

## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ATHEISM. A PROLIFIC CONTROVERSY WITH ATHEISM



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### Abstract

**Background:** This study concentrates on the relationship between theistic and atheistic paradigms of thinking. The phenomenon of atheism is a very powerful cultural phenomenon that is present especially in developed societies and sparks the question of a general grasp. The aim of the study is to look into the inner construction and finality of atheism as a humanistic concept of human liberation on which modern Western civilization is built and to confront it dialogically and non-confrontationally with the Christian humanistic concept. A partial objective is to grasp and to understand the phenomenon of *constitutive transcendence*, which is present in both humanistic conceptions, despite their often obviously diametric differences. It deconstructs the apparent contradictory nature of these conceptions through a discursive analysis of the different conceptions of atheism. In a simplistic reduction of atheism as the enemy of Christianity and theism, it reveals the structural mechanism of identification, condemnation and victimization of the potential culprit of the social crisis through the lens of René Girard's mimetic theory of culture. Through this, the positive aspects of atheism are revealed, which in a fruitful dialogue can act to purify both theism and Christianity, and the potential of Christianity and theism to act to purify atheist discourses is revealed. The research focuses mainly on the all-pervasive human need for liberation from all kinds of chaos, and their solution within a Christian conception. The results of the research reveal the interconnections and links between atheistic conceptions and the Christian conception of human liberation, reveal and define the common roots of all these building blocks of modern civilization, and discover and evaluate their mutual contribution in relation to the understanding of freedom of the individual and society.

**Conclusion:** The study contributes to the search for a common language within the society we call Western civilization; it should contribute to the definition of its roots and identity, and create a precondition for a mutual dialogue between different philosophical and theological schools. The discovery and naming of the phenomenon of constitutive transcendence can contribute to the mutual understanding of different social endeavours and their mutual tolerance and understanding. On this basis, the development of methods of dialogue, discourse of dialogue, and the search for new platforms for mutual dialogical encounters is recommended.

**Keywords:** Atheism – Christianity – Nihilism – Transcendence – Mimetism.

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### **Introduction**

Although traditionally mission territory was considered to be mostly remote areas of countries in the global south, it is now more than obvious that developed countries that were until recently considered Christian are rapidly becoming mission territory as well. According to some people, the phenomenon of atheism is the reason for their de-Christianization. We will try to show that, from a Christian point of view, atheism and atheists are not necessarily seen as antagonistic. The study is based on the hermeneutics of René Girard's mimetic theory of culture. Its research aim is to attempt a constructive theological reading of the atheistic paradigm, which is often inaccurately represented in contemporary society as a characteristic cultural feature of developed countries. Virtually all culture, in the eyes of mimetic methodological assumptions, is based on the mechanism of searching for the object responsible for various social crises. This mechanism is ritualized, it structurally permeates all institutionalization of social forms and establishes a ratio of social norms, taboos, institutions, symbolic forms and language. The conceptual categories contained in language can thus be used to varying extent as a support for rejection, delimitation or identification and condemnation of the potential culprit and his subsequent victimization. In this respect, a clear, self-evident and obvious interpretation of a linguistic message has a specific power. The obviousness of the reading of meaning is an attribute that consolidates the crowd that, consequently, creates and reinforces the power of the so-called rule of the masses.

The history of culture clashes has shown that some conceptual categories are subject to clashes and contests at certain times, and are far more explosive and conflictual than others. One such example of a conceptual category around which tensions, disputes and even persecution and violence accumulate in modern society is atheism. Despite the apparent obviousness of the meaning of this concept, it is interesting to observe the shift in the way in which its concept has been instrumentalized over the course of history. The rule of the masses has changed its assessment of the term several times in modern history, but always in the name of a clear conviction about its meaning. Whereas at the beginning of the modern era atheism was perceived by the masses as a pejorative, something to be condemned, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards atheism gradually became a symbol of emancipation and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even a means of prestige. Atheism becomes an expression of freedom, objectivity, science and common sense. However, in the so-called post-materialist mode of our time, atheism is once again in the dock and has become a pejorative. In none of the examples described above, however, is there a deeper recognition or reflection. This is what allows the mechanism of searching for and identifying the victim to be triggered.

