

Unbelief from Historical Perspective

("Kairos")

by Rev. Gudina Tumsa

Introductory Note: This paper was presented by Gudina Tumsa to the 9th General Assembly of the ECMY which met April 21-28, 1976, in Nedjo. On one mimeographed copy of this paper - on a copy which Gudina himself had obviously had in hand - there subsequently was written in his own handwriting the additional (or alternate?) title, "Kairos" (a Greek word meaning a decisive time, a pregnant time, a time for decision). This paper of Gudina's, in which he points out how ancient "Unbelief" is and takes issue with modern materialism and atheism, should be seen together with the paper on "The Church and Ideologies" presented to the same General Assembly, from a Marxist point of view, by his brother, Baro Tumsa (see Document 4, below). (PEH)

Unbelief - the lack of faith in God or the denial of his existence - is spreading in Ethiopia today: among the youth, among the educated, among those in political power, but also among the common people. Where does such unbelief come from? How should we Christians respond to the spread of unbelief?

I. The Nature and History of Unbelief

1. The first thing that we should note is that unbelief is not something new. It is as old as humankind. Two of the psalms of our Old Testament begin with the statement: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1 and 53:1). The psalmist, though he calls such persons "fools", admits that such men and women existed then, and they exist today. Sometimes unbelief takes the form of denial of God's existence. At other times it takes the form of questioning the truth or wisdom of God's word, as when Eve accepted the Serpent's question concerning the truth or wisdom of

what God had forbidden (Genesis 3:1-6). Sometimes it takes the form of trying to cover up one's misdeeds and denying one's responsibility for them, as when Cain tried to escape responsibility before God for murdering his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8-9), or when people hide their deeds and say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" (Isaiah 29:15). Sometimes it simply takes the form of denying in one's heart or in one's actions what one confesses with one's lips (Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6; Matthew 15:8). Unbelief thus takes many forms. At different times and in different circumstances the characteristics of unbelief change. It was when the "fortunes of Israel" seemed lost and would never be restored that unbelief was spreading in Israel in the psalmist's days (see Psalm 14:7; 53:6), much as, when misfortune strikes today, an individual begins to question the existence, power or goodness of God. Unbelief thus has always been known throughout our human history. Its source is the human heart.

2. However, intellectual argument, intellectual considerations are put forward which strengthen the unbelief which arises in the heart. Historically the source for these intellectual arguments and considerations is to be found in Ancient Greece. The religion of the ancient Greeks contained a multitude of gods. None of these gods created the world: they were part of the world, they had lusts and feelings, they were arbitrary in their actions, and in this they were very much like ordinary men and women. Except that they had immortality, men and women did not. About 600 B.C. there arose in Greece a remarkable intellectual movement which began to inquire into the nature of the world, the nature of things. In this intellectual movement were born what we today call philosophy (a Greek word meaning "the love of wisdom") and science a Latin word meaning "knowledge"). At first philosophy turned its attention to the world, in order to find explanations for things in the world, and a surprising amount of accurate observations and solid information was gathered about the world and its nature, which resulted in the growth of science. Soon, however, the philosophers began to turn their

attention to the Greek gods, and philosophers became increasingly sceptical about what the Greek myths told about the gods and their behaviour. Yet, as a whole, philosophy was not irreligious. Most of the Greek philosophers, though they might discount the gods, believed that behind the world and men and women were principles or elements which were "divine" or "godlike".

3. But there was a strand in Greek philosophy which abandoned such thinking altogether, in favour of what we call "materialism": belief that "matter" is the only and final reality. It is usually Democritus (born 460 B.C.) who is thought to have put forth the first theory to explain the world and human beings solely in terms of "matter". He was the first to propose that everything in the world and in human beings has its explanation in "atoms", tiny units of "matter" in motion that cannot be cut down further (from Greek atomē = "unable to be split further"). These "atoms" are in helter-skelter motion in a void. Gods may exist in some other world, but not in this. Two followers of Democritus, Epicurus (born 342 B.C.) and Lucretius (died about 58 B.C.), draw the consequences of their view. Epicurus set the pursuit of human happiness as the goal of life. Virtue consists in avoiding pain and in seeking pleasure. Lucretius, in a masterpiece of Latin poetry, "On the Nature of Things", is openly anti-religious, feeling that belief in what lies beyond this life, or interference of gods in this world, undermines the pursuit of happiness. The Bible knows of a popular Epicureanism which, as in the parable of the Rich Fool, describes the aim of life as "Eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19).

