



The Death of God and the Dissolution of Humanity

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Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed both the apex of humanist discourse¹ and the emergence of what Emmanuel Levinas referred to as “an atheism that is not humanist.”² Having dispensed with God in the nineteenth century, the human subject found itself, in the twentieth century, confronted with its own dissolution. Like countless other philosophical and intellectual developments, the crisis of humanism was deeply indebted to its own historical context. The pretensions of human beings to a privileged place in the universe, for instance, became somewhat difficult to stomach in the wake of two World Wars and the nightmare of Auschwitz.³ But to reduce the critique of humanism to a mere disgust with totalitarianism or skepticism with regard to human progress would be to overlook the more significant (and radical) philosophical claims of anti-humanism. For whereas the vast majority of philosophies leading up to the twentieth century make some sort of an appeal to the notion of a shared humanity, anti-humanism rejects outright “the very possibility of an irreducible or given *human nature* . . . or of something in man that is *essentially* or

¹ In France, for instance, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the humanist mantle was taken up by Catholics, Marxists and existentialists alike as a means of galvanizing public opinion and censuring rival ideologies. Thus, in 1945, the French Socialist Party (SFIO) adopted the epithet in an attempt to unite to itself the most extreme wings of the Catholic Social Democrats (MRP) and the Communist Party (PCF) (see Edward Baring, “Humanist Pretensions: Catholics, Communists, and Sartre’s Struggle for Existentialism in Postwar France,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, 3 [2010]: 582–585).

² “On Maurice Blanchot,” in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 127–128.

³ Thus, according to Levinas: “The unburied dead of wars and death camps accredit the idea of a death with no future, making tragic-comic the care for one’s self and illusory the pretensions of the *rational animal* to a privileged place in the cosmos, capable of dominating and integrating the totality of being in a consciousness of self” (*Humanism of the Other* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006], 45).

fundamentally human and that forms the core of human existence.”⁴ While the various humanisms of the nineteenth century locate the source of meaning in humanity itself or in individual human beings, anti-humanism reduces the human to the inhuman, locating meaning rather in the structures of language, culture or the totality of being. Whereas Feuerbach, for example, reduces the dignity of God to the dignity of man, Heidegger subsumes the dignity of man to the dignity of being. Whereas Marx declares that “man is the highest being for man,”⁵ Foucault insists that “Man is an invention of recent date. *And one perhaps nearing its end.*”⁶ Thus, we might say that if the “death of God” served as the rallying cry for atheist humanism, “the death of man” soon took its place as the slogan of that atheism that is not humanist.

My concern in what follows is not primarily to offer a theological *response* to this death of the human subject. Such a response would ultimately entail no less than a fully articulated Christian anthropology—an anthropology, that is, in which protology and eschatology are irretrievably bound up with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As vital as that task may be, the scope of this paper is more limited—namely, to trace the theological *significance* of anti-humanism as the necessary consequence of the immanentist anthropology of atheist humanism. Put otherwise, “the death of man” in the twentieth century is but a corollary of “the death of God” in the nineteenth. Thus, much as Karl Barth made use of Feuerbach in his critique of religion,⁷ I intend to show that Christian theology might have similar recourse to the claims of anti-humanism in abolishing “the myth of man as an end in himself.”⁸ In defense of these claims, I will draw especially on the work of Henri de Lubac. De Lubac’s engagement with atheist humanism is significant, not merely with regard to its scope and theological acumen, but also with respect to its very proximity to the humanist crisis. Written during the Second World War, de Lubac’s *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* was published in 1944, only a year before Jean-Paul Sartre declared before a crowded audience at the *Club Maintenant*, “there is no human

⁴ Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 12. Geroulanos provides an excellent introduction to the emergence and development of anti-humanism in twentieth century French thought.

⁵ “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 65.

⁶ *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 386–387, emphasis added.

