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VOLUME 9

God

An Introduction to Problems in Theology

CORNELIO FABRO

IVE Press



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Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata

First edition published 2017

Volume edited by Nathaniel Dreyer

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E-mail: fabroproject@corneliofabro.org

www.corneliofabro.org

www.ivepress.org

ISBN: 978-1-5457-0355-7

eISBN: 978-1-9475-6805-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017930562

Printed in the United States of America

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CHAPTER 1

ATHEISM

1. NOTION, DIVISION, POSSIBILITY

Atheism is the theory that denies the existence of a personal God. The term was in vogue during the renaissance to indicate the attitude of one who did not admit the existence of the divinity, but the definition was already present in Clement of Alexandria: “An atheist is one who does not believe in the existence of God.”^{1a} *Practical atheism* is when one lives without acknowledging God, “as if” God did not exist or without concerning oneself about his existence, and organizing one’s private and public life without reference to the existence of any absolute Principle which transcends the values of the individual and of humankind. *Theoretical atheism* is when one directly or indirectly arrives at the judgment that a divinity does not exist. Those who are completely ignorant of God, are incapable of making a judgment on the matter, or claim that the problem is of no interest to them (indifferentism), deny God “indirectly” (*negative atheism*). Those who deny God “directly” (*positive atheism*) are above all those who try to destroy the foundations of the proofs for God’s existence, of the necessity of religion and worship, and of what is necessarily connected with them (Providence, immortality of the soul, natural law, moral sanction, etc.). It is called *skeptical atheism* when one insists on the invincibility of doubt, which becomes *agnostic atheism* when the indemonstrability is said or acknowledged to be absolute on the part of either the object or the subject. *Theoretical positive atheism* is when one claims to be convinced and certain of the nonexistence of God, when one undermines and destroys the proofs advanced for his existence as erroneous and unfounded, and claims that a genuine demonstration of that existence has never been nor could ever be given.

However, from a theological and metaphysical perspective, atheism also includes all those philosophies and religions which propose a concept of God which is inconsistent with the requirements of his Nature: Flint² preferred to speak here of “anti-theism” rather than atheism. These conceptions, with the illusion of an acceptance of the divinity, in a certain sense depart from a true knowledge of God even further than atheism itself. It should be noted, moreover, that this traditional classification schema for atheism cannot be applied in the concrete, especially in philosophy and in modern culture, without an appropriate caution, paying attention in particular to whether there is an affirmation of an Absolute, *what* it would be, and *how* the human mind can reach it.

The *possibility* of an at least temporary practical atheism seems beyond doubt: the pressure of life’s concrete problems, the ardor of the passions, an indifferent family environment, and a secular education can divert a person’s interest from the problem of God for a certain period of life. But it cannot be so forever, or at least not for those engaged in society, where, due to the very demands of competition and of religious and political debate, the posing of the problem seems inevitable. Moreover, what the history of religions tells us regarding peoples can also be applied to individuals: first the great phenomena of nature, with amazement at their magnificence and dread at the overwhelming threat of destruction; then the essential facts of human existence such as birth and death, and that most agonizing problem of human life, that of the suffering of the just in this life and the frequent good fortune of the wicked. All of this must sooner or later pose to the human conscience the problem of a cause and a justification, which is in fact the problem of God.

Theoretical atheism, therefore, cannot be an ordinary situation but must be explained as a reflexive phenomenon, as the “conclusion” of a specific rational process based on certain premises: it belongs therefore to the reflexive consciousness proper to philosophy or to science disguised as philosophy. It is a fact that in every mature civilization firm advocates (i.e., those who call themselves and are thus considered to be “convinced”) of theoretical atheism, both negative and positive, have emerged; it also seems that the number of atheists increases in what can be called the “saturation phase” of a particular form of civilization, as with stoic and Epicurean philosophy in Greco-Roman civilization, Enlightenment and idealist philosophies in modern civilization, and the dominance of technology and economics in contemporary life. The possibility of theoretical atheism

therefore becomes more or less real and plausible according to the presence or not of certain environmental and cultural conditions which the theologian must consider on a case by case basis: in the concrete fabric of life these conditions often seem impossible to overcome except by a special intervention of divine Grace, which, according to Catholic doctrine, cannot be lacking to one who sincerely seeks the truth.

