

Atheism



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I. The Notion of Atheism

In ancient and modern languages the term "atheism" derives from the Greek *atheótes* , from which we have the Latin *atheismus* (It. *ateismo*, Fr. *athéisme*, Ger. *Atheismus*). As is well-known, the privative "a" in Greek expresses, as it does in Sanskrit, both the denial and deprivation of what is asserted by the noun: *á-theos* therefore means negation of the *theós*, negation of God. And yet, since the relationship of denial takes its meaning from what is denied, atheism can be only be defined on the basis of the idea of [God](#) [2] that is denied, or is intended to be denied, and thus modeling itself accordingly. Maritain correctly writes in *La signification de l'athéisme contemporain* (1949) that those who think not to believe in God, unconsciously believe in it, because that God whose existence they deny, is not God, actually, but something else. Many authors observe that hidden behind the term atheism is often not so much the denial of the true God, but rather the denial of that which God is not and is believed as such. A careful study of the phenomenon of atheism and a more adequate understanding of its different manifestations imposes the need to decipher the image of the God that hides behind this denial, to examine whether it corresponds to the true God or if it is a substitute, or even a disguising of it.

It happened thus, in history, that Socrates was condemned to death for "atheism", for he was guilty of not believing in those gods all citizens believed in (cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, 1,1; Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 23c). In reality, in respect of the gods of the Olympic religion, Socrates recognizes that: "when people tell me such stories about gods, I cannot believe in them" (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6a). And yet he claims to believe in the *daímon* as a sign (Gr. *semēion*) and "divine voice" (Gr. *phoné*), that enters his conscience through God (cf. Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 31c-d); and above all shows, in his teaching, the understanding of God as an intelligence and purpose of the cosmos: "God's wisdom is capable of taking cure of all things" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, 4,17); and is like Providence for man: "Gods have no other concern but taking care of the human beings" (*ibidem*, IV, 3,1-14).

In a similar way, the first Christians are condemned as "atheists" because they do not believe in the pagan gods of the Roman *civitas* (cf. St. Justin, *Apology*, I, 13,1); while they themselves, as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* testifies, adopt a very significant attitude towards atheism: when Polycarp is invited to cry out "away with the atheists," he makes the same accusation against the crowd of pagans in the stadium. Moreover, very soon the Christians consider the pagans that observe religious practices and follow the dictates of moral conscience (just like the philosopher-seekers of the Logos) as "implicit Christians" whereas they later compare the monotheist Jews who refuse Christ to the atheists, to those "without God". In turn, the Jews are accused by the pagans of being "atheists and misanthropists"; the Jews, from their own side, attack the religious syncretism of the pagans with the accusation of "atheism" (cf. Joseph Flavius, *Contra Apionem*, II, 148).

The difficulty in attaining an unequivocal definition of atheism therefore reflects the complexity and diversity of its historical expressions and its multiple interpretations. In the Christian context, moreover, one often tends to attribute the qualification of atheism to the doctrines thought to be heterodox to one's own profession of faith. The "correlative" or "referential" dimension of the idea of atheism remains up until today. If it is true that after the spread of the Christianity in the Western world the term has by and large indicated the denial, especially from the beginning of the modern age, of the God of Israel revealed in [Jesus Christ](#) [3], it must not be forgotten that social, cultural, and traditional factors can exercise a significant influence on the image of the Christian God that is adopted by a particular era. For their part, also the sciences, where these refer to the idea of God (or simply indicate it in some of their philosophical reflections) contribute to moulding such an image, and also indirectly condition, in this way, the understanding and content of the term atheism. In contemporary era, the sociology of religion and the phenomenology of the sacred have seen a tremendous evolution, especially through those characterizations that today define society as being "post-modern," provoking new questions about the nature and classification of belief and unbelief.

II. Plato's Classification and the Materialistic Root of Atheism

1. Plato's Philosophical Reflection on Atheism. The first classification of atheism is attributed to Plato (428-347 B.C.) on the basis of the type of philosophy that is at its core. In Book X of the *Laws*, three forms of atheism are substantially introduced: the first consists of the pure and simple denial of divinity; the second is the denial not of divinity, but of its providence towards humankind; the third one is the denial of the belief that the behavior of divinity can be conditioned by us with our sacrifices and offerings. The Platonic assertion that it is not fitting of the divine nature to let itself be corrupted by gifts, and that it is instead more consistent for it to always act with justice, must be seen precisely in relation to this third form of atheism, that is against the pretext of bending the wishes of gods by means of human sacrifices. Plato then considers human arrogance (Gr. *hybris*) of dominating the divinity as a sort of magic. They are the first two forms of atheism considered by Plato that deserve great attention, because

they are still current.

For Plato, the first form of atheism coincides with [materialism](#) [4], a doctrine according to which matter constitutes the only truth, and as such precedes and conditions the intelligible, spiritual and divine (cf. *Laws*, X, 891a-892b). The error of materialism thus consists, for Plato, in reducing the [soul](#) [5], and the "principle of all beings," to a material reality. Such error is common to all the Pre-Socratic philosophers or naturalists, because they see in a "natural," and therefore "material," principle the origin of all things, making of it a divine truth (water for Thales, air for Anaximenes, fire for Heraclitus, the four elements of earth-water-air-fire for Empedocles, the atoms for Democritus and Leucippus); here we are dealing with metaphysical atheism, because, for Plato, to deny the truth of the intelligible and super-sensible world is equivalent to denying the divine. According to him, materialism is thus, metaphysically, the most radical denial of God and the divine as spiritual realities. The discovery of the super-sensible and intelligible world, the fruit of the famous "second navigation" (cf. *Phaedo*, 79a; 96a), as well as the clearest acknowledgement of the spiritual nature of human soul, constitutes for Plato the only possible refutations of materialistic atheism. Some materialist philosophers, however, did not reach the point of denying the truth of the divine. It is the case of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), a follower of Democritean materialism. He recognizes the reality of the gods, but nonetheless proposes to ignore them, to avoid the fear of death and because the gods are truly "indifferent" to the fate of man. Even though his is a materialistic philosophy, Epicurus believes in the gods, as Cicero also testifies: "Epicurus believes that gods exist, because some excellent nature must exist, one that nothing could be better than it" (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 17, 46).

The same can be said of some religions and religious philosophies of the East, but also of some from the West, that do not possess a clear conception of the difference between matter and the spirit, between the body and the soul, the world and God -whose distinction, on the contrary, represents the main conquest of Greek metaphysics, in particular that of Plato and Aristotle- and therefore support, as Pre-Socratic philosophers did before them, various forms of pantheism. As for the Eastern religious philosophies, there are various materialistic schools, known in India as Carvaka or Nastika (from *na-asti*, that means does not exist); similar to Buddhism, to Jainism, to Sankhya and Mimamsa, they do not recognize the existence of God, in the Western sense of the term, though they are basically a denial of the *Karma*, that is, of moral responsibility as the cause of reward or punishment in another existence. As for Hinduism and Chinese Taoism, in all these cases one speaks more of pantheism rather than atheism. In the West various schools of pantheism have also sprung up: from Scotus Eriugena to the School of Chartres, to the Renaissance *ilozoism* of Pomponazzi and Telesio, to the "Infinite" of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600): "I say the universe all-infinite... I say God all-infinite... and I say God totally infinite, because all of Him is in all the world and in each part of it infinitely and totally" (*De l'infinito universo et mundi*, 1584). Similar considerations are made speaking of the "unique substance," that is, the *Deus sive natura* of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the author of *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* (1677) and of *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670); and also concerning the notion of God conceived as the moral order of the world by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), in his *Philosophical Journal of Jena* (1798). These religious philosophies certainly fail to appreciate the transcendental reality of God as distinct from the world, but do not go as far as the absolute denial of the divine; they rather identify God with nature, the cosmos, the soul of the world, the life of the universe, in particular in its intelligent expressions. It must be said that they are, in fact, various forms of [pantheism](#) [6], but not of "atheism". When in these religious philosophies the idea of a "divine being" is present, the concept of a personal God is, however, always absent, just like that of a transcendental Absolute, the provident Creator and the ultimate end of all things.

