

## Book Review

Fabio Calzolari<sup>1</sup>

**Book Title in English:** The Drama of Atheist Humanism

**Original Title in French:** Le drame de l'humanisme athée

**Author:** Henri-Marie Joseph Sonier de Lubac

**Translator:** Mark Sebanc

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**Language:** English

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### Introduction

Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) was a Catholic theologian but his opera should be read by any scholar of religions, anthropology or philosophy. It offers a significant insight of Western (European) culture. He was a loved professor, an erudite, who suffered the tragedy of the Second World War and the conservative policy of the Vatican. In 1950, the Roman curia condemned (but late pardoned) the way he taught and understood the Gospels, viewed as too liberal, against Orthodoxy. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the

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<sup>1</sup> English instructor at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, Chiang Rai, Thailand,

Vatican promoted an anti-reactionary policy in order to fight heterodoxy, punishing any diversion from the official **δόξα** (doxa=official/righteous doctrine).

We have to remember that the Catholic ecclesia is a political and religious institution, with liberal and conservative intelligentsia, like parties in a government. I know that for someone who is not Catholic or simply unaware of European history, the fact that a religion is represented by a political apparatus could represent a novelty, a quite awkward one indeed. The Holy See is a state with recognized embassies and politics, it is a leading actor in shaping world culture. Lubac foresaw the failure of Christianity in fighting the contemporary global distress, an inadequacy caused by a policy perched on a medieval paradigm (mostly Greek Patristic), lacking the philosophical instruments to understand the complexities of modernity. This discrepancy has partially dethroned the importance of the religious establishment (that has found itself thriving in the new cultural context) as a policy maker. Many theologians agreed on the importance to renew the Catholic identity, to promote an ecumenical spin, in place of a nondenominational stance. In 2013, Theologian reformist Hans Kung found on the election of a non-European pope<sup>2</sup> (very rare event) a positive sign, a beginning of a new criterion. The Argentinian Jesuits Jorge Mario Bergoglio could be the keystone of a new Era. It is noticeable that he chose to be named Francis, a name that recalled the Italian saint Francis of Assisi, a pious man celebrated for his kindness. Apart from praising the new pontificate, Kung underlined the urgency to abandon the clerical absolutist

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<sup>2</sup> The Roman Pontiff, or Holy Father, is the leader of the Catholic Church

system, moving toward a more democratic structure. In 2014, during my stay in Brazil (I worked there for a Salesian community and a public university), I firsthand experienced, the great relief that pope Bergoglio brought worldwide. The Brazilian clergy was truly moved by his stand for social justice and empathy. There is a state of emergency in Brazil, due to its dramatic fall into recession and widespread violence. The crisis is partially a consequence of past neo-liberalist policies on population and environment.<sup>3</sup> In Brazil, the Catholic Church is actively helping underprivileged children, promoting free education and social reforms. It is honorable, to help to a population in distress but the Church itself, is in need of institutional changes. The autocracy of the ecclesiastical government works against the notion of a community of Faith, undermining the value of the Church itself. The petrine supremacy, declared in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and his moral and jurisdictional infallibility, need be re-discussed. The charism of infallibility did not exist in proto-Christian

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<sup>3</sup> The assumption that a (state) capitalist democracy is a winning paradigm everywhere it is a terrible mistake, as MIT professor Noam Chomsky and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman often underline. See:

*Chomsky: Selected Readings* (edited by J. P. B. Allen and Paul Van Buren), London: Oxford University Press, 1971

*On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures*, Boston: South End Press, New York: Black Rose Books, 1987

*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (with Edward Herman), New York: Pantheon Books, 1988

*Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997, updated 2002

communities (being accepted in 1870) and do create problems, given the legal inability or impairment to walk back from accepted stances without undermining the principle itself. The infallibility has value “*ex cathedra*”, and brings a **ἀνάθεμα** (anathema, curse) as part of its legal definition, hence whoever contradicts it will be expelled or punished. This obsolete jus (a clear echo of Medieval and anti-democratic intolerance) can hardly find a space in a system that, supposedly, promote equality. To fight secularism, the Holy See has to adjust its positions, getting closer to laity and work together with it. Catholicism is losing ground because it failed to give the right answers to a humanity in agony. Reformists do not want ontological changes to the core doctrine, they seek an epistemological turn, new *modus operandi*. The call to renewal has a tremendous importance, it is the only way to sustain modernity, if not the axial age of the Church of Rome is coming to an end. Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians hoped that they could find the love of God (Eph. 3:19), this is also what father Lubac augured us.