The spiritual complications to which the modern culture of today may lead are such that Catholic authors have not yet been able to formulate a judgment on atheism on which all can agree.³ Some deny the very possibility of theoretical atheism (Blondel, de Lubac), which is nonetheless a fact; others admit that atheism can be invincible in individual cases (Billot), and there are some even who say that one can lose the faith without incurring theological guilt (K. Adam). Regarding adult atheists, Card. Billot distinguishes between “*adulti aetatis*” and “*adulti rationis*”: i.e., those deprived of the minimum light necessary to form a concept of the true God, and those whose environment provides them with the arguments and elements necessary for a definitive judgment. Only the atheism of the latter is conscious and culpable, and not that of the former, among whom Billot includes ancient and modern idolatrous civilizations and religions, and the secular and atheistic conceptions present in certain sectors of contemporary life.

Despite the circumspection called for in assessing the contemporary problem of atheism, one must acknowledge that it has represented in the history of humanity, and still represents today, more of an individual attitude than a social behavior—an attitude which can also signify protest or liberation for the individual. The claim of materialist, evolutionary ethnology, which puts at the beginning of history a man who either has no religion or is polytheistic and fetishistic,⁴ lacking any true notion of worship or of the divinity, has been disproven by the facts; it is now known that the situation was substantially the reverse, in that the most primitive forms of religion turn out to have been strictly monotheistic, with polytheism being a phenomenon of degeneration from an originary monotheism. Genetically, therefore, the various forms of atheism appear to have been forms of reaction to the absurdities and unseemliness of polytheistic conceptions and practices. In this sense an ancient doxographer could claim: “All men, without distinction of civilization and language, honor and fear the gods; there is truly no people that is atheistic.”⁵ Before him Aristotle asserted: “All men have

the conviction that the gods exist.”⁶ These claims have been reiterated in our own day, based on the inductions of modern ethnology, by G. van der Leeuw: “Peoples without religion do not exist. At the beginning of history there is no form of atheism. Religion has existed always and everywhere.”⁷ According to Van der Leeuw, this is because atheism represents the “negative moment” in the development of the consciousness, which can arise and flourish only inasmuch as it presupposes a prior stage of affirmation, i.e., that of religion as worship of the divinity, man’s master and his destiny.⁸ In this sense he calls atheism “the religion of flight” before God, or, using Kierkegaardian terminology, of the “anxiety of God,” in which one rejects faith and falls under the demonic.^{9b}

The intimate rationale for atheism, as a spiritual-individual attitude, is found in “human freedom” itself. On the one hand, the difficulty of arriving at a complete clarity regarding problems of the afterlife, of evil, and of Providence, and thus regarding the ultimate essence of the world and of consciousness, e.g., regarding the capacity of knowledge for transcendence, and, on the other hand, the contradictions between religions and the unseemliness of many religious beliefs and practices, along with the demand that every religion makes to encompass and influence a person’s whole life, can in fact alienate the person from religion and cause him to reject with it the problem of God. Moreover, it is precisely such a situation (i.e., atheism “due to scandal”) which must be at work and impel the person to seek and to choose, among the various contrasting religions, the one which is true because it does not cause scandal. But in the real conditions of human society the true religion, and thus the only conception worthy of God and of man, seems to be assured only by Revelation, which by its nature transcends rational evidence and requires faith. For this reason the definitive victory over the invitations to doubt which lead to atheism depends on grace and freedom. The interpretation of atheism, therefore, given by Protestant theologian K. Barth seems to be at least simplistic. For him, the phenomenon of atheism is a reaction to mysticism: against the mystic who claims to have a direct relationship with the ineffable, unobjectivizable God, the atheist proclaims the return of man to himself, to the world of creatures and of history. Atheism would thus be a negative mysticism or a mysticism “of the nothing,” which arises in opposition to the positive mysticism “of the all.”¹⁰ In the first place, however, Barth does not specify his concept of

“mysticism”; he must then explain why atheism has taken hold more strongly in Protestant countries. It is true that “mysticism” is the antithesis of atheism, but in a sense opposite to that understood by Barth (a theologian of the “strict observance” and of anti-pietistic inspiration), since in the Christian life mystical union represents the highest and the most intimate (though always “gratuitous”) form of union of the soul with God.

2. HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS

The naturalistic philosophies and religions of ancient India, Samkhya philosophy, Jainism, and Buddhism in its original form (i.e., before the Buddha himself was divinized) can all be called forms of atheism.¹¹ In pre-biblical religions, on the other hand, especially those of the Middle East, the divinity embraces all and relates to man primarily as a terrible and threatening omnipotence which keeps him in continual anguish, ultimately inciting him to human sacrifice in order to placate his wrath: this explains the innumerable monstrous depictions of the gods in the religions of the East, still seen today in the pagan temples of India and China. Depictions of the divinity in more evolved religions assume by preference a beneficent and aesthetic appearance, with the origin of evil attributed to the enmity and the ineluctability (ἀνάγκη) of fate (εἰμαρμένη) which the gods themselves, beginning with Zeus, are subject to. But in Greco-Roman religion, too, the fragmentation of the divinity pervades all activities of nature and of man, even to the most ridiculous details.¹² In this degeneration of the religions one must see the stimulus which provoked philosophical reflection, and with it both atheism and the search for a single absolute principle of being.

Among the Jews, conscious as they were of possessing the truth of the one true God in the teaching of the prophets and in the sacred books, atheism is the supreme act of “foolishness,”¹³ and idolatry the greatest sin. This view is taken up again by St. Paul, who sees the wicked vices of paganism as God’s punishment for the sin of idolatry,¹⁴ reminding the newly converted that they were “without hope and without God (ἄθεοι) in this world”¹⁵ and that “the nations do not know God.”¹⁶ Even pagans, however, should have been able to rise to God from the creatures in which he is manifest, and therefore the sin of idolatry was inexcusable.¹⁷ At the Areopagus¹⁸ the Apostle discovers that a profound inspiration towards the one true God is

inherent in the worship given at Athens to the “unknown God.” In Sacred Scripture and from a strictly theological point of view—something which is also confirmed by metaphysical reflection—there is no difference between atheism and idolatrous polytheism: at most a psychological distinction exists between them, which should in any case disappear as consciousness develops.

But in the Greco-Roman world, too, the greatest crime was that of impiety (ἀσέβεια), which was the object of severe laws, especially in Greece, and could even result in capital punishment. The precise nature of this crime can be determined by referring to the three-fold division of Varro’s gods recorded by St. Augustine: *fabulous or mythical, natural or philosophical, and civil, i.e., political.*¹⁹ The first, fruit of the imagination of the poet-theologians, was the heritage of uncultured peoples, whereas the third represented the religion of the State, so much so that the recognition of its divinities and their official cult represented the very foundation of civic life and the first duty of the citizen. An “atheist,” therefore, was anyone who spoke out against these beliefs or refused to recognize the cult, which was the only obligatory one in ancient society. A person given over to belief in and worship of the mythical gods, sowing the world with beneficent and malevolent divinities, was called “superstitious” (δεισιδαίμων) in the sense of excessive, but not of contempt.

The natural religion of the philosophers, based on the demand for a single principle and its transcendence, served as a critical resolution to both problems, especially for those thinkers who did not want to stoop to compromises with popular beliefs or political interests. These philosophers, with their vigorous affirmation of the transcendence and unity of the divinity, represented the highest point reached by human wisdom outside of Revelation, such that St. Augustine could write of them: “some of them, so far as they were guided from on high, made great discoveries,” and he acknowledges that “if the philosophers have discovered anything that can aid one to lead a good life and attain eternal happiness, how much more fitting would it be to adjudge divine honors to such men!”^{20c} For the superstitious common people and political types, however, they were “atheists”; not infrequently accused of atheism, some had to emigrate to save their lives (Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Aristotle), and we know from Plato (*Apologia*) and Xenophon that Socrates, faithful to his God, refused to flee and faced death.