2. The Materialistic Philosophical Root of Atheism. From the theoretical point of view, the Platonic interpretation of materialism as the principal source of atheism is still valid today. Ancient and modern

atheism, in fact, have drawn their reasons from, and found their philosophical foundations in, the materialistic conception of truth. Ancient atheism found its theoretical strength in the atomistic materialism of Democritus (ca. 460-360 B.C.) as can be seen in Evemerus of Messina (IV-III C. B.C.) and Filodemus of Gadara (110-35 B.C.); the Latin poet Lucretius (98-54 B.C.), a follower of Democritean materialism, professed a refined atheism in the context of a pessimistic vision of human life and destiny. Although the attribution of atheism to the poet Diagoras of Melo (475-415 B.C.) seems dubious -Diagoras was named by Teodorus of Cyrene as *the* "Atheist" of antiquity- he too was a supporter of Democritean materialism and denied divine providence (cf. Del Noce, 1964, p. 17). The identification of atheism and materialism has been proposed in the Modern Age by George Berkeley (1685-1753), who, in order to assert the existence of God, supports the unreality of matter. In his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), the Irish philosopher clearly shows how materialism constitutes the philosophical foundation of atheism. Actually, both the Enlightenment and 18th Century materialism have their basis in the idea of matter as the universal causal principle. In his work *Histoire naturelle de l'ame* (1745), Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709-1751) considers all psychic phenomena as a product of a pure material nature and hypothesizes that God is of no use for the practical life of human beings. Followers of the materialism of de La Mettrie include thinkers such as [Denis Diderot](#) [7] (1713-1784), author of *De l'interprétation de la nature* (1744), Francois-Marie Aruet, known as Voltaire (1694-1778), author of the famous *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1753), Pierre-Louis Moreau Maupertuis (1698-1759), author of the *Essai de cosmologie* (1750), Claude Adrien Helvetius (1715-1771), author of the *De l'esprit* (1758) and of the posthumous work *Le vrai sens du système de la nature* (1774), Paul Heinrich Dietrich von Holbach (1725-1789), author of *Le système de la nature* (1770), Jean-Baptiste Robinet (1735-1820), to whom we owe *De la nature* (1761-1766) and *Considérations philosophiques de la gradation naturelle des formes de l'être* (1768).

From the naturalist materialism professed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment derive other forms of materialism of the 19th and 20th Century, enriched by various connotations: the psychophysical materialism of Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887); the monistic materialism of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828-1893); the evolutionist and positivist materialism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and Roberto Ardigò (1828-1920); the dialectic materialism of Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and Vladimir Il'ic Lenin (1870-1924), author of the famous paper *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909). In *Nuovo Saggio sull'origine delle idee* (1851), Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) showed how "all materialistic arguments against God rely upon a confusion between *impression* and *sensation*, which fails in distinguishing as these notions oppose each other" (V, c. 16, a. 3); while in his work *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (1868), Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1875) leads a still current criticism of the supposed scientific foundations of materialism.

Regarding the second form of atheism pointed out by Plato, that which denies divine providence, the Greek philosopher supported that "as they are good and virtuos, gods take care of all things, because this is highly consistent with their nature" (*Laws*, X, 899d). The argument on what is "consistent" "in keeping" "worthy," of the divine nature had been already carried out by Xenophanes, founder of the Eleatic school, wrongly considered to be an exponent of ancient atheism, because he criticized the anthropomorphism of the Olympic religion that attributed to the gods repugnant actions which did not befit God, whom he considered as "One, God, the greatest one among gods and humans, unlike to all mortals, unlike to their intelligence" (Diels-Kranz, 21B, fr. 23). The denial of divine providence will always be the origin of "pessimistic atheism." Euripides (480-406 B.C.), who observed that many nations, devoted to the gods, are dominated by an impious authority and enslaved, then exclaimed: "Who can affirm are there gods in the Heaven? Certainly there are none!" (*Fragment of Bellerofont*, n. 286). For Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), author of *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), as well as

for Voltaire in *Candide* (1759), we live in the worst of possible worlds that exclude, on principle, the existence of a provident and loving God. For Schopenhauer, unhappiness, evil, and disorder of the world, are the strong and unsurpassable reasons that prevent us from asserting the existence of a personal and provident God, postulated by theistic visions.

III. Humanistic Atheism and its Nihilistic Outcome

1. From Feuerbach to Nietzsche. "Humanistic atheism" is based on the supposition, formulated by Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804-1872), that God and religion are no more than projections of the essence of the human being, more precisely, his/her universal conscience. The choice of atheism, thus, would be a choice in favour of us as humans over that which represented our denial, that is, God. In order to assert ourselves, we must deny God, taking back what belongs to us. The Hegelian left, Marxism in particular, would develop the theses of Feuerbach with an antireligious tone, seeing in atheism the preliminary condition necessary for the fulfilment of human society. The myth of Prometheus, punished and chained to a rock by the gods because he had stolen their fire and given it to men, becomes the emblem of humanistic atheism. For this reason is also referred to as "Promethean humanism," which for some authors becomes a pretext of an "atheistic humanism," and so in some way reiterates the suspicion that was hidden in the myth: that of the "envy of the gods" towards human goodness. This was a suspicion that Plato had already tried to demolish by asserting that God: "He was good and free from all envy, and precisely for that he wanted that all things were similar to him" (*Timaeus*, 29e); but one that the modern poet Goethe transforms into a sense of revolt against God, when his *Prometheus* says: "I am here, and I create the human beings in my image and likeness, a genus like me, made to suffer and cry, to joy and delight, not to take care of you, as I do."

In his works *The Principle of Hope* (1959) and in *Atheism in Christianity* (1968), Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), a Marxist educated author, supports the idea that humanistic atheism is the heir of the true religion, that values humanity: he sees an atheistic aspect in Christianity (the denial of the oppression of man by God), and a religious aspect in Marxism (negation of God oppressor of man).

More subtle, and fraught with consequences, it is the denial of God formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche holds that God and religion are "our longest lie," a lie devised by human charity for man to survive and give meaning to the drama of personal existence and to history, so as to defend humanity from the uncontrollable powers of nature and destiny. The "death of God," formulated by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1885), thus constitutes the death of a lie, so that the human beings can finally live in truth. It is a truth that commits man to living without God. It is not by chance that Nietzsche speaks about a "Superman," which scholars today tend to interpret as the figure of man who is capable of giving a meaning to his existence without turning to God, as the ultimate aim and global horizon of meaning (cf. Bodei, 2001). Due to the radical fragility of man, of which Nietzsche himself is clearly aware, the Superman is a tragic figure destined from the very start to fall, bound to the meaninglessness of the absolute nothing: "God is dead! --Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*-- God remains dead! And it is we who have killed him [...] Are we not wandering around as if across a great, infinite nothingness? Can we not feel the breath of the void? Is it not colder? Are we not, more and more, in one unending, ever darker night?"

In a similar way to Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) interprets religion as an illusion that uselessly tries to satisfy the desire of the father, rooted in humanity in an atavistic way. Freeing oneself from the obsession of the father means beginning to walk towards a mature personal existence, just as freeing oneself from the obsession of God means liberating oneself towards an adult and conscious humanity:

"Man cannot remain a child," he writes in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). In *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), and above all in *Moses and Monotheism* (1934-38), Freud claims that religion is a "mass neurosis" for humanity, even if the explanation that he offers remains totally unsatisfactory.

2. *Atheistic Existentialism as an Attempt of Humanism without God: Sartre and Camus.* Echoing the atheistic anthropocentric turning point of Feuerbach and Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) claims in his work *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951) that if God exists, man is nothing; if man exists... then God is dead. But in contrast of the God of Nietzsche, Sartre's God is an "absent God," because human beings "desire to be God," they have a "passion to be God," but since the idea of God is contradictory for Sartre, we get lost uselessly. Man thus remains "a useless passion" as will be inexorably sanctioned in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In the awareness of this negative truth, a defeatist attitude does not follow, but rather a greater commitment to one's own existence: God does not exist, we must decide the meaning of existence on our own: "If God does not exist, we alone have to decide the meaning of being" (*Cahier pour une moral*, Paris 1983, p. 502). The "atheistic existentialism" that Sartre ends up professing, would, deep down, show the choice of human existence against the absolute being of God, and the knowledge that "we are ethically condemned to be free" and "to have the total responsibility for our own existence" (cf. *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris 1946, p. 37). In *The Devil and the Good Lord*, God himself is the accused in the drama of human existence. The character of Goetz, who first committed evil and then good, guided only by his freedom, and without God intervening to save the victims of his crimes, shows God as a silent spectator, indifferent to the dramatic events of human life. For this reason he receives a sentence without any appeal. "God is the silence. God is the absence. God is the loneliness of men." Man is alone in a desert, God remains silent and distant, and this, for Sartre, is a sign of His absence and indifference. "I was asking all time --Goetz exclaims in *The Devil and the Good Lord*-- what might I be to God's eyes. And now I know the answer: Nothing. Look at this hole above our heads: It is God."

