

## THEISM AND ATHEISM

Crimes committed in the name of God are a recurrent theme in the history of Christian Europe. The ancients practiced torture and murder in war, on slaves (who were supplied by the wars) and as a form of entertainment: the *circenses*. But in spiritual matters the emperors were relatively tolerant. If the Christians were singled out as scapegoats, it was because they did not yet at that time place the state above all else and still recognized something higher than the empire. But since Constantine in his unscrupulous way singled out Christianity from among the existing religions to fill in the cracks in his crumbling empire and elevated it to the state religion, Europe has stood under the sign of that doctrine and betrayed it again and again. If the words of the founder, his recorded will, his precepts had been put in practice instead of being interpreted by the scholars, neither the unified Christians of the middle ages nor the disunited Christians of the modern period would have had their splendid careers. Whatever teachings could have been taken over from the Old Testament, glory in battle was no part of it. Under the heathen emperors, the commandment to render unto caesar what was caesar's could

Translated by Hans Kaal.

## *Theism and Atheism*

bring Christians into conflict with the state and, when they rightly refused to observe it, to the cross. But the Christian emperors would have undertaken no wars of conquest, they would have named no tribunals to punish those who had offended against them. The victorious course of Christianity since Nicaea and especially since Augustine, which was not unlike the expansion of Buddhism since the reign of Asoka, sealed its pact with that worldly wisdom which it had originally professed to renounce. Its readiness for fanaticism, without which its ascendancy would have been unthinkable, testified to a secret and indomitable hatred for that attitude of mind for which its founder had earlier been put to death.

Initially, when the Christians themselves were the persecuted, the divinity appeared to them as a guarantor of justice. There was to be no more suppression in the world beyond, and the last would be the first; it was for the sake of heaven and not because of hell, out of hope and not for fear that the martyrs and their disciples professed their faith. Suppression, even death under torture, was but a transition into eternal blessedness; apparently inescapable conditions were but a moment of false defeats or triumph. All were the likeness of the divinity, even the lowest, and especially the lowest. The man at the stake, on the gallows, on the cross was the symbol of Christianity. It was not the ruling order of the time which determined who were to be the first; the prison and the gas chamber were at least no further from the followers of the divine delinquent than headquarters. If the barbarian masters, the men of quick decision, the generals and their confidants were included in the divine love, it was because of their poor souls. The pact concerned first of all those who were poor in spirit, those whose lives were not primarily oriented towards riches, power, affairs of state, or even towards prestige. In the first centuries of the Christian era, when the self-confidence of the senate and the people was shaken by the aspirations of the tribes outside and the resulting growth of barbarism inside, the gospel of a goal beyond this world gave a new meaning to the lives of the masses, enslaved and unruly under their masters. If it was possible for the primitive Christians to follow the gospel without unconscious resistance, it was because they knew nothing except that heaven was open to

them. But the closer their doctrine came to gaining absolute power, the more it had to conform to the requirements of self-preservation under existing conditions, to come to terms with the law of this world—though its main idea had been the relativity of this law—and to conclude the pact it has kept ever since. Darkness gained in importance. As evil became increasingly necessary for it to carry out its plans for this world, hell became increasingly important to it in its thinking of the world beyond.

Theology has always tried to reconcile the demands of the Gospels and of power. In view of the clear utterances of the founder, enormous ingenuity was required. Theology drew its strength from the fact that whatever is to be permanent on earth must conform to the law of nature: the right of the stronger. Its indispensable task was to reconcile Christianity and power, to give a satisfactory self-awareness to both high and low with which they could do their work in a corrupt world. Like the founder, who paid the price for refusing to show any concern for his own life and was murdered for it, and like all who really followed him and shared his fate or at least were left to perish helplessly, his later followers would have perished like fools if they had not concluded a pact or at least found a *modus vivendi* with the blood-thirsty Merovingians and Carolingians, with the demagogues of the crusades and with the holy inquisition. Civilization with its tall cathedrals, the madonnas of Raphael and even the poetry of Baudelaire owes its existence to the terror once perpetrated by such tyrants and their accomplices. There is blood sticking to all good things, as Nietzsche remarked whose sensitivity was unsurpassed even by a saint. If the great had taken the conflict of Christianity and Christendom as seriously as Kierkegaard did in the end, there would exist no monument of Christian culture. Without the artful patch-work of scholastic theology, neither the works of pro-Christian nor of anti-Christian philosophy would have come into being, nor the struggle for human rights, which found in John XXIII a late high-minded spokesman, nor the remote village with its old church, which was at first allowed to remain intact by the traffic, the sign of a more advanced civilization, in its barbaric and at the same time benevolent manner. Building on the foundation of enlightenment and renewal which had been laid by church fathers, Pelagians and