Plato himself in *Laws* (bk. X, 885 b ff.) makes us aware of an entire legislation on the matter, which impacted those who denied the existence of the gods, providence, and the revenge exacted by the gods on those who transgress the state's laws. That these were political matters, i.e., that it was a case of religion as a function of politics, can be inferred from the fact that ἄθεοι were tried for ἀσέβεια not for personally held opinions or doctrines, but only when they publicly spoke against or insulted the gods of the official religion. The impiety of the “universalist philosophers” consisted in removing religion from the foundation of the local traditions to which the “city” owed its history and fortunes, with the consequence that their doctrines undermined the foundations of civil justice. Thus Derenne (following Drachman) rightly observes that, even in the context of politics, it was still religion and the conception of religion which was at stake in the charge of ἀσέβεια;²¹ however, it must also be added that in the classical age it was above all the reaction of philosophy which released man from the narrow confines of his national and racial interests and made the whole universe his homeland, in some way preparing humanity for the Christian concepts of the transcendence of God and universal brotherhood.

Many lists of “atheists” have come down to us: that of sextus Empiricus, which distinguishes both theists and skeptics from philosophers, includes Euhemerus, Diagoras of Melos, Prodicus of Ceos, and Theodorus the Atheist of Cyrene (called an ἄθεος par excellence). Cicero names Critias, Protagoras, Epicurus, and more, to whom Fabricius adds (from Lysippus of Epirus) many others such as Archagoras, Anaximander, Apollonophanes, Aristagoras of Melos, Bion of Borysthenes, Callimachus, Carneades, Gorgias, Hippias of Elis, Leucippus, etc.; Democritus, Diogenes of Apollonia, hippias of Reggio, and xenophanes should certainly also be mentioned. However, it must be said of most of these, as Drachman has shown (op. cit., p. 19), that their denial focused not so much on God as on the profusion of gods and on the superstitions of the cult. It does seem, though, that “atheists” in the strict sense were not lacking among them (Democritus, Theodorus of Cyrene, Protagoras, and others). Nestle records Cinesias of Miletus (cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 501e), who at Athens brought together a group of the impious (κακοδαίμονισταί) who gathered at the new moon to amuse themselves “in mocking the gods and our customs.”²² it seems that sextus's list also includes some radical “atheists.”

Epicurus's position regarding the external respect due the gods is treated with a certain approval (J. Festugière, C. Diano). Sextus, on the other hand, sees in Epicurus's external respect for the official religion merely a practical expedient for concealing atheism, since he ultimately doesn't admit the existence of the gods (cf. also Cicero: "Epicurus really abolished the gods, but nominally retained them in order not to offend the people of Athens" [*De nat. Deorum*, I, 30]^d).

In all of these matters both Sparta and Rome showed themselves more tolerant than Athens, contenting themselves with the external act of worship of the state's official divinities without concern for the opinions of individuals or the disputes among philosophers on the topic. It was with the Christians that the problem of atheism was raised at Rome, in the concrete form—or legal fiction—of the decrees ordering the persecutions.

Already in the Hellenistic period, with the fall of the local republics, belief in the indigenous divinities had disappeared from the Greek soul, since they had shown themselves incapable of defending the *patria*, of which they were the paladin. Hellenism, however, left intact the Greco-Roman principle of religion, which always remained a matter of the State and a national characteristic: it only lost the influence which the ancient religion had over the city, such that, practically speaking, as we note in writers from the time of Caesar Augustus, atheism was no longer restricted to the "élite" of philosophers but had spread to the masses, given over as they were to materialism. With Christianity any equivocation became impossible: since it embraced Hebrew monotheism, every form of idolatry was rejected; since it taught of Christ's Redemption from sin, it demanded asceticism and a renewal of one's whole life, something which ruled out the turbid—when they weren't impious and scandalous—practices of the various "mysteries," brought to Rome from Greece and the Orient. When Tacitus, however, gave as the motive for the first persecution under Nero "not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race" (*Ann.*, XV, 44, 3),^e he expressed the impression that the new religion made on even the best souls, i.e., of the abandonment of an entire form of civilization that had brought Rome to world empire. Under a similar impression, but in a higher context (that of mystical "catharsis"), is Apuleius when, defending the mysteries of Isis, he speaks of a woman who, besides her vices, "furthermore she scorned and spurned all the gods in heaven, and instead of holding a definite faith, she used the false sacrilegious presumption of a god, whom she would call 'one and only,' to