Also for Albert Camus (1913-1960), if God exists then everything depends on him, and we cannot do anything against his will. If he does not exist, everything depends on us, and so it is up to us only to give meaning to things and to our lives. There is something tragic in this effort of desperately wanting to find -in the case where God is absent- a meaning of existence, and in fact the task is even harder because of the lack of certainties, consolatory refuges and religious alibis. Camus sketches in Doctor Rieux, the main character of the novel *The Plague* (1947), a sort of saintly lay figure who tries to be more in solidarity with the defeated than with the saints, someone who fights plague for the good of others beyond all hope and all expectation of heavenly reward. Doctor Rieux wants to fight against Creation as it is, maintaining that, in the face of a plague that destroys a happy city world order is ruled by death, perhaps it is better for God that no-one believes in him, but rather fights against death without turning one's eyes towards the heaven in which he stays silent. And yet all this is in the knowledge that revolt against the absurdity of the existence is a useless revolt -as it appears in the works *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1944) and *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951). If Camus accuses God of being "the father of death" and a "supreme scandal," he still proposes the moral of he who acts in the name of some value, one perceived in a somewhat confusing way, but nevertheless, one he shares with all mankind. This is the moral of those who do not find rest in God nor in history, those who are striving for living in favor of those who cannot live, people humiliated as they are.

André Gide (1869-1951) too, after a sort of conversion from faith to atheism, wrote that man had to become, for his fellow man, providence and the hands of God, in order to compensate for God's absence (cf. *Dieu, fils de l'homme*, 1944; *Tesée*, 1946). In Gide, as in contemporary unbelief, there is no controversial opposition to the metaphysical or theological idea of God, but an invitation to live "as if God did not exist" in the awareness that this choice demands much more virtue than that witnessed by

those who "passively" place their trust in divine Providence. Gide contrasts "religious sanctity" with the bare responsibility of those who can love purely, without any hope of reward or prize.

The discussion is therefore about authors who choose atheism, erroneously claiming it as the necessary premise for the freedom of the human being and as the only possible answer to the "silence of God" towards a humanity left to its own devices. Thus, humanity would be engaged, alone and without God, in giving a meaning to its own existence. It is as if the phrase that Fëdor Dostoevskij (1821-1881) puts in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880): "If God does not exist, everything is possible" had been turned upside down by the various streams of humanistic atheism, now assuming the meaning that everything would be possible, and not only evil, for a human being that has lost God but has not lost the will to construct his or her own existence in solidarity with others. It is, however, a Utopia destined to the most tragic failure, as Sartre himself recognizes in *The Devil and the Good Lord*: once God has been killed, I will remain alone, with this empty heaven above my head, as there is no other way to be in relation to the others. Dostoevskij himself had clearly foreseen the failure of humanistic and "solidarity" atheism. Kirillov, the famous character of *The Devils* (1872), says that man invented God just to live without suiciding himself, conveying the idea that it remains impossible to find a meaning for life without God. Radical atheism, which by now had developed into nihilism, finds in the apology of suicide its outcome; in order to testify to the truth of atheism, Kirillov will choose to kill himself. But in the very character of Kirillov, Dostoevskij outlines an unknown union between atheism and faith, in the sense that beyond atheism there can only be faith. This is also the thesis of Leszek Kolakowski, for whom the absence of God, provoked by atheism demolishes and defrauds of significance all that that we are and all that that we love to think of the essence of the human being (cf. *Religion: If there is no God*, 1982), confirming the prophetic expression of Jeremiah: "Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh" (*Jer* 17:5).

IV. Forms of Atheism in Culture and Science

Besides the materialist root and that which would follow an immanent anthropocentrism, asserted as a Prometheic independence from God, atheism assumes additional forms and classifications. Referring the reader to other works that offer an historical perspective of atheism and provide accurate analyses of it (see especially the four volumes edited by Girardi, 1967-1970; but also Del Noce, 1964; Sciacca, 1964; Fabro, 1968; bibliographic documentation in English is available in Stein, 1990), I wish here to focus on some aspects that are of major interest for the scope of this Encyclopedia.

1. Skeptical Atheism and Non-Belief. The terminology "skeptical atheism" refers to a form of atheism whose deepest roots are in the refusal to accept those mythological (or also philosophical) ideas that attribute to the divinity a number of qualities that generate, by themselves, skepticism and incredulity. Carneades (214-129 B.C.) points out the difficulties found by philosophical thought when speaking of divinity. The existence of the gods, he says, implies that they are alive, therefore capable of pleasure and pain, quiet and agitation "and thus they are mortals" (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos*, IX, 139-140) Similar arguments are put forward by David Hume (1711-1776), who in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779, posthumous) claims that it is meaningless to query the cause of the world in its totality. If the world, that is, the effect, is imperfect and finite, then the Cause would also have to be imperfect and finite. But if the divinity shows itself to be imperfect and finite, then there is no reason to recognize it as unique.

Hume's skepticism, that heralds the agnosticism of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who will exert a great influence over a good part of scientific thought, is the basis of "religious incredulity." Without wishing to

avoid the "problem" of God, incredulity means that we are not able to find valid reasons to assert God or to believe in Him. Both in the *Dialogues* and in *An Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals* (1751), Hume declares that belief can never have a degree of absolute certainty and therefore it is not possible, on this basis, to claim the existence of God. Based on the impossibility of finding valid reasons to believe, such an atheism is not, however, an absolute atheism, and Hume must be defined as a skeptic or an agnostic rather than an atheist. In fact, the absolute atheism of non-belief demands a belief in atheism, thus resulting -also in the context of Hume's reasoning- in equal probability regarding belief itself. This is what was highlighted by F. Jeanson in *La Foi d'un incroyant* (Paris 1963), emphasizing moreover how a believer's "faith" is not the same as Hume's "belief."

2. *"Cultural" Atheism*. A recent form of atheism is that which we could define as the "atheism of culture." Its premises are again based on the anthropocentric position of Feuerbach: God is the mirror of man, from which it follows that *homo homini Deus est*. The truth of the religious cult would therefore be [culture](#) [8], now understood not as a natural opening up to the life of the spirit and an expression of its manifestations, but rather and foremost a mere deciphering and demystification of religious illusion. Anthropology here becomes the truth of theology, and culture the truth of religion, in a theoretical perspective in which atheism presents itself as culture, and culture as religion -since culture is essentially critical of religious illusion. Culture ceases to be the transcendent expression and a spiritual request, and it takes the role of a "religious" answer to human questions about the human being. According to various theorists of culture, the enormous influence of human sciences (anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychoanalysis, etc.), from the 19th century onwards has often implied this form of atheism.

The "archaeology of knowledge" of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is proposed as a final and radical demystification of every theistic-theological illusion, in which the *arché* of the *lógos*, that is, culture, is understood as a definitive erasing of God. Human sciences, from psychoanalysis to ethnology, assume the function of "interpreting" the truth of human person that had come until now from metaphysics and theology. Gilles Deleuze (b. 1925) and Pierre-Felix Guattari (1930-1992) would write in *Anti-Edipus* (1972) that with respect to God it is both impossible and indifferent to affirm or to deny him, to live of him or to kill him. In a similar way, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) says that the truth of meaning is absurdity (cf. *Ecrits*, 1965). Jacques Derrida (1930-1999) would claim that every text consists in the deconstruction of the text itself (cf. *L'écriture et la différence*, 1967): the meaning of the text, and therefore culture, is that of being without meaning, because it is lacking in every unifying sense of [truth](#) [9]. Claude Levi-Strauss (b. 1908), in *Tristes tropiques* (1955), maintains that even from the anthropological point of view, human culture is only the expression of relationships without an objective meaning. Nihilism, in the form of significance without meaning, and of a text without meaning, is the most recent form of the atheism of culture.

In relation to atheism in culture, forms of "religious atheism" also appear to be making inroads in recent times. These emerge in the context of a post-modern and post-metaphysical culture in the form of belonging to a "Sacred anonymity," that is placed not only beyond every conceptualization of God, but also beyond all religious relationships with the personal "you" of God. One wishes thus to explicitly withdraw from every connection with a historical religious tradition, first of all from biblical Revelation. This is a form of "religion without God" that cohabits with (and in a certain sense claims) the denial of the "great narrations," those of being and of history. It accurately avoids every reference to strong foundational traditions and to exercises of thought that could result, or claim, to be theoretically cogent for reason (cf. J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, 1979; H. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 1979). In such a cultural context there is ample room for new polytheism, adaptable to the new needs of contemporary societies (cf. O. Marquard, *Lob des Polytheismus*, 1979). Alternative "narrations" and substitutive visions of the cosmos are then introduced, that use the myths of the past to

replace foundational traditions and moral inheritance of religions, especially the Judaeo-Christian one.