⁷ See for example Barth’s introductory essay to Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

⁸ Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 48.

nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it.”⁹ In the decades immediately following its publication, the principal thesis of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* was thus corroborated by the existentialism of Sartre, the fundamental ontology of Heidegger, and the adherents of structuralist anthropology. Put simply, de Lubac heralds “the self destruction of humanism” by insisting that “where there is no God, there is no man either.”¹⁰

Henri de Lubac and the Drama of Atheist Humanism

Act One: Resentment

Henri de Lubac’s interpretation of atheist humanism occurs largely in three acts. The first act runs within a typical Promethean register. In the beginning, de Lubac reminds us, the deposit of Christian faith was regarded as *securing* the dignity of human beings, liberating them from the ontological slavery of Fate. By the nineteenth century, however, what was once lauded as humanity’s true source of liberation became, in the eyes of many, the perpetrator of a more insidious form of captivity. As de Lubac laments, “that same Christian idea of man that had been welcomed as a deliverance was now beginning to be felt as a yoke. And that same God in whom man had learned to see the seal of his greatness began to seem to him like an antagonist, the enemy of his dignity.”¹¹ The atheist humanism of the nineteenth century, therefore, as set forth by such diverse thinkers as Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, was more than a merely *critical* atheism. That is, “it [did] not profess to be the simple answer to a speculative problem and certainly not a purely negative solution.” Rather, according to de Lubac, the problem posed by such thinkers was a human problem: “it was *the* human problem—and the solution that is being given to it is one that claims to be positive. Man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness that, it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another. In God he is overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom.”¹² Like Jacques Maritain, de Lubac thus distinguishes between two forms of atheism: a *negative* and a *positive*. While the former entails a mere rejection of belief in God, the negation of a metaphysical assertion, the latter “is built upon

⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1968), 28.

¹⁰ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24–25.

resentment and begins with a choice.”¹³ Positive atheism, in other words, is “*antitheism*, or, more precisely, anti-Christianism.”¹⁴ As such, it is little wonder that a young Karl Marx considered Prometheus “the noblest of saints and martyrs in the calendar of philosophy.”¹⁵ For despite the many and often contentious differences among the various advocates of atheist humanism in the nineteenth century, each were in resolute accord in their rejection of God—a rejection predicated on positive, humanist grounds.

The chief protagonists of this anthropological revolt were, by de Lubac’s account, Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach insists, “the divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective – *i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.”¹⁶ According to Feuerbach, religion is nothing other than the relation of man to his own nature. Man projects his being into objectivity, thereby making himself an object to that image of himself now considered as the Divine Subject. This psychological account of religion was not simply a descriptive exercise. For insofar as religion is “the disuniting of man from himself,” man ultimately denies to himself that which he attributes to his God.¹⁷ “To enrich God,” Feuerbach writes, “man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing. But he desires to be nothing in himself, because what he takes from himself is not lost to him, since it is preserved in God. Man has his being in God; why then should he have it in himself?”¹⁸ It is this denigration of human dignity—the sacrifice of human greatness at the altar of Divine Being—that Feuerbach’s

¹³ Ibid, 25. According to Maritain, *negative atheism* entails “a merely negative or destructive process of casting aside the idea of God, which is replaced only by a void.” *Positive atheism*, meanwhile, entails “an active struggle against everything that reminds us of God—that is to say, antitheism rather than atheism—and at the same time a desperate, I would say heroic, effort to recast and reconstruct the whole human universe of thought and the whole human scale of values in accordance with the state of war against God” (*The Range of Reason* [London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953], 104).

¹⁴ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 12.

¹⁵ “Foreword to Thesis: The Difference Between the Natural Philosophy of Democritus and the Natural Philosophy of Epicurus,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 15.

¹⁶ *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 14.

¹⁷ According to Feuerbach, “Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations” (Ibid, 33).

¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

projectionist account of religion intends to dispel. Thus, according to de Lubac, Feuerbach's sole aim was "to reveal to mankind its own essence in order to give it faith in itself."¹⁹

De Lubac's reading of Nietzsche follows a similar line of reasoning. For Nietzsche, religion is the self-debasement of man—relegating everything that is great in him to an alleged bestowal of divine grace.²⁰ Human beings must therefore rid themselves of God so as to regain possession of their own greatness. God must die, that man might truly live. "You higher men," Nietzsche declares through the mouth of Zarathustra, "this god was your greatest danger. It is only now, since he lies in his grave, that you are resurrected . . . Well then! Well now! You higher men . . . God died: now *we* want – the overman [*Übermensch*] to live."²¹ It is this proclamation of "the death of God" that delineates Nietzsche as the great prophet of atheist humanism and, as we shall see, precursor to the anti-humanism of the twentieth century. Like Feuerbach, Nietzsche is scarcely content with refuting the traditional "proofs" of God's existence. Rather, Nietzsche declares that "the question of the mere 'truth' of Christianity . . . is of secondary importance."²² It is not against a mere *belief* in God that Feuerbach and Nietzsche are revolting, but rather the particular ideal of human beings that such a belief entails. For "perhaps man would rise higher and higher," writes Nietzsche, "from the moment when he ceased to flow into God."²³ It is only through the crucible of theocide, in other words, that man begins the long march toward self-realization.

Act Two: Dépassement (Overtaking)

The second act of de Lubac's interpretation of atheist humanism involves what he refers to as a *dépassement* or *overtaking*. While not entirely absent from *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*,²⁴ this line of

¹⁹ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 32.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 86–87. As de Lubac notes, "God, according to Nietzsche, is nothing more than the mirror of man, who, in certain intense, exceptional states, becomes aware of the power that is in him or of the love that exalts him . . . Man, not daring to ascribe such power or love to himself, makes them the attributes of a superhuman being who is a stranger to him. He accordingly divides the two aspects of his own nature between two spheres, the ordinary weak and pitiable aspect appertaining to the sphere he calls 'man', while the rare, strong and surprising aspect belongs to the sphere he calls 'God'. Thus by his own action he is defrauded of what is best in him" (*The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 44).

²¹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65

²² *The Will to Power*, 145.

²³ *The Gay Science*, quoted in Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 59.

²⁴ See especially the section devoted to the work of Auguste Comte (215–261).

interpretation appears most clearly in de Lubac's 1968 publication, *Athéisme et sens de l'homme* [*Atheism and the Meaning of Man*].²⁵ According to de Lubac, the revolt waged by atheist humanism against the Christian God is typically complemented by a corresponding movement of overtaking, by which he means the transformation of the Christian mystery into the immanentist religion of atheist humanism. Thus, according to de Lubac, "contemporary atheism considers itself capable of absorbing into itself the Christian substance and of transforming 'without violence' the believer, now 'fully adult,' into an atheist."²⁶ Rejection is coupled with an act of reinterpretation, and the "fancies of theological illusion" are granted a more basic human meaning. De Lubac likens this transposition to the church's understanding of the relation between the Old and New Testaments. Just as ancient and medieval exegetes saw in the New Testament the disclosure of the true meaning of the Old, so the champions of atheist humanism have adopted a similar hermeneutic in their reading of the Christian faith. The essential reproach that the atheist humanist addresses to the Christian mystery is thus "similar to the one which Origen once addressed in the name of this mystery to the Jewish religion: he reproaches the figure for its refusal to disappear in the face of the truth that fulfils it. All theology is for him reducible to anthropology."²⁷ The atheist humanist presumes an understanding of the Christian faith, even claiming to exalt its role, all the while rejecting its mythological assertions in favor of their underlying anthropological truths.²⁸

De Lubac traces this tendency to the philosophy of Hegel; though, as de Lubac intimates, there is a certain irony in Hegel's role as progenitor of this distinctly *atheistic* movement of thought.²⁹ For according to Hegel, "God is the one and only object of philosophy." As such, philosophy's primary concern is

to occupy itself with God, to apprehend everything in him, to lead everything back to him, as well as to derive everything particular from God and to justify everything only insofar as it stems from God, is sustained through its relationship with him, lives by his radiance and has [within itself] the mind of God. Thus philosophy *is* theology, and

²⁵ *Athéisme et sens de l'homme* (Vienne: Cerf, 1968). While this text has not yet been translated into English, portions of the second chapter ("Sens total de l'homme et du monde") have been published as "The Total Meaning of Man and the World" in *Communio* 36 (Winter 2008), 613–641.

