

Taking Atheism Seriously

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I. THE REALITY OF ATHEISM

Is atheism an "emerging context" for the practice of ministry? We can begin modestly by acknowledging the reality of atheism. The thinking and acting of many persons in this time are not formed or informed by faith in God. They do not come to their days with a trust in a reality qualitatively superior to the human; they live out their years without worshipping God. If these statements are true, there is already enough reality here identified to occupy someone thinking about the task of Christian ministry. We need not argue that matters are worse in this respect than they once were, though we may need to attend to how they are different. We need not deny the appearance of fresh energies of faith taking a bewildering diversity of forms, though the pluralism of faiths and unfaiths may complicate the task of the Christian pastor. To begin it is quite enough to say that atheism is a significant reality in our time.

As such it is a significant reality for the church. We will readily grant, indeed eagerly insist, that Christian ministry is in and for the world. Few Christians would argue that their faith can be sealed off from the acids of modernity (and post-modernity) which are at work in the world in which they live.[1] Christian faith and atheism inhabit a common world, and each will be different because of the presence of the other. Moreover, Christian ministry is *for* the world. The truth claims of the faith are made for hearing; believing will make a difference. "Woe to me, if I preach not the gospel!" Faith may be tempted to settle back or scramble back into the security of the little flock, but the logic of its

[1]The phrase is Walter Lippmann's in *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 51ff. An equally landmark discussion for theology is Langdon Gilkey's "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language" in *The Journal of Religion,* July, 1961. I agree with David Tracy's remarks about the "crisis of traditional modernity" (see his Blessed Rage for Order [New York: Seabury, 1978]). I agree, as well, that the post-modern has not undone the damage of the modern, even if its prevailing mood is more despair than confidence.

constituting word will not let it do so. If God so loved the world, the church cannot well ignore it. In that world the Christian pastor not only lives alongside the atheist; she must address him. She is here for him.

For that matter, one may well contend that atheism needs to be taken *particularly* seriously. Atheism is not simply one more miscellaneous aspect of the context which must be borne in mind as a matter of tactical wisdom—even a major one, such as (say) the diminishing capacity of modern persons to attend to a sustained use of language. The atheist is not simply part of a passive audience, neutrally available to be won by the pastor. Rather, atheism is itself about faith; it is actively (whether overtly or not) against faith. That one needs to make this presumably obvious point at all may itself be related to the way in which atheism is emerging in our present context.

It is emerging in that it is diversifying. Were unfaith one thing, it might be easier to see its opposition to faith. But now it is not so, for atheism does not present an explicitly united front against faith. Faith may be tempted to regard the many-splendored reality of atheism as expanding somehow to accommodate one more "life-style," Christian faith. Consider the differences! There are still those who contend that to believe in God is to offend against our fundamental understanding of reality. (In the next section I shall consider such charges concerning "self," "world," and "history.") There are others who simply say that Christian belief is no longer needed in that human maturation has removed the reasons which once brought people to seek God, to speak of God.[2] A third sort is like the second in avoiding direct challenge but different in that one detects here a wistful sadness that faith is simply no longer possible. The integrity of quiet despair is to be accepted, whether as preferable or simply as inevitable.[3] (These last two forms do not so much need—or do not merely need—an answer to their criticism; they need a cause even to consider Christian faith; to that I turn in section three of this essay.)

I am saying that despite this disorienting diversity the Christian pastor needs to recognize a direct relationship to atheism. The Christian faith is for the atheist; atheism is about Christian faith. They have to do with each other. Perhaps the relationship can be underlined even more strongly without erasing the distinction the relationship requires. Increasingly, Christian pastors recognize that the objections, alternatives and erosions characterizing atheism's relationship to Christian faith are something they know *from within.* These are part of their own internal struggle, as surely as they are part of this culture and do not inhabit it only as aliens. In this sense, too, the consciousness of atheism as a genuine option seems to be emerging. Is this a sorry development? Perhaps not altogether. At the very least the Christian pastor involved in this internal strug-

[2]Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper, 1966).