3. Does Scientific Atheism Exist? From the inheritance of the exaltation of Reason brought about by the Enlightenment throughout the 19th century and for a good part of the 20th century, progressively we see the common belief that science and its progress constitutes one of the most important causes of modern and contemporary atheism. In particular, two areas for discussion are highlighted: the first is questioning whether scientific thought, in order to remain faithful to itself, should in some way postulate atheism as a condition of a true awareness; the second concerns the idea that technical-scientific progress could substitute the demands and expectations whose answers human beings were used to ask to God.

If the latter area has brought about the debate on humanistic and secularising meaning of [progress](#) [10], the former, methodological in character, has instead collected the confluence of two important streams of thought: [reductionism](#) [11] (in the physical-biological level), that privileged analysis as primary methodology to know nature, and analytical philosophy (in the logic-mathematical level), that connected knowledge itself to precise rules of language. Both, then, fed on Kant's gnoseological view, which recognized the room for the notion of God to ground the imperatives of practical reason, but denied the possibility to have any access to this notion in the level of rationally-founded knowledge, an area which exclusively concerned the "a-priori synthetic judgments" of physical-mathematical sciences.

19th Century philosophy has spoken of "semantic atheism," under whose label we indicate all those philosophical positions that considered any statement or discussion about God as "meaningless" (namely, "without any meaning"), in as far as this notion belongs to a metaphysical-type language and, as such, it is not verifiable by the canons of scientific language, the only one able to establish what is "true" or "false." According to Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), a representative of the Neo-Positivist logic of the Vienna Circle and author of *The Overcoming of Metaphysics through the Analysis of Language* (*Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache* , 1933), the philosophy of language shows how the word "god" could still have a meaning in the mythical and primitive cultures, which established, or thought they established, an existential relationship between humans and the deity; but such a meaning was destroyed by metaphysics itself, while wishing to think of God only in conceptual terms without establishing any living relationship with him, it ended by transforming the discourse about God into a discourse "without meaning." When compared with the criteria that are at the basis of scientific definitions, the definitions of metaphysics turn out to be merely "pseudo-definitions." The term "God," claims Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989), in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), does not have a universally recognizable meaning. For this reason, semantic atheism not only refuses the possibility of a philosophical answer to the question on God, but also the value of "linguistic meaning" of every question concerning God. However, a philosophical demonstration that such a formulation does not necessarily lead to an atheistic position is that provided by the path followed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who was explicitly opposed to the classic Neo-Positivist position (RUSSELL, V).

It must be observed, however, that scientific thought is undoubtedly exposed, more than others, to two "temptations." The first is that the study of [matter](#) [12] --according to the more sensitive and empirical aspects evoked by this term, which is nevertheless the proper object of science-- renders science more vulnerable to the attraction of materialism, thus favoring a reductive vision of the whole of reality. And any materialistic view of reality, in the present as in the past, continues to strongly offer a conceptual base for the "choice" of atheism. Secondly, the all-encompassing and unifying vision of science, reinforced by the spread and depth of contemporary scientific research, pushes it to coining models that pretend to exhaustively represent the entire reality, to the point of trying to explain the ultimate causes and foundations of being, thus replacing the foundational narrations traditionally provided by religion. Nevertheless, both temptations offer important elements to discern between "scientific thought" and

"scientism" (or scientist culture), as Etienne Gilson already outlined some time ago. Bringing to light the inevitable role of [mythology](#) [13] in the relationship between science and religion, the French thinker pointed out that conflicts arise when both turn to images and representations which, in the attempt to organize their own knowledge, run the risk of distancing themselves from reality (the real world for science, the same real world and the true God for religion). They can compose their contrasts only when they both make an effort to uphold a realistic, and no longer an idealistic, knowledge of nature. "All that science can do is to reinvigorate our mythologies; true religious faith is not interested in such a process for itself. The religious minds are accustomed to thinking that scientific revolutions do not regard religious truth at all. That the world of the creation is that of Ptolemy, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, of Einstein, in expectation of becoming that of some other, is not a worry for religious conscience. As an expert of many crises, even the untutored believer is used to the idea that the universe that God has created is in all ways that of science, at least to the extent in which the latter is also the real universe" (Gilson 1979, pp. 37-38).

If atheism is present in the world of science, it is not there as a specific factor of scientific knowledge, but, rather, as the existential situation of some people who make science; nor this existential situation is dictated necessarily by that knowledge. It does not seem suitable to speak, in the strictest sense, of "scientific atheism," although the adjective "scientific" has been historically used underlying its atheist meaning and, not by chance, as a precise qualifier for "materialism." Actually, atheism in science takes the qualifier of "scientism," but not all scientists are "scientist" (that is, people who endorse scientism). Nor are all "scientists" researchers in science, although it is commonly thought that the two overlap, and that science is today in a position to answer questions that were religious ones in the past. In reality, it is more pertinent to state that contemporary science seems to have favored religious questions to rise again in our culture, and without necessarily responding to them in an atheistic fashion. However, scientists' reflections, especially those presented in science popularization, should avoid shaping inappropriate or even false images of [God](#) [2], that end up conditioning the debate between belief and unbelief. Sociological inquiries on belief among scientists show contrasting indicators, often difficult to interpret: in any case, a certain consensus exists on the fact that science does not have to be considered a factor in the growth in atheism, nor is the activity of the scientist synonymous with postulatory atheism (cf. Poupard, 1982, Ardigò e Garelli, 1989-1990).

V. Human Suffering and the Denial of God

It must not be forgotten that contemporary atheism is shaped above all as reaction to the scandal of evil in the world (see above, III.2). "God and Birkenhau cannot go together," wrote Elie Wiesel, an Auschwitz survivor. "How to reconcile the Creator with the destruction by fire of one million Jewish children? I have read the answers, the hypotheses, I have read the theological solution offered: the question remains question. As for answers, there are none; there ought to be none" (E. Wiesel, *Foreword*, in *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust*, edited by A.J. Peck, Philadelphia 1982, p. X). The suffering of the innocent has been and still is the hardest difficulty for belief in God: "Why am I suffering? This is the rock of atheism," says Georg Büchner in his drama *Danton's Death*. Faced with the agony of a 12-year old boy, Doctor Rieux's reply to Father Paneloux in *The Plague* of Camus is: "No, Father, I have another idea of love. And I will refuse forever to love a creation in which innocent children are tortured." Dostoevskij puts a similar phrase in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov: "But here, however are the children, and what am I going to do with them? [...]. If everyone must suffer in order with their suffering to purchase eternal harmony, what do young children have to do with it, tell me, please? [...]. I do not want harmony, out of a love for mankind I do not want it [...]. It isn't God I don't accept, Alyosha, it's just his ticket that I most respectfully return to him" (tr. by D. McDuff, London 1993, pp. 280-282).

In *Night*, Elie Wiesel recalls the hanging of a child: "For more than half an hour he was agonizing before our eyes, fighting between the life and the death." The prisoners ask themselves: "Where is God, the good God?". Where is the goodness of God in the face of the suffering of an innocent child? Wiesel does not reply, like Camus, with a "revolt" nor, like Ivan Karamazov, with the refusal to understand, but with the attempt of a religious intuition, capable of reading a deeper truth in the face of God. "Where is, then, God? --Wiesel continues in his essay *Night*-- I heard a voice inner to me answering: "Where is He? He is there, hanging." It is God that is hanged, God that suffers with us and in us. For Wiesel, this is the only answer to the absence and silence of God, that, just as in the *Book of Job*, have made vain the answers of the metaphysical theodicy to the issues of suffering and evil.

For Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), if a metaphysical psychoanalysis of the modern world were made, one would discover that at the core of its revolt against God, and then of its indifference, there is a "Zeus-like" image of divinity, impassive in the face of the suffering of its creatures. The mystery of evil and suffering is, with all its sharp spikes, within the heart of man "in revolt," as a sort of spiritual despair which move humans apart from God and sometimes push them against him. Many Christians, writes the French thinker, "on the one hand have in their heads a vague idea [...] that God is Love, and on the other hand think that He is not like a Father [...], but like an Emperor of this world: a Tyrant-Dramatist who would himself be the first to committ all the world's sins and the one responsible for all world's misery, for the concession of erring that would precede our errors, a misery to which he would abandon his creatures, from the very beginning, leaving them to their own devices" (J. Maritain, *Approches sans entraves*, Paris 1973, pp. 85-86).