A problematic grasp of the term itself would prevent easy identification of its meaning. It is the easy identification of its meaning that allows for the perspective of the accuser or the accused through the particular, obviously positive or negative meaning that is attributed to it. For example, in the period of socialism under the communist party, atheism was part of the discourse of power and from its position it became the accuser at other times it places itself in the position of the accused, or its presumed or actual protagonists are placed in this position. However, the inherent nature of atheism defies such a shorthand, clear-cut and obvious reading. When we look more closely at the phenomenon of atheism, we find that we have considerable difficulty in identifying and evaluating it.

### ***The new social paradigm: "God is dead"***

Since the end of the Second World War, the concept of atheism has been frequently used in modern Western industrial society to explain the specific character of the feeling of the people who are part of this society. For some, atheism is seen as an aegis of the struggle against the

power lust of the churches, while others see it as an emancipation of reason or as a condition of knowledge, free consciousness or being in the world. Today, the age of militant, self-confident atheism seems to have more or less passed. The post-materialist perception of the world caused by the breakdown of the “grand stories”, the “powerful narratives” of modernity<sup>2</sup>, by the unmasking of the false legitimacy of the ultimate and explicit representatives of political, religious and scientific power, often even puts atheism in the dock as if it were something wrong. Yet it is interesting that when it comes to practical life, the various competing groups do not actually differ that much. We are all part of a platform of flattened thinking, in which “actions and attitudes accepted as normal are translated into automatisms that are characterized by great appeal and strong influence (fashion, trend, style, public opinion...)”.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, let us look at some of the meanings of the concept of atheism.

### ***The nature of the new paradigm***

Atheism cannot be understood as a clearly definable and unified term; it should be borne in mind that we are talking about *atheisms* rather than *atheism*. For example, Henry de Lubac speaks of positivist, organic, constructivist, critical, theoretical, practical, utilitarian, folk, and even mystical atheism.<sup>4</sup> André Charron divides atheism into three basic units: **atheism in the true sense of the word**, which includes theoretical atheism, a subset of which is positivist atheism and negative atheism; **antitheism**, subsets of which are three basic forms – individual, collective and political; and **agnosticism**, subsets of which are dogmatic agnosticism, empiricism, methodological atheism and criticism.<sup>5</sup> Jacques Maritain speaks of practical atheism, pseudo-atheism and absolute atheism, as well as negative atheism, which he further divides into superficial or empirical and metaphysical atheism, and positive atheism, which takes on antitheistic forms, such as in Nietzsche, in some strands of existentialism and in the revolutionary atheism of dialectical materialism.<sup>6</sup> The personalistically oriented philosopher Jean Lacroix, similarly to Maritain, divides atheism into theoretical and practical, then into antitheism and real atheism, but he also includes scientific humanism, with a subset of methodological atheism; political humanism (especially Marxist) and moral humanism, which includes Camus, Sartre and Marleau-Ponty.<sup>7</sup>

The definition of atheism itself must be understood very broadly; it is by no means an unambiguous definition that could summarize the various concepts of thought that can be hidden under the term *atheism*. In general, however, in the context of the Euro-American cultural environment, contemporary atheism can be understood as a challenge to all religions. However, it mostly confronts with Christianity. We can even say that the proprium of atheism is not anti-theistic<sup>8</sup>, as it might seem at first sight, but post-theistic. The fundamental problem does

2 Gianni Vattimo, Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Pensiero debole* (Milano 1983), 43nn; Cf. also: Jean-François Lyotard, *O post-modernismu* (Praha 1993), 97-118.