[3]The distinguished Columbia University physicist, Isidor Isaac Rabi, speaks thus of his journey away from the orthodox Jewish home in which he was raised: "In fact, to this day, if you ask for my religion, I say 'Orthodox Hebrew'—in the sense that the church I'm not attending is that one. If I were to go to a church, that's the one I would go to. That's the one I failed. It doesn't mean I'm something else." Jeremy Bernstein quotes Rabi's remark in *Experiencing Science* (London: Burnett, 1979) 45-6.

gle may come to understand far more fully the daring and delivering word of the gospel. The gospel may be pure gift, but it is not to be taken for granted! Moreover, the actual meaning of the gospel may be freshly discovered. Of course the gospel speaks of one Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and forever. But it also speaks to us, to human beings living in a world which is not that of the first century.

Thus the Christian pastor needs to take atheism seriously. The pastor understands that humans can hear the gospel intelligibly whether or not they believe it. The pastor understands that when human beings do believe the gospel, when they are surprised by the joy of the gospel, they nevertheless recognize it as just the good word for which they were unknowingly looking. Thus the competence of the atheist for conversation concerning faith is understood. The atheist's contribution may be to expose "bad faith," to critique distortions our formulations or our practices represent. It can be to identify concerns and questions which any true gospel for humankind must address, even as that gospel may expand and correct other concerns and questions issuing from the reality of unbelief. Let us consider how this might go, attending to the concerns of the atheist and commending the Christian faith.

II. ATTENDING TO ATHEISM

What is involved in the Christian pastor attending to the concerns of the atheist? Those claims must be heard; we must not be so quick to speak to convert that we cannot listen to learn. In listening we learn and our speaking will not be unaffected. If the concerns are to be truly heard, they must be weighed. One must feel their force. One must consider the charge, the evidence for the charge and what follows from the charge. The Christian does not cease to be a Christian in doing this. Indeed precisely as Christian, the pastor listens the more intently. The conversation is not about some other faith, after all. The charge may need to be corrected. It may misrepresent the faith in theory and/or in practice. It may misrepresent realities which are not the faith but which the Christian shares with the non-Christian: the character of the human condition, the way(s) in which we humans make our way toward truth. Thus the concerns can be attended to. They can have their critical force and they can themselves be subject to criticism, because both partners in the conversation are concerned with such fundamental realities as self, world and history. There is such ground in common. How might it go?

Consider the Christian claim that in faith one knows reality! Does such faith, focusing as it does on a decisive first century, deny the self's own experience? If the Christian pastor is to attend to this charge, there will be need to show how faith speaks to and even of present experience. That will require showing how the Christian claim to know is related to other generally accepted claims to know. It will require the Christian to argue that the action sought in and of faith is not beyond what the evidence warrants. Thus the conversation will include talking about what counts as evidence, and about how much of such evidence can reasonably be expected in the matter under discussion. If one recognizes, quite apart from faith, the field-dependent character of criteria and

even the varying presence of elements of intuition in fields such as science (Popper, Kuhn), law (Wisdom) and literature (Booth), one will assess the Christian claim to know in that context.[4]

We are not done with the Christian claim to know. One will need to consider alternative explanations of the claim. Is not religion, like magic, an attempt to explain and control the world? Does it not root in the self's wish (Freud) or derive from the self's own creative capacity (Feuerbach)? Does it not symbolize the reality of social relations in the human community (Durkheim)? These questions are far more complicated than I can indicate here, of course. And the answers will be more complicated still. I suspect, for example, that it will not do to try to deny that Christian religion has served empirically...and does still serve...many of these functions. Perhaps, indeed, one would not have it otherwise. One will need to show that we have not disproved Christian faith when we recognize that it is fully human and thoroughly worldly, for we have not exhausted its referent. We will need to show that the "more" of which we claim to speak in relation to self and world is not such that every human condition fits it equally well.

God talk connects *discriminately* with self and world talk. Thus Christian faith is not immune from disputes in the description of what is not God. And that faith does entail a vision of the proper end for that which is not God. Christian faith accommodates human form, but it does not whitewash what is distorted and demonic in our condition. And this last, the distorted and demonic, may indeed be found in Christian churches, and needs to be named as such.

