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Journal of Religion and Society Volume 11 (2009)
The Kripke Center ISSN 1522-5658

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Abstract

One of the central elements of the secularist tradition is atheism. Atheism has a long history and is nowadays again heavily debated. This article tries to present a reflection on the nature of atheism. The central thesis is that atheism is often misunderstood. The most fruitful definition of atheism is a negative one: an atheist does not believe in the god that theism favors. The concept of atheism should be carefully distinguished from the motives that some people have not to believe in the theistic god. The confusion of these two things is responsible for much needless controversy about atheism.

Introduction

[1] After 9/11 there seems to be not only a new interest in explicitly theistic conceptions of belief, but also for its traditional counterpoint: the atheist tradition. Books like those of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Victor J. Stenger have reached a wide reading public. But the interest in atheism is certainly not confined to philosophers and intellectuals operating in the public debate. Also in scholarly circles atheism is again discussed and analysed (Antony; Martin). This article in meant to be a contribution to the literature on atheism focussing on what might be called a fruitful definition of atheism.

[2] What is atheism? Sometimes atheism is presented as a coherent worldview, encompassing all the other traditions supposed to be associated with secularist orientations. So the Christian theologian and physicist Alister McGrath writes: "Atheism is the religion of the autonomous and rational human being, who believes that reason is able to uncover and express the deepest truths of the universe, from the mechanics of the rising sun to the nature and final destiny of humanity" (2004: 220). The first thing that strikes the reader is that atheism is here presented as a "religion." A second point that is remarkable is that McGrath presents as "atheism" what most people will associate with "rationalism." In clarifying his

definition the author even introduces other elements, such as optimism. Atheism, so McGrath writes, "was a powerful, self-confident, and aggressive worldview. Possessed of a boundless confidence, it proclaimed that the world could be fully understood and subsequently mastered" (2004: 220). Often these definitions seem animated by an aversion of the denial of God. This seems also the case with McGrath. McGrath wrote a history of atheism based on a claim of its declining significance.

[3] A similar thesis is defended by the prolific Catholic historian Paul Johnson: "Atheism as a positive set of beliefs, including a code of moral behaviour, has failed to flourish" (2). It may be that fewer and fewer people in Western countries practice religion, Johnson tells us, but the number of those prepared to state their disbelief in God openly and specifically is extremely small. There is only a small minority who does that, probably not greater today than in the time of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), expelled from Oxford for atheism. But although Johnson is very clear in his rejection of atheism it is far from clear what he understands by the term, apart from the fact that it has something to do with a denial of God.

[4] More attention is given to this matter in monographs explicitly dedicated to the subject of atheism. According to Julian Baggini, atheism is "extremely simple to define," because "it is the belief that there is no God or gods" (3). In other definitions atheism is contrasted with theism. That is done by Robin Le Poidevin when he writes: "An *atheist* is one who denies the existence of a personal, transcendent creator of the universe rather than one who simply lives life without reference to such a being. A *theist* is one who asserts the existence of such a creator. Any discussion of atheism, then, is necessarily a discussion of theism" (xvii). So in contrast to Baggini, this writer specifies that atheism is related to a *specific concept* of god: the existence of a personal and transcendent creator of the universe. According to Le Poidevin atheism also implies a conscious and explicit position in the sense that simply living a life without God is not sufficient to call someone an "atheist." We also find the same contrast between theism and atheism with Daniel Harbour who writes: "Atheism is the plausible and probably correct belief that God does not exist. Opposed to atheism, there is theism, the implausible and probably incorrect view that God does exist" (1).

The Alpha Privans

[5] Atheism is a-theism. So: "a," hyphen, "theism." An atheist is someone who does not subscribe to the central tenets of theism. The "a" is an alpha privans, it denies what follows. So an atheist denies what the theist tries to confirm. By denying what follows, you do not become identical with what follows (theism). Someone who is a-religious is simply what it says: not religious. It is not the case that by denying a religion you, by some magic trick, invent a religion of your own: the religion of irreligious or a-religious people. Perhaps this sounds like a commonplace, nevertheless it is necessary to state it. Often atheists are considered to be driven by a religious impulse: the religious impulse to deny religion. And denying religion is in itself a religion, it is said. Actually, we have seen that with McGrath. I consider this to be a strange rhetorical trick.

[6] Because atheism is the denial of theism, every tract on atheism should also address the question "what is theism?" Theism is the same as – a more current term - monotheism. Theists are adherents to one of the three theistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Theists believe in one god. That makes the word "monotheism," strictly speaking, a pleonasm. But theism is more than belief in one god, it requires also a conception of a *specific* god. God, according to theists, is good. And not only "good" in the sense you and I can be good, but *perfectly* good. If someone would identify, like the great Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) has done, God with evil ("the supreme evil, God"; Bury: 208) this person cannot be a theist. The god of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is necessarily good.

[7] Goodness is not the only tenet of the theistic god. He is eternal, the creator of the universe, almighty, transcendent, omniscient, holy, and personal. Western theology has tried to reflect on those characteristics and construe a concept of God that is consistent (McGrath 1994; Tilghman: 10-46).