## *Theism and Atheism*

gnostics against the superstitions of a decaying antiquity, the scholastics developed the view of the world on which the freemen of the middle ages organized their government and established their cities. The combination of acuteness and precision, knowledge and imagination to be found in the Summas rivals the interpretations of the Torah which have been admired and disparaged as products of the Talmudic spirit. Scholasticism signifies the great age of theology. But while its comprehensive system lent ideological support to a relatively static society, it could not in the end prevent the dissolution of Christian unity.

Scholasticism lived on its inheritance from classical philosophy. Eternal ideas, which were supposed to reveal themselves to the mind like numbers, formed according to it the intellectual structure of reality. Scholastic wisdom was accepted by all believers as an interpretation of revelation, as knowledge of the world, of the temporal and eternal, of past and future. The lord and the saints were enthroned on the highest plane. Above the earth dwelt the angels and the blessed. Then came spiritual and secular dignitaries, lords, freemen and serfs. The ladder of nature stretched into the darkness of non-living things, and at the bottom was the place of the damned. Men had a picture of the universe in which divine and natural knowledge, divine and natural laws were one. In spite of predestination and grace, a man's future in other regions was largely determined by his conduct on earth which had implications beyond the moment. Each man's life had a meaning, not just the lives of the prominent. The political divisions led to the disappearance of the belief in eternal concepts, in the harmony of natural and supernatural knowledge, and in the unity of theory and practice which the scholastics had in common with the Marxists, though the ones glorified the continuation of existing conditions and the others their transformation. In the end the medieval order was set in motion not only by wars, but as a result of the widening of the world, through economic activity, the misery of the masses, inflation, the beginnings of modern science and the backwardness of the religious professions. The educated reacted with scepticism and humanism, and the threatened powers with a religious renewal. The reformers, who had been preceded by the nominalists, the followers of Cusa and by others, renounced the

system as a way of rationalizing the union of Christianity and worldliness. The opposition was all too apparent. They acknowledged it and made it the central part of their teaching. The Protestant way of reconciling the commandments of Christ with those human activities that appealed to them was to declare any reconciliation to be impossible. Nothing could be said, either about the will of God or about the right order of things, which would set up a general connection between the two. Knowledge and science were concerned with transitory things in a transitory world. Luther hated scholasticism, theories of eternal relations, systematic philosophy, "the whole Reason." The view that men could justify their private or collective lives in theological terms and determine whether they were in harmony with the divine seemed to him sheer pride and superstition. Even though he judged Christians to be high above other men, especially Jews and Turks, his final judgement about right action remained suspended. In the end nobody knew what good works were—the church as little as a secular board of censors. Luther's verdict against theological speculation, which anticipated Kant's limitation of metaphysical speculation, left reason free to roam this vale of tears—in empirical research, in commerce, and especially in secular government. The interest of the individual and the state became the criterion of action in this world. Whether the troupes waded in the blood of peasants who had risen from hunger, or whether a man sacrificed himself out of political blindness to share his last bread with them, one action was as "Christian" as the other, provided each agent sincerely believed that he was following the Word. The reformation introduced the era of civil liberty. Hate and treachery, the "scab of time," had its origin in the inscrutable counsels of God, and would remain till the end of pre-history, till "all enemies of the Word have become like dung in the street."<sup>1</sup> The idealist philosophers in Germany, who outdid the classics of liberalism in England in their glorification of progress, came to regard the ruthless competition between individuals and nations as the unfolding of the absolute spirit. God's ways are peculiar. His Word stands: We must

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Die Hauptschriften*, ed. by H. V. Campenhausen, Berlin, n. d., p. 409.

