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## The No and the Yes of Scripture on Atheism

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eigentlich das *gratia plena* mit „du liebe Maria“ übersehen sollen. Das entsprach nicht nur seinem deutschen Sprachgefühl, sondern auch seiner christlichen Stellung der Mutter unsers Heilandes gegenüber. „Liebe Maria“, nicht weniger, nicht mehr. Das aber, was römischerseits aus ihr gemacht wird, und noch mehr, wie das geschieht, gewährt einen viel vernichtenderen Einblick in das Wesen jener Gemeinschaft, als die aller-  
 ehesten Skandalgeschichten es tun.

19. September 1933.

N. B. Heintze.

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## The No and the Yes of Scripture on Atheism.\*

### I.

The question to be investigated now is whether Scripture regards atheism as possible; whether atheism is viewed by the Biblical writers as a reality or merely a state of mind and a matter of imagination.

It is necessary, first of all, to determine what is meant by atheism. Atheism is the opposite of theism. It could not have come into existence without there having been previously theism, of which it is logically and etymologically the negation. In other words, there must have been theists before there could have been atheists. Theism is the belief in *θεός*, a personal divine Being, independent, self-determining, self-conscious, infinite, and eternal, who is the causating Principle of all that exists, and transcends and governs all things and beings outside of Him. The Christian religion is pure theism, and since the God whom it professes is the only true God and besides Him there is no other God, it is the only genuine theism. Atheism is the denial of the existence of this God of Christian theism.

Other meanings have occasionally been attached to the term atheism. "Atheism is sometimes said to be equivalent to *pancosmism*, that is, the theory that the universe consists of nothing but those physical and psychical existences which are perceptible by the senses or are cognizable by the imagination and finite understanding. *Pancosmism*, however, is a positive doctrine, while atheism, both by etymology and by usage, is essentially a negative conception and exists only as an expression of dissent from positive theistic beliefs. Theism is the belief that all the entities in the cosmos, which are known to us through our senses or are inferred by our imagination and reason, are dependent for their origination and their continuance in existence upon the creative and causal action of an Infinite and Eternal Self-consciousness and Will; and in its higher stages it implies that this

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\* This paper, too, like the paper on "Atheistic Diagnoses," etc., was read a few years ago before the St. Louis *Eintagskonferenz*, except references to recent occurrences.

self-existent Being progressively reveals His essence and His character in the ideas and ideals of His rational creatures and thus stands in personal relationship with them. In its earlier stages theism conceives of God simply as the Cause and Ground of all finite and dependent existences; but as it develops, it realizes the idea of God as immanent and self-manifesting as well as creative and transcendent. Until it attains to this consciousness of felt personal communion with the immanent Cause and Ground of the universe, it is more appropriately described as *deism*.

"As was said above, atheism presupposes the existence of theism. And it is not when the theistic idea is actually present that real atheistic negation becomes possible. If a Hindu or a Greek came to disbelieve in one or all of the deities of his national pantheon, he would not necessarily be an atheist; for it often happened that this scepticism, which the vulgar called atheism, arose simply from a more or less clear apprehension of the one supreme object of worship. Max Mueller well says in his *Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion* (p. 228): 'We must remember that to doubt or deny the existence of Indra or of Jupiter is not atheism, but should be distinguished by a separate name, namely, *adeism*. The early Christians were called *ἀθεοι*, because they did not believe as the Greeks believed nor as the Jews believed. Spinoza was called an atheist because his concept of God was wider than that of Jehovah, and the Reformers were called atheists because they would not deify the mother of Christ or worship the saints. This is not atheism in the true sense of the word; and if a historical study of religion has taught us that one lesson only, that those who do not believe in our God are not therefore to be called atheists, it would have done some real good and extinguished the fires of many an *auto da fé*.'

"Atheism, as we have seen, is not, like theism or pantheism, a positive belief the phases of which can be depicted in their relation to one unifying conception. It has no organic character. The history of it is little more than a collection of the instances in which doubt and negation in regard to some essential element in theism have arisen. And the occasion and cause of this atheistic frame of mind will generally be found in some new scientific or philosophical ideas, which have, for the time being at least, appeared to be incompatible with the current form of deistic or theistic belief." (Charles Barnes Upton, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy in Manchester College, Oxford; in *ERE*, II, 173 f.)

Our interest is chiefly in what Scripture declares concerning atheism.