Atheism and Liberal Concepts of God

[8] Theism as outlined above is something different from religious belief in general. So atheism in the sense outlined here is not opposed to religion as such. Atheism is concerned with *one specific concept* of god: the theistic god. The theistic god has a name and this is written with a capital: God. At first sight it may be strange to limit atheism to the conception that is opposed to the theistic concept of god and not all the other gods that have been venerated by humans. Buddhists or Hindus subscribe to polytheistic approaches of the divine. Should they not be included in the atheist rejection of the divine, as Baggini did in the definition of atheism, mentioned before? I think not and I will now spell out my reasons for this narrow definition of atheism.

[9] The best way to make my reasoning clear is by means of an example. Suppose there are people who are in awe or even venerate vague and wide dimensions of reality that they identify as "complete otherness" ("Das Ganz Andere"; Horkheimer), or that they refer to a certain mystical experience (Happold). It is also possible that people say, "God is love" or "the absolute" or "ultimate reality" or the "unsearchable region out of which all phenomena spring" (Caird: 8). Not only ordinary people do this sometimes, but theologians as well. Take the well-known theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965). In his book *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich tells us: "The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God" (45). Here God is not a person, not a father, not a creator, but a symbol. You cannot pray to a symbol, so it seems. A symbol does not lead the Jewish people through the desert. A symbol does not reveal the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai and symbols do not have sons to be sent to the earth to propitiate for our sins. The concept of God as advocated by Tillich is a completely different conception of God from the one that theistic religions proclaim. Should an atheist also be opposed to (or deny) the reality of such symbols? My answer is "no."

[10] Another theologian, John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983), criticizes in his book *Honest to God* the god-conception of a supernatural being "out there" or the "old man in the sky." God, so Robinson proclaims, is, per definition, "ultimate reality." And Robinson adds that it is meaningless to ask whether God exists. The only question we can fruitfully pose is: what does that ultimate reality look like? (29).

[11] We find ideas like those of Robinson and Tillich also in the earlier work of the German theologians and philosophers of religion Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) and Friedrich Daniel

Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834). I will not be concerned with conceptions of the divine as advocated by these liberal theologians (see Lilla). Why not?

[12] First, a possible discussion with Robinson and Tillich would probably not deal with theism or atheism but with logic, methodology, or philosophy of science. The discussion would focus on the question whether it is fruitful to discuss such vague concepts as "ultimate reality." What is "reality"? Is the love for my child "reality" or "a reality"? Is the dream I had last night part of "reality"? These are all difficult problems that first have to be solved in order to discuss the matter whether God is "reality" (or "a reality"). And what characteristics should reality have to be "ultimate"? And what justification do we have to identify such vague concepts with "god"? Would not that be a kind of verbal inflation? Are not Tillich and Robinson presenting a kind of sophisticated atheism?

[13] Suppose someone is completely involved in fishing in such a way that his "ultimate concern" lies in his hobby. During Sunday service this person sits at the border of the lake to enjoy his favorite sport. Would this make fishing his "religion"? Of course not. Following this semantic strategy would amount to an enormous verbal inflation. The eighteenth century freethinker and sexual debaucher Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) would have sadistic sex as his "religion." Youngsters who idolize Justin Timberlake would be the members of a new "religious" sect.

[14] Perhaps for sociologists of religion, trying to be as neutral as they can towards the different manifestations of "god," "religion," and the "divine," this may be an interesting approach. But should it therefore be our leading perspective in every other context? This can be doubted and this doubt is highly relevant for atheism. An atheist, so it may be safely contended, is primarily concerned with one specific religious tradition. He is concerned with the idea of a personal, almighty, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent god.

[15] Arguably, this is partly the product of the Greek rationalist tradition. It is what Pascal called the god of the philosophers. Atheism has no bearing on completely different conceptions of god, like the "God Without Being" (Jean-Luc Marion). By defining atheism in this limited way we acknowledge that it is difficult, if not impossible, and also useless to develop an argument against *all the different concepts of god and religion* that are sometimes defended. The only thing an atheist can do is to oppose the kind of language that makes it impossible to discern under what circumstances one can legitimately say, "I am not religious." If everybody is "religious" but only the content of that religion varies, the word "religion" has lost all meaning.

[16] Philosopher Roger Scruton writes: "We have cults like football, sacrificial offerings like Princess Diana and improvised saints like Linda McCartney" (232). He also speaks about "the new secular religion of human rights," and continues: "I call it a religion because it seems to occupy the place vacated by faith. It tells us that we are the centre of the universe, that we are under no call to obedience, but that the world is ordered in accordance to our rights" (238). Such language can draw our attention to certain similarities between football and religion in the sense of one of the world's religions, but we should be cautious in not identifying those phenomena.

[17] Let me present a last example by means of a dialogue to make that clear. Suppose someone would say "God is love" and the subsequent dialogue evolves:

> "Do you mean love is one aspect of the divine being?"
> "No, I mean God *is* love; God is identical with love."
> "But in that case God can not be a person."
> "No, indeed."

When an atheist opposes the statement "God is love" this is not because he wants to deny the importance of love, but because he deems it inappropriate to mix up this human emotion with the divine being that traditionally Judaism, Christianity, and Islam refer to as the transcendent, personal, almighty and perfectly good God. So there are good reasons why I stick to the limited conception of "atheism." "Atheism" is nothing more than the denial of the claims of theism.

