



The faith of the unbeliever

From time to time we get the impression that our freewheeling Western world is being flooded by a new wave of apostasy. That impression is not quite correct. In reality, that apostasy has become a broad stream, moving unceasingly forward and widening constantly. Sometimes there is a turbulence of sorts in this stream, when the conflict between the Christian faith and unbelief suddenly flares up. This is the case, for example, when it is suggested that the Christians' practice of discriminating against non-Christians, solely because they do not abide by the law of God, should be forbidden. Thus a church may not dismiss a functionary because he is a practicing homosexual, for example. This is also the case when Christians are accused of being undemocratic because they ascribe authority to the Bible. In such cases the mass media can be invoked to stage a sharp confrontation, and the amusement industry is usually ready and willing to be mobilized in an effort to ridicule those foolish Christ-believers. Hatred of the Christian faith is not uncommon in our present society.

Appreciation

But, you may protest, it is not really that bad, is it? So what if there are some misplaced jokes, if there is a complete misunderstanding of what we are all about. Isn't there also appreciation? Appreciation of faithfulness, reliability, hard work...

What, essentially, is the faith of the unbeliever? Unbelievers are people who believe that they can get by well, if not better, without the assumption that what believers call "their God" really exists. That describes all unbelievers. But outside of that, they form no unity. Unbelievers have to search elsewhere for answers to the fundamental questions. And the one will clash with the other. Even in the rejection of the Christian faith there is no agreement among them.

Atheists

"The fool says in his heart: there is no God." Psalm 14, as well as Psalm 53, opens with these words, showing that in the Old Testament times already believers encountered those who denied God. If we read further, we find that the psalmist was not referring to some vague general concept, like "the atheist," but rather to certain very real people, oppressors of Israel, who foolishly insisted that Israel's God was nothing. Did those oppressors not believe in gods? Of course they did. But they denied *the Lord*. To them He was just one of those national deities that could be destroyed by rooting out His people Israel.

Fools like those mentioned in Psalm 14 are still around today, and Christians are still being persecuted on the ground that the God in whom they trust is sheer fiction. But the situation in our time differs considerably from that of the ancient world.

Two distinctly different variations have made their appearance.

Over the centuries people have resorted to a reasoned and argumentative rejection of the Christian faith in order to justify their denial of God. That is quite different from Israel's many enemies who did not base their hostility on the reasoned rejection of any particular faith. Those ancient enemies were out to prove that Yahweh was powerless, by conquering that pitiful little nation that called itself by His name. Presently, the approach is quite different. The people of today believe they can advance convincing arguments to denounce the Christian faith, and at the same time condemn its adherers. We could call this branch of unbelief "antitheism," a doctrine which calls for powerful opposition against any belief in God.

Agnostics

A second variety of the denial of God seems a bit friendlier. The world is swarming with people who insistently proclaim their *absence of knowledge* about the existence of God. Visible things can be observed, but who says there is anything else? The fools of Psalm 14 never doubted the existence of gods. Mythology still shows who their gods were and how they were to be worshipped. They denounced Yahweh, but they realized full well that there is more between heaven and earth than what can be touched with the hand.

How different are our days! Christians are not criticized because they believe in the God of the Bible, but rather because they actually think that there is a way of gaining sure knowledge about matters that cannot be observed by the physical eye. Those who deny God on the basis of a professed absence of knowledge are called *agnostics*.

Do people care about doctrines?

Is it fruitful to discuss such "doctrines?" Most ordinary people do not care one bit about philosophical discussions. If we were to use the terms *antitheism* and *agnosticism* without further explanation, many of our readers would have no idea what we were up to. What do common folks care about such things? Yet, the background of modern unbelief is a matter that concerns us all. We do not have to prepare catalogues of the terms, nor parade before our readers the names of all the philosophers who systemized their apostasy, in order to be confronted with their unbelief.

Never heard of antitheism? But what about the claims that Christians are so narrow-minded? What about their pitiful discrimination against members of society who "follow an alternate sexual lifestyle?"

Never heard of agnosticism? But what about the irritation people display regarding the certainties of those Christians and their absolute values?¹ *"They are acting as if they had a direct line of contact with God Himself. A bit more modesty would not be out of place."*

Those are the very down-to-earth issues at stake.

