

On the Meaning of Contemporary Atheism

By Jacques Maritain

I SHOULD like to consider in this essay* one particular aspect of the present spiritual crisis—namely, contemporary atheism and its inner meaning. Such a topic, *the meaning of contemporary atheism*, involves very deep and intricate problems. I do not pretend to dogmatize about them; the views that I shall offer are somewhat tentative views, which originate in a desire to look for the hidden spiritual significance of the present agony of the world.

In an introductory part I shall try, first, to analyze briefly the various kinds of atheism we might have to deal with, in order to characterize more accurately contemporary atheism.

Second, I shall try to bring out the double inconsistency that such an atheism involves. I mean the inconsistency presented by the fact that this casting aside of all religion is itself a religious phenomenon, and the inconsistency presented by the fact that this rejection of God—of the true, transcendent God of nature—is in actual existence an adoration of the false, immanent god of history.

Thus we shall lead up to the main question that I should like to deal with: a comparison between the atheist and the saint—which of these two, the atheist and the saint, represents the more uncompromising and revolutionary break with all the injustice and deceit of this world. And perhaps we shall have to conclude that the atheist—I mean the genuine, absolute atheist, with all his sincerity and devotion—is but an abortive saint and, at the same time, a mistaken revolutionist.

A distinction between the diverse sorts of atheism can be made from two different points of view: from the point of view of the attitude of the human subject who professes himself to be an atheist; and from the point of view of the logical content of various atheistic philosophies.

From the point of view of the human subject who professes himself to be an atheist, I would say that there are *practical atheists*, who believe that they believe in God but who in reality deny His existence by each one of their deeds—they worship the world, and power, and

* This essay was delivered at Notre Dame on March 23, 1949 as a part of a celebration of the tenth anniversary of THE REVIEW OF POLITICS.

money. Then there are *pseudo-atheists*, who believe that they do not believe in God but who in reality unconsciously believe in Him, because the god whose existence they deny is not God but something else. Finally, there are *absolute atheists*, who actually deny the existence of the very God in whom the believers believe—God the Creator, Savior and Father, whose name is infinitely over and above any name we can utter. Those absolute atheists stand committed to change their entire system of values and to destroy in themselves everything that suggests God's name; they have chosen to stake their all against divine Transcendence and any vestige of Transcendence.

From the second point of view, from the point of view of the logical content of the various atheistic philosophies, I would divide atheism into negative and positive atheism.

By *negative atheism* I mean a merely negative or destructive process of casting aside the idea of God, which is replaced only by a void. Such a negative atheism can be only shallow and empirical, like the atheism of the *libertins* of the seventeenth century: it hollows out a vacuum at the center of the universe of thought which has taken shape for centuries around the idea of God, but it does not bother about altering that universe; it is concerned merely with making us live comfortably in the empirical freedom of doing whatever we want. On the other hand, negative atheism can be deeply and metaphysically lived: in which case the void it creates at the center of things extends to and lays waste our whole universe of thought; the freedom it claims for the human ego is absolute independence, a kind of divine independence that this ego, like Dostoievski's Kirilov, has no better way of affirming than by suicide and self-destruction.

By *positive atheism* I mean an active struggle against everything that reminds us of God—that is to say, anti-theism 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 according to that state of war against God. Such positive atheism was the tragic, solitary atheism of Nietzsche; such is today the academic, fashionable atheism of existentialism; such is the revolutionary atheism of dialectical materialism. The latter is of special interest to us, because it has succeeded in getting a considerable number of men to accept wholeheartedly this new kind of faith, and to give themselves sincerely and unquestionably to it.

Now when I speak of contemporary atheism, I speak of that form of contemporary atheism which is most significant, which spells a new

and unheard of historic event, because it is *absolute* atheism and *positive* atheism considered especially in the last aspect I have just mentioned. Human history has been confronted, for almost a century, with the thunderous bursting forth of an atheism which is both *absolute* (making man actually deny God himself) and *positive* (anti-theism, demanding to be thoroughly lived by man and to change the face of the earth). Such a bursting forth was the conclusion of a three-century-old progressive degradation of the idea of God, for which bourgeois rationalism was especially responsible; it means "the beginning of a new age in which the process of death and the process of resurrection will develop together, confronting each other and struggling with each other."¹

I should like to point out that today's absolute-positive atheism involves a double inconsistency.