Agression Against Atheism

[18] Atheism has always been a very unpopular position, to say the least. Richard Bentley (1662-1742) wrote in 1724 in *Eight Sermons* that an atheist could never be a loyal friend (Edwards 1967: 174-89; 1998a; 1998b; Nagel). He also proclaimed that an affective relation is impossible with an atheist and that an atheist can never be a loyal citizen. The protestant theologian Robert Flint (1838-1910) wrote over a century ago that in every country where atheism will become dominant "national decay and disaster" would be the result. In France, it was impossible to publish books defending atheism until the French revolution, so famous atheist philosophers, like Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) and Denis Diderot (1713-1784), wrote anonymously (Holbach 1997, 2006; Graille).

[19] In classical antiquity the attitude towards atheists was more tolerant but also in Greek society there was no complete freedom of religion (including the possibility to reject a religion). Plato (*c.* 428-347 BCE) discerned four sorts of atheists, but they had all to be punished by death (Plato, *The Laws,* Book X; Schofield: 313).

[20] The attitude towards atheism in the Middle Ages was, as one can expect, even more severe. Thomas Aquinas (*c.* 1225-1274) proposes the death penalty for atheists (*Summa Theologica,* 2-2. I-16). Even John Locke (1632-1704), the writer of several treatises defending tolerance, was vehemently opposed to atheists. As a reason he presents that promises by atheists would not be implemented. When Holbach's *Le système de la nature* (1770) was published the hangman complained that only the book could be burned and not the author.

[21] Obviously, atheists in the past had to be cautious. And Joseph McCabe rightly censors a certain A. B. Drachmann, author of *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (1922), for not sufficiently having taken this into account. According to Drachmann only ten known Greek and Roman thinkers, and few others, were atheists over a period of more than thousand years. McCabe calls such a remark misleading: "Professor Drachmann means that very few stood out in the cities of Greece and said that the gods did not exist. Since everybody knows at least since the death of Socrates, partly on charge of atheism, it seems a waste of time to look for atheists in this sense" (McCabe: 31).

[22] What McCabe writes about the Greek philosophers in particular could be said about other philosophers as well. A case in point is that of Spinoza (1632-1677), considered to be one of the most important influences on the European Enlightenment (Israel 2001, 2006; Meinsma). Because of his unorthodox views he was excommunicated from the Jewish community in 1656 and he changed his name to Benedict. In 1670 his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was published – anonymously. His *Ethica* (1677) was only published after his death. The *Ethica* rejected the idea of a personal creator, free will, and personal immortality. That implies that measured against the criteria outlined before, Spinoza should be characterized as an "atheist."

[23] Like Kant and Hume (Mossner 1933, 1970; Graham), Spinoza was extremely cautious not to offend the authorities. He was well aware that freedom of speech was far from accepted in even a relatively free country as the Netherlands. The most vehement reactions to Spinozistic doctrines, however, were aimed at disciples of Spinoza such as Adriaan Koerbagh.

[24] Adriaan Koerbagh (1632-1669) is considered to be one of the most radical thinkers of the early Enlightenment (Wielema). During the early 1660's Adriaan and his brother Johannes Koerbagh (1634-1672) became involved with the heterodox Spinozistic circles in Amsterdam, and eventually with Spinoza himself. In 1668 Adriaan published two books, *Bloemhof* and *Ligt,* that struck at the very roots of Christianity. But Adriaan did what Spinoza himself was always too cautious to do: he published in the vernacular language. The reason was that he wanted to enlighten not only the academic elite, but the common people as well. He was sentenced in 1668 to ten years of imprisonment in the Rasphuis (a prison) and subsequent banishment from Holland. He died in prison because of the harsh conditions.

[25] Although severe convictions as the one that struck Koerbagh are not heard of anymore in the western world, that should not make us forget that atheism or even the change of one's religion to another religion is not possible in many quarters without fear of death or serious reprisals.[1] When the stake as the *ultima ratio theologorum* could still be invoked, it certainly would be done, Schopenhauer remarks cynically at the end of the nineteenth century (Schopenhauer: 212).

[26] It is difficult to understand how atheism can ignite so much hatred in other people. Recent rebuttals of atheism usually try to load atheism with colossal pretensions. This is for instance the case with a recent wave of criticism directed against the so-called "new atheism" of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. One of those criticisms contains the following sentence:

> Those who believe they know how to bring about a conclusion to life seek to eradicate all other schemes for human perfection. These competing visions, in their eyes, pollute society, lead people astray, and stymie the ultimate

[1] Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) explicitly states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; *this right includes freedom to change his religion* or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (italics added).

> possibilities of human happiness. The new atheists, like all true believers, want these competing visions destroyed (Hedges: 99).

Destroyed? These are very strange ideas about atheism. The average atheist, like Spinoza or Hume, is far distanced from the fanatic frame of mind that this author associates with a denial of the theistic conception of God. Nevertheless, atheists are not only feared but also hated, so it seems.