### **The Solitude of Men**

Inside “*The drama of Atheist Humanism*”, Henri de Lubac (author of “*Catholicism: Christ and Common Destiny of Man*”, 1938) attempts to construct the origin of contemporary Western atheism, a form of humanism that has moved beyond religions, seeing their existence as an aberration of rational, logical grounds. Lubac is known for his accurate analysis (exegesis) of the Holy Bible (rational approach to the Scriptures) and his sympathetic attitude towards people outside the ecclesiastic world. He was a philosopher who tried to re-create an intimate relationship between modern manhood and God. The aim of

this article is to convey in words the work of a man who upheld his credo in an epoch of incertitude, and devoted his life to help humanity. There is no need to develop a specific expertise to appreciate the importance of his discourse, it transcends Christian theology, embracing us all. In Lubac' investigation, mankind is alienated not only from God but from itself, suffering moral ailment. The downfall of religions in our contemporary era is a truism, there is a common tendency to see theist congregations as something of a decadent past, thankfully washed away by scientific enlighten. This aloofness, this lack of empathy for a trans-mundane sphere set the ground for modern secularism. The author highlights modern society as a disquieting experience, where individuals live solitary existences while struggling to determine their identities. Modern manhood seems to be encapsulated, alienated from everything that has no value on the pursuit of personal (petty) interests. In a civilization that moved inward, relations are fragmentary, people do not (inter)relate, failing to see persons or events as wholes, noting only what can be useful and remain unsympathetic to the rest. In this frigidity, lies our unrested misery. According to Lubac, this social affliction started when atheism took root inside national ideologies. Atheism is the culprit but what does it mean?

The original adjective was the Greek ἄθεος (ἄ- “without” and θεος “deity”) and it had an ambivalent meaning. A ἄθεος was someone who confuted the existence of deities or judged (by a community or peers) as disrespectful towards them. Successively, the adjective ἄσεβής (wicked or corrupted) was used to better define someone who lacks of respect. Noteworthy, the ἄ privative in ἄθεος framed a negative inflection, now lost in daily usage. Inside Greek philosophy, a righteous man could only be a believer

and lack of belief was understood as a sinful instance or, at least, a wronged one. Lubac recovers the pejorative notion of ἄθεος to describe a man who lost certitudes and faith, who suffers a postmodern vertigo. For the writer the truth (and consequential healing) can only be apprehend nowhere else but in God. The author set a historiographic work to uncover the origin of this new form of humanism, a philosophical impetus that questioned orthodox theological scholasticism and confuted the veracity and the security of the Gospels. He foresaw in the atheistic appraisal of the 19<sup>th</sup>, a prodromal status of the nihilist solitude of our century, where men anguish toward the uncertainty of the future. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the French philosopher and left activist Jean Paul Sartre would commemorate God only as a disruptive echo from the past. For Sartre, the Modern subjectivist and rational approach to reality, freed men from any supra-personal and non-naturalistic grounds. A philosophical exclusion of God that leaves men forlon, but in cleaning the encroaching power of an institution that postulates submission, it enhances (individual) freedom. Modernism did not aim to plunge humanity into despair, but to make people realize that salvation (if possible) come only from within. Modernism created Jean Paul Sartre but his philosophy (kwon as Existentialism) later evolved in a different way.

He conceived a god-less individual whose conscience determines the limit of his freedom. This liberty of action was only restricted by the presence of other men. In Sartre, individuals are polarized entities that face otherness only as a potential threat. In this Humanism, relationships are made impossible by suspiciousness. Existentialism moved out from logic and rationality. Sartre uses words that evoke frames of minds, unsolvable spiritual conflicts and feelings because only their plasticity, their fluidity avoid the coagulation of thoughts