3 Andrej Rajský, *Nihilistický kontext kultivácie mladého človeka* (Trnava 2009), 79.

4 Henri de Lubac, *Il drama dell'Umanesimo ateo, L'uomo avanti a Dio* (Milano 1992), 12-15.

5 André Charron, *Les catholiques face à l'athéisme contemporain* (Paris 1973), 38-40.

6 Jacques Maritain, *La signification de l'athéisme contemporain* (Paris 1949), 10-22.

7 Jean Lacroix, *Le sens de l'athéisme moderne* (Paris 1961), 11-39.

8 Bloch's paradoxical statement should be included in this context: “Only an atheist can be a good Christian, only a Christian can be a good atheist.” (Roger Garaudy, *L'Alternativa* (Assisi 1972), 5); The quote of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) is also very interesting in this context: “I often ask myself why a “Christian instinct” often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious. While I'm often reluctant to mention God by name to religious people... to people with no religion I can on occasion mention him by name quite calmly and as a matter of course.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e Resa* (Milano 1969), 215).

not revolve around the question of God's existence, but around man's more or less hermetic closure to the transcendent world.

### ***The atheistic method***

Shifting the focus from God to man, which is the main asset of the atheistic method, requires a consistent theistic reflection on the meaning of history. Much has already been done in this direction by the philosophers and theologians of personalism<sup>9</sup>, but it seems increasingly necessary to enter into the thought patterns of modern man without apologetically stressing the differences, precisely through theistic reflection. In the context of contemporary culture, it is clear that this discussion needs to be based on anthropological foundations. A transcendent, phenomenological, existential anthropology must be used in conjunction with spiritual theology, and above all with theological ethics.

Every problem revolves around a basic axis. In this case, if we deal with the issue of atheism, it is the self-understanding and self-realization of man in history. The question of God, which is always inevitable, is methodologically included in the anthropological self-understanding of individual cultures. It does not have to be placed first; rather, it is to be sought and found within each inquiry. Contemporary postmodern culture positions itself primarily as a rational *relectura* of history, intending to continue to administer history in a more critical and constructive spirit than classical and modern culture did.

Friedrich Nietzsche writes in aphorism 125 in his essay *The Joyful Science*<sup>10</sup>: "God is dead".

<sup>11</sup> This short statement seems to form the core of modern atheistic humanism, which, according to William Hamilton, can be divided into six categories<sup>12</sup>. His categories serve as fundamental hermeneutical categories to read the problem of contemporary culture.

The first category (in terms of meaning) is traditional atheism. Implicit in the claim that God is dead is the claim that God does not exist and never did. The second meaning presupposes a definite rupture in the relationship between God and man, for man has discovered that the only stimulating and effective effort is his own, which is constantly compromised by a vague belief in a vague God. The third meaning of the statement that God is dead refers to the application of the symbol of "God" to everything that concerns the psychic level of reality. The fourth meaning carries the message that all the classical philosophical and theological models by which God has been proven and conceived have been overcome. The fifth is a reference to the interpretation of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>13</sup> God considers as mature only the man who goes through history mechanically, automatically, as if God did not even exist. It is a definitive rejection of God as the helper in need. The last meaning comes from Barthian-Bultmanian reflection. It underscores the necessity of overcoming those ways of human talk about God

9 See for example: Martin Buber, *Já a ty* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1996); Martin Buber, *Problém člověka* (Praha: Kalich, 1997); Ferdinand Ebner, *La Parola e la Via* (Roma 1991); Franz Rosenzweig, *Nové myšlení* (Praha 1994); Paul Tillich, *Odvaha být* (Brno 2004); Zdeněk Trtík, *Vztah já-ty a křesťanství* (Praha 1948); Emmanuel Mounier, *Místo pro člověka – Manifest personalismu* (Praha 1948); Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* (Roma 1980); Max Picard, *Člověk na útěku* (Praha 1970).

10 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher whose best-known works include: *Also sprach Zarathustra – Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, 1883-5; *Der Wille zur Macht – Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte* 1901, 1906, 1911; he also wrote two rather scathing writings against Christianity: *Götzen – Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer Philosophier* 1889; *Der Antichrist – Fluch auf das Christentum* 1895.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Radostná věda* (Praha 2001), 114.

12 William Hamilton, *La nuova essenza del Cristianesimo* (Brescia 1974).

13 After Hitler seized power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was active in building up the German Confessing Church in Germany, was arrested in 1943 and later executed. His best-known works include: *Ethik* 1949; *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* 1951.

that are tied to this or that culture or tainting ideology, and instead gives space to the God who speaks in history.

The first three meanings belong to the *redemptive* conception of atheism.<sup>14</sup> The other three respond to the attempted catharsis that redemptive atheism seeks to mediate<sup>15</sup>, and thus bring about the providential purification of theism.