[27] Atheism – or rather charges of atheism – can still pose great problems for the writers involved. The most serious attack on the principle of freedom of thought and religion was perpetrated by the Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989). If Khomeini had had his way, the British writer Salman Rushdie would have been killed for writing a novel (Pipes). The same applies for the Bengali novelist Taslima Nasreen who had to fly from India for criticising religion and openly advocating atheism.[2] Also in the Middle East, several people have been killed by religious fanatics, such as the Egyptian thinker Farag Foda (Jansen). So although atheism is not legally prohibited in many parts of the world and even protected by the clauses on freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and freedom of worship in declarations of human rights and national constitutions, the situation is far from effectively securing freedom of conscience and the right to free discussion (for the relation between these concepts, see Macklem). What these examples make clear is that those favoring free speech, freedom of conscience, and the good right to critique (also criticism of religious ideas) have much more to refer to nowadays than the well known historical examples of religious violence against Giordano Bruno (1548-1600; Kirchhoff; Rowland), burned at the stake in 1600 or Galileo Galilei (1564-1642; Shea), intimidated by the Church and placed under house-arrest in 1633.

[28] It is rather odd that even in the twenty-first century atheism is highly unpopular. It seems that the nature of the rejection of atheism has changed, but there still is, so it seems, a universal condemnation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the atheist was being criticized because his worldview would undermine sound morals and deprive life of meaning. The contemporary complaints are that atheists show no "respect" for the religion of others or do not want to enter into "dialogue" with believers. Other complaints that are widely voiced are that atheists are "polarizing" society or "just as dogmatic" as religious fundamentalists.

[29] These complaints are hardly convincing. Philosopher A. C. Grayling is right when he writes: "Religious apologists charge the non-religious with being 'fundamentalist' if they attack religion too robustly . . ." (Grayling: 7). He continues with the contention that "it is time to reverse the prevailing notion that religious commitment is intrinsically deserving of respect, and that it should be handled with kid gloves and protected by custom and in some cases law against criticism and ridicule" (15). His point of view with regard to religious criticism is that "nothing that people choose in the way of politics, lifestyle or religion should be immune from criticism and (when, as so often it does, it merits it) ridicule" (19). But this attitude is far from common nowadays.

[2] See *De Standaard Online*. For Nasreen's "fellow atheist" Ayaan Hirsi Ali, life in the Netherlands had become more or less impossible (see her own discussion in Hirsi Ali).

[30] Against the background of the universal unpopularity of atheism it is hardly surprising that the epithet is usually rejected and seldom vindicated. Only few philosophers insisted on being called an "atheist" (Edwards 1967: 175). Most people are being labelled "atheist" by their opponents, like Hume, and sometimes with unfortunate consequences for those involved. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) confided that the philosophy of Hume could be characterized as follows: "Take the 'not' out of the Decalogue and put it in the Creed" (quoted in Beck: 41).

Three Characteristics of Atheism

Atheism as Non-Theism

[31] So far I have indicated what atheism is not. This "negative" approach is defended by the philosopher Ernest Nagel (1901-1985). Nagel puts it as follows: "I shall understand by 'atheism' a critique and a denial of the major claims of all varieties of theism." And theism is the view which holds that the "heavens and the earth and all that they contain owe their existence and continuance in existence to the wisdom and will of a supreme, self-consistent, omnipotent, omniscient, righteous, and benevolent being, who is distinct from, and independent of, what he has created" (461, building on Robert Flint's definition of theism). In this quote we encounter the elements of theism as introduced above.

[32] "Negative atheism" was also the focus of the most important advocate of atheism in the nineteenth century: Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891). Apart from being an atheist, Bradlaugh was a campaigner for progressive causes such as birth control, republicanism, the alleviation of poverty, and the separation of Church and State. He defined the essence of atheism thus:

> The atheist does not say "There is no God," but he says: "I know not what you mean by God; I am without idea of God; the word "God" is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny God, because I cannot deny that of which, by its affirmer, is so imperfect that he is unable to define it to me (10).

According to the New Zealand philosopher and freethinker Bill Cooke, the philosophy of atheism was helped tremendously by the distinction between negative and positive atheism. "This had done a lot to clear up very old misconceptions about what atheism is really saying" (49).

Who has to Prove What?

[33] This "negative approach" to atheism (defining atheism in terms of what it is not) has serious consequences for the burden of proof. Atheism in the sense outlined above simply denies the claims of theism. "Theists believe in God, while atheists do not have such a belief," as it is succinctly formulated by B. C. Johnson (11). Atheists do not have the pretension to be able to prove that God does not exist. The atheist George H. Smith puts it as follows: "Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief: it is the absence of belief" (7). That implies that the atheist does not defend the claim that he can prove God's non-existence, neither does he need to. According to Smith, "An atheist is not primarily a person who *believes* that a god does *not* exist; rather, he does *not believe* in the existence of a god" (7).

[34] I elaborately quote the pretensions of a self-confessed atheist because his words contradict what often is alleged about atheists. Atheism is commonly presented as a special kind of belief that God does not exist. We find this in the definition by the well-known philosopher of religion John Hick, who writes: "atheism (not-God-ism) is the belief that there is no God of any kind" (5). By attributing to atheism the pretension that it must reject the gods *of any kind*, Hick enhances the claims that a more cautious atheist will be inclined to embrace (Baggini, whose definition of atheism is quoted above, is an exception). But he also deviates from the approach of Nagel and Bradlaugh in the sense that according to Hick the atheist must prove that God *does not exist*. This puts the atheist in a very disadvantageous position, because if the atheist is not successful in this undertaking (and how can he ever be successful with such an ambitious goal?), it is commonly surmised he has failed to substantiate his position. But according to Smith and others, this is an impossible claim to make. The only thing the atheist has to do is to wait until the theist has made his position clear. When that is the case, the atheist can judge whether he is convinced by his arguments. If not, then atheism is the stronger position over theism.

