

MODERN ATHEISM

THE December 1965 issue of a Students' magazine in the United States carried the following obituary notice: 'Atlanta, Ga, Nov. 9: — God, creator of the universe, principal deity of the world's Jews, ultimate reality of Christians, and most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday during major surgery undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence'.¹ This is only one way of expressing a form of current theological atheism that has been gaining ground on both sides of the Atlantic since the end of World War II. 'Is God Dead?' This is the question that is being asked in a vast range of paperbacks and periodical literature today,² and which many people are constantly asking themselves, unless they have already reached the conclusion in their heart of hearts that the answer is 'yes'.

The purpose of this article is not to attempt to give an answer to this question, but rather to ask what such a question means, and why should it have been asked at all. For atheism today is not a philosophical system. It is a world-wide phenomenon. Gone is the time when philosophers and theologians went a long way to uncover the faults in the argumentation of systematic atheists, or to distinguish and subdistinguish between positive and negative atheists, and claiming that positive atheism is an impossibility. It is a fact that there is such a thing as atheism today, even if most atheists have never stopped to ask themselves why they are actually atheists.

Even within Christianity itself, now confidently and in many ways renewing itself in spirit as well as in form, a number of radical theologians are seriously arguing that the churches must accept the fact of God's death unless they want their Christianity to become entirely irrelevant to modern man. Christianity without religion, demythologizing, secular Christianity: these are some of the names and key notions that one comes across in a book like *Honest to God*,³ written not by Nietzsche or Sartre, but by the well known Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson, first published in Great Britain in 1963 and subsequently reprinted at least 12 times since as a paperback, or the considerably larger book

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

² E.g. 'Is God Dead?', *Reader's Digest*, February 1967.

³ John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (SCM Press: London, 1963).

entitled *The Secular City*⁴ by Harvey Cox, of the Harvard School of Divinity. These and other exponents of the death-of-God theology, to signify that a transcendent personal God never really existed except in man's mind, declare that God is now absolutely dead, and yet they propose to carry on and advocate a Christianity without God, as better known theologians, like Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer,⁵ have done before them.

If nothing else, as somebody has well remarked, the Christian atheists are drawing the attention of Christians to the brutal reality that the basic premise of faith – the existence of a personal God, who created the world and sustains it with his love – is now subject to profound attack. Nor would this be hard to prove right. Princeton theologian Paul Ramsey observes that 'ours is the first attempt in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead'.⁶ That this has been more than a mere attempt, or at any rate not exactly an exaggeration, can be readily seen by looking at the world's population today. About one third of the human race today live subject to, or at least greatly influenced by, a brand of totalitarianism that condemns religion as the opium of the masses, which condemnation has stirred some to heroic defence of their faith, but has also driven millions away from any sense of God's existence. And many more in Africa, Asia and S. America seem destined to follow suit, if nothing effective is done to stop the present wave of atheism in the world.

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, atheism is referred to as being among the most serious problems of our age. 'The word atheism', says the Council, 'is applied to phenomena which are quite distinct from one another'.⁷

Atheism then can mean a variety of things. Ignatius Lepp, in his book *Atheism in our time*, says that there are as many brands of atheism as there are atheists.⁸ As I have said at the outset, however, I have not proposed to give a definition of atheism. My objective is rather to try to find out what it is that the atheists reject, and why. We should, of course, add this other question: why is it a problem that the atheist does not believe in God? Evidently, the problem of atheism is not a problem in its own right, but only in the context of some notion of normalcy linked

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (SCM Press: London, 1965).

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (E. Bethge: London, 1953).

⁶ Cf. *Time*, loc. cit.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19.

⁸ Ignace Lepp, *Atheism in Our Time* (Macmillan: New York, 1963), p. 11.

to the believing attitude. Self-conscious atheism is a rather recent phenomenon in Western culture and in mankind in general. Up till recent times, the affirmation of God's existence, one may or another, has been normal, the denial of God the exception. Perhaps the situation will be reversed in the not too distant future, as is perhaps already the case in some countries and some social groups, where the theists rather than the atheists have to account for their position. But, in a historical perspective, theism rather than atheism is the point of departure, and atheism is the newcomer whose emergence and development need to be explained. In this perspective atheism appears as a conscious or unconscious rejection of some elements which were basic to the cultural traditions of the West, which were in fact cultural universals of mankind. According to the conscious atheists, of course, this history of atheism is a story of liberation, the story of how mankind, in its growth towards adulthood, liberated itself from the suffocating religious myths and escapism, notably from the myth of God.

