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Food is handed out at a hospital in the Central African Republic.

## DEVELOPMENT

# Starved for solutions

Calestous Juma weighs up a call for a revolution to end world hunger.

Some 870 million people suffer from chronic undernourishment, despite humanity's best efforts to improve agricultural productivity, create markets and boost nutrition. In *Betting on Famine*, sociologist Jean Ziegler sets out to provide a human rights-based approach to addressing world hunger. The book is a sweeping indictment of global injustice and provides ample facts and figures. "The destruction, every year, of tens of millions of men, women, and children from hunger is the greatest scandal of our era," says Ziegler, who was United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on the right to food from 2000 to 2008.

His main thesis, which is in no way innovative, is that the world is capable of feeding 12 billion people — 5 billion more than now exist. The main obstacle, in his view, is global inequality and corporate control of the food system. The solution, he says, is to return to the fundamental principles of the right to food, defined by the UN as having "regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate

and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people".

Ziegler argues that access to food has been one of the most flouted human rights in history. He attributes much of the reason for this to the dominance of the private sector and an unfair global trading system, underpinned by what he sees as neo-liberal dogma, such as the perceived benefits of privatizing public enterprises. He argues that nothing short of a revolution is needed to curb corruption among leaders in emerging nations most affected by famine, promote popular resistance among social movements around the world, and make the right to food a policy priority in parliamentary and other governance bodies.

*Betting on Famine* disappoints for many reasons, one being that it says nothing new. Classics such as Susan George's *How the*

*Other Half Dies* (1976) have provided more incisive assessments of why famine has persisted despite increases in food production. Ziegler admits that much of what needs to be done has already been outlined in numerous UN documents. Furthermore, his book is primarily a diatribe against those in power; it offers little by way of example or inspiration on how to solve world hunger. Appealing to revolution is possibly the easiest of intellectual expeditions. Executing the task is much more complex and requires the involvement of the same corporations and governments that the book incessantly admonishes.

There is an equally revolutionary alternative that Ziegler does not acknowledge: empowering the poor by building their capacity to address hunger through improved agricultural practices, training of farmers, better infrastructure and access to markets. Following the 1974 coup in Ethiopia, for instance, Marxist leaders embarked on a peasant revolution aimed at overthrowing landowners in the hope that this would lead to the modernization of agriculture. It did not work. But now the country's government focuses on



**Betting on Famine: Why the World Still Goes Hungry**  
JEAN ZIEGLER  
The New Press: 2013.

promoting and expanding cooperation between farmers and the same corporations that Ziegler wishes to send to the gallows. Partly because of improvements in agricultural production, Ethiopia's economy has registered an average growth of 8% per year in the past decade.

Rights cannot be wished into existence. They need institutions to become realities. In 2010, Ethiopia created the Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA), mirroring elements of Brazil's Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), which has helped to bring technical support and credit to farmers. The ATA focuses on empowering farmers to become more entrepreneurial by helping them to improve productivity and participate in local and global markets. Ethiopia is also now a member of the Grow Africa consortium, which includes private enterprises, the African Union and the World Economic Forum, and has pledged to invest more than US\$3.5 billion in African agriculture. China, India and Brazil, among other countries, are also actively tackling hunger with more inclusive approaches, accommodating all major players including private corporations.

Ziegler rightly emphasizes the role of farmers, but fails to note how technical training can strengthen their political influence. Innovations such as the US land-grant university model, formalized 150 years ago to bring agricultural research, teaching and extension under one roof, played a key part in educating US farmers. The Green Revolution that helped countries such as India and Mexico to avert major famines relied heavily on scientific research, participation of the private sector and the upgrading of farmers' skills.