[35] Is not that the way we normally operate? I cannot *prove* that the world is not created by an elephant standing on the back of a tortoise, but why should I? It is the speaker who makes such a claim who has to prove his case.

[36] The atheist's position may be summarized as follows: atheism is a negative doctrine. The atheist is not convinced by the proofs of theism. And this not being the case, he does what every sensible person would do. That is, he says, "I am not a theist." This is far from what Alister McGrath expects atheists to defend. McGrath gleefully makes the pretenses of the atheist colossal: "Atheism is the religion of the autonomous and rational human being, who believes that reason is able to uncover and express the deepest truths of the universe, from the mechanics of the rising sun to the nature and final destiny of humanity" (2004: 220). So an atheist should have the pretension to solve the riddle of the universe. He should be able to express "the deepest truths of the universe." That kind of vocabulary does not make sense to atheists. What special properties must a truth possess to be "deep" or even "deepest"? Why should the atheist commit himself to speculations about the "final destiny of the universe"? McGrath mistakes atheism for a religion, in his case the religion of Christianity. Christianity has the pretension to provide deep truths about the universe, for example, that Jesus is the Son of God (see Evans). Christianity also pretends to know what is the final destiny of the universe: a resurrection of the dead, an apocalypse or the return of Christ on earth, or other parts of the Christian eschatology (see Kirsch). Because McGrath thinks that atheism is the exact antithesis of Christian belief, he supposes that the atheist must also have certain opinions on these matters, but this is not the case. In reality we never hear atheists boasting about the discovery of deep truths and ideas about the final destiny of the universe. Probably McGrath confuses atheism with the worldview of Marxism-Leninism of which a denial of God was one part (see Froese: 35-40). But no sane atheist would have such pretence. The British philosopher Anthony Flew once made this clear with the expression, the *presumption of atheism* (1976; for a new development in his thinking, see 2007). In other words, we should take atheism as the default position. The theist has to prove his case. The historian J. B. Bury (1861-1927) presents this idea with a funny example:

> If you were told that in a certain planet revolving round Sirius there is a race of donkeys who talk the English language and spend their time in discussing eugenics, you could not disprove the statement, but would it, on that account, have any claim to be believed? (20).

Atheism is an Examined Choice

[37] A third element of the atheist position is the psychological attitude of the atheist himself: atheism is considered to be an intellectual and explicit choice. I hinted on this matter above in discussing the thesis by Le Poidevin: simply living a life without God is not sufficient to call someone an "atheist." Let me illustrate this with an example. Suppose someone tells us: "God? I do not know what that means. I have never thought about the matter." How should we characterize this view? Is the person expressing this view an "atheist"? Many of us will waver and rightly so. What this person lacks is a conscious intellectual commitment; it would be strange to characterize this person as an "atheist." That is why children by definition cannot be "atheists," as Holbach once proclaimed they were. People who have never thought about God are pagans perhaps, not atheists.

[38] We may introduce the category of "implicit atheism," of course, but this should be distinguished from atheism as a conscious stance. Essential for the atheist position is weighing all the options, that is, all the traditional arguments for the existence of God. Who after careful consideration is not committed may be characterized as an atheist.

The Concept of Atheism and Motives for Atheism

[39] What I have outlined in the sections above is, basically, what the concept of atheism entails. We should not mix this up with *motives* for atheism. Many people are motivated not to subscribe to the belief in an omnipotent, perfectly good, personal God because this would conflict with important values they favor. It is also perfectly possible to say that one can be a "non-believer" in the existence of God (and so an atheist) and a "believer" in human freedom, human dignity, progress, and many other things. As a matter of fact, this is a combination that one often encounters. People's motives for developing an atheist position are often grounded in a laudable type of engagement and not in disillusion. So with most atheists we find a combination of "belief" and "unbelief," but what they believe in is not God and sometimes deemed to be irreconcilable with God. That is manifested clearly in a kind of "profession of faith" by the great American infidel Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899). Ingersoll wrote:

> I am an unbeliever, and I am a believer . . . I do not believe in the "Mosaic" account of creation, or in the flood, or the Tower of Babel, or that General Joshua turned back the sun or stopped the earth. I do not believe in the Jonah story . . . and I have my doubts about the broiled quails furnished in the wilderness. Neither do I believe that man is wholly depraved. I have not the least faith in the Eden, stake and apple story. Neither do I believe that God is an eternal jailer; that he is going to be the warden of an everlasting penitentiary in which the most of men are to be eternally tormented. I do not believe that any man can be justly punished or rewarded on account of his belief.