invent meaningless rites” (*Metamorph.*, 9, 4),^f deceived all the people (which, by the way, would seem to show a clear distinction of Christianity and Judaism, still confused by Tacitus). Thus, for Apuleius the new religion deprived man of the enchantment of the regenerative powers and the beauties of nature, which pagan religions and cults sanctioned and celebrated. To the convinced pagan, Christians must have seemed the worst “atheists” of all.

The Christians, however, beginning with the apostolic Fathers and the apologists, refuted the accusation of atheism and energetically turned the explicit epithet of ἄθεοι against their opponents (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Trall.*, 3, 2; St. Polycarp, *Martyr.*, ch. 9; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.*, II, 23–24). For Origen, pagan polytheism is atheism (πολύθεοι ὄντες καὶ ἄθεοι: *In Ps.*, 65, 12), is on the same level as “superstition” (δαισιδαίμωνία) as a work of the devil (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.*, I, 18, 22; II, 1315;^g Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.*, 25: PG 35, 1220 A), and is branded ἄθεότης. For the apologists the Christians are not atheists, since they worship the one true God (St. Justin, *Ap.*, I, 5:^h one should glory in being ἄθεος with respect to the pagan gods; and cf. Lactantius, *De ira Dei*, IX, 2; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, VII, 9, 54, 3: “The Christian therefore is no atheist”).ⁱ

The Jews themselves are called ἄθεοι by St. Gregory Nazianzen (*Or.*, 2, 37: PG 35, 444) and are associated with polytheism. The Fathers call the Chaldeans atheists (Hippolytus, *In Dan.*, II, 31, 3), along with the Persians, and first among atheistic philosophers was Epicurus, whom Clement of Alexandria called ἀθεώτετος κατάρχων (*Protrept.*, II, 3, 10).^j Regarding pagans, Clement speaks of a twofold ἀθεότης, that of not knowing the true God (τὸν ὄντως ὄντα), and of giving the name “gods” to that which is not (*ibid.*, II, 23, 1). Proclus too speaks of a twofold ἀθεότης: that of those who deny the existence of the gods, and that of those who deny their providence.²³

Thus the accusation of atheism in the early centuries of the Christian era didn’t so much refer to the absolute denial of the divinity, which has always been rare, but to the perversion (mutually assumed of their adversaries by each party to the dispute) of the concept of God, which, in the terms of the dispute, amounted to denial. This is so clear that the Fathers unhesitatingly treat heretics as atheists: the Arians are called such by St. Maximus the Confessor (*Acta*: PG 90, 144), as are the Manichaeans (St. Athanasius, *Or. I contra Arianos*: PG 26, 124;^k St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ep. can.*: PG 45, 225 C; *Cod. Iustin.*, I, 5, 12, 3). Marcion is called “that mouthpiece of ungodliness”

by St. Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catech.*, 6, 16)^l and ἀθεώτατος par excellence (ibid., 16, 3, 7). Similarly, Eunomius is called author of the “godless heresy” (*Synes. Epist.*, V),^m and those are called “atheists” who deny the Holy Spirit (οἱ μὴ δεξάμενοι τὸν Παρακληίτον). Already in St. Ignatius of Antioch the Docetists are called “without God, that is, unbelieving” (ἄθεοι καὶ ἄπιστοι) (*Trail.*, 10),ⁿ and pagan mythology as a whole is charged by Clement of Alexandria with being “godless myths”^o (*Protrept.*, II, 11, 1).