created by conceptualism. Sartre saw in rationality an infecund ground, unable to embrace the complexities of our identities. It is a philosophy that exasperate the precariousness and friability of human life. Modernism found in logic a way to defeat God, Sartre de-construct logic and moved to a Post-Modernism where the solitude of our paradoxical existence cannot be comforted by rationality. Sartre developed an ontological study of life based on a phenomenological methodology. For him, life it is what appears to our yes, there are no hidden secrets, no abstractions. Soul and persona are coincidental. The French philosopher was part of a philosophical vanguard that understood freedom as an unstoppable creative (or disruptive) force, transcending cognition. Subjects become artists of their lives and being the only legislators of their needs, they are also the only culprits of their failures, a terrific political *selbstständigkeit* (independence). This uneasiness, this heaviness nails us on our hypocrisies. Like children, we want to do mischiefs without responsibility. Sartre saw God as futile for self-knowledge (being men the only legislators of their lives) and being orphaned of an unwelcome father was considered better than being held by love for an old shadow. Was it? Henri de Lubac confronts the problem between laity and religion, focusing on three main topics: a historical approach to the notion of atheism, an analyses on Dostoevsky, and a final part with a plea for a reformed theocentric humanism. The chapter on atheism is centered on the philosophical doctrine of Positivism, the Marxist humanism and the revolutionary Nietzsche who rebuked any transcendental source of human morality. Comte, founder of Positivism (and modern sociology) grew up amidst the French Revolution. He greatly contested religion in general and Christianity in particular, as obstacles for the (social) making of autonomous individuals.

While finding religions inappropriate, Comte also bitterly criticized the ineptitude of social movements to senate the social and intellectual disorder originated after the Revolution. It is with melancholy, that he remembered the unity of Medieval Christendom, looking at Paris where streets were bathed in blood. Republican ideas (not antithetical democratic ones) were (for the moment) only a substitute utopia to the old religious values. Even though the clash of battle was still audible, Comte found in humanity a positive force and in science a way to better it. In his social epistemology (ἐπιστήμη=knowledge) he accused religions of being a set of discourses and practices that rule subjects. He condemned the bound of obedience/subservience, *locus fidelium* of any Christian pastoral, where salvation becomes extra-personal, where individuals piously abandons the sovereignty of their souls, asking to be led towards redemption (a hand-carried one). The guiding role of the old priesthood, had to be conquered. Comte postulated a religion of humanity (*Religion de l'Humanité*), an epistemic community, built on the solid ground of science. He believed that with the establishment of a positive science (and subsequently unification of all other branches of human knowledge) manhood would be able to benefit again from a truly organic system. This paradigmatic shift was centered on the possibility for humanity to decipher and master all social and natural laws, framing a new society. A great joust under a new discovered positivism. The (atheistic) religion of humanity and its charity based approach tried to replace the (theistic) Christian agape, in filling the spiritual emptiness of the men in revolt. In 1970, Michel Foucault noted that tyranny secretly inhabits the revolutions, hiding behind the blind enthusiasm of the masses. For him, there was something morbid in the lust for violence sprung out from the French

revolution. A phenomenon that eviscerated the movement of its ethic (democratic values) and philosophical ground. For Foucault, democracies and republics<sup>4</sup> cannot rise from (armed) revolutions, only tyrannies do that. The anger towards a despotic and absolutist government is truly understandable but suffering cannot pardon a massacre, a political upheaval failed when it happens. The modern era was unfolded.

Whereas Comte recognized a partial positive role for Christianity and theistic religions, Feuerbach took a different and more radicalized approach. To the extent that he reconsidered God only as an *imago mentis*, an illusion created by men. For Feuerbach (who studied theology) philosophy should help men recognizing the different ensembles of God' anthropomorphic attributes (benevolence, justice...) and conveyed them (again) inside the notion of humanity. Feuerbach described a theist as someone who emancipated himself, going beyond religious predicaments, someone who finds superfluous even the concept of deity. With the publication of his *magnus opus* "*The Essence of Christianity*" (Das Wesen des Christenthums) in 1841, he was greatly celebrated among his peers. Feuerbach's philosophical framework was a derivation of Hegel's speculative theology with some structural variabilities. Inside Marx' opera, God suffers an ontological change, becoming the essence of human cognition. For Feuerbach, it meant only that while men alienated themselves within a classic theological spectrum, inside the Marxist

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<sup>4</sup> A Democracy is not a Republic. Within a democratic framework the majority rules over minorities. Inside a Republic that would not be tolerated, a Republic safeguard IN PRIMIS individual rights and minorities are protected