²⁶ *Athéisme et sens de l'homme*, 24.

²⁷ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 422; see also *Athéisme et sens de l'homme*, 29. On the relation between the "Old and New Testaments" in the theology of Origen, see Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

²⁸ *Athéisme et sens de l'homme*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

[one's] occupation with philosophy – or rather *in* philosophy—is of itself the service of God.³⁰

To what extent then does Hegel's thinking anticipate the hermeneutic of atheist humanism? How does the Hegelian "service of God" lend itself to the overtaking mentioned above? For Hegel, God is absolute *spirit* (*Geist*). As spirit, "God is essentially in his community . . . he is objective to himself and is such truly only in self-consciousness [so that] God's very own highest determination is self-consciousness. Thus the concept of God leads of itself necessarily to religion."³¹ Religion then, as conceived by Hegel, is not merely a mode of human cognition or feeling, but the very process whereby the self-consciousness of absolute spirit is actualized in and through the medium of finite consciousness. It is, as it were, "the highest determination of the absolute idea itself."³² For Hegel, God is not the infinite as set wholly over-and-against the finite. Rather, the divine spirit becomes absolute spirit precisely in and through the mediation of finite spirit. "It is in the finite consciousness . . . that the divine self-consciousness thus arises. Out of the foaming ferment of finitude, spirit rises up fragrantly."³³ It is not difficult, therefore, to see how Hegel's idealist rendering of the Christian kerygma might lend itself to the overtaking proffered by the advocates of atheist humanism. For if the absolute spirit is mediated through finite consciousness—if God ultimately *becomes* God in and through religion—then one might just as easily dispense with the postulate of transcendence, thereby relegating the mystery of the infinite to the realm of human consciousness. The self-consciousness of absolute spirit is thus subsumed under the self-consciousness of finite spirit, rendering the former superfluous. One sees this most explicitly, of course, in the work of Hegel's student, Ludwig Feuerbach.

For Feuerbach, as was intimated above, religion is identical with self-consciousness. As such, "the consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, *in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject*

³⁰ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 1985, 1987), 1:84.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:186–187.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:318.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3:233. Thus, in the Hotho transcript of the 1824 lectures, Hegel asserts: "Religion is therefore the relation of [finite] spirit to absolute spirit. But, as knowing, spirit is thus what is known or absolute spirit itself, and religion is the *self-consciousness of absolute spirit*—its relation to itself as the object of its knowing, which is *self-knowing* . . . Religion is also consciousness, and has therefore finite consciousness within it, though sublated as finite because absolute spirit is itself the other that it knows, and it is only by knowing itself that it becomes absolute spirit. Consequently, however, it is only mediated through consciousness or finite spirit, so that it has to *finitize* itself in order by this finitization to come to know itself" (*Ibid.*, 1:318).

has for his object the infinity of his own nature.”³⁴ Having therefore rid himself of that “residue of transcendence that still betrayed the Hegelian philosophy of religion,”³⁵ Feuerbach devotes chapter after chapter of *The Essence of Christianity* to showing the ways in which “the object and contents of the Christian religion are altogether human.”³⁶ Feuerbach’s projectionist hermeneutic is thus applied to an impressive array of theological illusions, from the mystery of the resurrection, to the doctrines of providence and creation.³⁷ With similar scope, though far less convincingly, Auguste Comte seeks to displace Christianity with the positivist “religion of Humanity.” But whereas the overtaking waged by Feuerbach remains a principle of interpretation, Comte offers a more radical reconstruction of religion, complete with its own forms of worship, dogma and regime. In the “religion of Humanity,” for instance, there are nine social sacraments, a Trinity of Space, Earth and Humanity, a cult of saints, and a priesthood composed entirely of scientists.³⁸ Despite their many differences, however, both Feuerbach and Comte are driven by a similar dialectic—religion, construed as “a vampire that feeds upon the substance of mankind,”³⁹ is substituted for a humanism which,

³⁴ *The Essence of Christianity*, 2–3, emphasis added.