How does absolute-positive atheism start in a human mind? At this point we are faced with a remarkable fact. A man does not become an absolute atheist as a result of some inquiry into the problem of God carried on by speculative reason. No doubt he takes into account the negative conclusions afforded in this connection by the most radical forms of rationalist or positivist philosophies, as well as the old platitude stating that the scientific explanation of the universe got clear of the existence of God. But all that is for him a second-hand means of defense, not the prime propelling and determining incentive. Neither those philosophical conclusions nor that nonsensical commonplace does he submit to any critical examination. He takes them for granted. He believes in them. And why? By virtue of an inner act of freedom, in the production of which he commits his whole personality. The starting point of absolute atheism is, in my opinion, a basic act of moral choice, a crucial free determination. If a man, taking a stand with regard to his own self and the whole direction of his own life, mistakes the rejection of any transcendent law for moral maturity; if this man decides to confront good and evil in an absolutely free experience, by casting aside any ultimate end and any rule coming from above—such a free moral determination, dealing with the primary values of his existence, will mean a casting aside of God from one's whole life and thought. Here is, in my opinion, the point at which absolute atheism begins in the depths of a man's spiritual activity. But what have I just described, if not a kind of an act of faith, a reversed act of faith, whose content is a rejection of, not an adherence to, the transcendent God?

¹ *A New Approach to God, in our Emergent Civilization*, edited by Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harpers, 1947), p. 292.

Thus it is that absolute atheism is positive atheism. "It is in no way a mere absence of belief in God. It is rather a refusal of God, a fight against God, a challenge to God."² The absolute atheist is delivered over "to an inner dialectic which obliges him ceaselessly to destroy any resurgence in himself of what he has buried. . . . In proportion as the dialectic of atheism develops in his mind—each time he is confronted with the natural notion of and natural interest in absolute values or unconditioned standards, or with some metaphysical anxiety—he will discover in himself vestiges of Transcendence which have not yet been abolished. He must get rid of them. God is a perpetual threat to him. His case is not a case of practical forgetting, but a case of deeper and deeper commitment to refusal and fight."³ He is bound ceaselessly to struggle against God, and to change, to recast everything in himself and in the world on the basis of that anti-theism.

What does all that mean? Absolute atheism starts in a reversed act of faith and is a full-blown religious commitment. Here we have the first internal inconsistency of contemporary atheism: it proclaims the necessary vanishing away of all religion, and it is a religious phenomenon.

The second inconsistency is similar to the first one. Absolute atheism starts as a claim of man to become the only master of his own destiny, totally freed from any alienation and heteronomy, made totally and decisively independent of any ultimate end and any eternal law such as is imposed upon him by any transcendent God. Does not, according to atheistic theorists, the idea of God originate in an alienation of human nature separated from itself and transferred into an ideal, sublimated image whose very transcendence and sovereign attributes keep man submitted to an enslaved state of existence? Is it not by getting rid of that sublimated image and of any transcendence that human nature will achieve its own fullness and freedom and bring about the final "reconciliation between essence and existence?"

What is the actual end-all of the philosophy of absolute immanence which is but one with absolute atheism? Everything which was formerly considered superior to time and participating in some transcendent quality—either ideal value or spiritual reality—is now absorbed in the movement of temporal existence and the all-powerful ocean of becoming and history. Truth, justice, good, evil, all the standards of conscience, henceforth perfectly relativized, become radically contingent: they are

² *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

but changing shapes of the process of history; for Descartes they were but contingent creations of divine Liberty. Truth is at each moment what conforms to the requirements of history's begettings. As a result truth changes as time goes on. A given action which I carried out today was a noble deed today and will be a crime tomorrow. And thus must my conscience pass judgment on it. The human intellect and moral conscience have to become heroically tractable.

And what of the self, the person, the problem of human destiny? Total rejection of transcendence logically entails total adherence to immanence. There is nothing eternal in man, he will entirely die, there is nothing to be saved in him. But he can give himself, and give himself entirely, to the whole of which he is a part, to the boundless flux that is the sole reality and that bears the fate of mankind. By virtue of his decisive moral experience itself, and of that primary moral choice—against any ultimate End—which I have tried to describe, and which implies a commitment much deeper than that which individualistic egoism or epicureanism is capable of, the absolute or positive atheist delivers himself over to the all-absorbing—social or cosmic—whole in evolution. He is not merely satisfied to die in it, as a blade of grass in the loam, and to make it more fertile in the very dissolving. He also realizes that his total being, with all its values and standards and beliefs, as I said a moment ago, must be given to that Minotaur that is history, man-eating history. Duty and virtue for him are but a whole submission and immolation of himself before the sacred voracity of becoming.