4. The main body of Greek philosophical thought decided, on the other hand, that, whatever one thought about the gods, one could identify some principle or element in the world and/or in humankind, be it "soul" or spirit, as divine. Plato (died 347 B.C.), in particular, is responsible for this side of Greek thinking, which saw in "matter" and "soul" or "spirit" opposing principles, without attempting to explain how "matter" came to exist. It was Plato's pupil, Aristotle

(died 322 B.C.), himself a student of natural science as well as of philosophy, who tried to do justice to both strands of the tradition. While maintaining that the divine (God in the singular, not the gods in the plural) was the Prime Mover or First Cause to put everything into motion. The world as it existed was capable of being studied and explained without reference to action or activity of the gods.

5. The Greek philosophical tradition posed a problem for Christian theology as the Christian Church evangelized the Greco-Roman world. The materialist tradition was easily rejected. But Plato and Aristotle could not be rejected out of hand. Plato had taught the immortality of the soul. And Aristotle was understood to have come close to the doctrine of creation with his teaching about the Prime Mover and First Cause. Was not Aristotle, in particular, proof that human beings had a natural knowledge of God, and that one could prove by human reason that the God revealed in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures actually existed? It was with such reasoning that the Greek philosophical tradition and the Greek impetus to the study of the natural sciences were maintained in Christian Europe.

6. But the problem of relative authority persisted between revelation and natural revelation and natural knowledge, faith and reason. While with the help of Aristotle the chief theology of the Catholic Church maintained that faith and reason were complementary, revelation and faith simply supplying what natural knowledge and reason could not achieve, there grew up in the Late Middle Ages the philosophical teaching of the Nominalists that "universals" like "man" "nature" etc. do not "exist", they are simply human names for particular, individual things. The Nominalists give up any attempt to "prove" the existence of God. They taught that reason cannot prove the main teachings of Christianity, including the existence of God and creation of the world by Him, but that these must be believed on the authority of the Bible and the Church. Reason and natural knowledge, which largely up to then were seen as supporting the

Christian teachings, were now understood as ending up in scepticism or agnosticism.

7. It was in the time of Nominalism that the Renaissance brought a new interest in Ancient Greece - and a new scepticism and agnosticism into European culture. The Renaissance also brought with it a new impetus to the study of natural science: the world, the planets, the universe. In 17th Century Europe, noting the regularity with which the earth and the planets moved around the sun, and being convinced that the whole universe moved by inherent natural laws, a group of thinkers who are called "Deists" borrowed from Aristotle's teaching about the Prime Mover and First Cause to claim that while God created the world and set it in motion, the world was like a watch and God like a watchmaker. God could not interfere in the orderly running of the world without bringing the whole thing to a stop. With this view the world was understood as a sphere in which God is not, in fact cannot be, active. The universe is a closed system in which nothing new can or does happen. It is this understanding of the world and of natural science which lies behind much of the unbelief at present spreading in Ethiopia.

8. Contributing to present understandings about man and God and the world among educated Ethiopian youth today are the teachings of the German Idealist philosophers of the early 19th century. The concern of Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) was to maintain the truth of both the natural sciences and the truth of such ideas as God, freedom, immortality. Kant basically accepted the Deist understanding of the world as a closed system, and came to the conclusion that God, freedom and immortality cannot be proved by observation or experiment, the methods of the natural sciences. He tried to show, however, that these concepts were inherent in the structure of the human mind. The human mind cannot prove that it is free, for instance, but it knows itself to be free. Furthermore, God, freedom, immortality are essential assumptions for "practical reason", reason at it deals with ethics and religion.

9. Out of this teaching arose the teaching of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). A former student of theology, Feuerbach came to the conclusion, on the basis of reading Kant, that the idea of God is a creation of man. "God is not the Creator of man; man is the creator of God". He believed that man makes God in his own image, not the other way around!

10. The thought of Feuerbach profoundly influenced the thinking of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), the founders of what is called "Scientific Socialism". These men were followers of Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) who had taught that Spirit was the origin and end of all things. Marx simply reversed the philosophy of this German Idealist. He and Engels adopted as the basis for their philosophy or ideology the materialist worldview of Democritus and Lucretius, that all things are to be explained in terms of matter. They built upon Feuerbach's views; not only is God the creation of the human mind, the human mind or consciousness is itself a product of matter. This has led to a philosophical and practical denial of human freedom and a denial that freedom belongs in any inherent way to human nature or human dignity. Man and his history are purely to be explained on the basis of economic causes, economic forces. Marxist ideology, arising as it did in the 19th century, also accepted the basically Deist [opinion that the world is a closed system]* Engels eagerly accepted the teachings of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) who put forth the theory of evolution. Neither in the philosophy of Marxism, nor in the popular worldview called Darwinism, is there any place for God as an active creative agent in human affairs or in the world.