According to some intuitions of Léon Bloy, Raïssa Maritain confirms in some way the intuition of Wiesel --that the suffering of the innocent is understandable only in the light of a God that suffers in the suffering of man. "Neither theology, nor Aristotle admit this union of suffering and happiness... But our God is a crucified God; the happiness of whom he cannot be deprived, has not prevented him fearing, moaning, or sweating blood in inexpressible agony, nor to complain on the cross, nor to feel abandoned!" For this, Raïssa concludes, "there needs to be something in the impenetrable Essence which corresponds to our reality, without sin, and the succession of human torments is nothing other than a dark reflection of the inexpressible contrasts of light [...]. These 'inexpressible contrasts of light,' this kind of glory of suffering, that perhaps here correspond on the earth to the suffering of the innocent, the tears of children, certain excesses of humiliation and misery that the heart almost cannot accept without scandal; and that, when the figure of this enigmatic world has passed away, will appear at the top of the Beatitudes" (*Les Grandes Amitiés*, Paris 1966, pp. 168-169).

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), John Paul II also faces the problem of evil and its "justification" in the face of non-belief. The reply that God gives to human suffering is not an answer of a theoretical and merely conceptual character, but rather that of a truth that becomes a person, and shows, in the scandalous reality of a God that suffers, God's solidarity with the suffering of every human being. "How could God have permitted so many wars, concentration camps, the Holocaust? Is the God who allows all this still truly Love, as Saint John proclaims in his First Letter? Indeed, is He just with respect to His creatures? Doesn't He place too many burdens on the shoulders of individuals? [...] Obviously, one response could be that God does not need to justify Himself to man. It is enough that He is omnipotent. From this perspective everything He does or allows must be accepted. This is the position of the biblical Job. But God, who besides being Omnipotence is Wisdom and -to repeat once again- Love, desires to justify Himself to mankind. He is not the Absolute that remains outside of the world, indifferent to human suffering. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, a God who shares man's lot and participates in his destiny. This brings to light another inadequacy, the completely false image of God that the Enlightenment accepted

uncritically. [...] If suffering is present in the history of humanity, one understands why His omnipotence was manifested in the *omnipotence of humiliation on the Cross*. The scandal of the Cross remains the key to the interpretation of the great mystery of suffering, which is so much a part of the history of mankind" (pp. 61-63). Omnipotence and humiliation are still mysteriously conjugated in the amazing experience of the transfiguration of suffering and the sufferer, a part of the answer that Christian tradition has offered to the problem of evil, and summarized by St. Paul's testimony: "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2Cor 12,10). Therefore, in nature perfected by the gift of grace, many believers can face pain and contradiction not with simple resignation, but almost as response to a vocation, a sign of a fuller identification with Christ.

VI. Some Interpretations of Atheism: Jacques Maritain, Cornelio Fabro, Augusto Del Noce, Etienne Gilson

Atheism was a phenomenon unknown to pre-Christian world, taking a precise configuration of its own, in a prominent way, in the Modern Age. It is the complexity of the modern era, with the presence of its various scientific, philosophical, ethical, political, economic and religious components that defines the articulation of atheism in a specific way; and above all with its claims of autonomy in various fields of knowledge and action -autonomy that is seen now as opposed to the religious world-view typical of the Christian Middle Ages.

Realizing that behind such a phenomenon was hidden a change of the human mind towards the world, a change of our minds towards ourselves and our ethical and religious values, Maritain proposes in his work *La signification de l'athéisme contemporain* (1949) to discover the spiritual meaning hidden in the present agony of the world. Before considering the philosophical content present in the various forms of atheism, Maritain attempts to characterize who are the "atheist" subjects, that he distinguishes as: a) "practical atheists," who think they believe in God, but in reality do not, because they are only concerned with the world, power and money; b) "pseudo-atheists," who instead think they do not believe in God, but who unconsciously believe in him, since that which they deny is not God; c) "absolute atheists," who not only deny God, but also act, in thought and deed, against God. From the point of view of the philosophical content he recognizes: a) a "negative atheism," that replaces the idea of God with the assertion of absolute freedom (the libertines of the 17th Century) or with a nihilistic choice (like Kirillov in Dostoevskij's *The Devils*); b) a "positive atheism" that positively fights against religion, regarded as an obstacle to the affirmation of a set of new values supported by modernity (the tragic atheism of Nietzsche, the existentialist atheism of Sartre and Camus, the revolutionary atheism of Marxism). Maritain's conclusion is that, all in all, contemporary atheism is "absolute," because it denies God, and "positive," because it involves all of the human being in a fight against God and religion. For its burden of uncompromising protest and its demand for total acceptance, atheism is a type of "reverse faith," that assumes the character of a religious phenomenon: with their sincerity and self-denial, the authentic and absolute atheist is nothing more than a failed saint and an aborted revolutionary.

In his *God in Exile. A Study of the Internal Dynamic of Modern Atheism* (1964), an in-depth analysis of the philosophical roots of atheism, Cornelio Fabro (1911-1997) establishes its origin in the "principle of immanence" introduced by the Cartesian *cogito*, which, expelling being from the conscience, has unavoidably and consequently lead to the elimination of God as the subsistent Being, and, therefore, to atheism. "The indifferent neglect of being, heralded by Cartesian *cogito*, has led, as was inevitable, to the loss of Absolute. It has left man to wander, an aimless nomad, within the confines of a world that lowers around him as a deadly menace. In our day, science has succeeded for the first time in fathoming the

forces hidden in the heart of the atom and has even now harnessed these forces for a noisy invasion of the immemorial quiet of deep space. Yet, never has man been so painfully aware of the imminent threat that his civilization may vanish utterly, that the human race itself may be destroyed; indeed, the very impetus given modern man by his mastery of the forces of the universe has pushed him to the verge of the void; chaos may erupt at any moment from a will that is no longer anchored in objective truth nor bridled by it. And contemporary thought, by making nothingness the ground of being, has wrenched from man's mind all objective tether. The eruption of this active void in the very core of man's mind has sent shock waves far beyond the area of a philosophy drained of the living God: literature, art, politics and the whole complex of the social and psychological disciplines have banished the true God from their field of vision. In ages past, God was the mainstay of the founders of civilization and the champions of freedom. They saw him as the Father of mankind and the one sure refuge in times of doubt and grief" (Fabro, 1968, p. XLI). Since contemporary atheism wholly eliminates the God of transcendence in the name of human conscience, and therefore of a totally autonomous "freedom," Fabro qualifies it as a "radical humanism," or rather "humanistic atheism" or "atheistic humanism" (see above, III.2). In contrast to the atheism of the Enlightenment, which was the reserve of intellectual elites and had a predominantly destructive character in comparison to religion, the characteristics of humanistic atheism is that of its having become, by reason of its pervasiveness and its plan to affirm the human leaving God aside, "mass atheism" and "constructive atheism." According to Fabro, such atheism operates at various cultural levels: "phenomenological atheism" (human conscience establishes itself as merely "nothingness" and expels God); "psychological atheism" (that refuses God because it does not see him as an object of psychological intuition); "pedagogical or didactic atheism" (that excludes the possibility that God takes part in the educational and formative training of human beings); "methodological atheism" (the exclusion of the hypothesis of God in the systematic understanding of the world). In reality, the latter is a philosophical position, but it exercises a great influence in the scientific arena. It transforms a methodological prescription, whose character would be confined to the sphere of empirical objects, into a more general ontological conclusion. Fabro observes that if science, as such, does not have God as an object of its research, this does not exclude, but rather demands, that *the scientist as a human person* face the problem of God in the horizon of the problem of meaning, and in the search for the ultimate basis of natural phenomena.

For Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) the "question of atheism" should not be addressed only from the theoretical perspective, but above all from the ethical and political perspective. Distancing himself in *The Problem of Atheism* (1964) from the unanimous interpretation of the Modern Age offered by Fabro (from the *cogito* of Descartes to the *nothingness* of Nietzsche), Del Noce proposes a different reading of this epoch, going on the line "from Descartes to Rosmini," and taking into account authors such as Vico, Leibniz, Pascal, Malebranche, etc. Del Noce recognizes that if the Cartesian *cogito* is understood as a *ratio separata*, it leads to the immanentist result of the idealistic thought of Hegel, that turns conscience into an "absolute auto-conscience," self-sufficient with respect to all transcendence. After studying the evolution of the moral of "laicism," that passed from the laying down of its ethical political roots in the implicitly theist Kantian ethics in the 19th Century, to the atheist option of the moral and political science of the 20th Century, by then deprived of every transcendent root, Del Noce concludes that the demystification of the morality of Bourgeois laicism, first performed by Marx and then by Nietzsche, constitutes the strongest criticism to the self-sufficient morality of rationalism. He thinks that such a criticism postulates, for moral and political science, a post-Marx and post-Nietzsche era, open to the acknowledgement of a transcendent Truth. An operation that is all to be carried out, but for which Del Noce proposes, like a valid instrument, the resumption of the "synthecism" of the forms of being of Rosmini. With the growth of welfare and consumerist society, Bourgeois laicism, grounded until the mid-20th Century in rationalism, appears to have privileged irrationalism and the varied forms of "weak thought" (it. *pensiero debole*), with serious consequences for morality and politics.

L'athéisme difficile (1970), by Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), performs a type of breaking-off in comparison to an interpretation of atheism uniquely based on the appraisal of its metaphysical denial of transcendence, and it opens a new debate on atheism, underlining the existential dimensions there involved. What causes problems, Gilson says, is that atheism itself, as a denial of God's existence (and therefore of his transcendence, necessity, causality, etc.) is difficult, in the sense that it must continuously, and in vain, search for proofs to support its own thesis. "The simple fact that many people still believe that is worth making a profession of atheism and they must justify their incredulity with arguments such as the existence of evil, shows that this issue is still alive. If the death of God means his final and definitive death in the human mind, the persistent vitality of atheism constitutes, for the self-same atheism, its most serious difficulty. God will be dead in the human mind only when people will no longer think of denying His existence. In the expectation that atheism ends with Him, God's death remains a rumour that still awaits confirmation" (Gilson, 1979, p. 24). Atheism is difficult, for Gilson, because it is difficult to meet true atheists who possess a reasoned and reliable theory that demonstrates the non-existence of God. Rather than focusing on demonstrating the existence of God --which he considers a reality quite evident-- Gilson urges us to reflect on the fact that more than 24 centuries of human culture have been influenced by meditations on God. Gilson excludes therefore that the various forms of contemporary atheism: scientific, practical, State atheism, religious atheism (with reference to some circles of Modernism), and Christian atheism (with reference to theologies of the "Death of God"), are solely the conclusion of philosophical reasoning. He is convinced that there are many instances of doubt, of hesitation and of uncertainty in the path of a spirit looking for God, but the possibility of such a search implies that the problem of God's existence remains, for the spirit of the philosopher, an unfailing inevitability.

VII. The "Religious" Dimension of Atheism: Romano Guardini, Dietrich Bonhöffer, Martin Buber

Other interpretations of atheism exist, that consider it not only as a metaphysical or scientific phenomenon, but also as a historical phenomenon of reaction against an inadequate ethical and religious vision of the relationship between human beings and God. Among these, offered by authors such as: H-U. von Balthasar, K. Rahner, E. Borne, C. Bruaire, G. Fessard, H. de Lubac, G. Marcel, G. Morel, E. Mounier, J. Lacroix, P. Ricoeur and others, is one which says that atheism can have a positive function of intellectual purification from the false idols of modernity and from all the absolutes created by us, responsible for having hindered the vision of the true God, revealed in Christ. In short, it is suggested that atheism is not only (justly) criticized from the metaphysical or rational perspective, but is also valued by a renewed Christian philosophy that is more attentive to the Bible.

Romano Guardini (1885-1968) speaks of a "purifying atheism" with regard to the philosophical idols represented by all those deistic or theistic conceptions, which take the cue from the conception of God as a Being and transcendent Principle of the cosmos, instead of beginning by considering Him as highest and greatest personal subject. Atheism would then have the providential function of purifying the "outdated viewpoint" of ontology, to open our eyes to the vision of the living and personal God. The God-Person is the God that looks not at the being, but at the existence; He is the God-for-us, the God-for-humankind, the God who speaks and gives a meaning to real human life. Atheism, of course, does not lead us to explicitly recognizing the existence of God, an existence in which metaphysics was positively concerned, but rather would prepare more suitable existential conditions to the act of faith in his Word. Faith, according to Guardini, cannot be born as the result of a conceptual elaboration. We can open to faith only existentially, in the horizon of a conception of God as Value and as a Person. Only when faith is welcomed as a gift, we have the proof that the true face of God is the "God-for-us."

"Atheism can act in a positive sense also as historical factor, which awakens a dull and 'sleepy' religiosity, which leaves aside a false auto-intelligibility and intensifies the attention towards issues. By making everyone responsible that every genuinely religious existence is based on decision and constitutes an audacity, this type of atheism can bring vital matters to a superior level" (R. Guardini, *Fenomenologia e teoria della religione*, in "Scritti filosofici", vol. II, Milano 1964, p. 280).

Along the same lines the theologian Dietrich Bonhöffer (1906-1945) pushes this vision even further and in a more radical way (1906-1945). A witness to his faith to the point of martyrdom under Nazism, Bonhöffer, like Barth maintains that the provocation of atheism allows the overcoming not only of the concept of God as a "being" but also the religious concept of God as "transcendence," both linked to a purely rational and mundane consideration of God. According to them, this should open the way to the God-for-us of Biblical Revelation, a thesis that recalls what was stated by Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995) regarding the absolute transcendence and "otherness" of God, who can appear to us in the "face" of others. Radicalizing the positions of Karl Barth's "dialectic theology," who confirmed the absolute distance between the human being and God (the Totally Other, Ger. *ganz Anders*) and the supremacy of the historical Revelation of God in Christ against every philosophical speculation on God, Bonhöffer also adopts the position of existential thought, in particular that of Kierkegaard. According to the Danish philosopher, God is not an object but a Person, not an *Es* but an *Er*, and the believer must be familiar not to the calmness of thought but to the risk of faith (Ger. *Glaubenswagnis*), he is not asked for concepts on God, but for a very decision of life (Ger. *Entscheidung*). It is in this precise theological context that Bonhöffer is not afraid to claim that, thanks to contemporary atheism, we are in reality faced with the death of the "religious God-object," the "stop-gap God" (Ger. *Lückenbüsser*) invented by us to respond to our own insecurities. The human being, having reached adulthood in the era of secularisation, no longer knows what to do with such an idea of deity: God as a hypothesis, as a stop-gap, has become superfluous for our existential problems.

It is no longer possible to announce to our contemporaries a God merely understood as a remedy for human deficiencies, the God of Power and the Supreme legislator of the cosmos. We must rather announce a God that is powerless and weak in the world: only a God like this can remain with us and help us. This, for Bonhöffer, cannot be the God of philosophers, but the God of Biblical Revelation. The death of the stop-gap God, capable of covering our personal deficiencies and gaps, opens up a vision of a God who abandons us not because he is absent, but because he appears present in our own lives, in the good that we do and in the positive efforts of our work. Feuerbach's thesis, according to which God is the alienating projection of the essence of the human conscience, is here turned on its head: God is with us in our lives and our story when we fulfil our nature and our full vocation as men and women. "And we cannot be honest without recognizing that we must live in the world *etsi Deus non daretur*. It is just this that we recognize in the presence of God. God himself compels us to this recognition. The achievement of the 'coming of age' brings us to a true recognition of our situation in God's presence. God makes it known to us that we must live as men and women that can get by without God. The God who is with us is the God who abandons us (*Mk* 15:34). The God who makes us live in the world without the work hypothesis of God, is the God in whose presence we are at all times. With God, and in the presence of God, we live without God. God is powerless and weak in the world and only in this way does he stay with us and help us (*Mt* 8:17). It is very clear: Christ does not help us by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness of his suffering" (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, C. Kaiser, Gütersloh 1998, pp. 533-534). The transcendence of God is discovered therefore not as metaphysical transcendence, but rather as an "agapical transcendence," as God for us, who makes us, in turn, a sort of transcendence for the others.

Leaving aside any theological judgements on the assertions of Bonhöffer -one could for example object

that the rediscovery of the human face of God does not necessarily imply a denial of metaphysics, or also that faith in the God of Revelation does not exclude the correctness of a philosophical access to the existence of an Absolute as grasped by reason- there is no doubt that his thought represents a valuable contribution to better understanding how contemporary atheism is not only a metaphysical product, but is closely linked to the new historical and religious situation defined by Bonhöffer as "secularization." If secularization, combined with the growth of human autonomy in the world, has also produced atheism as an obscuring of the God of transcendence, it is also true that the same atheism can constitute for the Christian a fresh possibility for rediscovering the true face of God.