At that point we are faced with a new kind of mystical "pure love"—giving up every hope for personal redemption—a real unselfishness, self-denial and self-sacrifice, a total and absolute disinterestedness—but a monstrous one, paid for at the price of the very self, of the very existence and dignity of the person, at the price of what is in us an end in itself and the image of God. Christ had said: "He that shall lose his own soul for me, shall find it,"⁴ because losing one's own soul for God is delivering it over to absolute Truth and Goodness and Love, to the eternal Law itself which transcends all the contingency and mutability of Becoming. The positive atheist delivers his own soul over—and not in order to save it—to a worldly demiurge crazy for human minds to bend and bow and yield at the event's sweet will.

I am not diminishing the spiritual significance of the moral attitude

⁴ *Math.*, X, 39.

of the absolute atheist. On the contrary, I am emphasizing its kind of mystical disinterestedness, and the element of greatness and generosity that it contains. But I say that this moral attitude also involves a basic inconsistency, and that the whole process is in the end a failure. That break with God began as a claim to total independence and total emancipation, as a proud revolutionary break with all that submits man to alienation and heteronomy. It ends up in obeisance and prostration before the all-powerful movement of history, in a kind of sacred surrender of the human soul to the blind god of history.

II

The failure that I have just mentioned reveals to us a fact which has, to my mind, a deep significance: I mean the materially very strong, but spiritually very weak and deceptive revolutionary character of absolute atheism; I mean the fact that its radicalism is an inevitably self-deluded radicalism—for a genuinely revolutionary spirit does not kneel before history, it presumes to make history; I mean the fact that absolute atheism falls short of that uncompromising protest, of that absolute non-compliance, the semblance—and the expectation—of which make it seductive for many people.

Thus with the second part of this essay, we arrive at the point I should like especially to discuss. Which of these two, the atheist and the saint, is the more uncompromising and thoroughgoing, which lays more deeply the axe to the root of the trees? Which brings about the more complete and far-reaching, the more radical break?

Let us try to imagine what takes place in the soul of a saint at the crucial moment when he makes his first irrevocable decision. Consider St. Francis of Assisi when he threw away his raiment and appeared naked before his Bishop, out of love for poverty; or St. Benoit Labre when he decided to become a verminous beggar and to wander about the roads. At the root of such an act there was something so deep in the soul that it can be hardly expressed, I would say a simple refusal—not a movement of revolt, which is temporary, or of despair, which is passive—rather a simple refusal, a total, stable, supremely active refusal to accept things as they are: here it is not a question of knowing whether things and nature and the world are good in their essence—yes, they are good, being is good insofar as it is being, grace perfects nature and does not destroy it—these truths have no concern with the inner act of rupture, of break, that we are contemplating. That act has to

deal with a fact, an existential fact: things as they are are not tolerable—positively, definitely not tolerable. In actual existence the world is infected with untruth and injustice and wickedness and distress and misery. Creation has been marred by sin in such a way that in the depth (of the depths) of his soul the saint refuses to accept it as it is. Evil—I mean the power of the sin, and the universal suffering it entails, the rot of nothingness that gnaws things everywhere—evil is such, that the only thing at hand which can remedy it, and which inebriates the saint with freedom and exultation and love, is to give up everything, the sweetness of the world, and what is good, and what is best, and what is pleasurable and permitted, in order to be free to be with God. It is to have himself totally stripped and given in order to lay hold of the power of the cross, it is to die for those he loves. That is a flash of intuition and of will over and above the whole order of human morality. Once a human soul has been touched by such a burning wing, it becomes a stranger everywhere. It can fall in love with things, it will never rest in them. To redeem creation the saint wages war on the entire fabric of creation, with the naked arms of truth and love. This war begins in the most hidden recesses of his own soul and blood, it will come to an end with the advent of a new earth and new heaven, when all that is powerful in this world will have been humiliated and all that is despised will have been exalted. The saint is alone in treading the winepress, and of the peoples there is no man with him.

