

# *Atheism and the University*

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THE biggest trouble with talking is that we have to use words. And the trouble with words is that some of them, which we consider important, and use frequently, may mean very little to us personally, and may communicate even less to the persons we are talking to, and what is worse this situation may exist without either the talker or the hearers knowing it. Perhaps I can make this point with a simple little illustration. A small child tells his mother that in Sunday School that morning the teacher taught them a song about a bear. The bear was cross-eyed. His name was Gladly. "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear." We are threatened, I think, with an equal amount of misunderstanding in addressing ourselves to the subjected assigned for consideration at this meeting. We are to consider "Atheism and the University," and in this we are faced with a battery of words which we all know and use, but which at this moment probably none of us knows and uses in the same way, and many of us know and use with considerable vagueness.

I shall not assume any responsibility for solving the term university. What a university is I shall permit you to continue defining or mis-defining in your own way. When I use this word today, I shall simply mean the people (the community of teachers, researchers, students, administrators) living here and working at whatever it is we do at Kansas State. What I want to do, is make some sense out of the cluster of words which are involved in and related to the term atheism.

That this word atheism is not simple and precise, at least as I see it, I will try to illustrate by using it in two sentences

which I can and do make, which are on the face of it contradictory, but which I do not see as contradictions when placed in a proper context of understanding. To the question, "Are there any (do you know any) atheists at Kansas State University?" I could answer first, that I do not know of any atheists here, and rather doubt that there are any; and I could answer second, that almost every one here is an atheist. When I say that there are no atheists here, I am saying that, although I know some who call themselves atheists, and think they are atheists, I have met very few, if any, who know enough about the matter to deny what must be denied to be "genuine" atheists. On the other hand, when I say that almost everyone here is an atheist, I simply mean that everyone here has probably sufficiently denied the reality of somebody's god to be regarded at least by that somebody as an atheist.

The key term to be considered is not atheism, but God. Only if we understand what the word God stands for, can we properly understand what to deny God stands for. Let us get the word God straightened out in our thinking, and then maybe we can get the word atheism straightened out. God—or some equivalent term—is a word which men use to refer to what they believe causes or has caused things to be, and has caused or causes things to be the way they are, especially as these things relate vitally to the physical, moral, spiritual welfare of men. I make this simple definition simply because, so far as I can tell, it is what men (primitive and modern, East and West) mean when they talk about God, or the gods, or spirit, or mana, or manitu, or what-have-you. They are talking about, at least what they believe to be, ultimately real, and really involved and valuable

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in the processes of their lives and destinies.

Now, the question of whether God is real or just believed to be real is, of course, a question of great interest. And one of my students once put it to me very directly and succinctly. He asked me if I believed that God made man, or man made God; and I said, "yes." The student seemed unimpressed by my answer, and lest he consider that the abyss between professor and student is not only one of indifference, but also one of stupidity, I tried to explain my laconic answer somewhat as follows: First, it is an apparent fact, corroborated by science, that once there were no men in the world, but now there are men. This must mean that there was once a Being or a Process (a creative power) which created, or caused men to become. Whether this was accomplished by divine fiat or out of evolution does not really alter the fact that man was a "created" creature. There was, therefore, a God-who-created-man reality someplace in the world. *Ipso facto* — God created man. But, second, once created (or sometime after arriving here) man, being a creature of reason and imagination with a passion for words, turned back upon the Being or Process which created him, to define, if he could the nature of The Creator. In doing this man created (and yet creates) concepts of what God was and/or is like. Man attributes God; he defines God; he names God. He gives God various kinds of qualities: goodness, power, intelligence, personality, life, concern, etc. And this God-talk, these ideas about God, then become important dimensions and limitations that condition the life of the human creator of the God-Description or God-Concept, which the individual accepts as his own and true. In this sense, at least, man creates God. The answer continues to be, "Yes."