In the light of the foregoing remarks it should be clear that the primary condition for a successful study of atheism is a sufficient knowledge of theism in its different forms and, more specifically, of the form of theism that is rejected, i.e. the theism as it appears to the atheist. A negation takes its meaning only from the idea it opposes. So there could be as many forms of atheism as there are ideas of God to be attacked or denied. 'The true God may be misunderstood and misconceived by a de-based religion that falls to the level of superstition; the idea of God is then changed into an idol, and a religion that is self-contained, self-contended, self-preserving will defend its false God not only against the denial of the rebel, but also against the denial of the iconoclast who, inspired by a purer religion, shatters its clumsy images of the divine'.⁹

There are cases, such as that of Socrates, in which wickedness is added to misunderstanding in the charge of impiety or atheism. This methodology, however, while being the more correct one for an accurate study of the genesis of atheism, would take us far beyond the scope of this article, which is more of an introductory nature in the study of this phenomenon which is modern atheism.

As a world-wide phenomenon, then, modern atheism can be said to have been inaugurated with the 20th century, and more precisely in 1914 when the First World War broke out and with it crumbled the old political

⁹ E. Borne, *Modern Atheism* (Burns and Oates: London, 1961), p. 10

order clearing the way for a new age. This new age was ushered in the month of October of the year 1917, when a young revolutionary by the name of Karl Marx seized a decaying empire and injected a missionary zeal into it. After the Russian revolution, in less than 15 years, Eurasia was for most of its enormous extent conquered for Marxism and became the colossal crucible in which was produced a Communist civilization and an atheistic culture. About a third of mankind, roughly a thousand million souls at that time, endured the tremendous social pressure of a materialism holding all temporal and spiritual power. The state became identified with an atheistic machinery which strictly regulated the inspiration of men's minds and the direction of their consciences; and the ruling party, for which overt atheism was a first requirement, commanded the will of the masses. In the Communist system today no one can reach the dignity of active citizen without professing atheism, implicitly or explicitly, and that little worship which may be allowed from time to time for practical purposes, and the God who is forbidden to come out of Church, are treated as folk-survivals, vestiges of the past which manage to survive into the present, like a decrepit ship stranded on the beach which can never again set out on the deep.¹⁰

This powerful position occupied by atheism today raises some anxious questions. A force is powerful less because of what it has done than because of what it can still do. Communism is an all-embracing creed which, like Islam in earlier centuries, joins in a single battle in order to expand and keep expanding. Its leaders and its followers believe in the infallibility of the Book received from Marx and Lenin, and for its prophecies to be accomplished they believe it is necessary that all men shall one day be Communists. Another third of humanity, another thousand million men and more, are tempted to think of their hope for liberation from their oppressed condition in terms of Marxist ideology. In the liberal countries of the West, if Marxism has miscarried, even if it is sufficiently refuted by economic growth and human progress brought about without revolution, yet the freedom to question a society called capitalist is at once both its unique strength and its greatest weakness. It is lukewarm in its own assertiveness and hesitant in gambling on the future. Communism, insofar as it is so firmly and aggressively established in the world, seems to many to be a proof of at least the practical use-

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 84 f.; cf. also H. Gollwitzer, *Athéisme marxiste et foi chrétienne* (Tournai, 1965); R. Jolivet, *The God of Reason* (Burns and Oates: London, 1963), 118-124; I. Lepp, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-113.

lessness of religion and the temporal efficiency of atheism. And if Marxism goes on expanding, will not history become for many a practical but tremendous proof of the non-existence of God?¹¹

But Communism was not born by spontaneous generation. It opposed Christian civilization from within, at a time when this same civilization had already been stricken by an unseen malady, slow to evolve but latently developing. And as pathology has its own laws, and the stages of a disease follow one another with a recognizable connection between them, so also here we can notice a sort of law of three stages, the substance of which is to be found in most Christian philosophies of history.