And I would say that in that war of which I have just spoken his God has given him the example. For in calling intellectual creatures to share in His own uncreated life God uproots them from the very life of which they are possessed as rooted in nature and *maya*. Jews know that God is a hidden God, who conceals His name and manifests Himself to mankind in prodigies and in the spirit of the prophets, in order to renew the face of the earth, and Who has separated for Himself His people from all the nations of the world. Christians know that God is both so dissatisfied with that lost world which He had made good and which evil has ruined—and so carried away by love—that He has given His Son and delivered Him over to men, in order for Him to be rejected by the world and to suffer and to die, and in this way to redeem the world.

To this true God the saint is entirely given. But there are false gods; even, as I shall shortly say, there is a spurious and distorted image of God that can be called the King or Jove of all false gods, the great god of the idolators. With regard to *that* god the saint is a

thorough atheist, the most atheistic of men—just because he adores *only* God.

Let us dwell a moment on this point. And let us consider the merely rational, merely philosophical concept of God. This concept is twofold: there is a true God of the philosophers, and there is a false god of the philosophers. The true God of the philosophers is but the true God himself, the God of the saints, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—imperfectly and inchoatively known, known in His natural attributes only: such a merely rational notion of God is in actual fact open to the supernatural.

But suppose now a merely rational notion of God which, knowing the existence of the supreme being, would at the same time disregard what St. Paul called His glory, deny the abyss of freedom which is meant by His transcendence, and chain Him to the very world He has made. Suppose a merely rational—and warped—notion of God which is closed against the supernatural, and makes impossible the mysteries that are hidden in God's love and freedom and incommunicable life. Here we would have the false god of the philosophers, the Jove of all false gods. Imagine a god who is bound to the order of nature and who is but a supreme warrant and justification of that order—a god who is responsible for this world without redeeming it, and whose inflexible will, that no prayer can reach, is pleased with and hallows all the evil as well as all the good of the universe, all the trickery and cruelty together with all the generosity which are at play in nature, a god who blessed iniquity and slavery and destitution, and who sacrifices man to the *cosmos*, and makes the tears of the children and the agony of the innocents an ingredient without any offset of the sacred necessities of eternal cycles or of evolution. Such a god would be the unique supreme being but made into an idol, the *naturalistic* god of nature, the Jupiter of the world, the great god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich, of lawless success and mere fact raised to a law.

I am afraid that such was the god of our modern rationalistic philosophy, the god perhaps of Leibniz and Spinoza, surely the god of Hegel.

Such was also, in quite another mood, not rationalistic, but magical, the god of Pagan antiquity, or rather one of the countenances of that double-faced god. For the Pagan god was ambiguous: on the one hand he was the true God of nature and reason, the unknown God of whom St. Paul spoke to the Athenians; on the other hand he was the

false, and self-contradictory god of naturalism whom I have just described, and who gets on fine with the Prince of this world.

It could be added that among Christian sects, the crazy Gnostics, especially the followers of Marcion, who regarded the God of the Old Covenant as an evil world-maker in conflict with the Redeemer, mistook the Creator for the same spurious and absurd Emperor of the world.

Now what I mean to say, is that the saint, in bringing about the great act of rupture on which I have previously laid stress, rejects by the same stroke, breaks and throws away, with uncompromising violence, that spurious Emperor of the world, that false god of naturalism, that great god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich, who is a non-sensical counterfeit of God but who is also the imaginary focus whence the adoration of the cosmos radiates, and to whom we pay tribute each time we kneel before the world. With regard to that god the saint is a perfect atheist. Well, were not the Jews and the first Christians often called atheists by the Pagans at the time of the Roman Empire? There was a hidden sense in this slander.*

But let us turn at present to our modern atheists, our true and actual atheists—what can we say about them? I would say that in the sense just emphasized the absolute atheist is not atheist enough. He too is indignant with the Jupiter of the world, the god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich; he too decides to get rid of him. But instead of throwing against that false god the strength of the true God, and of giving himself to the work of the true God, as the saint does, the atheist, because he rejects the true God, cannot struggle against the Jupiter of the word except in calling for help upon the strength of the immanent god of history, and in giving himself to the work of that immanent god. It is indeed because he believes in the revolutionary disruptive power of the impetus of history, and because he expects from it the final emancipation of man, that the atheist delivers over his own soul to the blind god of history. Yet he is caught in a trap: after a while the blind god of history will appear just as he is—yes, the very Jupiter of the world, the great god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich, of lawless success and mere fact raised to a law—that same false god in a new disguise and crowned by new idolaters, and meting out a new brand of power and success. And it is too late for the atheist. As we saw it in the first part of this essay, he is possessed by that god.