But the answer has now, I think, prepared the ground for some essential insights and analyses which bear directly upon what the term God stands for, and

therefore, what a denial of God also stands for. In saying that man creates God and God creates man we are saying, first, that the word God has at least two distinctive kinds of meaning. First, in its most abstract meaning (which I entitle the Quintessential Meaning), the term refers to whatever it is that is the source of existent things, and the over-arching power which directs their destinies. In Greek literature, for example, we are told that behind the gods there is a power which both caused the gods to be; and which finally determines the destinies of both gods and men. The Greeks called it Fate. In some forms of Hinduism it is held that everything in the natural world and in the supernatural world is simply a manifestation of the ultimate and therefore the only final reality which is called Brahman. Even primitive people (who do not necessarily live in an orderly universe, as they see it) seem to recognize that behind the mana and spirits and magic which govern and sustain and sometimes devastate their lives there is something holy or sacred. The Alogonquin Indians of North America called it Manitu. Among the Christians, there has always been a half-articulated recognition that behind articulated Christian God, there was the unknown God, the unspeakable God, the God about which only negations should be uttered. And, of course, Paul Tillich has made this Divine Prius a major dimension in his Christian Theology. Tillich seems to have been extremely concerned to make my Quintessential Meaning of God, which he called The God Behind God, a major part of Christian sensitivity. His terms for this level of the God concept are Being itself, or the Ground of Being, or the Power of Being.

Now, to deny God in this dimension, on this level, is to be a genuine atheist; an atheist worthy of the name; an atheist who recognizes, as Jean Paul Sartre, that there is no meaning or value any place in this universe, except the little, nauseous amount of meaning and value

that man tries to create for himself. In this kind of atheism one might include Friedrich Nietzsche, and his noble dream of man himself becoming God. Bertrand Russell belongs here. But Karl Marx was not an atheist of this genuine variety. He believed in the inevitable, meaningful, redemptive, perfecting process of history. He called it Dialectical Materialism, but that was just his rebelling way of saying that at the heart of things there is a power that causes man to be, and causes him to be what he is, and will eventually cause him to be worthy of the Kingdom of Man.

But how can anybody say that Karl Marx wasn't an atheist, except by splitting hairs as we are doing here, or reading the term into an abstraction that nobody ever uses. After all, isn't an atheist a man who denies the existence of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then perhaps calls religion an opiate of the people, to boot. And I must say, "All right, if that is what you mean by atheist, then call Marx an atheist, and anybody else who denies some particularization of God which you or somebody else happens to hold. But then, of course, you yourself become an atheist from somebody's point of view."

This particular level of the God idea I call the Particularized Meaning of God. It is not the question of, "Is God?" but the question of "What is God like?" I think it is quite proper and quite necessary for men to particularize their gods. This is especially true for religious purposes. There are, indeed, some Brahmins who can simply meditate upon Nirguna Brahman, which means God undescribed, God without attributes. And I think all mystics do this. And many of us in our better moments of high worship do it. But by and large, and generally, we seem to need a God who is somewhere, and somewhat. We need a God with attributes—a God of love, a God of wisdom, a God of concern, a God of intelligence, a God we can speak to, and relate to as person to

person. And in all this, I personally think there is nothing wrong, and much that is right and valuable, provided we remember that it is man who is creating this particular God, and it may be somewhat impious then to call atheist anyone who doesn't agree with the definition given, and equally improper for us to call ourselves atheists for the same reason.

An ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes once said that if a lion had a God it would surely look like a great big lion. We are not lions, so, of course, God doesn't look like a big lion to us. But more often than not, I suspect, he looks like a big man. And this is all right. I would certainly prefer to worship God in the image of a big man than in the image of a big lion.

The theology which conceives of God in personal terms is, I think unfortunately, called Theism. This greatly confuses the question of atheism, for it would seem to follow that one who denies the existence of a personal God is therefore an a-theist, such a person, however, may be, and usually is not an atheist but simply an a-personalist, a non-personalist. Marx was a non-personalist. Hinduism (in its Brahmin dimension) is non-personalist. Scientists very often — especially those who hold to a meaningful, evolutionary order in the universe — are non-personalists. I myself, much of the time, am a non-personalist. But none of us is, therefore, necessarily a genuine atheist. I personally haven't got guts enough to be a genuine atheist — a real one — even if I had reason, for genuine atheism, truly understood, is the most frightening idea that any man can have. It literally means that man is nothing but a tiny, momentary, accident, in an almost infinite expanse of utter indifference.

Now, how about atheism and this University? As far as genuine atheism is concerned — i.e., the serious and conscious denial of any kind of meaningful purpose in the universe, except the selfish and trivial purposes and values

that man creates for himself, there is little, if any atheism on this campus, or any other campus. But as far as pseudo-atheism is concerned (non-personalism

on the one hand, or calling atheist any who deny a particular notion we have about what God is like), there is an abundance of it here.

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