All the six hermeneutical keys have a common denominator in the anthropological vision of contemporary culture. In this environment, any acknowledgement of a particular God is fundamentally marked by an atmosphere of controversy and confrontation. "Something new has happened. The question of Job, of Ivan Karamazov, of Albert Camus has fallen upon us. Auschwitz was the work of Christians. And when it ended, their God became an absurdity."<sup>16</sup>

### **Man, Society and History**

Every epoch of history has its shadow sides, which reveal the various abysses of human nature. However, the 20th century has led man to an unprecedented emptying of the very notion of humanity, to Auschwitz, Hiroshima, communist hecatombs, nationally conditioned slaughter, and a terrorist penchant for the "easy" solution. The reasons for the Hegelian *unhappy consciousness*<sup>17</sup> caused by the alienating relationship between a slave and a master, do not help to clarify the situation today: on the contrary, they make it even more difficult. <sup>18</sup> We perceive without ceasing the hopeless disjunction between what could be and what we want to be and, even worse, what we no longer want to be.

The newly profiled *unhappy consciousness* is no longer confined to the economic and religious fields, as it was in the days of Hegel and Marx, but increasingly manifests itself in terms of social and existential meanings. Thousands of different messages and legacies reach man every day; the man tries to deafen himself by strengthening the dimension of "having" that is based on things and weakening the dimension of "being" that builds on man. Everywhere: in peripheries, factories, stadiums, schools, centres of power, ghettos, there is a tendency towards a new way of life that is no longer determined by looking upwards, but is governed by the clatter of the course of history.<sup>19</sup>

Any reflection on the eternal problems of meaning, origin, destination, on the problems of existence, goodness and truth, derives from a man with his gaze fixed on the ground. Each question contains its historicity, rediscovery and revaluation of a human in his/her process of becoming human.<sup>20</sup>

The transition to the historical condition of every questioning is due, among other things, to the shift from a theological centre of perception to an anthropological perception, as Ludwig Feuerbach has already noted.<sup>21</sup> According to this thinker, the real object and content of religion

14 Hamilton, "La nuova" 17.

15 Roger Garaudy, *L'Alternativa* (Assisi 1972), 12-16.

16 William Hamilton, *Cosa é la morte di Dio? in: Dio é morto* (Milano 1967), 181.

17 "Unhappy consciousness is the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a merely contradictory being." (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Fenomenologie Ducha* (Praha 1960), 167)..

18 "The lord is consciousness that exists as a being-for-self... it is consciousness through another consciousness... it is merged in being itself", the being for bondsman "is life, or being for others... it is the opposite of what it immediately is." (Hegel, "Fenomenologie," 157-159)..

19 Marcel Gauchet, *Odkouzlení světa* (Praha 2004).

20 Man is a *historical being* (*Ens historicum*). Cf. Emerich Coreth, *Co je člověk* (Praha 1996), 171-172..

21 Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), one of the main representatives of German classical philosophy, who originally studied theology, develops a theory of anthropological atheism and materialism in his work. His important works include: *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie* 1839; *Das Wesen des Christentums* 1841; *Das Wesen der*

is a human alone: "I promote anthropology to theology"<sup>22</sup>, "The divine being is nothing other than a human being."<sup>23</sup> Reflections on human attitudes in history are determined by human growth in love in a totally non-transcendent environment. "If human nature is the supreme being for man, then practically also the love of a human for humans must be the supreme and first law: Homo homini Deus - that is the highest practical principle - a turn in the history of the world."<sup>24</sup>

According to Feuerbach, the man who invented God is not an isolated individual. He is an individual involved in relationships, a man-society. "The individual man has for himself neither the essence of a human in himself as a moral being nor in himself as a thinking being. The essence of man is contained only in communion, in the unity of the human with another human...."<sup>25</sup> God is thus ultimately replaced by Humanity.