> But I do believe in the nobility of human nature; I believe in love and home, and kindness and humanity; I believe in good fellowship and cheerfulness, in making wife and children happy. I believe in good nature, in giving to others all the rights that you claim for yourself. I believe in free thought, in reason, observation and experience. I believe in self-reliance and in expressing your honest thoughts. I have hope for the whole human race. What will happen to one, will, I hope, happen to all, and that, I hope, will be good. Above all, I believe in Liberty (quoted in Williams: 67).[3]

Ingersoll was a great success as a public speaker, as everyone will understand who reads this passage, and this probably has to do with the fact that he, as no other, understood how to ride the moral high ground (much as the Victorian scholar W. K. Clifford). He competed with the religious orators in the sense that he used some of their imagery, e.g. when he writes: "I believe in the religion of reason - the gospel of this world; in the development of the mind, in the accumulation of intellectual wealth, to the end that man may free himself from superstitious fear, to the end that he may take advantage of the forces of nature to feed and clothe the world" (1889: 6).

[40] It is very difficult to cast somebody who writes and speaks like this as a cynic or as someone without firm beliefs and ideals.

[41] As we may expect on the basis of the last sentence of the passage from Ingersoll, one of the most important values that animates much of atheist writing is the attempt to safeguard human freedom. This we encounter in the work of the German philosopher Eduard Von Hartmann (1842-1906). In 1874 Von Hartmann wrote a small book under the title *Die Selbstzersetzung des Christenthums und die Religion der Zukunft* ("The Self-annihilation of Christianity and the Philosophy of the Future"), in which he distinguishes between the traditional religious position based on moral heteronomy and his own position based on moral autonomy. It was in particular the protestant tradition in Christianity that brought human autonomy to the fore, but, so Von Hartmann argues, the principle of moral autonomy, although generated within the Christian worldview, will ultimately destroy Christianity. And he is happy with that. Once one gives primacy to human reason and moral autonomy, the authority of the divine will and scripture have to be rejected: "For the absolute moral principle of Christianity is obedience to the divine will as expressed in Holy Scripture" ("Das absolute Moralprinzip des Christenthums ist nämlich das des Gehorsams gegen den in der heiligen Schrift ausgesprochenen göttlichen Willen"; 12). This is – and here comes my point – irreconcilable with human freedom. As long as we believe in the theistic god who has created us and the rest of the world, we are nothing. Our true morality can be nothing different from strict submission to the almighty will of this transcendent God. In that situation morality is always heteronomous.[4]

[3] Ingersoll also stated: "Now and then some one asks me why I am endeavouring to interfere with the religious faith of others, and why I try to take from the world the consolation naturally arising from a belief in eternal fire. And I answer: I want to do what little I can to make my country truly free. I want to broaden the horizon of our people" (7).

[4] Von Hartmann also argues, "So lange ich . . . an einen theïstische Gott glaube, der mich samt der Welt geschaffen, und dem ich gegenüberstehe wie das Gefäß dem Töpfer, so lange bin ich ein Nichts gegen ihn, eine

[42] True morality, so Von Hartmann contends, will always start with human autonomy, and like Ingersoll, he also spells out what this implies for the theistic worldview: "then all theistic morality will be necessarily unethical" ("so muss alle theistische Moral nothwendig unsittlich wirken"; 30). That implies that the "Christian idea" has run its full course ("Die christliche Idee hat ihre Lebensbahn bis zu Ende durchlaufen"; 91). We have to find a new spiritual perspective for the modern world. As long as we believe in the idea of the theistic God we are nothing but an object, a material object made by a divine creator and accordingly limited in our freedom.

[43] The same was contended by the twentieth century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). If we try to imagine a world created by a divine creator, a supernatural handworks man, we, humans, are not free. We can only play the role that He has written for us and that completely destroys human freedom. So Sartre develops what he calls an "atheistic existentialism," in contrast to Christian varieties of existentialism as had been developed by Christian philosophers like Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). Human freedom demands that we proclaim that man has no "essence," but only "existence." Only within the confines of such an ontology is human freedom secured.[5]

[44] So far we have seen that some thinkers consider the theistic worldview as contradicting human freedom. That has to do with the field of meta-ethics. But it is also possible to present a critique on the theistic worldview because the values it espouses conflict with our own values. This is the focus of one of the most elegant books on moral and political philosophy from an explicitly atheist point of view: *An Atheist's Values* by Richard Robinson (1964). Robinson (1902-1996) studied philosophy at Oxford and Marburg, taught philosophy at Cornell University for nearly 20 years and then back at Oriel College for more than 20 years. He wrote on classical philosophy (in particular Plato and Aristotle) and logic (1931, 1962).

[45] Robinson states that we hear people talk about "Christian values." What he tries to do with *An Atheist's Values* is offer a counterpoint. He makes a distinction between "personal goods" and "political goods." As the personal goods he describes beauty, truth, reason, love, conscientiousness, and religion. His treatment of religion is, as one may expect, very critical. Religion is more of an evil than a good because it is gravely inimical to truth and reason (1964: 113). Faith is a vice. There is no God or afterlife and religion provides no good reason for behaving morally. But Robinson also gives an introduction to political philosophy with his treatment of the "political goods": the state, equality, freedom, tolerance, peace and justice, and democracy.