The first stage is that of the middle ages, which we may call the 'theocentric' stage. That was a time when even secular life was closely related to God and to religion: human life had no meaning except in terms of God and of its relation to God. In his book entitled *The Death of God*, Gabriel Vahanian, of Syracuse University, suggests that 'Christianity, by imposing its faith on the art, politics and even economics of a culture in the medieval world, unconsciously made God part of that culture — and when the world changed, belief in this God was undermined'.¹²

Modern times are the second or 'anthropocentric' stage. In it man tended to reclaim his autonomy, as it were, and to make himself the centre of things. This is shown in the Renaissance, in the Reformation and in the French Revolution — the three great outbursts characteristic of this age. Man could do without having God at the centre of human life, and in fact man thought he could do without God at all. Man, as a rational animal, was capable of developing a culture without God and of building an ethical system that made as much sense as one based on revelation.

The third stage is our own contemporary era, which, in its turn, is characterized by both irritation with, and destruction of, the modern age. Anthropocentrism, at first respecting God in order to be able to manage man's affairs, shows its true colours and turns against both God and man. This is a time of anti-theism and atheism (against God and, what is worse, without God).

Thus we see that from the 14th to the 20th century the downward process was gradual, and that at every stage it was done in the name of man's freedom and emancipation from any authority and direction from

¹¹ Cf. E. Borne, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹² *Time*, *loc. cit.*

above: thanks to the Nominalists of the 14th century, who introduced fideism into theology and put out the eyes of faith reducing it to a blind certitude; and thanks to the Renaissance humanists who, while learning research into antiquity, invented out of nothing a pagan religion of nature and of the will to power; and thanks to the scientists of the 17th and 18th centuries, who wanted to reserve to man, whose hand was now well aided by machines, the mastery and the possession of a world in which no one recognized or wanted to recognize any trace of God. And these were followed by the philosophers of the enlightenment, whose deism was only a weapon to be used against any trace of supernatural realities. Then we have the French revolutionaries, experts in theorizing about the rights of man, yet deliberately forgetful of the rights of God, and the liberal economists, who under the pretext of not interfering with the free play of impartial laws, gave industrial society a lesson in materialism at its best. All of these heroes and each one of them have found heirs and disciples in our own age: they have helped to build the modern world and prepared the ground for the great triumphs of today's atheism. Whatever their apparent purpose, political or social, religious or humanistic, all the above mentioned revolutions of man's mind derive from the same source: acute anthropocentrism, the rebellion of man usurping the place of God, a rebellion which is best summed up by the word 'secularization'.¹³

So far we have made some philosophy of history; we have attempted to outline the historical background and we have pointed to the sociological causes of modern atheism. In order, however, to understand better the nature of today's atheism, it might be worthwhile to carry our study a little further and try to analyse the more proximate, or what we might call the psychological causes, of contemporary atheism. And these causes, I think, are of three kinds: intellectual, moral and religious.

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

¹³ Cf. H. Cox, *op. cit.*: H. de Lubac, *Le drame de l'athéisme athée* (Paris, 1950); E.L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity* (London, 1965); I. Lepp, *op. cit.*, p. 114 ff.

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 answered: 'I had no need of that hypothesis'.¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ 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

¹⁴ *Time*, loc. cit.

¹⁵ Cf. I. Lepp, *op. cit.*, pp. 141 ff.

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 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,¹⁶ 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 after-life 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*:¹⁷ 'For many centuries the Church has not

¹⁶ J. Lacroix, *The Meaning of Modern Atheism* (Gill & Son: Dublin, 1965).

¹⁷ M. Novak, *The Open Church* (London & New York, 1964); of the same author see also *Belief and Unbelief* (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1966).

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'.¹⁸

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 was: 'God is all that I cannot understand'.¹⁹ 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,

¹⁸ Cf. also I. Lepp, *op. cit.*, p. 190 ff.

¹⁹ *Time*, *loc. cit.*



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.²⁰ 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'.²¹

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

²⁰ Cf. John A.T. Robinson, *op. cit.*; in a subsequent booklet *The New Reformation?* (SCM: London, 1965) Dr. Robinson faces the question, 'Can a truly contemporary person *not* be an atheist?'; cf. 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).

²¹ *Time*, *loc. cit.*

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.

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