In the first place, the Bible denies that such a thing as the rejection of the existence of God is possible to any human being still in possession of his ordinary mental faculty and obeying the prompting

of his conscience. "That which may be known of God," says Paul, Rom. 1, 19, "is manifest in them." The apostle is speaking of pagans, who had no written revelation of God. He had just declared, v. 18, that these people "hold the truth in unrighteousness"; that is, they hold it down, throttle it, by their immorality. And now Paul proceeds to show why the anger of God is revealed against these people: what they did they did not do in ignorance; else they might be to a certain extent excusable. For there is in them "that which is known," or may be known, "of God" (Luther: *dass man weiss, dass Gott sei*, the knowledge that God is). They have with them some perception of God which requires no special revelation and to which their inner consciousness testifies. The reason for this is, God has clearly laid it before them in the general revelation of the universe. When viewing this evidence, the heart in every human being responds to it. The evidence has been "made to lie openly before them as an object of knowledge." (Meyer.)

The natural intelligence of a pagan, the apostle further asserts, grasps not only the fact of the existence of God, but it apprehends even some of His attributes. The attributes themselves indeed are "invisible things"; but in contemplating and meditating on "the things that are made," that is, the created works of God, the human mind cannot fail to grasp such facts as these, that the Maker of these myriad creatures must be an eternal, all-powerful, and altogether divine Being. Clearly this text teaches the continuous presence of God with the works He created, or, rightly understood, His immanence in the universe, however, as a Being distinct from all other existences, or His transcendent character.

In Ps. 19, 1—3 we have a passage that describes how the things that are made serve as agents for a message to man. "The heavens," that is, the sphere outside the earth, which, as far as human vision is concerned, is lost in infinite space, "declare," that is, make plain, "and the firmament," that is, this transparent vault which is stretched out overhead far and wide, "shows," that is, sets out to men's view conspicuously, "the glory of El," the Almighty. How do they declare and show it? "Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge." What does this mean? Are we to think of Pythagoras's "music of the spheres," the inaudible symphony which some mystic, dreaming, imagines he is hearing as he watches, fascinated, the revolving heavens? No; by their mere existence the heavens and the firmament force upon man information concerning God. This is what the older expositors have called *obiectivum vocis non articulatae praeconium*, an objective announcement given without articulate voice, the voiceless heraldry of the heavens. They speak of the God who made them; and since they, though only creatures, are so glorious, He, their Creator, must be still more glorious. That is

what they silently witness to all men, and no person can escape this testimony of theirs; for they do this forever and ever. The verbs "declare" and "show" are participles, expressing the idea of continuance and perpetuity. This idea is expanded in v. 2, where the sublime discourse of the heavens and the firmament is represented as being carried on in an uninterrupted line of transmission. "Day unto day uttereth speech," literally: gusheth forth a tale, as from a deep, inexhaustible fountain, "and night unto night showeth knowledge," that is, exhibits things that may be known, *viz.*, regarding Him who made day and night. "Each day reveals works which God does by day and each night such as He performs during the night, and this diurnal and nocturnal testimony of His creatures is continuous and parallel. Each dawning day continues the speech of that which has declined, and each approaching night takes up the tale of that which has passed away." (Delitzsch.) Our physical ear is not reached by this testimony. The psalmist does not wish to be misunderstood as having said so; therefore he adds in v. 3, literally rendered, this thought: "There is no language, and no words, whose voice is inaudible." The meaning is: "The discourse of the heavens and the firmament: the day, namely, the sky by day, and the night, namely, the sky by night, is not a discourse uttered in a corner; it is a discourse in a speech that is everywhere audible, and in words that are understood by all." Thus Paul's declaration: "It is manifest," has been anticipated by the psalmist. Incidentally Delitzsch by this interpretation has justified Luther's rendering: "*Es ist keine Sprache noch Rede, da man nicht ihre Stimme hoere.*"