Feuerbach's consistently atheistic humanism is imbued with social values based on the principle of love. It can be seen as a prophecy of a new land that completely dissociates itself from God. The method of his humanism is the conversion of a man in his consciousness and conscience. A similar prophetic-ethical attitude based on the conversion of hearts is encountered in the thinkers of early socialism, especially in France. For example, the young Charles Péguy, at the time he was still a convinced socialist, writes: "We are those who do not want to separate the social and moral revolution from each other at any price. On the one hand, we do not believe that a moral revolution can be carried out seriously, sincerely and profoundly without a total transformation of the social environment. And on the other hand, we believe that any merely external revolution would ring hollow if not accompanied by a refinement and profound shift in the level of consciousness and conscience."<sup>26</sup>

### ***Atheism and Nihilism***

The implicit and sometimes explicit form of nihilism is related to the ethical dimension of atheism. In its effect, atheism postulates nihilism, and vice versa. In common parlance, nihilism is commonly replaced by words such as "depression, apathy, resignation, meaninglessness, scepticism, individualism, disinterest, isolation, anxiety...".<sup>27</sup> A statement of equating these words with nihilism would be too strong, but there is a certain causal link in the sense of nihilism reinforcing these phenomena. Philosophical nihilism denies a concrete system of values, destroys any ontology that appeals to a metaphysical notion of being, rejects the reality of common meaning, and likewise rejects theoretical and ethical principles and the standards that follow from them.<sup>28</sup> Karl Jaspers writes, addressing Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism, that it can be interpreted in different ways, just like atheism.<sup>29</sup> However, it should be pointed out that not every form of nihilistic thinking leads to atheism. Nihilism, according to Jean-Luc Marion, can be a hermeneutic-phenomenological possibility to be guided by thinking itself, and not by metaphysical assumptions.<sup>30</sup> There is also dogmatic nihilism, but it can be neither proved nor

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*Religion* 1845.

22 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Podstata křesťanství* (Praha 1954), 51.

23 Feuerbach, "Podstata," 73.

24 Feuerbach, "Podstata," 323.

25 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Zásady filosofie budoucnosti a jiné filosofické práce* (Praha 1959), 51.

26 Jean Bataille, *Peguy, il noncristiano* (Milano 1994), 40.

27 Rajský, "Nihilistický kontext," 11.

28 Rajský, "Nihilistický kontext," 23; Cf. also: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogie morálky* (Praha 2002).

29 Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche. Introduzione alla comprensione del suo filosofare* (Milano 1996), 228n.

30 Jean-Luc Marion, *Dio senza essere* (Milano 1987).

disproved. The essence of nihilism is linked to the event of truth.<sup>31</sup> Nihilism convinces us that truth is an illusion and an appearance. Truth is endlessly dissolved in interpretations, but nihilism simultaneously raises a question mark over itself and opens up the possibility of the re-establishment of the question about religions. Nihilism, which is stored in the heart of atheism, provokes a counter-movement to the desire for an objective dimension of existence and causes an openness for the arrival of the “quite other”, for an anonymous experience of holiness.<sup>32</sup>

Man, experiencing his finitude and the risk of total disorientation, needs some compensation capable of giving meaning to his existence. There is no longer an existence that can be grasped, understood and expressed by existence as some kind of fundamental; there is rather an existence grasped by being. Being is never finished, it is never fully present, it always remains a transcending otherness.<sup>33</sup>

The spiritual interpretation of nihilism as a mode of negative theology is also present in the writings of the eminent Italian philosopher and Christian thinker Gianni Vattimo. He finds a correlation between Catholicism, and more generally Christianity, and the nihilism of Nietzsche or Heidegger, in the incarnation-kenosis of God.<sup>34</sup> According to Vattimo, it is through kenosis, and thus nihilism, that salvation is realized.<sup>35</sup> Vattimo replaces the metaphysical violence of strong thought, or metaphysical infallibility, with the regulus of *charitas* realized through the practice of love, friendship, tolerance, respect for difference, pluralism and democratization.<sup>36</sup> Vattimo connects the history of nihilism with the history of Christian revelation.<sup>37</sup> In his conception, nihilism is linked to ethical relevance. He sees the ethics of weak thinking as a secularized ethics of Christian love<sup>38</sup>, participation, cohabitation, consensus and dialogue. Nihilism teaches us to uncover the mechanisms of metaphysical violence in ourselves and to realize that “we suspect the one who presents his narrative as true simply because our narrative is different”.<sup>39</sup>