## *Theism and Atheism*

love our enemies. But whether this means burning the heretic and the witch, sending children to work before they can read, making bombs and blessing them, or whether it means the opposite, each believer has to decide for himself without even suspecting what the true will of God might be. A guiding light, though a deceptive one, is provided by the interest of the fatherland, of which there is little mention in the Gospels. In the last few centuries, an incomparably greater number of believers have staked their lives for their country than for the forbidden love of its enemies. The idealists from Fichte to Hegel have also taken an active part in this development. In Europe, faith in God has now become faith in one's own people. The motto, "Right or wrong, my country," together with the tolerance of other religions with similar views, takes us back into that ancient world from which the primitive Christians had turned away. Specific faith in God is growing dim.

Theology was able to adapt itself to the triumphs of the new science and technology in the last few centuries. In those European countries which had resisted the reformation, especially in France and Italy, the intellectual and political struggles produced a form of life in which the consciousness of civil liberty was allowed to flourish while Christianity in its traditional form was able to retain a place in connection with it. There the social forces which had found expression in the enlightenment were able to assert themselves in political reality, whereas in the German states they were confined to the subjective realm, to the benefit of romantic poetry, great music and idealist philosophy. Here the way to bliss led again through faith, through the idea. Similarly religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, survived the nineteenth century as an element of bourgeois life, even though it changed its role. Much of the credit for its survival belonged to the militant atheists. Even when the great atheists did not themselves suffer martyrdom for their beliefs like Bruno and Vanini, it was so obvious that the antithesis—their radical or not so radical departure—was inspired by the thesis—the spirit of the Gospels—that they were far more capable of deepening the interest in religion than of extinguishing it. Voltaire, the foremost among them, was still so generous as to let theism pass, and his work remained as foreign to the general

consciousness as Goethe's, which resembled his. The popular figure of atheism, metaphysical materialism, was too barren to become a serious threat to Christianity as long as it lacked a dialectical and idealistic—or in reality, a utopian and messianic—theory of history. As long as government was not yet in control of everything, from the co-operation of political and economic forces in commerce and industry to the conduct of one's private life—the struggle with solitude which is called "spare time"—preaching the love of God and trust in His guidance continued to be the better way. The Absolute of the theologians was incomparably more effective in providing consolation, incentive and admonition than any concept which the philosophical materialists had to offer. True, their critique of theism sounded plausible enough. "It has always been in the womb of ignorance, fear and misery that men have formed their first conceptions of the divinity,"<sup>2</sup> writes Holbach in his *System of Nature*, the bible of eighteenth-century materialism. This shows that those teachings "were either doubtful or false and in any case deplorable. In fact, whatever part of the globe we look at, whether the icy regions of the North, the torrid ones of the South, or the most moderate zones, we find that people everywhere have trembled and, as a result of their fears and their misery, either created their own national gods or adored those brought to them from elsewhere. It is ignorance and fear which has created the gods; conceit, passion and deceit which has adorned and disfigured them; it is weakness which adores them, credulity which nourishes them, and tyranny which supports them in order to profit from the delusions of men." So much for the materialist's account of the origin of religion. In place of the rejected divinity they offer Nature. "Nature," continues Holbach at a later place, "tells the pervert to blush at his vices, at his shameful inclinations, his misdeeds; she shows him that his most secret disorders will necessarily affect his happiness... Nature tells the civilized man to love the country in which he was born, to serve it faithfully, to enter with in into a community of interests against all those who

<sup>2</sup> Paul H. D. d'Holbach, *Système de la nature*, vol. 3, the Second Year of the Republic, p. 167.