philosophical apparatus (Marxism), the void is open again, for a fall into pure (unattainable) rationality. Feuerbach strongly contested Marx on this point, accusing him to have made the same mistakes of Classical Theology, considering menial and humane reality only as negative momentum (antithesis of manhood) of a higher transcendental truth. Philosophy must start with the concrete and quality of humanity itself. This new laity anthropology is a theology collapsed into humanism, where spirit and flesh are united and not divested. According To Marx, religions are a specific historical (discursive) product, a sub-specie technique, used by societies to blindfold individuals, they are a cloaked expression of economic injustice. Religions are de facto symptoms (not cause) of a corrupted social system. The top down scheme inbuilt inside Christendom is only a reflex of a widespread social unfairness, where people are exploited. To achieve happiness men should abandon religions and promote popular movements to demolish economic inequalities. Marx moved critics to Feuerbach' materialism, in his view the French philosopher failed to understand that men are social beings, constructed and designed by the very societies they live in. Religions must be understood (only) within the framework of social gnosis, due to a strict dependency between secular practices and devotional ones. In failing to understand the intimate correspondence, Feuerbach dwarfed the utility of his study. Lubac strongly rejected the Marxist deceptive notion of religion, for him the supernatural is a not a blindfolding element but an opening to a new dimension, where every dualism or conflict is solved. It is with an uplifting certitude that he underlines the belief that God does not negate humanity. After having discuss the ideological bedrock of Marxism, Lubac introduced one of the mightiest and fierce adversaries of

Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche. It is important to remember here that atheists understood God as a *specula mentis*, a product of our cognition but for Lubac that was a hideous mistake. Within a Catholic theological scheme, God is an integral part of our essence and not a mirrored artefact. In hurting God, atheism hurt humanity. The Modern man is like a wanderer who, after having walked for long time on the surface of a frozen river found his path broken, destroyed by an unexpected thaw. His convictions and ideologies are like the fragments of the old pack, carried away by the fury of water, leaving the old pilgrim bewildered.

Inside the nihilistic pedagogy of Fredrick Nietzsche, to a murderous humanity who killed God (meant as a summa of Christian ethic) is offered a new moral path to wipe off the blood stained on its guilty hands. In 1894, The Russian psychologist Lou Andreas Salome' described Nietzsche not only as a prophet of the death of God but also as a seer of a humanity without future, sickened by crimes who cannot atone. Nihilism does not start with Nietzsche; its origin can be traced back to French revolution, to the marquees de Sad. His nihilism was a metaphysical consequence to the rational philosophy of materialism. His dissolute works focused on sexual and moral perversity deconsecrated religions and mocked rationalism. In Nietzsche, depravity is absent but there is a strong call to anarchism. Inside "*The Drama of Atheist Humanism*", Nietzsche is compared to Dostoevsky (whose works Nietzsche knew and read) as a brother but also as an enemy. The Russian writer penetrated the solitary universe of Nietzsche, living strong (at first) empathic impressions that slowly mutated into repulsion. Dostoyevsky faced himself the alluring philosophical appeal of a choice between an atheist *man-god* (the

Übermensch, Above-Human) and the *God-man* of Christian revelation but chose the latter, envisioning the moral danger of the first. Nietzsche found nihilism inside Christianity and rational philosophy, with his prose he aimed to unchain men, to free their shoulders from the sacred and its authority. In killing God, he wanted to strip off morality of any metaphysical attributed, to make it carnal. Nietzsche did not promote nihilism, he was afraid that with the ending of religions and the absence of a valid moral alternative, humanity would fall into chaos. He wanted to create an independent individual, someone moved by inner force. French writer Albert Camus concurred with Nietzsche on it, especially on the need to emancipate humanity. Unlike Nietzsche, Dostoevsky do not condemn religions (or their *missio Dei*) but accused (with a subversive tone) society to have misled humanity, to have forgotten the obscure irrational vacuity of human soul, to have caged and suffocated the emotional part of our essence. A nothingness (not an emptiness) where our being has origin. Dostoevsky searches a new (emotional) ethos, not a dryland where brutal reasoning control everything, he aims to a fertile ground, where hope can blossom. The Russian writer found the solution in a more spiritual approach to the *imago Dei*. He does not promote bigotry or lukewarm devotion, but true spirituality. There is something scary in Dostoevsky' narrative, the idea that happiness can only be achieved through suffering. An ordeal that tests and forges people. The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig in portraying him, wrote that for Dostoevsky, life is beautiful but only tribulations give it a meaning, substance.

Zweig with rare poignancy describes the Russian author as a man who knew the abyssal dismal of life, who found God by dint of torments and understood that any individual who faces perdition can change it into salvation.