### Sartre's Century

The moral appeal of atheism is particularly evident in the position of Jean Paul Sartre, especially in his influential work *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre was seen as the major icon of twentieth-century atheism. Many have even called him the Pope of Atheism. Sartre understands man as a constant self-project,<sup>40</sup> that is still establishing its essence. For him, the consciousness of the individual is turned inward. It is a circular consciousness, i.e. self-consciousness.<sup>41</sup> In Sartre's position, Cartesian foundation is evident. The *Cogito* has an absolute character in Sartre's atheistic position. Outside of it, there is only nothingness. “Only this truth can be taken as the starting point: I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of con-

31 Enrico Nicoletti, “Dal nichilismo al postnichilismo,” in *Interpretazione del nichilismo* Ed. Alberto Molinari (Roma 1986), 233.

32 Carmelo Dotolo, *La teologia fondamentale davanti alle sfide del „pensiero debole“ di G. Vattimo* (Roma 1999), 228.

33 Rajský, “Nihilistický kontext,” 70n.

34 Gianni Vattimo, *Credere di credere* (Milano 1996), 41.

35 Vattimo, “Credere,” 47.

36 Vattimo, “Credere,” 60; “charitas need not be an alternative to veritas, but its intrinsic motive is “charitas in veritate,” love in truth.” (Rajský, “Nihilistický kontext,” 126).

37 Vattimo, “Credere,” 32.

38 Vattimo, “Credere,” 37.

39 Vattimo, Rovatti, “Pensiero,” 82.

40 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Bytí a nicota* (Praha: Oikoyomenh, 2006), 553.

41 Petr Horák, *Jedna přednáška Jeana – Paula Sartra*, doslov ke knize Jeana Paula Sartra *Existencialismus je humanismus* (Praha 2004), 102.

sciousness that finds itself.<sup>42</sup> Through the *cogito*, one finds not only oneself (and that in the first place) but also all others. All people's *cogitos* are in relation to each other. Each individual self-project has a universal value.<sup>43</sup> Understood in this way, the situation of freedom modifies the classical humanist concept. The role of choice, commitment and responsibility is quite different. Whereas traditional humanism is built on the self-evident assumption of humanity, in Sartre the objective concept of humanity is out of the question.<sup>44</sup> Man does not have an essence, he only constitutes it in his consciousness. His humanity is nothing, he is constantly constituting himself as a person.

For Sartre, atheism is a prerequisite for freedom. Without freedom, true humanism is unthinkable. If we admitted the world being created, then everything created would lose its independence and consistency.<sup>45</sup> Man can only be human within an atheistic horizon. Only then is his freedom of choice assured. What makes a man a man is his existence, which is constantly happening. Man is constantly becoming a human. "The atheism of the philosophers of the 18th century did indeed suppress the concept of God, but not the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea basically everywhere. We find it in Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant. Man has some kind of human nature. Human nature, which is the concept of humanity, is found in all human beings, which means that each human being represents one particular instance of the universal concept, namely a human. ...Atheistic existentialism, which I hold, is more consistent. It declares that God does not exist. Then there is at least one being for whom existence precedes essence. A being that exists before it could be defined by any concept. This being is a human... therefore, there is no human nature, because there is no God to conceive it in his mind."<sup>46</sup>

Atheism is Sartre's starting point for every thought. It is even his only option for philosophizing. There is no heaven that is filled with metaphysical values. And there is no human nature that would be part of the content of God's mind. If there was, a man would be absolved from full responsibility for himself and would not know the toil that characterizes a free man.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Sartre recognizes that man's position as being absolute central is unlivable. A human is hopelessly lonely.<sup>48</sup> Many of Sartre's disciples and Sartre himself are forced to rethink and reassess the position of a human.