Some of Bonhöffer's theories have been taken up by the "theologians of secularisation," in particular by Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, 1966), also Fr. Gogarten, J.B. Metz, G. Vahanian, P.M. van Buren, for whom it was the Christian vision of the relationship between God and world that abolished the sacral-pagan vision, introducing the "desacralization" in which contemporary men and women live, and in which the adult faith of a Christian can operate refusing the traditional "mythicization" of the world. An extreme form of this theology of secularisation is represented by the so-called "theologians of the death of God," in particular William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, author of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), in which he claims that the essence of the Gospel consists in the renouncing of every human discourse on God, to every mythical-religious vision, so as to make room for an "adult" faith that would make atheism the very premise, interpreting the figure of Jesus as "the man-for-the-others," without further theological specifications relating to his nature and divinity.

Also for the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965), author of *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (1953), atheism has a purifying function in comparison to the false images of God created by us. The human being is an "I" that can experience God only if he or she meets him as a "You," a divine You. God is not an It (Ger. *Es*), but a He (Ger. *Er*), indeed, Buber specifies, a You (Ger. *Du*): "if God is not a living person, then he is an idol," because "we can encounter God only in a I-You relationship." The "eclipse of God" is Buber's answer to Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead." The eclipse of the "God of concept," of the God-It, does not mean for Buber the death of God, but only that the God-It of science and philosophy is eclipsed in the modern conscience, and that the road is being prepared to rediscover the God-You. God-You, the God of prayer, will continue to live untouched behind the wall of obscurity that atheism has raised, because although human beings eliminate the name of God from philosophy and science, that name will however live in the light of its eternity. The Nietzschean announcement of the death of God, in truth, says that man has become incapable of apprehending a reality absolutely independent of himself and of having a relation with it, and is also incapable of depicting or representing this truth in living images that cannot replace the contemplation one longs to have of it. In contrast to Heidegger, Sartre and Jung, Buber maintains that between the human being and God stands now our omnipotent *Ego*, surrounded by the God-It built around: God would then stop being a You for us, someone with whom one could establish a true dialogue and enjoy a genuine reciprocity.

Similar to what we previously observe when speaking of Bonhöffer, the re-evaluation of the purifying role of atheism in comparison to the false gods and the rediscovery of an existential dimension in the relationship between the human person and God, a relationship that cannot be surrogated by the simple conceptualization of a philosophical Absolute, as brought to light, with different slants, by the previous authors, does not imply the refusal of metaphysics or the denial of any access to God through the analogy of Being. The metaphysical perspective, whose global appraisal in today's world still appears to be greatly conditioned by the work of Heidegger, does not lead to a conceptualization of God. The notion of God brought about by metaphysics is not closed on itself, but offers meaningful connections with anthropology and phenomenology, including existentialist phenomenology. Such a notion of God remains

open to the inexpressibility and the mystery of Being, taken not only as a foundation, but also as source of morality, meaning and freedom. From a more theological perspective, a correct understanding of the image of God transmitted by Biblical Revelation implies --as shown by P. Ricoeur-- the notion of the God of common sense and philosophical thought, including some reflections on God even coming from scientific thought (cf. Jervolino, 1995). The problem of atheism and its debate with the believing thought, seems therefore destined to keep open both fronts of discussion and study, that is the metaphysical-scientific and the existential-personalist.

VIII. The Considerations of Roman Catholic Church on the Phenomenon of Atheism

1. The First Vatican Council. The first considerations of the Church on atheism come from the First Vatican Council (1870). In the Council's view, atheism, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view, is typically an occurrence of the Modern Age, foreign both to ancient and mediaeval Christianity. In the Bible we find the radical alternative between Yahweh and the other gods, which are "nothing" (cf. *Is* 44:6; 45:6-22; *Ps* 96:5); and if Psalm 14 says "the fool says in his heart, there is no God," this denial probably does not refer to the ontological aspect, unknown to Judaism, but rather to the non-belief in God's powerful action in the personal and historical matters of people (cf. *Jer* 5:12). The declaration *Dei Filius*, expresses the concern that atheism, especially in the rationalistic form, is capable of corrupting the [notion of God](#) [14] as Supreme Being, Creator and Legislator of all things, more than the ancient doctrines and medieval heresies. In that regard, realizing that it can take on a speculative-doctrinal form, as intellectual denial of God, as well as a practical form, as the breaking of every relationship with God in one's personal life, *Dei Filius* condemns all those philosophical doctrines which constitute the support of atheism: [materialism](#) [4], which "is so bold as to assert that there exists nothing besides matter" (DH 3022); [pantheism](#) [6], which says "that the substance or essence of God and that of all things are one and the same" (DH3023); emanatism and immanentism, which state "that finite things, both corporal and spiritual, or at any rate, spiritual, [are] emanated from the divine substance" (DH 3024), thus operating an implicit but clear reference to Hegel's immanentism and to Schelling's pantheism.

2. The Diagnosis made by the Document Gaudium et Spes of the Second Vatican Council. A century later, the Pastoral Constitution [Gaudium et spes](#) [15] of the Second Vatican Council (7.12.1965) conveys a new vision with respect to atheism, considering the latter not only as a philosophical phenomenon concerning the concepts of God and the world, but rather as an historical and religious phenomenon which considers the existential situation of humankind in the world and in relationship with God (cf. nn. 19-22). What now concerns *Gaudium et spes* is not only the denial of God as a Supreme Being, but also the fact that refusing God soon implies the denial of true human values, as in fact has occurred in modern and contemporary atheism. *Gaudium et spes* shifts the observations of Catholic Church on atheism from the metaphysical to the axiological level. It was emblematic, in this regard, the denunciation made a few years before by John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961) against the "ideologies" and the "systems" which proposed exclusively worldly solutions to human problems and saw in religion an obstacle to free people from misery, since religion would have neglected the problems of the present in the waiting for a future world. Referring the socio-historical context in which communism developed, this document illustrated an important distinction between "atheistic ideology" and "historical reality," opening the road to the reflections made by *Gaudium et spes*, in which the phenomenon of "atheism" is not simply identified with a philosophy or with an ideology, but, rather, is evaluated within a complex historical context, in which different and contrasting factors combine, factors that need to be deciphered and interpreted. "Taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian

religion in particular" (n. 19).

Considering the vastness of the phenomenon, *Gaudium et spes* points out that atheism "must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age," confirms the denunciation pronounced by the declaration *Dei Filius* regarding the philosophical denial of [God](#) [16], and diagnoses its different forms: systematic atheism, agnostic atheism, religious indifference, practical atheism, promethean humanism, and finally atheism as an effect of the rejection of evil in the world. The Second Vatican Council performs a diagnosis of the causes that generated atheism, which are identified in existential and historical motivations more than in theoretical reasons. It is the new condition of humankind in the world, nourished by a critical and rationalistic spirit, which leads to understanding the human being as an absolute value independent of God, whose existence is declared to be an "hypothesis" typical of a pre-critical and pre-scientific phase of humanity; in the same way, the affirmation of moral conscience seems to make the existence of God incompatible before the presence of evil in the world.

An important innovation of *Gaudium et spes* is the thorough examination of the responsibility of believers in the rise of atheism. "Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion" (n. 19). The document is not intended to stop at offering a diagnosis of atheism, but looks for the deepest reasons hidden in the heart of contemporary men and women and wishes to indicate a therapy (cf. nn. 20-21). And because these reasons are often sought after in an erroneous idea of God, who is considered the antithetical of the affirmation of any truly human value, the Church clarifies the real message of the Gospel facing these strong objections that are at the roots of modern atheism (see above, III). The Council first explains why God is not the rival of man, on the contrary it is He who wants the full realization of every human being, to the point of raising us to the dignity of being children of God; then it clarifies that the eschatological expectation is not in contrast with our earthly effort to take care of the present world, but, rather, expectation and hope of future world regenerate, support and renew that human effort. Far from being the rival of man, the God of Christian Revelation is the core and the meaning of all that elevates human life. He does not alienate human beings from their earthly commitments, but rather strongly motivates them in all tasks of their daily life. For this reason the Vatican Council kindly invites axiological atheism, that is rooted on the erroneous antagonism between man and God, to take into account the Gospel of Christ with an open spirit, because it is in harmony with the most secret aspirations of the human heart. It is indeed Christ who "fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (n. 22). Even the terrible enigmas of existence, such as suffering, evil and death, find a meaning and a definitive overcoming in Christ. To the challenge of humanistic atheism, *Gaudium et spes* contrasts the witness of God incarnated in Christ and the values of freedom, communion and justice that this involves, because "whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man" (n. 41). Therefore, the therapy for atheism consists in an adequate presentation of the doctrine of the Gospel and in the authenticity of the witness of the lives of believers (cf. n. 21). By inviting atheists to take into account the Gospel of Christ, the Council also invites believers to distinguish the error of the "errant," that is, the atheists, with whom believers need to establish a constructive communication. In addition to the necessary philosophical and theological considerations, this invitation also involves the renewal of the pastoral care of non-believers and of catechesis as well.