[46] *An Atheist's Values* is in many ways a brilliant book, but I fear the title of the book is somewhat misleading. Many people will be scared off because they expect a long diatribe

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Scherbe in seiner Hand, und kann meine Sittlichkeit in nichts anderem bestehen, als in der strickten blinden Unterwerfung den allmächtigen heiligen Willen dieses transzendenten Gottes, d.h. so lange kann alle Moralität nur auf dem von außen an mich herantretenden Gebot beruhen, oder heteronom sein" (30).

[5] See 1943: 485 ff.; 1970: 17, where Sartre states that all forms of existentialism have in common that existence precedes essence, or, if you want, that one has to take subjectivity as a point of departure ("que l'existence précède l'essence, ou si vous voulez, qu'il faut partir de la subjectivité").

against religious faith, Christianity in particular. This is not the case. What Robinson shows is that it is perfectly possible to write about ethics and politics from a purely secular perspective. In other words, a secular life stance is perfectly suited for moral and political reflection.

[47] Another author that is in a certain sense similar to Robinson is L. Susan Stebbing (1885-1943). Stebbing was the first female professor in philosophy in Britain and what Bill Cooke calls a "formidable smiter of humbug" (505). She came down strongly against pretentious woolly thought, as can be extracted from her *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939) and also from her *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) where she targets Sir James Jeans (1877-1946) and Sir Arthur Eddington (1882-1944), two theistic astronomers who according to Stebbing strayed from their area of specialty into Christian apologetics.

[48] Stebbing was writing in a time that British universities became a stronghold for analytical philosophy. The attitude of this philosophical current with regard to values was not very forthcoming. It was associated with the metaphysical and absolutist philosophy of Plato and it acolytes. So T. D. Weldon, well known for his analytical approach to political philosophy, writes somewhat dismissively about

> Plato and his modern disciples who suppose that philosophy leads to the discovery of eternal Ideas and Values and that anyone who is acquainted with these must know beyond any possibility of doubt how all States ought to be organised and what the relation of States to one another and to their own members ought to be. This special insight into the nature of reality makes the philosopher the final court of appeal of all kinds of important practical problems such as education, birth-control and the proper use of atomic bombs (1946: preface).

It is a funny statement, of course, and before the eye of the mind arises the image of a pretentious philosopher-cleric who has no practical experience whatsoever and still tries to tell us how "beyond any possibility of doubt" we have to deal with the great political problems. And yet, we may ask ourselves whether a curious and modest philosopher who engages in analysing and weighing values and subsequently advocating some of these values necessarily has to be such a pompous figure. Anyhow, this is not the impression we get from the work of such intellectually integer philosophers as John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, Richard Robinson, and Suzan Stebbing, or a contemporary moral philosopher such as Peter Singer (see 1993; 2004, which combine critical acumen with a firm choice of values). It seems possible to engage in an analysis of values and still avoid the pretentious claims of the Hegelians that Weldon and his fellow analytical philosophers revolt against.

[49] Stebbing formulated another vision on this topic than Weldon. In 1943, she wrote: "Moral philosophers, I contend, must be concerned with the ways in which men live – their ways of life which embody their ideals. I conceive that it falls within the proper province of moral philosophers to formulate ideals worth living for and the attempt to make clear principles which may afford guides for action. This is a task difficult to fulfill" (Stebbing 1952a: 4).

[50] In *Ideals and Illusions*, Stebbing listed "spiritual excellences" that were not based on any religious conviction:

- Love for other human beings;
- Delight in creative activities of all kinds;
- Respect for truth and the satisfaction in learning to know what is true about the world and about ourselves;
- Loyalty to other human beings;
- Generosity of thought and sympathy with those who suffer, and hatred of cruelty and other evils;
- Delight in the beauty of nature and in art; and
- To have experience of pain and of forgoing what would be good for oneself in order that the needs of others may be met (1948: 29-30).

Like Robinson, she did not shy away from presenting values and even wanted to use the word "spiritual" for her "goods" or "values."

[51] The last philosopher we have to mention in this context is the most well known: Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). Russell had a tremendous influence in the whole tradition of twentieth century secularist thought. He was, in a phrase borrowed from Noel Annan, "writing in a prose whose lucidity was equalled by its elegance" (101). With books as *The Scientific Outlook*, *Religion and Science*, *Why I am Not a Christian and Other Essays*, and many others he proved to be a paragon of liberal and secular thought in the twentieth century, comparable only with his godfather, John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century. Russell wrote also an influential history of philosophy in which his worldview is expressed in sometimes-hilarious comments on his colleague philosophers, ancient and modern (1974). One of his pieces that is less well known but highly relevant for our topic is his "Liberal Decalogue" as part of what he called the "Liberal outlook." "Perhaps the essence of the Liberal outlook could be summed up in a new Decalogue, not intended to replace the old one but only to supplement it," Russell writes (1951). This is what Russell as a twenty-first century liberal-secular legislator presents us:

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worth while to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.

6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that is happiness.

These examples of Stebbing, Robinson, and Russell could be augmented *ad libitum*, but that is not necessary within the confines of this article. My primary purpose is analytical, more in particular to distinguish the concept of atheism (limited or "negative") from the motives that atheists have for subscribing to this position (a predilection of human freedom, as we see in the work of Sartre and Von Hartmann or specific liberal values as expounded by Stebbing, Robinson, and Russell).