³⁵ Stanislas Breton, *La Passion du Christ et les philosophes*; cited in Henri de Lubac, *Athéisme et sens de l’homme*, 28.

³⁶ *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.

³⁷ Of particular importance to Feuerbach’s psychological overtaking of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Incarnation. As a morally perfect being, Feuerbach explains, God is nothing other than the moral nature of man posited as an absolute. But consciousness of the absolutely perfect moral nature entails with it a consciousness of one’s own moral ineptitude. It is therefore “a dispiriting consciousness, for it is the consciousness of our personal nothingness, and of the kind which is the most acutely felt—moral nothingness” (Ibid, 46–47). Man is placed in a state of disunion with himself, a sinner in contradiction to a just and angry God. It is thus only insofar as he is conscious of *love* as the highest truth—only insofar as he regards God as not merely a moral law but a personal, loving being—that man is ultimately delivered from this state of disunion. Love is therefore the principle of reconciliation between God and man and the essential truth behind the idea of the Incarnation. For according to Feuerbach,

Love determined God to the renunciation of his divinity. Not because of his Godhead as such, according to which he is the *subject* in the proposition, God is love, but because of his love, of the *predicate*, is it that he renounced his Godhead; *thus love is a higher power and truth than deity*. Love conquers God. It was love to which God sacrificed his divine majesty (Ibid, 53).

The Christian idea of the Incarnation, therefore, is not merely subjected to Feuerbach’s projectionist hermeneutic as one doctrine among others, but rather contains within itself the very justification of such an anthropological overtaking. For “as God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God” (Ibid).

³⁸ See “Positive Transpositions,” in Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 215–261.

³⁹ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 29.

in turn, feeds upon the substance of religion. Thus, according to de Lubac, the humanism represented by such thinkers as Feuerbach and Comte is “a phenomenon parasitic on Christianity, which is grafted onto its dogma in order to empty it of its kerygmatic content.”⁴⁰ Having decried Christianity for conflating anthropology and theology, the advocates of atheist humanism, it would seem, have merely returned the favor.

Act Three: Annihilation

The third and final act of de Lubac’s hermeneutical drama marks a significant shift in his engagement with atheist humanism. Having assumed, for the most part, the equitable role of narrator in acts one and two, de Lubac’s rhetoric shifts in act three to polemic, and the narrator dons a more prophetic persona. “It is not true,” writes de Lubac, “that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can ultimately only organize it against man. Exclusive humanism is inhuman humanism.”⁴¹ Having fought and been seriously injured in the First World War, and having fled from the Gestapo in the Second,⁴² de Lubac witnessed firsthand the horrors of a world “organized against man.” But the gross inhumanity played out on the historical stage throughout the first half of the twentieth century was, according to de Lubac, simply the manifestation of a deeper crisis begun a century earlier.⁴³ For all their differences, the various “humanisms” set forth by Feuerbach, Comte and Nietzsche share a similar telos. The final act of the drama of atheist humanism is, according to de Lubac, *the annihilation of the human person*. “If man takes himself as god,” writes de Lubac, “he can, for a time, cherish the illusion that he has raised and freed himself. But it is a fleeting exaltation! In reality, he has merely abased

⁴⁰ *Athéisme et sens de l’homme*, 30.

⁴¹ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 14.

⁴² According to de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* was originally composed during the Second World War as “several disparate articles coming principally from semi-clandestine conferences with an anti-Nazi point” (*At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 40).

⁴³ As is well known, Nietzsche had predicted just such catastrophic repercussions as the legacy of his own philosophy. “Some day,” wrote Nietzsche, “my name will be linked to the memory of something monstrous, of a crisis as yet unprecedented on earth, the most profound collision of consciences, a decision conjured up *against* everything hitherto believed, demanded, hallowed.” Nietzsche thus saw himself as *the man of impending disaster*. “For when the truth squares up to the lie of millennia, we will have upheavals, a spasm of earthquakes, a removal of mountain and valley such as have never been dreamed of. . . there will be wars such as there have never yet been on earth” (*Ecce Homo* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 88–89).

