

Modern Atheism

Excerpt from *Melita Theologica* 19/1-2 (1967): 29-34

It is first of all on the intellectual level that the certainty of God's existence is undermined in the minds of many people. The atheistic argument here runs chiefly on two different levels, objective and subjective, which basically correspond to the two levels in the structure of human consciousness. Objective atheism, if we may use this term, is that system which calls the existence of God into doubt on the grounds that the proofs that have been provided so far are found lacking. One must not underestimate the interior conflicts of certain men who found that their scientific discoveries and rational convictions were at odds with religious tradition, and we know that many a scientific mind has spent much thought and energy in reconciling scientific insights with religious tradition. And the time had come when Western man thought he could shake off this tradition as standing in the way of what seemed to be the destiny of Western culture, namely the scientific and technological mastering of this world for the benefit of mankind, a task which was sometimes met with indifference by representatives of religion, if not outrightly opposed. Thus, science was one of the most important agents in the secularizing process of mankind. And while many of the pioneers of modern science - like Newton and Descartes - were devout believers, they actually explained much of nature that previously seemed godly mysteries. When the French astronomer Laplace was asked by Napoleon why there was no mention of God in his new book about the stars, he coolly

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answered: "I had no need of that hypothesis."¹ Neither for that matter, did Charles Darwin in uncovering the evidence of evolution.

Subjective atheism is the other kind of intellectual atheism. It rests on the rational analysis of man as a religious subject. The problem here is not whether or not God exists, but whether religion is at all possible. It is man himself who is questioning his own motivation to believe. According to some, God is really believed in only because man needs to believe in God (and the reason why man needs to believe in God may be different in different persons); hence it follows, according to these, that God does not really exist, but that He is only the projection of man. This kind of argument, with which we meet, for instance, in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and others,² returns in an even more subtle way in another form. Modern man feels the need to be wholly in his activity, to be authentically himself. And his eyes are open to all the possibilities of self-deceit and hypocrisy on the one hand, and of escapism and day-dreaming on the other. The high degree of rational understanding of the structure of human culture has no doubt diminished the spontaneity with which man could recognize himself in cultural values. Hence atheism is an expression of a deep uncertainty of man in a world which he has himself created and made dangerous. Relatively well off materially, and reasonably certain as regards the primary needs of daily existence, modern man is uncertain with respect to the ultimate meaning of it all. He does not believe any more, because he is incapable of believing.

Another source of atheism for modern man consists of considerations which have to do with morality, with human dignity, with questions of right and wrong. But here again the rejection of God is related to the image of God which is rejected, and hence we can distinguish three kinds of moral atheism: the atheism that rejects the very idea of God, the rejection of faith in God as a proper human attitude, and finally the rejection of God as a protest against the moral attitude of the believers.

In the first category we would classify such forms of atheism, as the rebellion against the idea of a God who is love, because of the suffering and injustice in this world. In the second group fall such forms of atheism that consider it a sort of escape from the human condition to rely on God rather than on man's own power. The third form rejects God because one does not see any positive fruits of faith in the group of the believers, no higher moral standards, no more human dignity, no more love, but, on the contrary sometimes even injustice and oppression

¹ "Is God Dead?" Time magazine, April 8, 1966.

² See Ignace Lepp, *Atheism in Our Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 141.

in the name of faith. It would take us too long to judge such attitudes and to see to what extent similar allegations may be true at times; but we may perhaps only make ours some remarks that are contained in a recent book entitled *The Meaning of Modern Atheism*, by Jean Lacroix,³ who is a Catholic. Here we have a study on the relation that is thought to exist between human responsibility and the denial of God. None of the various possible ways of avoiding responsibility is specifically Christian; nor indeed can it be claimed that Christianity encourages irresponsibility. What is it then that led some to think that being a believer tended to make one less aware of one's responsibilities as a man? What is it that makes one give up the struggle in this life and remain content to be no worse than the majority of men? Is it the admission of an afterlife that is fully happy and unending? Is it a false notion of the providence of God, which they turn to suit their own laziness and greed? Is it a false notion of the will of God, which they have set into their minds to conceal their lack of hunger and thirst after justice? The answer to these questions is somehow given by Michael Novak in the introduction to his book *The Open Church*:⁴

For many centuries the Church has not *appeared* to be developing a Godlike race. It has appeared to not be forming men to integrity, to courage, to humble charity. It has seemed to many to call men to lead an unreal life, an irrelevant life.⁵