This brief sampling of texts shows that writers who use the term ἄθεος intend not so much to give a simple theoretical evaluation in the area of religion, as to attach to it a moral condemnation which followed from that evaluation; in both the classical and patristic periods the term’s connotation was more ethical than dogmatic. This is confirmed in a sentence of Porphyry, an adherent of the dying paganism, for whom “every easy life is full of servitude and irreligiosity and is therefore atheistic (ἄθεος βίος) and without justice (ἀδίκιος βίος) because in it the spirit is full of irreligiosity and therefore also of injustice (ἀδικία).”²⁴

It is along these lines that Greek and patristic thought invites us to identify the true essence of atheism. If atheism means in the first place the direct denial of God, it consists also—and above all—in the acceptance of a notion of God which nullifies him as God and is unworthy of his majesty. This is precisely the judgment made by the greatest of the Greek philosophers regarding the divinities of popular and state mythology, and in this also consisted, by the law of contraries, their condemnation of Christianity. In their requisite rebuttal the Christian doctors, guided by sacred scripture, judged paganism in the same way. Strange though it may seem, they also included heretics in the condemnation of atheism, and for good reason, since the concept of God must be taken to its ultimate consequences. It is not enough to affirm the existence of the “divine” or the absolute to avoid being called an atheist; one must think of him as a subsistent and transcendent Person who cares for the world and for our troubles. Given too the fact that God has spoken with man directly (Revelation), his word must be accepted in its entirety; any “selectivity” (ἄρρησις) man wants to exercise is a genuine sacrilege (ἀθεότης), a truly impious act (ἀθεΐα): it is a denial of God which cannot be done partially, but always and only completely, especially when His fullness is given to man “fully explicated” in a gift of the highest communication, as in Christianity. Today, then, whoever does not accept

Revelation in its entirety rejects God himself, since in our time he is always given to man as revealed.

In light of this criterion, most of *modern* philosophy falls under the accusation of atheism, although clothed in new and different forms than those of earlier periods. In the Middle Ages the history of atheism is tied up with that of the heresies and does not present itself under a single face. In the modern age the main forces which stimulated and sustained the development of atheism can be reduced to three: the recurrence of forms of ancient philosophy (especially stoic, skeptic, and Epicurean), the reformation, and finally and especially the pantheism of the transcendental philosophies. Christian theism still seems to be solid in Descartes and Malebranche; Locke's real position is uncertain, whereas Bacon's defense is patent: "A little philosophy can lead to atheism; but much knowledge brings back to religion."^{25p}

First there is the open and confessed atheism of the materialistic and skeptical philosophies which arose in the Renaissance and reached their maximum development in the 16th—18th centuries: among these are English deism, the atheists and libertines of 17th-century France (the "*esprits forts*"), at the time of Descartes (when Fr. Mersenne wrote that in Paris alone there were 50,000 atheists), the French and German Enlightenments (Frederick II of Prussia), the materialism with which the encyclopedists prepared the ground for the French Revolution (Lamettrie, d'Holbach, and later Cabanis), and that of 19th-century Germany (Feuerbach, Haeckel, Moleschott, Buechner, Czolbe, etc.).

The atheism of Marx's dialectical materialism and of Marxism of the "strict observance" (Lenin, Stalin) is akin to a profession of faith and is the basis of the new society founded on the Fourth Estate. Following Feuerbach, Marx indiscriminately applied to the Christian religion the criticism of Democritus and Epicurus regarding the ancient mystery religions, according to which faith or the belief in beings above the world is generated in part by an excess of imagination and in part (and especially) from a utopian longing to avoid the inevitable sufferings of earthly life. Marxist atheism old and new has found a staunch ally in Darwinian biological evolution, which it considers the definitive account of man's origin from the higher forms of animal life.²⁶

Another Renaissance source of modern atheism, argued forcefully by Campanella in *Atheismus triumphatus*,²⁷ is Machiavelli, whose amoral and atheistic conception of politics quickly inspired a good portion of European politics; the accusation most insistently brought against Bolshevism or political Marxism today is precisely Machiavellianism.