Or consider the God of whom we Christians speak! Is this God so "other" as to fail to engage the human condition? What has the perfect, the timeless, the omniscient, the necessary to do with us? To attend to this question without "selling the store" the Christian pastor will struggle to express God's qualitative superiority in terms of God's relatedness, of God's will to be for us. Recall, for example, how Kierkegaard speaks in distinguishing the incarnation from the sham of a human monarch donning servant's garb to win the beloved:

> God's servant-form is...not a disguise, but is actual; not a parastatic body, but an actual body; and from the hour when he with the omnipotent resolve of his omnipotent love became a sinner God has so to speak imprisoned himself in his resolve, and now must go on (to speak foolishly) whether he wills to or not. He cannot then betray himself; he does not have the possibility which is open to the noble king, suddenly to show that he is after all the king—which, however, is no perfection with the king (to have this possibility), but shows merely his impotence and the impotence of his resolve, that he does not actually have the power to become what he wills.[5]

[4]For a sample of this emerging consensus see Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: University, 1964); Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962, 1970); John Wisdom, "Gods," *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus,* ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Harper, 1961) 391-406; Charles Taylor, "Understanding in the Human Sciences," *Review of Metaphysics,* XXXIV:1 and Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University, 1974).

[5]S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1936) 44.

Perhaps while proceeding down this line the Christian will also be able to attend to charges concerning the logical abnormality and the moral enormity of this God. In doing so one is attending, one is feeling the force of the charge. One is not denying that the unbeliever can recognize and assess evil. One is not trying to convert a deficit into capital by claiming that apparent contradictions (as, say, that developed by claiming that God is immutable and immaterial and yet active and personal) in fact point out precisely the qualitative otherness of this God. Rather, one is feeling the force of the charges and considering how the concern can be accepted and response still be made. And one will sense all the while the possibility that one may deplete the treasury of faith in order to meet the charges due. Thus it may seem to help to say that we do not suffer alone for God suffers with us, but does it help enough if we are left simply with God as the ultimate victim? The pastor will need to accept the question of what the God of Christian faith is "good for," what can be counted on absolutely.

In any case Christian faith is good for something. That is, it does have efficacy. The pastor will be asked about this. What follows from Christian faith? Does it fulfill the self? What about those tendencies to isolate the self from itself, to deprive the self of any confidence in itself? Or does Christian faith diminish the convert's capacity to appreciate other goods, say beauty? Was it only Wallace Stevens who found

> It was when I said,
> 'There is no such thing as the truth.'
> That the grapes seemed fatter,
> The fox ran out of his hole.[6]

And what work does faith do out beyond the self in the world? How will the Christian pastor steer between Scylla, the Marxist charge that faith exercises a narcotic power stultifying ethical passion, and Charybdis, the contrary charge that the Christian claim to absolute truth encourages and informs direct violence against non-Christians, as anti-semitism illustrates. It will not do to deny that non-Christians can recognize the good. It will not suffice to plead that abuse does not count against proper use. Why do so many "get it wrong?" Why should we not suppose that they really have it right? Why should we not reject Christian faith? It does help that the Christian pastor listens patiently to such charges. But that pastor must speak as well.

III. COMMENDING THE FAITH

The Christian pastor has words and reason to speak because of what lives and grows within the community of faith. Thus the pastor's work is not completed in attending to the objections of the unbeliever. That attending itself is ongoing: hearing, weighing, acknowledging, responding. But at the same time faith hears a word of God which it is called upon to speak within the sanctuary and beyond. This speaking is not to occur in an echo chamber. It finds resonant fabric and flesh in such basic structures as self, world, and history. In the speaking, hear-

[6]Wallace Stevens, "On the Road Home," *The Palm at the End of the Mind,* ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1971). On the destructive effects on the self, Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1947; Fawcett Premier Edition) 56, remains an excellent discussion.

ing and trusting of that word our relationship to such constitutive structures may be shaken and transformed, but the new that is born is actually that which was intended in creation for humankind and world. Thus an "inverted continuity" can inform the conversation, so that faith's invitation is concretely understood in relation to who we are, where we are and where we are tending.[7]

Consider, again, the self! The Christian commendation of the gospel connects with the precarious human project of selfhood. It has to do with human beings who seek identity in the multiple relationships of life...or consistency in the welter of possibility, novelty and finitude...or equilibrium within the competing constituents within/for the self. It connects with human experience of intensification, as in the aesthetic experience of the completeness of form or moral experience of commitment to and with others. Christian faith does not deny such human experiences, but it finds in them the quest for something within and beyond them.