Antireligion

Declared opponents of the Christian religion have one thing in common: they all claim that acknowledging God is detrimental to man. It tends to retard people's development, impede their liberty, and impair their sense of justice, for believing in God causes them to take injustices for granted.

Let's look at a few examples of such opponents.

Karl Marx was an avowed atheist. To him religion was an environmental phenomenon. People respond to a society that robs them of their individuality. Therefore they create a dreamworld that awaits them after death. It gives a golden edge of expectation to the misery of their present conditions. Therefore religion must be opposed. How can people ever reach their true, earthly, human destiny, if they continue to believe that the sense of all reality lies in God? Such a belief causes them to resign to the fact that man cannot reach his true destiny here on earth.

Marxism is antireligious — not in order to vent a particular hatred against any one individual Christian, but only to open up a better way toward understanding the nature of man. Antitheism, for the benefit of mankind.

Friedrich Nietzsche, another influential thinker of the nineteenth century, proclaimed the necessity of God's death in order to save man, who had become weak and emaciated. No one dares to go his own way, find his own truth, and leave others behind. The coming of the new man, free of inhibitions, not afraid of the loneliness of harboring unshared convictions, is being held back by tough barricades, of which Christianity is one of the worst. For what have those Christians done? They have taken the lifestyle of the very meek and utterly impractical man Jesus and turned it into

a milky white doctrine. And now they are trying to convince themselves and others that weakness is strength and that love for the infirm is mandatory. Therefore, those who desire to greet the day of the new man, the man who dares to live, must oppose religion. Antitheism, to benefit mankind.

One more example: **Jean Paul Sartre**, the twentieth century thinker for whom freedom is the essence of humanity. Animals and things do not possess that freedom. They always exist as a consequence of something else; they never are themselves. But man is. He is constantly in the position of having to make a choice. Of course, he can flee from his responsibilities by hiding behind "the circumstances," but he does so at the expense of his humanity. Those who want to be truly human must dispense with any grounds for their existence outside themselves. Therefore religion is a threat to free man. If you perceive God's guidance in your life, if you wish to abide by God's commandments, you have destroyed your humanity. *"Once freedom has arisen from the bottom of man's heart, the gods are powerless over him,"* Sartre says in his stage play "The Flies." They can kill him, but that would be no more than just one defeat. A free man is too strong for the gods. Therefore, religion must be opposed. Antitheism, to benefit mankind.

A deadly mistake

Is it possible to be true man and yet to serve God? Strange question! But what is so obvious for Christians is not quite so self-evident for those philosophers. They conclude that man's essence, his human nature, is threatened as soon as faith dominates him. It is detrimental for social development; it denies his freedom and his greatness. We find this view all around us. It is said that man sours because he is hemmed in by rules and prohibitions, and he becomes spiritually distraught, because he is pressured into following commandments that clash with his own nature.

Not all who look at life that way will violently oppose religion. Most of them will restrict themselves to a patronizing smile. However, as soon as the Christian faith manages to get a somewhat broader influence, or if a call to follow God's ordinances receives more than average attention, the antitheists suddenly seem to be driven by prophetic zeal.

In this concept, this cornerstone of modern unbelief, God and man are competitors. And that is a fatal error. In that system of thought man is valued far too highly, and, worse, God is valued too lowly. Man, together with all of creation, is totally dependent on God the Creator. That dependence was dramatically emphasized in the fall into sin. Man is in no way capable of redeeming either himself or the world which is accursed on account of his guilt. Man a competitor of God? Come off it!

Not only does this doctrine lift man beyond his real stature, it also reduces God to a level far beneath His exalted state. Would God not be able to be almighty Creator without robbing man of his freedom? Would He not be able to promise a new earth, without impeding on man's responsibility on this earth? But then God is portrayed as a sort of superior craftsman (Sartre) who, no matter how clever, can only produce puppets. If that were so, the proposition would indeed be true: it is either up to God or to man. But the Bible teaches us that God, although He disposes of the works of His hands like a potter of his clay, can never be compared with a human craftsman. God has created human beings who are responsible and who, as His image bearers, are still called to have dominion over themselves and over the world. This transcends(!) our understanding. But who is the man who seriously proposes that God's qualities are limited by our understanding?