The most speculative form of atheism is undoubtedly that which derives from pantheism, and can be divided into two periods: one whose most important representatives are Bruno and Spinoza, and the other which incorporates Spinoza into the new concept of truth and reality as *subjectivity*, inaugurated by Kant and brought to completion in the idealist transcendental philosophies. For Fichte, God is reduced to the moral order of the world, for Schelling (influenced by Bruno) to the absolute of nature, for Hegel, to absolute spirit (*Geist*) that realizes itself in universal history (*Weltgeschichte*). For Fichte, it is enough to cite his *Atheismusstreit* (1798), which he got mixed up in by publishing an article of decidedly atheistic content by the Kantian Forberg in his journal, and for not having adequately specified his own position on the matter. Schelling's Spinozism (and not only the "early" Schelling, the philosopher) was immediately noted with triumphant joy by Heine in 1834 as follows: "Spinoza's doctrine and the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling's best period are substantially the same thing" (*Deutschland*, I). It is enough, finally, to peruse the series of theorems that opens, e.g., Schelling's *Philosophie der Kunst* (1801), to recognize that it is inspired in both form and content by the great model of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

The judgment of Spinoza's contemporaries affirming his radical atheism was taken up by modern historians of materialism (F. A. Lange) and of atheism (F. Mauthner),²⁸ and by Spinoza's German translator (and editor), Karl Gebhardt.²⁹ The most famous accusation of atheism in Spinoza's thought was advanced by Jacobi in the controversy with Mendelssohn, especially in the *Beylage* which summarizes the essence of Spinozism in 44 propositions and then offers some doctrinal comments, the first being: "Spinozism is atheism"^q (*Werke*, IV, I, p. 216). The basic argument for a "reduction" of Spinoza's pantheism to atheism is found in the assertion of the "unicity of substance" (*Ethics*, part I, prop. 5) and of cause (*ibid.*, prop. 6), which is identified with God (*ibid.*, prop. 14), and by the assertion of the immanence of substance in its modes, *cogitatio* and *extensio* (*ibid.*, prop. 11, 18; *ibid.*, part V, prop. 30). Thus Spinoza can say: "God or nature," and yet maintain the

impossibility of atheism: “Nobody can hate God” (ibid., part V, prop. 18),^r since in the “metaphysics of identity” there can be no contrast.

Hegel deliberately took on the task of defending Spinoza against Jacobi’s accusation. For Hegel, Spinoza had succeeded in recovering the one of the Eleatics and giving it its proper metaphysical content, i.e., “that unity (of opposites) which is spirit within itself”; in philosophy, therefore, “spinozan being is the essential beginning of philosophizing.”³⁰ Atheism, observes Hegel, is to affirm that God “is not”; spinoza, rather, says the exact opposite, i.e., that only God truly is, and that what is finite, the world, is not: we must speak therefore not of atheism but of *a-cosmism*: not only does spinoza not deny God, but in him “there is too much of God.”³¹ spinoza’s merit is rather to have shown that the finite is the inessential and apparent and must be set aside, such that his one substance, as later schelling’s Absolute, constituted the stage of passage to the conception of the “True as all,” which has necessarily “Resulted.”³² Hegel’s main argument in defense of spinoza against the accusation of atheism is that he has overcome and negated the world of the finite in the unicity of substance, and therefore his system may well be called, and indeed must be called, *Monotheism* (op. cit., ed. cit., 197 note: emphasis Hegel’s). Spinoza’s defect, on the other hand, was that of stopping at a “unique, rigid and immobile” concept of the Absolute as substance; in keeping distinct from one another attributes and modes, movement and will, which are merely intellectual distinctions: in not having arrived at the absolute as self-developing “process.”^{33s}

However, once one reaches—as did Hegel—the absolute as “process,” not only does the accusation of atheism brought against pure philosophy disappear, but also the more frequent one of pantheism, since in this conception empirical individualities, in the sphere of immediate consciousness, in no way form part of the absolute, but rather belong to the phenomena of immediacy and thus remain outside the being of truth. In the 3rd edition of the *Encyclopedia* Hegel consoled himself in the fact that “the accusation of atheism had become rare mainly because by then the content and demand of religion were reduced to a minimum.”³⁴ This may also have been true in 19th-century Protestant Germany, engulfed as it was in politics and commerce but almost ignorant of the Gospel, as Kierkegaard often observes in his critique of Protestantism. Hegel’s atheism was unmasked and denounced in a practical and convincing way by someone of whom it would

have been least expected, the materialist Feuerbach (*Das Wesen des Christentums*, Einleitung). We owe to Feuerbach, a professed atheist, the explicit accusation against reformed Christianity: "Protestantism denies God in himself, i.e., God as God."³⁵