God, and it is not long before he finds that in doing so he has abased himself.”⁴⁴

Henri de Lubac’s assessment of atheist humanism is thus, by this point, unabashedly theological. Human beings are derivative, originating in an act of divine creativity and ordered to the perfect enjoyment of their maker. The truth of human being therefore transcends itself, residing in the one in whose image we were created and after whose likeness we are continually being transformed. Thus, according to de Lubac,

If man, by an act of sacrilege, inverts the relationship, usurps God’s attributes, and declares that God was made to man’s image, all is over with him. The transcendence that he repudiates was the sole warrant of his own immanence. Only by acknowledging himself to be a reflection could he obtain completeness, and only in his act of adoration could he find his own inviolable depths.⁴⁵

Such claims are, of course, wholly unconvincing in abstraction from the grammar of the Christian Gospel. For as de Lubac is often eager to insist, it is only by revealing Himself to us that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, reveals us to ourselves.⁴⁶ Thus, in defense of his assertion that “atheist humanism was bound to end in bankruptcy,” de Lubac insists that “man is himself only because his face is illumined by a divine ray.”⁴⁷ As John Webster remarks elsewhere on the content of Christian anthropology, “such claims, for all their loveliness, are culturally marginal.”⁴⁸ It is difficult to imagine public consent, that is, to an argument predicated on the brightness of a divinely illumined face! For de Lubac, however, the adamant refusal to ground human being in itself is simply ingredient within a believer’s witness to the one “in whom we live and move and have our being.”⁴⁹

De Lubac’s critique of *atheist* humanism must not, therefore, be misconstrued as simply a defense of *humanism* on wholly theological grounds.⁵⁰ As D. Stephen Long aptly notes, such a reading would invite a mere “instrumentalization of God for the preservation of

⁴⁴ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 67–68.

⁴⁵ *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 359.

⁴⁶ See, for example, “The Mystery of the Supernatural,” in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 314; and “The Total Meaning of Man and the World,” *Communio* 35 (Winter 2008): 626–627.

⁴⁷ *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 67.

⁴⁸ “The Human Person,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 219.

⁴⁹ Acts 17:28.

⁵⁰ This particular reading of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* was unfortunately adopted by a large number of de Lubac’s initial readers. Thus, according to a recent historian of post-war France, the book was initially “presented as arguing that while atheistic forms of humanism were inadequate, a Christian humanism could remedy their insufficiency by providing the transcendental dimension” (Michael Kelly, *The Cultural and Intellectual*

humanism.”⁵¹ Were such the case, then one would surely be hard-pressed in defending de Lubac from the charges of Jüngel and others concerning the “non-necessity” of God for the self-establishment of man.⁵² In contradistinction to the humanist readings of his work, however, de Lubac was far more reluctant to identify his own engagement with atheist humanism as itself *humanist*. In his 1950 publication *Affrontements mystiques* [*Mystical Confrontations*], for instance, de Lubac questions the very merit of speaking of a Christian humanism. “More than one Christian contests it,” notes de Lubac, “and for serious reasons: either this expression risks suggesting that Christianity would come merely to crown a humanism already constituted without it, or one is anxious to recall that the essential object of revelation is not man but God and that the Christian must seek God, not himself.”⁵³ While de Lubac thus acknowledges the potential impropriety of the expression “Christian humanism,” he is nonetheless emphatic that the Christian affirmation of God in no way entails the negation of humanity. On the contrary, the nobility of human beings resides precisely in their being in relation to God. It is not the affirmation of God, therefore, but his denial that eventuates in the dissolution of humanity. “Man without God is dehumanized.”⁵⁴

An Atheism that is Not Humanist

Despite the unmistakably *confessional* nature of his polemic, de Lubac’s critique of atheist humanism soon found an unlikely host of allies. To return to an earlier quote by Emmanuel Levinas,

Contemporary thought holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist. The gods are dead or withdrawn from the world; concrete, even rational man does not contain the universe. In all those books that go beyond metaphysics we witness the exaltation of an obedience and a faithfulness that are not obedience or faithfulness to anyone.⁵⁵

Levinas’s pronouncement denotes a new form of atheism emerging particularly in France in the aftermath of the Second World War. Hav-

Rebuilding of France after the Second World War [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 149).