## *Theism and Atheism*

might try to harm it.”<sup>3</sup> In the name of Nature the enlightened Holbach calls for the defense of one’s country not only against external enemies but against internal tyrants. But what does he mean by “Nature?” There is nothing outside her; she is one and all at once. Man shall discover her laws, admire her inexhaustible energy, use his discoveries for his own happiness, and resign himself to his ignorance of her last, her ultimate causes which are impenetrable. With his whole being man belongs to her.<sup>4</sup> The abstract entity which, according to such materialists, forms the basis of right conduct is as indeterminate as the *Deus absconditus* of the Protestants, and the promise of happiness in this world is as problematical as bliss in the next, which is extremely uncertain. The naturalistic doctrine agrees with the theological doctrine it opposes in identifying what is most permanent and powerful with what is most exalted and worthy of love—as if this were a matter of course. In their fear of death men turn to the One, eternal and immortal—which is their own wishful thinking hypostatized—as if in obedience to a superior power. The ancient materialists were still inclined to stop with a plurality of atoms; the worshippers of Nature, like the pantheists, ontologists and theologians, will hear of nothing less than the One. But Nature does not say anything, as little as Being, which has been tried recently and which is supposed to deliver its oracles through the mouths of professors. The place of God is taken in each case by an impersonal concept. The scholastics had already depersonalized the humanity and individuality of the murdered Jesus by multiplying them as it were into the Oneness of God. The *ipsum esse*, the true identity of the divinity, his humanity could hardly be distinguished any longer from the radiant Being of the neo-Platonists, because of the ceaseless interpretation of being and being-in-the-world—the unity of essence and existence—in which all differences disappeared. When they build a system, theists and atheists alike posit an entity at the top. The dogma of a Nature which can speak and command—or at least serve as a principle for deducing moral truths—was an inadequate attempt to go along with science

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 23 ff. and pp. 183 ff.



without giving up the age-old longing for an eternal guide-line. But nature could only teach self-preservation and the right of the stronger, not for example liberty and justice. The liberal bourgeois order was always forced to pursue non-rational interests. Traditional institutionalized religion was still in a far better position to arouse these interests than atheism of whatever kind. The French materialists of the eighteenth century and especially the so-called "free-thinkers" and the pale monists of the nineteenth century were only a passing threat to Christianity.

The upheavals which began with the present century—the era of world wars, of nations awakening all over the globe, of stupendous population growth—can only be compared with the decline of antiquity or the middle ages. Christianity and theism in general are far more seriously called in question than in the *Siècle des Lumières*. In the nineteenth century, individual advancement depended in relatively wide areas on general education, initiative, responsibility and foresight. In a changing economy, the decisive qualities are now versatility, ability to react precisely to stimuli, specialized skill, reliability. We are witnessing a rapid decline in the importance of highly differentiated and independently acquired attitudes, along with a decline in the role of those qualities and of the family which produced them. But qualities which lose their social utility become obstacles, the marks of the provincial, of backwardness. These changes in the psychological structure are part of a comprehensive process in which political and religious institutions are also involved. Democracy is being undermined, at least as Locke and Rousseau conceived it and as it was still functioning under the French Third Republic and even in imperial Germany: as a conflict between the different commercial, industrial and agrarian interests of independent groups. (The relationship between workers and employers formed as it were a surd which could not be expressed in parliament.) There has been a radical change in the character of the deputies, in their relationship to their party, in their ability to form their own independent judgements on the questions under debate. When faced with important matters of state, especially in foreign policy and even more so in case of conflict, the clumsy democratic apparatus calls for its own transformation into a fast and efficient instrument operated by strong men.

## *Theism and Atheism*

Theology had to adapt not only to structural changes in the social mechanism and to the related transformation of the family and the individual; a powerful enemy, called "communism" by friend and foe alike, sprang up at the same time. This threat, which concerns not only religion but civilization as such, comes not so much from the theory of Marx and Engels which is itself among the great achievements of civilization. Dialectical materialism was, moreover, quickly transformed into a mere ideology, like the bourgeois enlightenment after its victory in the French Revolution and like theistic religions wherever they come to power. Much more important is a social mechanism which is also operative in other countries where it is about to integrate religion completely with the state, and which ensures that the only serious interest transcending the horizon of individual self-preservation is collective power, the rule of one's own nation or supra-national block. National socialism was a case in point. It had no longer any need of Christianity and felt it as a threat in spite of mutual concessions. Anybody, whether theist or atheist, who did not belong without reservations was an enemy of the national atheism. Even today the Third Reich—the savage collective will to power—tends everywhere to suppress the thought of another Reich and to achieve thereby what the *civitas terrena*—in spite of the gruesome deeds it committed in the name of the *civitas Dei* throughout history—was unable to accomplish earlier because of its backward technology: a world without shelter.