As transcendental philosophers developed the atheism implicit in the agnosticism of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, so Schopenhauer drew a position of atheism from the primacy attributed by Kant to practical reason in the affirmation of the transcendent. Until Kant the dilemma had persisted: either materialism (the rule of blind chance) or theism (an ordering intelligence). After Kant's critique of the proofs of God's existence, all of the claimed reality of the world was reduced to phenomenon, with the "order" of phenomena therefore reduced to appearance and dependent on the *a priori* forms of the intellect.³⁶ Thus God can never be an "object" of human knowledge, and for Schopenhauer Kantianism constituted the "most serious attack" against theism.³⁷ Schopenhauer further observes that there is no identity between religion and theism: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are all atheistic, yet they are undeniably religions. Religion is thus a generic term of which both theism and atheism are subspecies. Attacking the hypocrisy of the apparent theism of Hegel (without naming him), Schopenhauer maintains that pantheism is a self-defeating concept since it presupposes (as point of departure) the concept of a God that is both distinct from the world and its essential correlate. If, on the other hand, it is the world that assumes this role, then "pantheism is nothing but a euphemism for concealing atheism," in which atheism can truthfully claim the "ius primi occupantis."³⁸ Schopenhauer's atheism, rather, is expressed without illusions and hypocrisy, since the ultimate foundation of being and the end to which it tends are constituted by negativity.

E. von Hartmann's atheism of the unconscious derives in a direct line from Schopenhauer, as does especially Nietzsche's atheism of the "will to power," with Zarathustra's cry, "God is dead."³⁹ Nietzsche is an epigone, who repeats but without explaining how modern philosophy, having given primacy and precedence to consciousness over being, had to rid itself of God and consider him non-being, in the expression of G. Reni.⁴⁰

Today's Marxist and existentialist atheism is formulated based on the denial itself of the Absolute, who is dispensed with as an empty mirage of a still undeveloped consciousness, hindered in its ordinary movement. A

simple note will suffice here. In Marx, the recognition is clear and explicit that the metaphysical attitude leads to the admission of God, since once one admits “essences” with their ontological weight and the consequent hierarchy of values, the passage to an absolute Value is inevitable. This is clear even from the earliest writings, already in his thesis on *The Philosophy of Nature of Democritus and Epicurus*, but especially beginning with the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, in which is found the famous definition of religion as the “opiate of the people.” Thinking certainly of Feuerbach’s theory, Marx writes: “The proofs of God’s existence are nothing but proofs of the existence of the essential human consciousness.” These proofs are reduced, according to the Kantian schema, to the ontological proof, and this in turn is resolved for man in “consciousness of self” (*Selbstbewusstsein*). Hence the brutal and Solomonic conclusion: “The lack of reason is the existence of God.” Religion, therefore, “is the imaginary realization of the human essence, when the human essence is deprived of its true reality. The critique of religion frees man from illusions so that he would think, act, and *shape his reality* as a man who has become reasonable, so that he would revolve about himself as his own true sun.”⁴¹ When Lenin will later deny personality to the individual, throwing him into the arms of the State, this is nothing but an extreme, absurd attempt to reconstruct the positive with the negative: “There is only a mass of men, but no individual man.”⁴²

The existentialism of the contemporary left also leads to atheism: the explicit and professed atheism of the pan-phenomenism of J. P. Sartre and A. Camus. “Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence—a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man. . . . Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to conceive of it. . . . Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”⁴³ there is also the implicit atheism of the Kantian-based existentialism of Jaspers, for whom God is a limit-concept; Heidegger too, locating the “foundation” in the “nothing,” could not arrive at the positive and subsistent Absolute that is the principle of theism. The Absolute referred to in Heidegger’s most recent writings would still not seem to satisfy any of the attributes of transcendence and of possibility: it leaves open the possibility, however, of an “experience” of God in poetry and in mysticism.⁴⁴

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