The right to food will continue to be a major global challenge as pressure on natural resources increases. But solutions will not come from traditional appeals for popular uprisings. They will come from increased inclusivity in partnerships, involving rather than punishing private corporations. To feed the hungry, the world needs new approaches that expand the practical use of human creativity, not more pleas for hollow revolutions. ■

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## SCIENCE AND RELIGION

# Godless chronicles

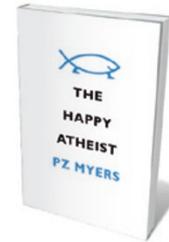
Glenn Branch goes for a dip in the antitheologic.

When the producers of the 2008 creationist film *Expelled* asked to interview PZ Myers, they misrepresented the nature of their project and the purpose of the interview. By the time the film screened, Myers knew that his brief clip would portray the scientific establishment as dogmatically suppressing dissent from evolution. Ironically, when he arrived at the cinema, he was excluded — unlike a colleague who was also interviewed for the film. Myers repaired to a nearby computer store to post a hilarious account of his expulsion on his widely read blog, Pharyngula. *Expelled* was quickly shown with unwelcome publicity as a result.

Myers is a developmental biologist, who named his blog after the pharyngula stage of embryonic development — both, he jokes, are notable for the appearance of brain and jaw. Pharyngula is a freewheeling mix of explanations of developmental biology, denunciations of creationism, commentary on politics, feuds with critics and rivals, and the sort of in-jokes and recurrent features that typify the blogosphere, enlivened by a raucous chorus of commenters. Its slogan is: “Evolution, development, and random biological ejaculations from a godless liberal”.

A major theme of Pharyngula, and Myers's first book, *The Happy Atheist*, is what he views as the incompatibility of science and religion. In addition to excoriating various absurdities and atrocities that he associates with faith, such as the bad science deployed by anti-abortion zealots, Myers repeatedly asserts that science and religion are necessarily in conflict: “One is a method of analysis and experiment; the other is pretense and lies.” He is fierce with regard to the proponents of old-fashioned creation science (“trying to get their Old Testament superhero to adhere to the rules of physics, chemistry, biology, and ordinary common sense”) and the adherents of newfangled intelligent design (who “hide the bearded old sky god from the public eye”). He also castigates scientists who accept evolution while retaining their faith.

Whatever Myers's target, his weapons are taken from the arsenal of ridicule. He is in good company — writers such as Jonathan Swift and George Orwell spring to mind. Myers's prose, although serviceable, isn't quite in the same class, but sometimes reaches lyrical heights. Explaining his decision to bury, rather than burn, unwanted books of scripture sent for his spiritual



**The Happy Atheist**  
PZ MYERS  
Pantheon: 2013.

instruction, he exults “as nematodes writhe over the surfaces, etching the words with slime and replacing the follies of dead men with the wisdom of worms”. Myers's favourite weapon is the extended metaphor, deployed to expose his targets as arbitrary and absurd. He wields it adroitly, comparing religious diversity to hat variety and theologians to courtiers fawning over the Emperor's new clothes. These conceits are often amusing and occasionally instructive, but the tactic is cheap.

Whether infuriating or invigorating, ridicule is no substitute for a considered critique, and Myers often fails to do justice to his targets. For example, his analysis of the idea that God guides evolution by acting undetectably at the quantum level, if amusing, is a popular rather than a scholarly treatment, and incorporates value judgements that are unsupported by science. Myers might respond that his targets are too ridiculous to warrant anything more serious, but such a response presupposes, rather than compels, agreement.

The chief problem with *The Happy Atheist*, however, is that it seems to break no new ground. By my count, Pharyngula posts provide the basis for at least 26 of the 38 essays and 5 more are adapted from a talk he gave in 2010.

Admirers and detractors alike will be disappointed by the book as a missed opportunity for Myers to refine, systematize and extend his thoughts on science and religion. It is not comparable with Jason Rosenhouse's *Among the Creationists* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Steve Stewart-Williams's *Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), or that ‘summa antitheologica’ of our day, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006) by Richard Dawkins. It was Dawkins, by the way, who was admitted to the screening of *Expelled* when Myers was excluded. Was Voltaire's prayer, “O Lord, make our enemies ridiculous,” ever better answered? ■

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