* St. Justin said: "We are called atheists. And yes we confess it, we are the atheists of those so-called gods."

He kneels before history. With regard to a god who is not God, he is the most tractable and obedient of the devotees.

Thus his break with this world of injustice and oppression was but a shallow and temporary break. He is subservient to the world more than ever. In comparison with the saint, who achieves in his flesh his initial break, and dies every day, and is blessed with the beatitudes of the poor and the persecuted and all other friends of God, and who enjoys the perfect freedom of those who are led by the Spirit, the atheist is, it seems to me, a very poor replica of the liberated mind and the heroic insurgent. Nevertheless, as I have tried to point out, it is by an ill-directed longing for inner freedom and non-acceptance of things as they are that he has been led astray. A somewhat paradoxical, yet in my opinion, true statement about absolute atheism would be to say that it deprives God and mankind of some potential saints, in making their attempts at heroic freedom a failure, and turning their effort to break with the world into a total and servile subservience to the world.

III

There is now another paradox, in an opposite direction. If we look at the saint, it seems that his inner act of total break with and total liberation from the world, making him free from everything except God, will inevitably overflow from the realm of spiritual life into the realm of temporal life. Thus, if he is not dedicated solely to a contemplative state of existence, he will be led to act as a reformer in social matters and in the field of the activities of civilization.

As a matter of fact, that is what has been taking place for centuries. The Fathers of the Church were great revolutionists. Thomas Aquinas in the cultural field, St. Vincent de Paul in the social field, are eminent examples of genuine radicals, whose initiative brought about decisive changes in the history of civilization. For centuries temporal progress in the world has been fostered by the saints.

Yet here is the paradox that I just mentioned—the day when, in the course of modern history, a particularly inhuman structure of society, caused by the industrialist revolution, made the problem of social justice manifestly crucial; when, at the same time, the human mind became aware of the *social* as a specific object of knowledge and activity, and when the first attempts to create workers' organizations provided the beginnings of a historical force capable of acting upon social struc-

ures—then should not saints have taken the lead in the protest of the poor and of the movement of labor toward its historical coming of age? In actual fact, except for a few men of faith, like Ozanam in France and Toniolo in Italy (they are not yet canonized, but some day they might be), the task, as we know, was not led by saints. It even happened that atheists, instead of saints, took the lead in social matters, much to the misfortune of all.

Why such a tragic defection? I consider it hard not to see in it a kind of punishment of the Christian world, which for a long period had more or less betrayed Christianity in its practical behavior, and despised the lessons of the saints, and forsaken the immense herd of the hopeless whom destitution and unlivable conditions of existence riveted to hell on earth. Let us not be mistaken. During the time of which I am speaking, the saints were not lacking on the earth; there was a considerable flowering of saints in the last century. But they did not pass beyond the field of spiritual, apostolic or charitable activities; they did not cross the threshold of temporal, social, secular activity. And thus the gap was not filled in. Because in the historical age which is ours, the indirect repercussion of the inner renewal of conscience over the external structures of society, which remains a basic necessity, and by means of which such social changes as the abolition of slavery were progressively made possible, is definitely not enough. An activity directly aiming at improving and recasting the structures of the temporal life, a specifically social activity is also needed.

Perhaps a concrete example will help to make clear what I mean. A poor priest named Cottolengo, who was a saint (though his name is not to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) and who founded in Turin, in the second half of the last century, a hospital that rapidly grew into a sort of city of all kinds of human infirmity, established the rule, from the very first, that no money would be saved and invested to support his institute, where hundreds of poor were treated and fed everyday. Money each day received from the Providence of God should be spent each day, for "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."⁵ Nay more, one evening, noting that his assistants had reserved a certain amount of money for the morrow, Cottolengo became so indignant that he threw the money out of the window—an action which in our mammon civilization is the limit of insanity, perhaps of sacrilege. That

⁵ *Matt.* VI, 34.

action, as well as the rule of *not saving money* established by the saint for his hospital, was in itself a perfectly revolutionary action, all the more revolutionary in that it succeeded. Cottolengo's work has thrived astonishingly: it is now one of the biggest institutions in Turin, and still operates on the same principles. Yet such a revolutionary deed, for all the spiritual significance that shone in it, was nevertheless of no social consequence. It transcended the social problem. The social problem must be managed and solved in its own order. For half a century men of good will have realized better and better that the temporal mission of those who believe in God is to make over the job.