Faith finds words to speak of how knowing God identifies the self formally in relationship to the unconditioned:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
    Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?.
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
    If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! (Ps 139:7-8)

And faith finds words to speak of how knowing God unifies the self materially, inasmuch as the unconditioned one is the perfectly constant one:

If I take the wings of the morning
    and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me,
    and thy right hand shall hold me. (Ps 139:9-10)

But such aesthetic-like experience of completeness is not won by withdrawal from ethical-like experience of commitment. The Christian faith goes on to speak of how the self is to live in actual relationship with the Other, who at the same time directs the self out to all those others. Finally, faith remembers to speak of how knowing this God promises judgment for the self, for here the scope and stance needed for true decisiveness are at hand. The Christian pastor knows that such intensifying talk is available in other faiths as well. But that pastor speaks a particular word:

> ...a self directly before Christ is a self intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die, also for the sake of this self....Qualitatively a self is what its criterion is. That Christ is the criterion is the expression, attested by God, for the staggering reality that a self has, for only in Christ is it true that God is man's goal and criterion or the criterion and goal.[8]

[7]The phrase is Kierkegaard's in *Papirer,* ed. P. A. Heiberg and Victor Kuhr (11 vols.; Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1909-48) 4.C 29. Kierkegaard was drawn to the Johannine (7:17) "do and you will know"; see Pap. 10.4 A 349 and Pap. 10.3 A 455 ("...first the venture, then the proof comes forward....").

[8]S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death,* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University, 1980) 113-14.

To be able to speak in this way may be to be able to win the interest of the hearer. But the expression of that interest may take the form of hard questioning: Can this word be true? Can it, that is, connect with what I know to be the truth of my existence as a self in this world? Does the witness to God invite a leap from our struggle to understand and cope in the world? Again the pastor has something to draw upon from faith's own store: the world itself is created by God, and so it can best be comprehended in God. So the Christian does not at all demean or diminish any human efforts to create and understand. Rather the Christian "comprehends" them; in faith a perspective is made available which interprets the experience of the world's givenness, its directedness, its momentousness. Moreover, the faith recognizes that this connecting cuts both ways, so that the God of faith is put at risk as surely as efficacy for the care or destruction of the world is put in the hands of creatures.

Thus again the pastor will find questions coming. A "can't win" situation seems to be developing. If talk of God is to connect with this world, it would seem to make sense to look here for signs of something "more" or "other." But if we do that, how can we avoid looking at what Robert Scharlemann looks at:

> No single series of occurrences in the twentieth century has so demanded a second language besides that of human agents, intentions, and actions as has the Holocaust. What happened cannot be adequately told by a narrative whose subjects are human beings, political forces, and national entities. Something 'supranormal' occurred. But it is not clear what that second language can be. Some authors (Richard Rubenstein, for example) think that it calls for the negation of theological language: that is to say, it does call for saying something about God but what it calls for is that God was not there and perhaps is not at all.[9]

If the pastor scrambles back to some kind of "free will defense," what is left of the appeal to God, after all? Again we ask: Can a God "excused" from the *tremendum* still save?[10]

The pastor is not done speaking. But the sheer gravity of the problem will force faith's further word to be eschatological. The problem the Christian faith addresses is finally ontological. "Self" and "world" struggle together in the third that is "history," but to what issue does that come? Necessity and possibility are together in the third that is human freedom, but how can my freedom be transcended without being abrogated? In speaking to this ontological problem the pastor will speak of an historical particular, one Jesus of Nazareth. But to speak of that one will be to speak of God, decisively and uniquely. The pastor struggles to bear witness to the fact that in this one the very life of God and the destiny of all that which is not God are brought together in a decisive resolution. In thus facing the human problem in its most fundamental form one has not left the faith behind. And one has not left the human behind, for that which lies beyond me is for me and so gathers up what has come to be through me. In God's judgment human freedom is fulfilled. Furthermore, faith is at pains to

[9]Robert P. Scharlemann, *The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 122.