The changes with which Catholics and Protestants alike are trying to meet the threat in the developed countries are no less far-reaching than the most fundamental changes in the history of theology. Rome these days (May 1963) is both progressive and conservative. The new spirit seeks to improve the lot of the workers, to give them a share of the wealth in free countries and to liberate them from brutal suppression under backward dictatorships. Social movements are judged without hatred even when they derive from an anti-religious doctrine. Who could deny, we are asked in *Pacem in terris*, the papal encyclical, "that something good and worthy of recognition is to be found in such movements, as long as they conform to the law and order of reason and take into account the just demands of the human

person?"<sup>5</sup> The inevitability of social change is being acknowledged and affirmed. But tolerance of social progress is combined, by internal necessity, with the endeavor to salvage as many middle-class virtues as possible and to build them into the new order even at the risk of making quick adaptation to existing conditions impossible. It is by remaining within the tradition while giving it a new sense that the Church is trying to take an active part in shaping society. Its efforts to keep up with the times appear modest when compared with the conclusions that Protestant theologians have already drawn. The latter have eliminated the possibility of any conflict not only with science—which science in its positivistic form has been avoiding in any case—but even with all moral principles, no matter what their content may be. Further, the assertion that God really exists as a person or even as a trinity—not to mention the other world—is true only in a mythical sense. According to a popular work, *Honest to God*, by John Robinson, an Anglican bishop, which is now being debated in several countries, the whole conception of a God who "visited" the earth in the person of His Son is as mythical as the prince in the fairy-tale. The "supernatural scheme" which includes for example the Christmas story and corresponding legends can, we are told, survive and take its place as a myth "quite legitimately."<sup>6</sup> The only reason why it ought to survive is that it points to the spiritual meaning of our lives. Robinson is only putting into simpler words the thoughts of Paul Tillich and other philosophical theologians: The stories of the Bible are symbolic. When the New Testament tells us that God was in Christ and that the Word was God, this only means according to Robinson that God is the ultimate "depth" of our being, the unconditioned within the conditioned.<sup>7</sup> The so-called "transcendent"—God, love, or whatever name we might give it—is not "outside" but is to be found in, with and below the Thou of all finite relationships as their ultimate depth, their ground, their meaning.<sup>8</sup> But if we must talk of ultimate depth, then Schopen-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, Encyclical of April 11, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, London 1963, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

## *Theism and Atheism*

hauer was closer to the truth when he denounced it in each creature as the instinct for self-preservation, the will to be and to be well. However well-intentioned, the bishop's words turn out to be mere verbiage, unctuous words which to German ears are nothing but well-worn clichés. And even though theism is to be sacrificed for an anti-dogmatic attitude, the rejected view is being presupposed in a perfectly naive way. Truth—eternal truth outlasting human error—cannot as such be separated from theism. The only alternative is positivism, with which the latest theology is in accord irrespective of contradictions. On the positivist view, truth consists in calculations that work, thoughts are instruments, and consciousness becomes superfluous to the extent that purposive behavior, which was mediated by it, merges into the collective whole. Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning. No matter how independent a given form of expression may be within its own sphere as in art or religion, and no matter how distinct and how necessary in itself, with the belief in God it will have to surrender all claim to being objectively something higher than a practical convenience. Without reference to something divine, a good deed like the rescue of a man who is being persecuted unjustly loses all its glory, unless it happens to be in the interest of some collective whole inside the national boundaries or beyond them. While the latest Protestant theologians still permit the desperate to call themselves Christians, they subvert the dogma whose truth alone would give their words a meaning. The death of God is also the death of eternal truth.