⁵¹ *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 43.

⁵² See Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 19–20.

⁵³ Translated from *Affrontements mystiques* and appended to *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* as “The Search for a New Man,” 399.

⁵⁴ Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 193.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, 127–128.

ing liberated themselves from obedience to God, these new atheists sought deliverance from obedience even to the human subject. Thus, in his famous 1945 lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Jean-Paul Sartre declared, “One may understand by humanism a theory which upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value . . . That kind of humanism is absurd . . . an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined.”⁵⁶ Following in the wake of Sartre’s “critique” of humanism,⁵⁷ a litany of anti-humanisms began to emerge—each dismissing the one that preceded it for its alleged failure to overcome the specter of humanism. Thus, while Heidegger denounces Sartre’s existentialism for its complicity in the tyranny of metaphysics,⁵⁸ Derrida faults Heidegger for granting *human* beings a privileged relation to *being*.⁵⁹ Rather than narrating the unique contributions of each of these adherents of anti-humanism, I want to conclude by focusing briefly on an essay by the French writer and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot. Not only is Blanchot paradigmatic for our discussion of anti-humanism (the above-mentioned quote by Levinas, for example, is located in an essay devoted to the work of Blanchot!), but his 1949 article “On Nietzsche’s Side” was written directly in response to Henri de Lubac’s *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

As the title suggests, Blanchot’s rejoinder to de Lubac takes the form of a defense of Nietzsche. Like de Lubac, Blanchot grants that for Nietzsche the negation of God entails the affirmation of *something*. However, for Blanchot this *something* is scarcely akin to the positive ideal of man set forth in de Lubac’s reading of Nietzsche. According to Blanchot, “‘God is dead’ cannot live in Nietzsche as knowledge bringing an answer, but as the refusal of an answer, the negation of a salvation, the ‘no’ he utters to this grandiose permission to rest, to unload oneself onto an eternal truth, which is God for him.

⁵⁶ *Existentialism and Humanism*, 55.

⁵⁷ As Geroulanos notes, Sartre’s essay is at once “an accomplishment for antihumanism” and, paradoxically, an attempt to maintain the moniker of humanism for his own existentialist project (*An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 223).

⁵⁸ Thus, in considering Sartre’s claim that existence precedes essence (*Existentialism and Humanism*, 28), Heidegger writes: “In this statement [Sartre] is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which from Plato’s time on has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. *But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of being* (“Letter on Humanism,” in William McNeill, ed., *Pathmarks* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 250).

⁵⁹ Thus, according to Derrida, “in the *Letter on Humanism* and beyond, the attraction of the ‘proper man’ will not cease to direct all the itineraries of thought . . . It is in the play of a certain proximity, proximity to oneself and proximity to Being, that we will see constituted, against metaphysical humanism and anthropologism, another insistence of man, one which relays, relieves, supplements that which it destroys” (“Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy* [Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982], 124).