All his characters are tragic heroes, and their dissolute passions mirror a spiritual insanity. Inside Dostoevsky' words, those afflicted spirits yell at us. A gloomy sense of moral oppression, the absence of the sky, the screams of afflicted people, the deep introspection, the powerful emotions. These are the symptoms of a life spent in a metaphorical underground (подполья=underground or underworld), far from the light. Dostoevsky tells us that the underworld is a deformed reality, a croaked one. It is a parody of life, where people do not live but only survive. Condemned to exist like shadows, they cursed everything. It is the place where modern nihilism manifests itself negating both spirituality and carnality. Dostoevsky condemned the naivety of Marx and his theory that Western alienation can be cured by a social revolution. For Dostoevsky only a spiritual catharsis can heal desperation, only a true awakening.

Lubac saw in the Russian writer and his ardor for a spiritual Risorgimento, a prophet of a new form of humanity, a tragic and apocalyptic martyr thirsty for God. Dostoevsky can represent for humanity what Virgil was once for Dante Alighieri, a sage poet who can guide us out of darkness. Hope is still sparkling

*“The drama of Atheist Humanism”* ends with the author outlining a new (possible and desired) cultural turn where (Western) Humanism and Christianity are co-existent entities and not paradoxical forces. The historiographic narratives on atheism shows how an uncurbed “aseptic” rationality is the cause of the alienation of modern man. The writer fathoms that only love for humanity and thereof love for God is the only way to end the solitude of men.

Moral salvation is always possible but, as Dostoevsky underlined, only by means of struggling toward the light.

### **Conclusion: Solitude and Modernity**

Lubac has a Christian point of view and we can differ from it but the crisis that Western society is undergoing can be hardly negated. The French insurgents wanted to abolish social stratification and install a meaningful Republic, a political apparatus based on equality. It was a revolutionary idea that now is perishing under the attack of the global economy. Our world suffers a radicalized “fast food society” syndrome, where low quality items (or personal relations) are served and trashed during the twinkling of an eye. The fear of the otherness (often labelled as a terrorism threat by embedded media) brings us to look suspiciously at every outsider. Having welcomed the ending of spirituality<sup>5</sup> and demised the value of social morality, we habit a world where everything collapsed into unpredictability. Noteworthy sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote that inside our nations:

*“Social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools. For power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences,*

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<sup>5</sup> I prefer using the word spirituality than religion, being the latter based on the first. For spirituality I mean any transcendental philosophy that does not necessarily convey a fixed set of rules or dogmas.

*barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints*" (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 2000: 14)

This uncertainty and the friability of our status, is the main cause of our inner ailment, we feel lost because "*the universe is a fearful sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere*"<sup>6</sup>. In this epoch, the individual is still tasting the bitter reality of the underground. As a researcher in Social Science I think that a solution is possible but hardly attainable if we do not fight together, with true commitment. We should abandon policies only aimed to generate economic profits and embrace new strategies that promote social fairness and equity. Catholicism can truly help the process but it must renew itself, promoting a more collegial and democratic framework. Pope Benedict and The Second Vatican Council, failed in doing that, hopefully the new Pontiff will be able to accomplish it. Lubac was a man of faith and he tenderly loved humanity, this book is only part of his lifelong opera and legacy.

### Suggested Books in English

- ✓ Arthur Morius Francis, *Nihilism: Philosophy of Nothingness*, lulu.com, 2015
- ✓ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, Picador, 2015
- ✓ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Vintage, 1991,

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<sup>6</sup> Blaise Pascal is often cited as the author but the phrase comes from the Latin text "*Liber XXIV philosophorum*" whose author is unknown.

- ✓ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003
- ✓ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2014
- ✓ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, Penguin Classics, 1961
- ✓ Geoffrey Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body*, Routledge, 2015
- ✓ Giacomo Marrameo, *The Passage West: Philosophy After the Age of the Nation State*, Verso, 2012
- ✓ Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, Ignatius Press, 1995
- ✓ Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, Oxford Paperbacks, 2008
- ✓ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996
- ✓ Monroe Beardsley, *The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche*, Modern Library, 2002
- ✓ Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, Penguin Classics, 1997
- ✓ Noam Chomsky, *A New Generation Draws the Line: Humanitarian Intervention and the "Responsibility to Protect" Today (Expanded Edition)*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, November 2011
- ✓ Noam Chomsky, *What We Say Goes: Conversations on U.S. Power in a Changing World (Interviews with David Barsamian)*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007

- ✓ Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (edited by Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel), New York: The New Press, 2002
- ✓ Noam Chomsky, *Propaganda and the Public Mind: Conversations with Noam Chomsky* (with David Barsamian), Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001
- ✓ Steven M. Cahn, *Classics of Western Philosophy*, Hackett Pub Co, 2013
- ✓ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, 2013

All these books can be found in international libraries or internet based retailers