The third source of atheism in our analysis is religious. What we mean here is perhaps not a real form of atheism, but a rejection of the traditional forms of theism. It is a form of negative theology pushed to its extreme. It is the assertion of the utter incomprehensibility of God, who is the Unknowable and has therefore to remain undefined. As an attitude, this form of atheism can run through a whole range of positions, from no concern with the Unknowable to a deep awareness of God's complete mysteriousness. The high God is, so to speak, too high to have any real interest in man's problems. There is the rather frequent attitude of people who say they believe there must be "something behind it all," but have no real concern to come to any clear conception of him. To many who do formulate their notion of God, he could be anything from a celestial body well beyond the range of astronauts, to an invisible honorary president "out there" in space. When a student of theology was asked to formulate his own notion of God, his answer

³ J. Lacroix, *The meaning of Modern Atheism* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1965).

⁴ M. Novak, *The Open Church* (London & New York, 1964); of the same author see also *Belief and Unbelief* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966).

⁵ See also I. Lepp, op. cit., 190 ff.

was: "God is all that I cannot understand."⁶ Very often this sceptical form of atheism is a clear protest against the certainty with which certain churchmen, especially preachers, sometimes express themselves, just as if they had just finished having lunch with God, or against certain popular conceptions of God which appear to be rather childish and primitive, like that of God as an insensible judge who seems to have somewhat more fun in punishing than in rewarding men.

I think we must also include here, under the heading of religious atheism, that form of atheism which finds the pole of religious commitment not in God but in some other value, like for instance one's personal dedication to the benefit of mankind. In this form the phenomenon of atheism seems to be rather frequent and, indeed, rather typical of modern religiosity, even though its identification with religion is perhaps not so commonly accepted. I think we can admit that in such a mentality there is not certainly a full rejection of transcendence as such, even if there is a rejection of a transcendent God. For today the idea of the "sacred" is being more and more defined in terms of a realization of mankind's highest potentialities, which may well imply transcendent spiritual values. And this can have a meaning even in an evangelical context, where the love of God and the love of man would be identified to such an extent, that the love of man becomes the final content of man's religious life.⁷ Hence what we really end up with is this: an acceptance of the religious contribution of Christianity, accompanied by a rejection of its basis in revelation. This is what is meant today by secularized Christianity and religious atheism.

These are then the answers we might expect from one out of three persons we meet in a busy street of any large modern city, like Oxford Street, London, or Fifth Avenue, New York City, although for most atheists, as I have already suggested, these causes are only active in their subconscious and one would often find it hard to draw them out. "Personally, I have never been confronted with the question of God," says a politely indifferent atheist, Dr. Claude Levi-Strauss, Professor of Social anthropology at the College de France. We may perhaps call this phenomenon, with Father John Courtney Murray, the atheism of distraction: "People are just too busy to worry about God at all."⁸

⁶ Time, loc. cit.

⁷ See John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963). In a subsequent booklet *The New Reformation?* (London: SCM, 1965) Dr. Robinson faces the question, "Can a truly contemporary person not be an atheist?"; see also W. Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York, 1966); F. Jeanson, *La foi d'un incroyant* (Paris, 1963); P. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York, 1963).

⁸ Time, loc. cit.

At this point of this study, where one might have logically expected to see, at least in outline, a refutation of atheistic thinking, I must come to a conclusion. My aim was to understand, not to disprove. For much too long, I think, we Christians have been content to dismiss opposing points of view as erroneous and futile, while making little attempt to understand why these opinions were held. Yet, if the Christian message of salvation is to be relevant, and seem relevant, to all men, then the Church, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, and of Pope Paul in his Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, must look not with censure, but with understanding; she must not condemn those who are away from her, but establish a dialogue with them. And this Pope Paul has done, when in April of 1965 he announced to the world the setting up of a special Secretariat for non-believers, with the specific task of organizing inquiries in various countries, seeking contacts and drawing up norms and directives for the use of Catholics in the dialogue with atheists of all kinds. Hence, it was not a complete surprise for us when a few months ago Pope Paul himself received in audience none other than the President of the Soviet Union.

Nietzsche spoke of the death of God, and the theme became a catchphrase. But it was not Nietzsche's invention, nor should it come as such a shock to Christians, whose faith is based on the death of a person who was God and on his victory over death. But what surprised the ancient world most was not that God was dead, but that, once and for all, he had risen from the dead. God is not dead: He is the most living of all living things. But many false gods must die before man can make his way to the living God.