Bernard-Henri Levy, one of Sartre's disciples, as a result of developing and rethinking Sartre's position, comes to see himself as an atheistic spiritualist.<sup>49</sup> Levy has not come to grounding in personal transcendence, but he is aware of the necessary need for transcendence in its generality. He considers the fact that the realm of the "holy" has been appropriated to modern philosophy and politics to be a gross blasphemy against humans. His position is similar to that of Søren Kierkegaard. The latter reproached Hegel that while he was combating one form of alienation, he was conferring the attributes of divinity to the Absolute Spirit, which is part of the

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42 Sartre, "Existencialismus," 39.

43 Sartre, "Bytí," 23.

44 Sartre, "Bytí," 74.

45 Sartre, "Bytí," 31-32.

46 Sartre, "Existencialismus," 15-16.

47 Sartre, "Bytí," 632.

48 Sartre, "Bytí," 497.

49 Bernard-Henri Levy, *La barbarie en visage humaine* (Paris 1977), 12.

Absolute State, and thereby creating another form of alienation, which is much more serious.<sup>50</sup> There are also those who, precisely on the basis of the absolutization of the state bureaucratic mechanism, predict the end of the human.<sup>51</sup>

Man wields unprecedented power to some extent. For he holds in his hands the power to end history.<sup>52</sup> The proclamation of the “*death of God*”, originating in the works of Heinrich Heine<sup>53</sup>, Jean Paul, and Friedrich Nietzsche, can now be supplemented with a *proclamation of the death of Man*, or at least the danger of his imminent death.<sup>54</sup>

In his analysis of the phenomena of contemporary existence, which are the result of developments in the previous two centuries, André Malraux<sup>55</sup> noted in the early twentieth century: “God used to be the absolute reality, and today we are anxiously looking for someone to whom to entrust his strange legacy.”<sup>56</sup> Malraux suspected that the question about God is at the same time a question about man and vice versa: “Is it possible for man to survive in a world in which God has died?”<sup>57</sup> What has been taken away from the divine transcendence has been attributed to the totalizing politics that has been incorporated into the modern concept of the state. “It is necessary to specify that what plays the most important and decisive role (in today’s society) is the crisis of the perception of the sacred.”<sup>58</sup> With regard to the increasingly widespread mass forms of atheism, Bernard-Henri Levy concludes: “The twilight of the gods is a prelude to the twilight of man.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Conclusion: Mission as dialogue in a fruitful dispute**

In the context outlined above, we can say that there is a mutually enriching relationship between atheism and theism, and especially between atheism and Christianity. It does not necessarily have to be a conflicting, rivalling relationship filled with mutual accusations and blaming. Atheism encourages Christianity to get rid of the magical relics of God-Deus.<sup>60</sup> Christianity on the other hand contributes to the consolidation of atheistic attitudes. For instance, atheistic Marxism and practical atheism encourage Christianity to free itself from its inherent mechanistic conception.<sup>61</sup>

50 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs, or, A Crumb of Philosophy* (Olomouc 1997); “Considered in itself, state-power reflected into itself, or its having become spirit, simply means that it has become a moment of self-consciousness.” (Hegel, “*Fenomenologie*,” 330.)

51 Jevgenij Zamjatin, *My* (Praha 189); George Orwell, *1984* (Praha 1991); Aldous Huxley, *Konec civilizace aneb překrásný nový svět* (Praha 1993); Jerome Leroy, *Sladká apokalypsa* (Praha 1995), Gottfried Benn, *Básně*, (Praha 1996); etc.

52 “*man-world-God stant simul vel cadunt*” (Paolo Miccoli, *Dal nichilismo alla Teologia* (Pavia 2000), 67.)

53 Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), a German novelist, poet, journalist and essayist, a representative of Romanticism. His major works include: *Zeitgedichte* 1843; *Der Doctor Faust* 1851; *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* 1834; *Buch der Lieder* 1827; etc.

54 “Nietzsche has once again found the point where man and God belong to each other, where the death of the latter is synonymous with the disappearance of the former, where the promise of the superman means mostly the imminence of the death of man.” (Michel Foucault, *Slová a veci, Archeológia humanitních vied* (Bratislava 1987), 348.)

55 André Malraux (1901–1976), a French philosopher, politician, and writer. His major works include: *La Tentation de l’Occident* 1926; *La Condition humaine* 1933; *L’Espoir* 1937; *Le Démon de l’Absolu* 1946 etc.