Scripture also furnishes an argument against atheism by declaring that man is possessed of an inalienable moral knowledge. The works named in the Decalog, says Paul in Rom. 2, 14. 15, are "written in the hearts" of the Gentiles; for "they do by nature the things contained in the Law." Their *nativa indoles*, their congenital disposition, is such that "without any extraneous training, culture, or any other influence beyond the endowments of nature and their natural development" they comply with requirements of God's Moral Law. Paul does not assert this of the entire Law as we have it in the Scriptures, but he speaks of "concrete actions which correspond to particular portions of the Law." Thus the Gentiles "are a law unto themselves." "Their moral nature, with its voice of conscience commanding and forbidding, supplies to their own ego the place of the revealed Law possessed by the Jews. Thus, in their doing of the Law, they serve for themselves as a regulator of the conduct that agrees with the divine Law." (Meyer.) They obey a law that is not exhibited in visible characters of human writing; it is really an unwritten law; but in a sublime, inscrutable manner it is written in their hearts, indelibly inscribed in their moral faculty, and they cannot

escape its testimony; for their conscience cites it to them and rivets upon them the sense of their personal responsibility for all their actions, and in their mutual intercourse with one another, in the accusations and vindications that are carried on between Gentiles and Gentiles, they reveal the fact that their thoughts are ever busy with questions of right and wrong, that they court approval and seek to escape disapproval, both of the moral voice in them and the same moral voice in their fellow-men.

Accordingly, Scripture pronounces the profession of atheism the act of a fool, Ps. 14, 1. We are told that "the etymology of the Hebrew word נָבֵל leads to the idea of something withered and without sap and that the usage of the word in the Old Testament implies spiritual dulness, barrenness, and worthlessness (Is. 32, 5. 6), in contrast with the religious freshness and moral ability of the truly wise man. But the expression does not refer to intellectual weakness." (Lange-Schaff.) Barnes thinks that the word "is designed to convey the idea that wickedness, or impiety, is essentially folly, or to use a term which will, perhaps more than any other, make the mind averse to the sin — for there is many a man who would see more in the word 'fool' to be hated than in the word 'wicked,' who would rather be called a sinner than a fool." Perrowne finds another idea hinted at in this word: The fools, he says, "are those whose understanding is darkened; who, professing themselves to be wise, became fools. Such men, who make a boast of their reason and would walk by the light of their reason, prove how little their reason is worth. The epithet is the more cutting because persons of this kind generally lay claim to superior discernment." Spurgeon remarks: "The atheist is *the fool* preeminently and a fool universally. He would not deny God if he were not a fool by nature; and having denied God, it is no marvel that he becomes a fool in practise. Sin is always folly; and as it is the height of sin to attack the existence of the Most High, so it is also the greatest imaginable folly. To say there is no God is to belie the plainest evidence — which is obstinacy; to oppose the common consent of mankind — which is stupidity; to stifle conscience — which is wickedness."

Bacon remarks shrewdly: "A little knowledge inclineth man to atheism." Young in his *Night Thoughts* says: "By night an atheist half believes a God." (V, 177.)

The *consensus gentium*, that is, the universal affirmation of all races of men that there is a God, is an ancient and by no means inferior argument. Cicero employed it in his *Tusculan Disputations*, where he says (*lib. I*): "There is not a race so rude, nor in all the world an individual so crude, that the idea of gods has not entered their minds. Many conceive depraved thoughts concerning the gods, for that is usually done where vice prevails; however, all hold that

there is a divine force in nature. This opinion is not produced by the consentient talk of men, nor is it confirmed by ordinances and laws. Rather in every matter the consentient opinion of all races must be regarded as a law of nature." Again, in his *Nature of the Gods* (*lib. II*) he says: "The notion of gods is innate in all and, as it were, graven on their hearts." It was, in part, for the purpose of defeating this argument that Darwin went in quest of a race of natural, born atheists, and failed to find it.

Hollazius has made an attempt to define the innateness of the notion of God in the human mind. He says: "That there is a God, or the real existence of a knowledge concerning God, is a fact; however, what it is or how to define its quality is not so clear. Hence it is that it has been differently defined even by orthodox theologians. . . . Whatever this thing is, which in their opinion can be said to reside in the intellect by nature or to be connate to it, all have to go back to a certain inborn perfection or light in the intellect by the aid of which the truth of the common notions concerning God, when the terms in which they are set forth have been apprehended, is immediately perceived without debate. On this point they are nearly agreed. . . . However, we do not deny that the knowledge of God lodged in man is a certain perfection, *analogous to a habitus*, that is inborn in man during his earthly pilgrimage. The analogy consists in the following points: 1. As the divine image in the first men was a *habitus*, so the remnants of the same, to which belongs the law of nature which enjoins the worship of God, somehow come close to being a *habitus*, since homogeneous parts are of the same nature as the whole. 2. As a *habitus* is a certain perfection, superadded to nature, which facilitates its operation, so the natural knowledge of God has been superadded to the faculty of cognition, inclining it in every possible way to the apprehension of God. 3. As a *habitus* is difficult to unsettle, so that natural knowledge of God is deeply inherent in the soul and is never eradicated entirely." (*Examen*, etc., P. I, c. 1, q. 5, p. 189 sq.)