It is a deadly mistake, that notion that man is God's competitor. Adam and Eve believed the story that God had forbidden them to eat of the one tree, in order to prevent them from climbing up to His level. And they wouldn't take it. They wanted to be like God. And thus they lost everything. That same pretentiousness is still as alluring. And also just as deadly.

I know not

"Let us assume for a moment that there is a God; then still for me, as I am at present, He does not exist." That is the notion of the present-day agnostic. He does not accept any absolute certitudes, whether it be the Christian belief that God is, or the atheist certainty that God is not. The agnostic simply does not know.

Agnosticism has its own history. In Western culture there have always been those who refuse to accept that perception is possible of things beyond the visible world. Their arguments seem plausible: don't all religious people model their religious views on their own limited experiences? A philosopher of ancient Greece suggested that if oxen had a religion, their god would look like an ox. The message: be modest with your opinions about the supernatural.

In the time of the Enlightenment (say the eighteenth century), the doubt about the possibility of knowing God was basic to the optimistic expectation that mankind would soon outgrow its desire for "supernatural knowledge." An enlightened man has no need of such superstitions.

A French thinker, **Auguste Comte**, systemized this line of thought. In the eyes of children, everything is animated, everything from trees to houses to clouds. That's why they talk to them. As a child grows up, he loses that perception. Mankind, too, when it was immature, searched for principles which explained the world. But now that man has reached maturity, that urge has died. He realizes that no sensible thing can be said about something that is supposed to be beyond our reality. Mature people do not worry about that; they can live without the tooth fairy. Science will tell us how the world works; what else do you want? For Comte, agnosticism, of the kind that demystifies the world, is a healthy sign of maturity.

In the meantime, the scene has shifted somewhat. The world of naked facts, of nature's reign, and of rational structure cannot possibly satisfy a human heart. Every person has his own individual experiences. And is it then proper to denounce as childish those believers who perceive something like a God in the intricacies of reality? Perhaps those Christians aren't so primitive after all. Doesn't the search for the sense of it all occupy everyone's mind? So, the world has indeed been demystified, and that is good; we are no longer afraid in the dark. But didn't we also lose a lot that way?

Thus agnosticism now appears in a new form. Objective knowledge of God still remains unthinkable. But there must be room for personal experiences reaching beyond the surface of reality. It also changed the attitude towards Christians. Condescending haughtiness toward religious ideals has turned into an embarrassed endearment. Is religion childish? Yes, but who says that grownups understand the world that much better than children? Therefore, be not too hasty in condemning them...

The heavens are telling the glory of God

Anyone who does not deliberately close his eyes can see in creation the glory of the Creator. Of that the Psalms sing, and the children of God join in with that song. But what reaction do you find? This: *"You who like to talk about creation and Creator have made up your own language; you are living in a different world."* To some extent that is quite true: one's eyeglasses color one's vision. Faith does influence your view. But the agnostic derives from this fact the conclusion that the question of the reality of those diverse worlds is not debatable, that the degree of reliability of the eyeglasses cannot be established. Now then, some people say that God has created the world. If you were to flatly deny that, you would give the impression that you know what is meant by "God" and by "creating." But that is the whole issue: we don't know! And everyone uses different images and concepts, which sometimes makes exchange of thought a frustrating undertaking.

Many of us will have experienced that. You talk about your faith, about sin and forgiveness, about the working of the Holy Spirit, only to find out that the people you are talking to don't have the slightest idea of what these are all about. They are interested in your way of experiencing reality and they respect it, but they do not understand it. Continued secularization will probably serve to spread that ignorance.

The heavens tell the glory of God? Most people will not begrudge you that "experience." It sounds good, although they do not know what it means.

Relativism and cynicism

Evangelistic talks are often frustrated by such a total absence of understanding. By now it may be clear that in our days this ignorance is actively being fed by an agnostic world view which has

made the inability to understand someone's religious convictions part of its system. *Faith* is not *knowledge*, in the ordinary sense of the word. Therefore, to discuss the question whether God exists would be meaningless. After all, a concept such as "God" has meaning only for someone who believes, a meaning which others will never comprehend.

Thus, compared to the outright-hostile antitheists, the agnostics seem to be much friendlier towards Christians. Their relativism is much more open. They seem to grant everyone his own world of perceptions.

