believers—that is, a survey of the leading *defenders* of Christianity who exhibited few defective fathers. In conclusion an exploratory comparison of male and female atheists throws up interesting questions about other factors—psychological or otherwise—that *might* contribute to atheism.

Vitz’s analysis derives from what he terms Freud’s unacknowledged theory of unbelief, the acknowledgement of a relatively unexplored concept—Oedipal atheism—which produces a new theory of atheism: that the defective father hypothesis, defined in many ways by insecurity, leads to—generates—unbelief. The majority of the book then explores case studies, in distinct groups: first, atheists and their fathers (Nietzsche, Hume, Russell, Sartre, Camus, Schopenhauer, *et al*); then, abusive and weak fathers (Hobbes, Meslier,

Voltaire, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, Feuerbach, Butler, Freud, H.G. Wells, *et al*); also, minor unbelievers and contemporary (often celebrity) names, who were self-confessed atheists. By comparison Vitz postulates theists and their fathers (Pascal, Berkeley, Butler, Reid, Burke, Paley, Wilberforce, Schleiermacher, Newman, Kierkegaard, Chesterton, Schweitzer, Buber, Barth, Bonhoeffer, *et al*); he then considers further evidence and qualifications in the form of "substitute fathers," even the atheist father as a positive influence, likewise, he explores gender issues. Finally these conclusions are considered in the light of other related psychologies of unbelief, "superficial" atheism, even a consideration of autism:

In the actual practical interaction between believers and unbelievers the preceding study supports the conclusion that many an intense personal "reason" lies behind the public rejection of God. If one wishes genuinely to reach such people, one must address, probably indirectly, their underlying psychology. Aside from the common, superficial reasons, many serious unbelievers are likely to have painful memories behind their rationalization of atheism. Such interior wounds need to be fully appreciated and addressed by believers. (Vitz, p. 197)

So is atheism psychologically determined? Above and beyond conditioning we have moments of free will where we are faced with the choice, the decision to accept God or reject *Him*. What Vitz succeeds in is denying the uniqueness of attributing religious faith to irrational psychological needs; there are—equally—psychological factors, equally irrational, that may trigger atheism. However, atheism/atheist is a term with multiple meanings, nuances and objectives, subtleties which are not explored, for this reader, in the

depth that may seem necessary. The obvious question in all cases is, which "god" does a self-confessed atheist choose, elect, *not* to believe in, and how does this "god" measure up against the revelation of the one true living God of the Hebrews and the Lord and Father of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, God incarnate? Likewise the validity before God's revelation of the "gods" of some believers is not considered to the depth this particular reader would like to have seen.

\* \* \*

In one sense these two books are about a multi-faith perspective that is innately contradictory, issuing from the confused world of post-modern relativism. The belief that one religion is as good as another is condemned by all traditional and orthodox churches, by Rome as a heresy (named Indifferentism), and considered by many Evangelical Churches as a refutation of the Gospel. If exponents of Indifferentism argue that there is no quantifiable evidence to distinguish one religion from another then this becomes a form of absolute indifferentism. Neo-Pagan secular liberal humanism, as promoted in the West, appears to be grounded in a doctrine of religious plurality and indifferentism, which states that all examples of the religious impulse in humanity are to be regarded as equal; likewise the exponents of a neo-Pagan secular liberal humanist position implicitly wait for all to arrive at the faith perspective that there is really no "god," that we have no sure and confident religious knowledge, and certainly no revelation, therefore in this all religions must be equal because there is finally no ultimate truth in them, but they must be practised in private, and not express—publically—anything that contradicts the implicitly religious Pagan nation state.

Anyone of biblical-traditional-orthodox Christian faith should be able to recognize the confused mind-set religion today is held (in the West): "Our culture has made tolerance the virtue to be prized above all virtues and intolerance the greatest sin."<sup>7</sup> But is this "tolerance" innately religious and intrinsically contradictory? Not all beliefs systems, ethics and lifestyles are deemed tolerable in post-modern Western society, and the criteria is not only implicit, veiled, hidden, but is variable from generation to generation, and from group to group. Paul C. Vitz and William Kilpatrick demonstrate how confused any sense of religious truth has become in official circles, while ordinary individuals struggle to bear witness to the veracity of the Gospel.

**P.H. Brazier**

*Paul Brazier is an independent theologian and scholar who lives in London, U.K. For the last fifteen years he has been the full-time care-giver to his wife who has epilepsy. His doctoral work was on the influence of Dostoevsky on the young Karl Barth. He is editor of the late Colin E. Gunton's work, and, has produced an in-depth systematic analysis of C.S. Lewis's Christology and doctrine of revelation—[www.cslewisandthechrist.net](http://www.cslewisandthechrist.net).*

---

<sup>7</sup> Tom Watts reviewing, D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012), in *The Churchman*, 127.4, Winter 2013, pp. 359-60.