Having retreated to their last position, Protestant theologians, unconscious of this philosophical dilemma, try to rescue the idea that the life of each individual has its own meaning. It is essential for life in this world to mean something more than this world. What more? Their answer is: Love. The reason why love remains to determine what cannot be determined is obviously the memory of the Christian heritage. But love as an abstraction—as it appears in recent writings—remains as obscure as the hidden God whom it is supposed to replace. If its consequences for thought and action are not to be left entirely to chance, it is essential that the various implications contained in this principle be made explicit. The meaning of

the concept would become apparent if it were explicated in the form of a theory of reality—of those real situations in which it should be tested. One would then deduce from the concept of Christian love how the world appeared today within its horizons, in which direction it could work within society, and especially, to what extent it would have to be negated to be able to express itself—not to speak of finding the strength to assert itself. As the theory was being developed, it would in turn affect the principle behind it by defining it more fully and by modifying it. Even the will to eradicate all hunger and injustice is still an abstraction, though it is already more concrete than empty talk about values, eternal meaning and genuine being. The idea of a better world has not only been given shape in theological treatises, but often just as well in the so-called “nihilistic” works—the critique of political economy, the theory of Marx and Engels, psycho-analysis—works which have been blacklisted, whether in the East or in the West, and provoked the wrath of the mighty as the inflammatory speeches of Christ did among his contemporaries. The opposition between theism and atheism has ceased to be actual. Atheism was once a sign of inner independence and incredible courage, and it continues to be one in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries where it is regarded as a symptom of the hated liberal spirit. But under totalitarian rule of whatever denomination, which is nowadays the universal threat, its place tends to be taken by honest theism. Atheism includes infinitely many different things. The term “theism” on the other hand is definite enough to allow one to brand as a hypocrite whoever hates in its name. When theism adopts eternal justice as a pretext for temporal injustice, it is as bad as atheism insofar as it leaves no room for thoughts of anything else. Both of them have been responsible for good and evil throughout the history of Europe, and both of them have had their tyrants and their martyrs. There remains the hope that, in the period of world history which is now beginning, the period of docile masses governed by clocks, some men can still be found to offer resistance, like the victims of the past and, among them, the founder of Christianity.

Even though Catholics and Protestants are nowadays both on the defensive, theism is again becoming an actual force

## *Theism and Atheism*

in the period of its decline. This follows from the very meaning of "atheism." Only those who used "atheism" as a term of abuse meant by it the exact opposite of religion. Those who professed themselves to be atheists at a time when religion was still in power tended to identify themselves more deeply with the theistic commandment to love one's neighbor and indeed all created things than most adherents and fellow-travelers of the various denominations. Such selflessness, such a sublimation of self-love into love of others had its origin in Europe in the Judaeo-Christian idea that truth, love and justice were one, an idea which found expression in the teachings of the Messiah. The necessary connection between the theistic tradition and the overcoming of self-seeking becomes very much clearer to a reflective thinker of our time than it was to the critics of religion in by-gone days. Besides, what is called "theism" here has very little in common with the philosophical movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which went by that name. That movement was mostly an attempt to reconcile the concept of God with the new science of nature in a plausible manner. The longing for something other than this world, the standing-apart from existing conditions played only a subordinate part in it and mostly no part at all. The meanings of the two concepts do not remain unaffected by history, and their changes are infinitely varied. At a time when both the national socialists and the nationalistic communists despised the Christian faith, a man like Robespierre, the disciple of Rousseau, but not a man like Voltaire, would also have become an atheist and declared nationalism as a religion. Nowadays atheism is in fact the attitude of those who follow whatever power happens to be dominant, no matter whether they pay lip-service to a religion or whether they can afford to disavow it openly. On the other hand, those who resist the prevailing wind are trying to hold on to what was once the spiritual basis of the civilization to which they still belong. This is hardly what the philosophical "theists" had in mind: the conception of a divine guarantor of the laws of nature. It is on the contrary the thought of something other than the world, something over which the fixed rules of nature, the perennial source of doom, have no dominion.