Many Christians are in danger of adopting this relativistic view. To them faith becomes "*the adventure of giving meaning to purely personal experiences.*" In that way the Bible becomes the summary of our predecessors' experiences, in which Christians then recognize themselves, since they are similar to their own. Is this experience out-of-reach for many people in this world? Too bad, but we cannot really expect all the world to be willing to share our world of personal encounters.

Realistic as this approach may seem, it still amounts to an actual denial of God. The God of heaven and earth, the Creator of all mankind, is being transformed into a bleak idea, a name used to give form to a set of personal experiences. How can anyone call upon others to repent and believe in the name of such a God? What is to be expected of a God who only lives in the private world of believers?

It is true, faith has much to do with personal experiences. And it is not easy to explain to others those concepts which are so completely woven into the fabric that makes up the world of our experiences. But that need not lead to relativism. Why not? Because experiences, important as they are, are never the basis of our faith. That basis is the revelation of God through His apostles and prophets, and through Jesus Christ His Son. It does make sense to tell each other and also outsiders what God means to us. Maybe we should do that more frequently than we do. But we must be wary of the possible misconception that God is only "God-to-us."

Modern unbelief which is not per se hostile towards religion as a personal self-realization, can cause such a misconception. But those who refuse to go along in that respect should not be surprised if the sympathy quickly evaporates. A believer can evoke a certain sense of endearment among unbelievers, but if he insists that the content of his faith is also valid for others, embarrassed endearment will quickly turn into bitter cynicism.

Undemocratic?

Orthodox Christians are often accused of being undemocratic in their political stand. Most Christians will immediately and vehemently refute such claims by explaining that there is no secret organization dictating their political choice, no backroom plotting, that the Bible is an open book for everyone to read, and that, more than anyone else, they wholeheartedly honor all the rules of parliamentary democracy.

Yet, it is true, there is a real difference between Christ-believers and democracy-believers. The latter insist that all authority on earth lies with man. That notion that Christians have faith and that all others are faithless is not true. Socialists and Liberals have principles just as well which were not born from objective and readily acceptable arguments, but rather from a faith commitment which was presupposed. Basic to this faith commitment is the doctrine that man never speaks but by his own authority.

This is the difference, and therein the opposing world views clash. The Christian wishes to obey God's revealed will, also when — along democratic ways — he influences government policy. Accordingly, the views he espouses are also founded upon what he reads in the Bible. He will argue, and he will attempt to convince others with his arguments, but when it comes to the point, it will become clear that the authority of the Scriptures has a decisive impact on his views. "*Authority from elsewhere*" is then being introduced into the discussion. A true democracy-believer will not accept that. He will insist that every viewpoint is debatable and that if no reasonable arguments are presented to undergird a precept, it should be dropped.

Reasonable arguments! That is basic to the conflict. That is where the knot of agnosticism is tied. For what can be reasonably argued? What can be reasonably understood? Not such a thing as the will or the precepts of God, say many. If someone nevertheless brings questions of what God requires from us into the discussion, he vacates the field of reasonable argumentation. He is undemocratic.

But may religious considerations play no role at all in someone's social or political choices? Most certainly they may, but only as a source of personal inspiration; not as a source of political argument. The defence against this accusation of having an undemocratic attitude should not be undertaken on superficial grounds. Quick assurances like: "Of course we are democratic," tend to gloss over one important point.

A Christian politician will acquire as much expertise of the democratic processes as he can, and he will use that expertise to tie in with those values which are also accepted outside Christian circles. Thus equipped, he partakes in the political traffic. But — and this is the point — he will never accept the democratic faith which dictates that any authority ascribed to God's Word is unacceptable in political argument.

The conviction of things not seen

Modern unbelief has taken on a variety of forms. But those forms are nothing but variations of the ancient themes.

Man wants to be master of his own destiny. That is antitheism in a nutshell. Servitude to God impedes on true human development. The serpent himself hissed it into Eve's ear.

Man will only accept what suits him. That is the final outcome of agnostic faith, which insists that universally acceptable knowledge is restricted to "tangible" matters. That was the reason why Noah's boat building was considered so hilarious in his days.

But there is also another aspect. Those whose eyes are opened by God's grace, are, like Moses, not afraid of the anger of kings, for they endure as seeing Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27).

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¹ For an actual example, see the July 1984 issue of *Reformed Perspective* on the Alberta events, in which the trend to deny Christians their certainty was exposed.