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Towards an Understanding of Atheism: Atheism in Our Time

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are very tolerant; that they are quick to see differences in individuals and that they do not seek revenge from the son for the sins of his father, or class all Americans as one; no, nor Spaniards either.

History is turned upside down to provide sport at the expense of the Spaniard. On p. 272 we read that the Moros sent "gifts" to Fertig. This Keats says is "the intricate Filipino game they learned from the Spanish." His knowledge of the Filipino hardwood is evidently very sketchy. He calls apitong and luan "hardwoods" on p. 317. They are softwoods. He calls Father Calanan (correct spelling is Callanan), "the Jesuit priest of the city of Jimenez". Father Callanan is a Columban priest. Then there is the patronizing air with which he describes the Ozamis family in Jimenez on p. 133 and the fantastic, far away, fairyland atmosphere he casts over them. For us who know these people the emotions aroused were first anger and then laughter.

If there had been more of Fertig and less of Keats, the book would ring more true to life. Still, even as it stands Colonel Wendell W. Fertig walks through the pages strong, sincere, courageous, loyal—an American who continues to do honor to many a place in Mindanao that in gratitude and admiration is named after him.

THEODORE DAIGLER

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF ATHEISM

ATHEISM IN OUR TIME. By Ignace Lepp. Translated by Bernard Murchland, C.S.C. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963. 195 pp.

In the rising tide of unbelief throughout the world, Christians must achieve some understanding of unbelievers, if there is to be peaceful co-existence with them and collaboration. Ignace Lepp, who for many years was a Marxist atheist and is now a Catholic priest and psychotherapist, is eminently qualified to help us see into the heart and mind of the unbeliever, and understand not merely the theory of atheism, but also why and how a flesh-and-blood atheist denies the existence of a personal God.

For although most atheists put forth reasons from history or science to justify their unbelief, Lepp contends that its basic causes are generally of the existential order, and best revealed by a psycho-

logical study. And while they are many and varied, some classification of them is both possible and necessary.

After an introductory autobiographical account, therefore, in which he enable us to gain a clear insight into the motives that gave his own Marxist unbelief its appeal and dynamism, Lepp devotes a chapter to a kind of atheism that occurs consequent upon a psychic conflict in the individual. This atheism he calls neurotic and shows how it differs from sane unbelief by its irrational and excessive character, evident in the lives of those whose psychic history he narrates.

The chapters that follow deal with the four main groups of contemporary atheists, the Marxists, the Rationalists, the Existentialists, and all those who resemble in some way Nietzsche, Malraux, or Camus, each of whom denies the existence of God in the name of value.

Within each of these groups, the author treats separately those who have always been atheistic and those who became so after losing their faith, because they generally act quite differently from one another, as is evident from the case histories narrated.

Marxist atheism differs particularly from other types of atheism in that, while overthrowing the foundations of religious faith, it takes unto itself the functions formerly exercised by religion in social life and the conscience of the individual. Far from being accidental to Marxism, atheism is of its essence and the author has never known anyone who succeeded in reconciling Marxism with belief in God. This incompatibility can be traced to the psychological and emotional life of Marx himself, whose hatred of religion was kindled by the 'religious alienation' which he suffered with other Jews who were prevented from finding their social identity by the barriers which were erected against them for reasons of religion in a nineteenth century Europe that was supposedly Christian. From his letters it appears that Marx proclaimed his materialism, economic theory, and the revolution of the proletariat, in order to destroy Christianity and thereby abolish what he considered to be the fundamental alienation, the religious one. In his opinion each religion was but an ideological super-structure erected on some particular economic system, and if Communism would bring about the destruction of capitalism, the downfall of Christianity which depends on it would follow.

The rationalist atheist believes that he is possessed of intellectual certitude of the falsity of religion. Most rationalists today, however, unlike those of the last century, are agnostic rather than atheistic, for they are less dogmatic and more inclined, like the celebrated biologist, Jean Rostand, to admit that they discover themselves "in a state of frightened incomprehension" when faced with

such fundamental questions as the origin of man and the meaning of human life. Only scientific method, however, is capable of attaining certitude, and nothing it makes known confirms for us the truth of religious doctrine, which remains a body of unproved hypotheses.

Feuerbach's explanation of the common belief of mankind in the existence of God as merely a projection into an imaginary being of the best part of man is taken up again by Sartre. Atheism is of the very essence of his existentialism, which extols human liberty to such an extent that it will not brook an absolute and universal order of values founded upon God.

Finally, there are those who oppose Christianity and belief in a transcendent being for the sake of a value which they consider to be lost because of such a belief. Nietzsche professed abhorrence for an ideal that teaches "trust, candor, simplicity, patience, love of neighbor, resignation, submission to God, a kind of disarming and repudiation of the proper self." The practice of these Christian virtues degrades man, by despoiling him of the better part of his nature and leaving him a weak and colorless being. Nietzsche rejoiced in putting God to death, that is, in stamping out the idea of God in human minds, because man would be thereby exalted. "We have killed God", he writes,—the grandeur of this act is too great for us. Is it not necessary that, as a result of this act, we become gods ourselves?"

The atheism of Malraux, who is obsessed by a conviction of the tragic meaninglessness of life, has none of the blasphemous and aggressive character of Nietzsche's. In fact, he pays homage to Christianity for the coherence it gave to human existence in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the respect he has for it is for something that lived in the past but is no longer effective. It does not succeed in our day in giving meaning to life, nor does anything else take its place in doing so. "To the myths of God and an immortal soul," he remarks, "the modern world has only succeeded in opposing the ridiculous myths of science and progress." All that remains for man, in his tragic condition, possessing a life that is an insoluble mystery, is to revolt against that condition. The heroes of Malraux's novels struggle for liberty and justice against the world in which they find themselves seeking to give a meaning to their lives, but their efforts result only in failure. This struggle is their only true joy, the only hope by which they can live. "Man is hope as well as anxiety, hope for nothing."

For Camus also human existence is without finality and suicide is, consequently, the principal philosophical problem. But man, he claims, has an obligation to live in order to revolt against his absurd condition and the injustices he meets in this life.

Throughout the book the author gives case histories to exemplify the various types of contemporary atheism. They succeed in showing concretely how the acceptance or rejection of God is not merely a matter of intellectual apprehension, but also one of emotions and choice. All the powers of the human person are gathered up into this fundamental orientation of his life for or against God.

JOHN P. RUANE