‘God is dead’ is a task, and a task that has no end.”⁶⁰ The radical ingenuity of Nietzsche’s claim to theocide, according to Blanchot, does not reside in the bare affirmation of humanity, for such an affirmation would simply be the substitution of one absolute for another. Rather, the Death of God heralds something far more courageous and unsettling. “The Death of God is less a negation aiming at the infinite than an affirmation of the infinite power to deny and to live to the end of this power.”⁶¹ The Death of God is therefore the refusal of all foundations, an act of what Stefanos Geroulanos has termed “ontological revolt” whereby the individual is constituted by the very power of this negation.⁶² As such, according to Blanchot,

the infinite collapse of God allows freedom to become aware of the nothing that is its foundation, without making an absolute of this nothing . . . And the infinite ability to deny remains an ability to deny the infinite, and *escapes the temptation to place oneself outside of questioning, to turn petrified by choosing oneself as the inarguable value.*⁶³

The denial of God is the denial of all certitude, the refusal to ground truth and morality even in the self or the nature of humanity. Thus, without granting de Lubac’s recourse to the claims of theology, Blanchot accepts his critique of atheist attempts to supplant the transcendence of God with the “dogmatic affirmation of immanence.”⁶⁴ In countering de Lubac’s reading of Nietzsche, therefore, Blanchot ironically confirms his principal thesis that “where there is no God, there is no man either.”

Conclusion

It is precisely here, in its refusal to secure an absolute in the resources of its own immanence, that the theological significance of anti-humanism resides. Henri de Lubac’s pious (some might say *naïve*) prediction of the imminent collapse of atheist humanism was thus corroborated by some of the most significant inheritors of the anti-theism of the nineteenth century. For the advocates of anti-humanism, moreover, the death of man does not occur *in spite of* the negation of divinity, but rather, as de Lubac had insisted, as the very *consequence* of the death of God. The existentialism of Sartre, for example, is but

⁶⁰ “On Nietzsche’s Side,” in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 292.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁶² Geroulanos, *An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 256.

⁶³ “On Nietzsche’s Side,” 296, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

one attempt at drawing the consequences of atheism right to the end. For according to Sartre, if God does not exist, “[man] cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself.”⁶⁵ For Blanchot, moreover, the adamant refusal to locate value within the confines of human subjectivity is indispensable to the ever-recurring task of theocide. The human subject simply cannot bear the freight of “truth” and “meaning” that humanity once attributed to its God. There is therefore a certain aversion to the idolatry of humanity in this “death of the subject” that Christian theology recognizes in its own particular discourse. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them,” asks the psalmist, “mortals that you care for them?”⁶⁶ There is, moreover, a radical self-awareness of its own limitations that distances this “atheism that is not humanist” from the hubris of its predecessors. The death of God does not, it would seem, lead to the affirmation of humanity, but rather to the abyss of uncertainty. The restlessness of Blanchot is thus reminiscent of that restlessness mentioned by Saint Augustine—one that terminates only in the knowledge of God.⁶⁷

As Augustine himself was deeply aware, however, one must be wary in “spoiling the Egyptians” of leaving with their idols as well as their gold. While Christian theology might have recourse to the claims of anti-humanism in abolishing the myth of man as an end in himself, it must take care to avoid the opposite temptation of abolishing the human subject altogether. To borrow the rhetoric of Jean-Paul Sartre, we must insist that there *is* a human nature, precisely because there *is* a God to have a conception of it. Christian humanism (should we maintain the moniker) is a *converted* humanism, to be sure, and human beings must therefore lose themselves so to be found in that humanity re-constituted in the person of Jesus Christ.⁶⁸ But while anti-humanism affirms energetically the death of self, it knows nothing of the one in whom the self is risen to the newness of life. The theological significance of anti-humanism is its witness to the self-destruction of a humanity indignant of its divine derivation. But if anti-humanism presumes a knowledge of the destruction of Good Friday, it is incapable of comprehending the hope of Easter morning. And though we ought to insist, along with the

⁶⁵ *Existentialism and Humanism*, 33–34. According to Sartre, “The existentialist . . . finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *à priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that ‘the good’ exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted’; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point” (Ibid, 33).

⁶⁶ Psalm 8: 4.

⁶⁷ *Confessions*, bk. 1, c. 1.

⁶⁸ See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 368.

advocates of anti-humanism, that man is not an end in himself, we must still affirm that there *is* such a thing as human being, and that such a being finds its meaning *precisely in its end*. For though we may not yet know what we will be, we know that when the Lord appears “we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.”⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ 1 John 3:2.