

Of Heresy and Humanism: Response to Alford

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Book Review

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In C. Fred Alford's (2020) recent review of my book, *Inventing God* (Mills, 2017), he wrote in a biased and self-serving way, failing to address the inherent humanism of my project and hence distorting its scope and focus, and further failing to inform the reader that he is a practicing Christian. In his latest book, *God Now: Christianity and Heresy*, Alford (2019) begins with a section labeled, "Why I Pray," and specifically tells the reader in his Introduction, "I believe in God and Jesus Christ" (p. xi). This omission and deception in not alerting the reader to his beliefs in the context of reviewing a book on secular spirituality is disingenuous, if not intellectually dishonest, as it soon becomes very clear that I am a heretic who is set up as a straw man to be burnt at the stake.

Why would Alford assume an assignment of reviewing a book that directly opposes his own beliefs and not inform the reader of his position, let alone declare his inherent conflict of interest, only then to provide a prejudiced review rather than debate me properly and honestly? Let me suggest that it is because his arguments are tenuous and his position is dubious, as I will set out to show. It would have been helpful if he had taken me head-on with the real issues he is troubled by, rather than presenting a very

circumscribed and myopic locus that misleads readers as to what my book is truly about. First of all, the reader should know that he erroneously paints me as an "aggressive atheist," when he fails to mention two thirds of the book's contents, including my humanistic commitments to the pursuit of the sacred. From his account, the reader will have no idea what the project accomplishes.

What Professor Alford does not address are my very careful philosophical arguments addressing the question of the existence of God as presented in every historical tradition of monotheism, from the early Church Fathers to scholasticism and contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion. What he does not address are the ontological refutations offered by the evidential arguments, logical disproofs for the existence of God, and the problem of infinite regress that besieges both theism and cosmology alike. Nor does he address my extensive treatment of God as a metaphysical question; religion as naturalized psychology; extended debates over operational definitions of God; the sociobiology of religion; the fallacy of divine sense; and sundry psychoanalytic arguments that explain why humanity has a need to invent God. In fact, to my knowledge, no book has been written to date that provides such a comprehensive psychoanalytic critique of God as the invention of an idea, including how God is the inversion of our *pathos*; is an antidote to the trauma of cosmic loneliness; serves as a compromise formation; is an idealized fixation of imagined value; is the supreme transference *and* attachment figure; serves as transitional

phenomena, selfobject experience, interpassivity; is imaginary; and represents the sublime object of ideology informing cultural neurosis. Nor does Alford attend to my arguments on the microdynamics of the God introject and the psychic depletion involved in mourning divine absence.

Professor Alford also makes no mention of the last third of the book that focuses on spirituality without God or the secular sacred, and covers a broad range of topics in philosophy from existentialism to the phenomenology, feeling, and value of the lived experience; aesthetics; the nature of the ethical; the sublime; friendship and love; our ecological sensibility, responsibility, and duty toward nature and alterity; the quest for happiness; eros, ecstasy, transcendence; individuation and wholeness; and the pursuit of the numinous in the face of our impending being-toward-death.

What Alford does focus on is a single preoccupation, namely, his beef that I denounce the existence of God. But he does not debate me, nor does he engage any of the historical, theological, or philosophical arguments. What he does say, surprisingly, is that we should not be concerned with such a question, which is “neither needing nor demanding proof.” Instead, his preferred attitude is “don’t ask” if God exists or is real – it really doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters, he asserts, is our relation to God as “an objective experience. The same can be said about beauty and love. Wrap a good story around an ultimate ideality and you have both God and a religion – if, that is, your ultimate ideality is God. (If it is love, then you have a love story.)” This category mistake of confounding beauty and love with “an objective experience” of God is simply sophomoric. As he continues, “things we believe exist for us,” but this does not

make them mind-independent extant ontologies. The existence of a purportedly ultimate, supernatural divine agent *does* matter to those in search of truth and reality, and any claim otherwise surely suffers from supercilious denial. Alford’s review reads like a pedestrian plea for belief from a Christian apologist without any need to justify one’s propositions or conclusions simply because it feels good or right to the believer.

Alford further charges: “Mills, like so many new atheists, misunderstands the issue of scientific meaning [...] Lots of statements are meaningful, but not scientific [...] Statements about God have roughly the same status, or should.” But why “should” they? Why can’t we engage scientific reasoning when postulating the existence of God? When one makes an ontological claim about God, one brings science into the discussion. The God posit is not outside the jurisdiction of reason any more than the parameters of the physical universe. In fact, Alford opines, “the most important thing about God isn’t his existence [...] but the way we relate to him.” Notice how Alford presupposes the very thing that is in question. Existence is not a predicate. No proposition is proof of itself. You just can’t define something into being. Just because one claims to have an experience of God does not mean that one is experiencing God. At most, one can say one thinks they experience God. But we could easily substitute one object of experience for another and it would not make it any more real without some form of objective demonstration – “I experience the Flying Spaghetti Monster, therefore it exists! Who are you to say otherwise?” Just because one believes in and thinks they experience the Almighty does not make it so. As Freud (1927) reminds us, “If one man has gained an unshakable conviction of the true reality of



religious doctrines from a state of ecstasy which has deeply moved him, of what significance is that to others?" (p. 28).

How can uniquely subjective experience remotely become an ontological reality that exists for all? Not only is this begging the question; it sanctions the fallacious certitude that one need not ask for evidence in order for something to be true. This is simply an argument from desire, and hardly a scholarly one at that, let alone a fair representation of my book as a whole that is deeply engaged with the spiritual from the standpoint of secular humanism. As I state in the book, I don't want to take away anyone's need to believe in God if that is their predilection, as this is an existential burden we all bear to answer for ourselves. In the end, I'm just another pilgrim in search of something numinous like everyone else.

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