I have just spoken of the historical deficiencies of the Christian world. Parenthetically, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, I should like to point out that by these words "the Christian world" I am designating a sociological category, which is involved in the order and history of temporal civilizations, and is something of this world. The Christian world is neither Christianity nor the Church. The failure of the Christian world cannot stain the Church or Christianity.

There was, moreover, a lot of confusion on that score. Neither Christianity nor the Church has been commissioned to make men happy, but to tell them the truth—not to bring about justice and freedom in the political society, but to give mankind salvation and eternal life. No doubt, by the same token, the Church and Christianity have also, as an additional task, to quicken the energies of justice and love in the depths of temporal existence and thus to make that existence more worthy of man. Yet success in this regard depends on the manner in which the divine message is received by the world. It is here that we are confronted with the responsibilities of the Christian world, that is, of the social groups of Christian denomination at work in secular history.

It is nonsense to reproach Christians, as some young people are doing today, for not having baptized "the Revolution," for not having devoted their whole power to "the Revolution." The messianic myth of "the Revolution," which is a secularized perversion of the idea of the advent of God's Kingdom, is but a deceptive device to warp human history, and turn into failures the non-messianic, genuine and genuinely progressive particular revolutions that must follow one another as long as human history will last. But it is not nonsense to reproach Christians in the world for having failed to bring about at certain given times such needed particular revolutions, and more generally for being

sinner—they know that they are—who, more or less, always betray Christianity. It is not nonsense to reproach the many people in modern times who pay lip-service to the God in whom they believe themselves to believe, for having been in actual fact practical atheists.

It is my conviction that, if a new age of civilization, not of barbarization, is to come, the deepest requirement of such an age will be the sanctification of secular life, a fecundation of social, temporal existence by spiritual experience, contemplative energies and brotherly love.

I am afraid we have not come to that yet. For the moment we are at the lowest point: human history is in love with fear and absurdity, human reason with despair. The powers of illusion are spreading all over the world, throwing all compasses off direction. The faculty of language has been so dishonored, the words so worn out and falsified, so many truths, met with at every corner in press or radio reports, are in each moment perfectly mixed up with so many errors similarly advertised, that men are simply losing the sense of truth. They have been so lied to that they like the drug and look forward to their everyday dose of lies in order to feel comfortable. They swallow it for the taste, and act as if they believed in it; yet they are beginning to start a kind of underground mental life in which they will believe nothing they are told, but will only rely upon savage experience and elementary instincts. They are surrounded on all sides by spurious marvels and false miracles, which dazzle and blind their minds.

Things being as they are, it seems that the wisest reasonings and the most eloquent demonstrations and the best managed organizations are definitely not enough for the men of this time. Men today need *signs*. They need deeds. They need first of all sense-perceivable signs of the reality of things divine. Yet there is everywhere a considerable shortage of thaumaturges, though they probably are the kind of a commodity that we need most.

At this point I should like to bring back to our minds a saying of Pascal's. "We are always acting," Pascal says, "as if we were commissioned to make the truth triumph, whereas we are commissioned only to struggle for it." It does not rest with us to give men miracles. It is up to us to practice what we believe.

One of the deepest meanings of absolute atheism might be stressed in that connection. As I have said on other occasions,⁶ absolute atheism

⁶ Cf. *New Approach to God*, pp. 292, 294.

means "a translation into crude and inescapable terms, a ruthless counterpart, an avenging mirror, of the practical atheism of too many believers who do not actually believe." It "is primarily the fruit and condemnation of practical atheism, and its reflected image in the mirror of divine wrath." If this statement is true, "then it must be said that the only way of getting rid of absolute atheism is to get rid of practical atheism." Decorative Faith is nowadays not enough. Faith must be actual, practical, living faith. To believe in God must mean to live in such a manner that life cannot be lived if God does not exist. Then earthly hope in the Gospel can become the quickening force of temporal history.