[52] Only if we carefully distinguish between the limited (or negative) conception of atheism and the motives for atheism is a fruitful debate about atheism possible. If we – as authors like McGrath do – use "atheism" as an umbrella formula for a variety of ideals as rationalism, belief in progress, belief in the secularization thesis, and many other elements associated with secularist approaches, the discussion between theists and atheists will remain needlessly rhetorical and fruitless. If we stick to the negative conception of atheism, on the other hand, it is a fruitful term that can be used to designate the differences between those who believe in the existence of a god with the characteristics that theists ascribe to God.

Atheism or Non-Theism?

[53] Atheism *in the sense coined above* seems also a defensible position. The only problem is that hardly anybody follows the semantic convention that I have proposed. In popular parlance, atheism is associated with all kinds of negative ideas and attitudes, especially with the way it *can* be defended. Atheists have a reputation for being arrogant, militant, missionary, zealous, and also impolite if not rude. For that very reason George Jacob Holyoake coined the word "secularism."

[54] George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) is nowadays most famous for his trial on the ground of "blasphemy" (Levy: 453; Bradlaugh Bonner: 71-75). At one of his lectures in Cheltenham, he was confronted with a question from the audience about man's duty to God. Holyoake's response was that England was too poor to have a God. So it would not be a bad idea to put Him on "half pay." For this remark he was arrested and sentenced to six months in jail. After his release he returned to Cheltenham where he reiterated the exact words that had gotten him into trouble the first time.

[55] Less well known is that Holyoake coined the word "secularism." He did this because he was convinced that "atheism" was in bad repute. Secularism was defined by him as concern

with the problems of *this* world. He summarized his position as follows: "1. Secularism maintains the sufficiency of Secular reason for guidance in human duties. 2. The adequacy of the Utilitarian rule which makes the good of others, the law of duty. 3. That the duty nearest at hand and most reliable in results is the use of material means, tempered by human sympathy for the attainment of social improvement. 4. The sinlessness of well-informed sincerity. 5. That the sign and condition of such sincerity are – Freethought – expository speech – the practice of personal conviction within the limits of neither outraging nor harming others" (348).

[56] Holyoake may have been a learned man but he did not have the gift of making snappy formulations. Nevertheless, in one thing he was right: the concept of "atheism" is hopelessly tainted with negative images and every author that would try to launch this epithet as the banner of his lifestyle is confronted with almost insurmountable difficulties. He is constantly obliged to explain his use of the term "atheism" while his audience reacts with: "All right, but is not atheism also . . ."? And then a whole litany against atheism is begun: Is it not a bit arrogant to pretend to know that God does not exist? (Answer: the atheist does not proclaim that God does not exist, he affirms that the reasons to believe in his existence are not convincing). Why are people not allowed to believe in God? (Answer: atheists are not against free speech or against freedom of conscience; they only claim the right to disagree with someone who affirms the existence of God). Is not atheism a bit arrogant? (Answer: atheism is no more arrogant than agnosticism or theism. The "arrogance" is not in the position itself, but in the way that people hold their opinions – dogmatic, not willing to discuss their views. Atheists are usually fond of discussions).

[57] So although atheism is a defensible position to take, the odds are very much against it. That brought many proponents to the conclusion that it may be better to keep the position but to change the name. We find this with A. C. Grayling, for instance. He avoids the term "atheism" when he writes: "I subscribe to a non-religious outlook, and criticise religions both as belief systems and as institutional phenomena which, as the dismal record of history and the present both testify, have done and continue to do much harm to the world, whatever good can be claimed for them besides" (9). So Grayling speaks of a "non-religious outlook." He also writes: "As it happens, no atheist should call himself or herself one. The term already sells a pass to theists, because it invites debate on their ground. A more appropriate term is 'naturalist', denoting one who takes it that the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature's laws" (28; see also Kors: 7, who writes that Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, and also Erasmus were all decried as "atheists" in the debates on their work).

[58] Another point that makes atheism unpopular is that it seems to be connected to one of the most oppressive systems in human history, Marxism-Leninism, as the official philosophy of the state in the Soviet-Union and its satellite states between roughly 1917 till 1989.

[59] Again, we should clearly proclaim that atheism in the sense of the simple denial of the theistic position does not imply some sort of state doctrine. Atheism in the sense indicated is "private" atheism. So that brings us to three kinds of atheism or rather three positions an atheist can take towards his own view of life. First, there is "private atheism" or what could also be called "non-theism": the view of someone who rejects the theistic worldview and proclaims to do this on good grounds. Second, there is "public atheism." Here the atheist

creed is perceived to be something that we have to share with fellow citizens, because otherwise no decent society is possible. So here some "missionary" element is involved: the atheist actively wants to "convert" his fellow citizens to his personal conviction. Third, there is "political atheism," being the conviction that the state has to eradicate all kinds of religious belief, as was done in the Soviet Union and in Albania.

[60] Atheism as a defensible position should be primarily private atheism or non-theism, sceptical towards public atheism, and downright dismissive of political atheism. But because "atheism" in the first sense has overtones of atheism in the second and third sense it may be a feasible strategy to refrain from using the term altogether and rather refer to "non-theism." If we would do that, we may acknowledge that atheists have won the intellectual battle, but lost the debate on public relations.

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