Finally, as far as the role of scientific thought is concerned (see above, IV.3), no specific responsibility for atheism seems to be addressed to it. It is rather in the ideological use of science or in its instrumental and depersonalizing view, that people can meet the danger of intellectual seductions and false certainties, leading them to distort the meaning of science itself. Thus, the Council reminds us that "many, transgressing the limits of the positive sciences, contend that everything can be explained by this kind of

scientific reasoning alone, or by contrast, they altogether disallow that there is any absolute truth" (n. 19). And further, when referring to the systematic atheism of those who consider man "the sole artisan and creator of his own history," points out that "favoring this doctrine can be the sense of power which modern technical progress generates in man" (n. 20). More articulated, but substantially similar is the analysis that is offered in the section that the document dedicates to the relationship between faith and culture: "Indeed today's progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth. By virtue of their methods these sciences cannot penetrate to the intimate notion of things. Indeed the danger is present that man, confiding too much in the discoveries of today, may think that he is self-sufficient and no longer seek the higher things. Those unfortunate results, however, do not necessarily follow from the culture of today, nor should they lead us into the temptation of not acknowledging its positive values" (n. 57). The context here taken as reference seems to be always existentialism and personalism: neither science is demonized, nor is the erroneous use that human beings make of it silenced.

The indications of the Second Vatican Council will be developed in different ecclesiastic and magisterial sites. Beside the work of special committees of the Holy See, such as the Secretariat for the Dialogue with the Non-Believers, after transformed into the Pontifical Council for Non-Believers, and finally into the Pontifical Council for Culture (a work progressively gathered in the journals "Athéisme et dialogue," "Athéisme et foi" and "Culture et foi"), we must remember the growing interest that catechesis and pastoral theology dedicated since the 1970s to the theme of atheism and the many documents prepared for this purpose.

3. Aspects of the Teachings of John Paul II. The materialistic root of atheism is again highlighted in John Paul II's encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986), dedicated to the divine Person of the Holy Spirit. In the context of the relationship between matter and spirit, it is affirmed: "Even though it is not possible to speak of atheism in a univocal way or to limit it exclusively to the philosophy of materialism, since there exist numerous forms of atheism and the word is perhaps often used in a wrong sense, nevertheless it is certain that a true and proper materialism, understood as a theory which explains reality and accepted as the key-principle of personal and social action, is characteristically atheistic. The order of values and the aims of action which it describes are strictly bound to a reading of the whole of reality as 'matter.' Though it sometimes also speaks of the 'spirit' and of 'questions of the spirit,' as for example in the fields of culture or morality, it does so only insofar as it considers certain facts as derived from matter (epiphenomena), since according to this system matter is the one and only form of being" (n. 56). The attention towards the atheistic consequences of historical-dialectical materialism, in the systematic form theorized and brought to realization by Marxism, was to be later considered by John Paul II in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991), where the mistake of such ideology is elucidated not only in a theoretical frame, but also in an anthropological, social, and existential level (cf. nn. 13-14).

Considering the Christian roots of European culture, John Paul II discloses an interesting interpretation of atheism, of its philosophical motives, but specifically of its historical, religious and theological aims (cf. *Discourse to the Council of the European Bishops Conferences*, Rome, 6.10.1982; *Discourse at the European Community*, Brussels, 20.5.1985). When remembering that the modern times have been characterized by numerous improvements in the field of human, technical and civil progress, at the same time one discovers that different streams of thought, philosophical and ideological, discredit the acceptance of faith and lead to suspect God. Such suspicion rebounds on the human person, depriving him or her of a full *raison d'être*: contemporary men and women are therefore tempted by doubts on the meaning of life, by anguish and by nihilism (cf. *Insegnamenti* VIII,1 [1985], p. 1582). The most important question is then formulated: why have the very cultures that have been enlightened by the

Gospel, historically adhered to atheism? One has to recognize that the crises of European culture are the crises of Christian culture; or rather "we can claim that these temptations and the consequence of the European drama not only question Christianity and the Church from the outside, as a difficulty or as an external obstacle to be overcome in the process of evangelization, but in a real sense they are internal to Christianity and the Church. European atheism is a challenge that can be identified within the horizon of a Christian conscience" (*Insegnamenti*, V,3 [1982], p. 693). We are in the presence of an important turning point in the interpretation of atheism: no longer as an external phenomenon, but as internal to the very history of Christianity. Atheism is considered as a purely Christian temptation, in that it belongs not only to philosophy, but also to the existential vicissitudes of the spiritual path undertaken by the Christian faithful and the Church in the world and in history: "We will discover, perhaps not surprisingly, that the crises and the temptations of Europeans and Europe are the crises and the temptations of Christianity in Europe [...]. If atheism is a temptation of the faith, it will be conquered with a thorough examination and purification of faith itself" (*ibidem*, p. 694). Atheism appears here as the great spiritual challenge on the road of the Christians, not of the Pagans. Perhaps, for the Church this is the most advanced stage in the interpretation of atheism: a great spiritual test, reserved especially to European Christianity and to Western culture in general, to purify it and to lead it to a more authentic and living encounter with the God of Jesus Christ.

Finally, within the analysis of modern and contemporary philosophy, the encyclical [Fides et ratio](#) [17] (1998) identifies the theoretical foundation of non-belief in the (cf. nn. 45-48). After having stigmatized the mistakes of eclecticism, of historicism, of scientism and of pragmatism (cf. nn. 86-89), it dedicates more attention to the relationship between atheism and nihilism, this being an aspect of the simultaneous loss of God and of the truth about the human being (cf. n. 90). Even though the encyclical recognizes the impossibility to reduce modern and contemporary philosophical visions to a unitary picture, it claims that the "the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention" (n. 91). Such streams seem in fact not to push towards the autonomy of reason, which has become impossible due to modern rationalism, but towards the recovery of a renewed relationship of philosophical reason with faith, possible within a hermeneutic circle between reason and faith, which would allow the truths contained in biblical Revelation to stimulate and make fruitful the work of philosophy. By applying this analysis to atheism, which has been the most emblematic result of that *ratio separata* (reason separated from faith) developed by the Modern Age, *Fides et ratio* suggests as a therapy the correct interpretation of Revelation, which today is the star still capable of orienting Western and Eastern philosophies and cultures towards the truth of [God](#) [16], beyond the modern "the eclipse of God."

Read also: [Agnosticism](#) [18]

[Autonomy](#) [19]

[Encyclopedism](#) [7]

[God, Natural Knowledge of](#) [20]

[God, notion of](#) [2]

[Idealism](#) [21]

[Materialism](#) [4]

[Pantheism](#) [6]

Documents of the Catholic Church related to the subject:

[Abbreviations and complete titles of the documents](#) [22]

Vatican Council I, DH 3021-3025; [Pius XI, Divini Redemptoris, EE 5, 1197-1280](#) [23]; [John XXIII, Mater et magistra, EE 7, 426-436](#) [24]; [Paul VI, Ecclesiam suam, EE 7, 810-816](#) [25]; [Gaudium et spes, 19-21](#) [26]; Secretariat for the Dialogue with non-believers: The Dialogue with non-believers, 28.8.1968, ORWE 10.10.1968, pp. 6-7; [Secretariat for non-believers, Declaration on Modern Science and Non](#)

[Believing, 3.4.1981](#) [27]; John Paul II, Discourse to the Symposium of Council of the European Episcopal Conferences, Rome, 5.10.1982, ORWE 13.12.1982, pp. 6-7; [John Paul II, General Audiences, 12.6.1985, and from 3.7.1985 to 17.7.1985](#) [28]; [Redemptor hominis, 15-17](#) [29]; [Dominum et vivificantem, 56](#) [30]; [Centesimus annus, 13-14](#) [31]; [Fides et ratio, 45-48, 60, 90-91](#) [17]; [Spe salvi, 42-43](#) [32]; [Caritas in veritate, 29](#) [33]; [Evangelii Gaudium, 89](#) [34]; [Francis, General Audience, 21.10.2020](#) [35].

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