11. Mention of Marx and Darwin, a German and an Englishman, shows that unbelief is not restricted to one nation or culture. Atheism - the philosophical denial of the existence of God - is not just a constitutive element of Marxism, or of Socialism as understood in the Eastern countries, it is constitutive of much

* Reconstituted text from the Amharic translation

modern philosophy also in the West, and of much popular thinking also in capitalist societies. Unbelief does not confine itself to one social or political system.

II. Our Christian Response

1. Our Christian response to expressions of unbelief and attempts to spread unbelief cannot be one of repression. If we Christians wish that our right to believe and to see belief spread should be respected, we should equally wish that the rights of those who do not or cannot believe should be respected. To repress those who hold other views is no way of convincing them. We must vigorously exercise, however, our own right to believe and to propagate our faith. To such as have no hope and are without God in the world (Eph. 2:12) we are bound to give witness, but not in a proud or overbearing manner: "Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15).

2. Our response to unbelief should be based on a clear and full testimony to the nature of God, the world and man from the Biblical perspective. It is God who created the world, the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, not like Aristotle's "Prime Mover" or "First Cause" who simply puts all things in motion, or like the Deists' "Watchmaker" who after starting the watch cannot interfere in the working. Jesus said, "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17). The creative power of God is still at work in this world. God is busy and active in this world, creating ever new. And Jesus, the Son of God, came with this same creative power. The one who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, is the one who still promises, "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5-6). This creative power of God extends also into the affairs of men. God is not far off (Acts 17:27), but in His providence He is constantly bringing good out of evil. The God to whom both Jews and Christians witness is the God who in the midst of the nations has called into being a people peculiar to Him

(Deuteronomy 14:2; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9; Psalm 135:4), who leads His people out of bondage, who uses even the rulers of the world who do not know Him to do his bidding (Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Jeremiah 25:8; and Cyrus the Persian, Isaiah 45). This God is "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, He burns the chariots with fire!" (Psalm 46:1.9). He is the God whose "mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever" (Luke 1:50-55).

3. The Biblical view of God demands an open understanding of the world and of man. The world is neither an arbitrary collection of atoms in a void, nor a closed system. Man is not just matter. He does not just have consciousness, awareness. He has been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). And human beings have freedom, creativity, honour, dignity, deriving from that image of God. To have a closed understanding of the world and a materialist understanding of man is to deny essential elements of science and human nature. No truly scientific worldview can be closed, or dogmatically rule out the possibility of essential new occurrences taking place.

4. The truly effective testimony against unbelief is a life lived by faith. Unbelief does not accept the possibility of the sick being healed; faith does (Mark 9:22-24). Unbelief scoffs at resurrection (Matthew 22:23-29; Acts 17:32); faith sets its whole hope on resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). Unbelief scoffs at the providence or presence of God to save (Matt. 27: 43); faith, even in death, places one's spirit in God's hands (Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59). Faith is not

holding the form of religion but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:5). Faith puts one's trust in the presence and power of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in all the activities and circumstances of life: in preaching and teaching, farming and business, conferences and administration; in joys and sorrows, honour and dishonour, praise and persecution. Faith puts its trust in Him who fed the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). That is the faith which trusts in Him who “supplies seed to the sower and bread for food” and who therefore blesses also what we share with others, in full confidence that He will also multiply resources and increase the harvest of righteousness and justice (1 Corinthians 9:6-11, esp. vs. 10). The important thing is to turn to Him with all one's cares, concerns and problems. It is then that we experience the reality of God, and in turn can speak and witness to him in defiance of all expressions of unbelief. Then can we say with Isaiah, the prophet:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. Morning by morning He wakens my ears to hear as those who are taught... For the Lord helps me: therefore I have not been confounded: therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; He who vindicates me is near (Isaiah 50:4.7).

It is such faith that receives miracles and that removes mountains, yes even mountains of unbelief (Mark 9: 14-29; cf. Matthew 17:14-21).

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Source: ECMY 9th GA, 1976, Minutes GA-9-44-76 Doc.1



In the front: Baro Tumsa In the background, at the Presiding Table, (l. to r.) Dr. Emmanuel Gebre Sellasie and H.E. Emmanuel Abraham. At Nadjö 9th General Assembly (1976)