[10]See Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum* (New York: Crossroads, 1981) on the filament of God going out.

show that this eschatological resolution doubles back to affect the life of the Christian now. So "Ethics" and "Eschatology" are together in life and not merely in the theological dictionary. Faith wants to speak about all of this. Unfaith's questions and concerns require no less.

IV. CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Is that it? Do these few pages amount to "taking atheism seriously"? How can they? There is here no decisive resolution. These pages are entirely too sketchy. Yes. These pages are that because they purport to contain a sketch for a conversation which is critically important for church and world. To conclude this article is, I can only hope, to continue this conversation with the help which may be had in a sketch of the territory to be covered.

To admit that we are not done is only honest. Our situation today is such that apologetics cannot write a happy ending to this conversation. Faith and unfaith are far too fundamental realities in the world—and within us—for the conversation to end. Already in 1967 Dorothee Soelle could speak of the coexistence of two realities, the experience of the death of God and the experience of faith in Christ' s resurrection. That co-existence was—and is—such that the attempt to force a choice between the two must be resisted:

> To try to compel a choice between them—on grounds of so-called logic, traditional orthodoxy, church theology—is to do positivism's work for it and to hand over those who have this twofold experience to the self-assured smugness of people who simply *know* that there is no God and that Christ is dead; or, worse still, to those who are equally sure that God exists and that Christ is therefore alive. But Christ is not a replacement for the dead God. He is the representative of the living God....[11]

Perhaps this is why the traditional field of apologetics today seems divided between those who claim too much and those who claim too little for Christian faith.[12] In the one case the apologetic effort proceeds as monologue, missing the other alongside and inside the Christian self. The common ground of the human becomes the burnt-over region of the invaded. And yet, as against the other case, the Christian apologist needs to recognize that what is held in common may not be what is prized in particular. It will not do to fail to take atheism seriously, or to fail to take Christian faith seriously.

What is needed is the conversation.[13] This does not surprise the Christian, for the faith itself recognizes that God seeks to enter into relationship with the human. As the human develops and diversifies, the relationship will take dif-

[11]Dorothee Soelle, *Christ the Representative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 134. (Italics hers.) The appeal that Soelle still had available ("God's identity is still to come") seems less available today.

[12]I have discussed several apologetic styles in " Apologetics of the Center," *dialog* 21 (1982) 180-84.

[13]Consider Richard Rorty's comment in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979) 376-77: "...to look for commensuration rather than simply continued conversation—to look for a way of making further redescription unnecessary by finding a way of reducing all *possible* descriptions to one—is to attempt to escape from humanity." (Italics his.)

ferent forms. Thus the Christian expects and welcomes the continuing conversation. There will be enough to talk about to keep us well occupied. For example, in this article I have not mentioned even in sketch form the significant questions raised for Christian faith by developments in the study of the (other) religions and in the feminist movement. We will not lack content for the conversation.

The conversation is not done, but it is begun. The conversation will continue in ever so many particulars of parish life. How will it end? Perhaps we do not know. Perhaps we *cannot* know. If we are genuinely committed to the conversation, three things are fundamental: (1) Each participant seeks to contribute. Belief, doubt, and unbelief—all—bear some witness here. (2) Each participant expects to learn. These others, with whom I disagree and to whom I intend to contribute, have something to teach me. (3) Given these two, the outcome(s) cannot be predicted.

Out of this conversation something will come.

Rainer Maria Rilke has described our condition well:

I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years.
And I still don't know if I am a falcon
or a storm, or a great song.[14]

Perhaps, as the conversation continues, we can at least hum a little.

[14]Rainer Maria Rilke from *Book for the Hours of Prayer,* 1899, as cited by Robert Bly in *News of the Universe* (San Francisco: Sierra, 1980) 76.