56 André Malraux, *La tentation de l’Occident* (Paris 1926), 106.

57 Malraux, “*La tentation*,” 6.

58 Bernard-Henri Levy, *La barbarie en visage humaine* (Paris 1977), 159.

59 Levy, “*La barbarie*,” 160.

60 Garaudy, “*L’Alternativa*,” 107-110.

61 Garaudy, “*L’Alternativa*,” 117.

To some extent it seems to us justified to say that the forefathers of secular conceptions of human liberation<sup>62</sup> played a providential role in some way. It feels like a prophecy “*from the neighbours*”. Jean Lacroix<sup>63</sup> wrote that in their case it is “purifying atheism”.<sup>64</sup> Their role is purifying in relation to Christianity. However, these considerations also point to the reality of a rivalling tension between theistic and non-theistic concepts. It is important that Christians and non-Christians alike do not get caught up in the maelstrom of mimetic struggle and escalating crisis that leads to scapegoating the “other” side while at the same time scapegoating within their own ranks based on stereotypes of similarity to the “other” side of the argument. For both sides, the existence of the other is both a drama and a stimulus. The texts of the opponents of various forms of theism, which express the position of atheism – nowadays rather post-atheism – present a critical tool to expose the misleading forms of theistic interpretation of reality, rather than portray a thrown gauntlet for life-or-death combat.

Meanwhile, cultured theistic reflection reveals the fact that in the cultural and existential tangle of modern consumer society, the dimension of fullness becomes impossible. On the one hand, modern society, true to its foundations, undercuts the roots of transcendence, but on the other it also rediscovers them. The unfortunate implicit antithesis *aut Deus, aut homo* is still in the air under various guises, reducing both the questioning of God and the questioning of man. However, this antithesis need not lead to the combative bullying of committed supporters, stigmatizing those who are ambivalent, but can be a fruitful basis for dialogue. The decision for man, history, and the world does not have to be made at the cost of rejecting or at least neglecting God and the transcendent dimension of human existence (Richard Dawkins). It is increasingly evident that the controversy between theism and antitheism is more in the nature of a complementarity of a wide range of meanings of one and the other world of thoughts, which are often intertwined. Christianity does not have to perceive atheism as a dark enemy, but it can read atheism and nihilism as being ciphers of transcendence. The mission of Christianity in the modern world does not lead through controversies, antagonisms or culture wars; it is above all a question of the capacity for dialogical hermeneutics. On this basis, it appears that the analytical study of secular conceptions of human liberation, especially atheistic ones, needs to be further developed. Genuine concern for people leads to the search for a common language within society much more than to controversy and accusations. This leads us to the need to develop in a deeper way, on a theoretical as well as on a practical level, the forms and methods of dialogue and thus contribute to the definition of the roots and identity of modern man within advanced societies. It turns out that an important prerequisite for listening and dialogue within society is the mutual dialogue of the various philosophical and theological schools. The discovery and naming of the phenomenon of “constitutive transcendence” can contribute to the mutual understanding of different social endeavours and their mutual tolerance and understanding. This implies that it would be more than necessary to build on the present study by developing methods of dialogue, discourse of dialogue and the search for new platforms for mutual dialogue encounters between representatives and forms of atheist discourses and Christianity (but not only that).

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62 This refers to Marxist, psychoanalytic, and scientific conceptions.

63 Jean Lacroix (1900–1986), a French philosopher, essayist, and co-founder with Emmanuel Mounier of the magazine *Esprit*. His most notable works include: *Personne et amour* 1942; *Le sens du dialogue* 1944; *Marxisme, existentialisme, personnalisme. Présence de l'éternité dans le temps* 1949; *Le sens de l'athéisme moderne* 1958; *Crise de la démocratie, crise de la civilisation. Chronique sociale de France* 1965; *La crise intellectuelle du catholicisme français* 1970; *Le personnalisme comme anti-idéologie* 1972.

64 Lacroix, “*Le sens*,” 64.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author hereby declares to be the sole author of this work and has approved its publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that the research involved in the article and the publication of the article were carried out without having any business, financial or other relations and/or circumstances that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest. At the same time, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this article or its review.

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