If, then, we understand by atheism "most intimate convictions of the heart" that there is no God, the possibility of atheism must be denied pointblank by every one who accepts the Scriptures, also by every one who accepts the facts of common human experience. Even among the most backward races a religious conception has been discovered, albeit it was of a very low order. There are proofs, too, that among disciples of the most thoroughly compacted systems of atheistic thought there has ever been discovered a residuum of belief in God, of which these persons had not been able to rid themselves by all their reasoning. Their atheism was found to "overlie and conceal an instinctive and indestructible 'sense of the divine.'" During the French Revolution it was not safe to mention the name of God even

in ordinary conversation. Many turned atheists from fear, professing with their lips what they were repudiating with their heart. But also among those who espoused atheism from personal choice, recurrences to the thought of God, yea, to prayer, especially in moments of great personal danger, were not infrequent, so that a leading infidel remarked in despair that men seemed "hopelessly religious."

The case of these atheists is similar to that of Christian Science. Its devotees scout the notion of the reality of matter, of disease, pain, and death. They are taught to regard themselves as being "in mortal error" whenever they catch themselves inadvertently believing these things. Well, the poor things, just like their leader, have to die in that mortal error. Since they must die, they cannot but die with an accusing conscience; for by dying they commit the unpardonable offense of their creed. And while they live, they live with us on *terra firma*: they prefer coffee to tea, or *vice versa*, with or without sugar; they like to have their steaks well done, medium, or rare; they stub their toes, they howl under a raging tooth-ache, they sneeze and cough when they catch cold, they even buy material coal and build a material fire to keep themselves warm in winter, etc., etc., just like we unprogressive dunces who are not Christian Scientists.

It appears, then, that this world was not made for atheists to live in successfully. Nor can the atheist get along with his own human organism as it is constituted, because the thought of God is in him. Nor can he associate intelligently with his fellow-men in a common human brotherhood, because they cannot help being theists, have made a history in this world that is full of God, and are continuing to make such history. Since he cannot eliminate God from the universe, nor pluck Him out of his thought, nor eradicate Him from the mind of his fellow-men, he will have to have another world, another organism, to live in and entirely different associates to live with.

There is in man, says Benjamin B. Warfield, "an innate sense of the divine," and we behold it "struggling for expression," in the inadequate forms which their low stage of culture provides, among savages. "If this is all that is meant by atheism, atheism is, no doubt, a condition impossible to man. Man differs from the lower creations, not in being less dependent than they, but in being conscious of his dependence and responsibility; and this consciousness involves in it a sense of somewhat, or, better, some one, to which he is thus related. The explication of this instinctive perception is a different matter; and in this explication is wrapped up the whole development of the idea of God. But escape from the apprehension of a Being on whom we are dependent and to whom we are responsible is no more possible than escape from the world in which we live. God is part of our environment." (*Schaff-Herzog Encyclop.*, I, 546 f.)

Voltaire, himself a professional infidel, forgetting his metaphysics



and speaking as a practical man, declared, in view of the terrible things which he saw coming, that, if there were no God, it would be necessary to invent one. If the analysis is only carried far enough, it will be found that those who deny the existence of God (in a conventional way) are all the time setting up something in the nature of a deity by way of an ideal of their own, while fighting over the meaning of a word or its conventional misapplication. (*Encycl. Britan.*, II, 828.) Russia, with its violent atheistic propaganda and its worship of the corpse of Lenin, is the most recent and most shocking illustration of this fact.

Thus, all atheistic effort is really a continuation of that mad endeavor under diabolical leadership, which occurred in the first generation of mankind, to set up something else in the place of God that shall be regarded as equal to God.

## II.

On the other hand, Scripture speaks of *ἄθεοι ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ*, people "without God in the world," Eph. 2, 12. The context shows that these persons are outside of the commonwealth of God, outside of the covenant of God with His people, void of the knowledge and faith of Christ, the Redeemer, and of any hope which His Gospel kindles in the hearts of sinners.

Cremer paraphrases *ἄθεοι* in this text by "destitute of divine help, abandoned by God, out of connection with God." Meyer prefers the first of these meanings; he holds that "the lowest stage of Gentile misery" is here indicated and says: "The Gentiles had gods, which, however, were no gods (Acts 19, 26; 14, 15; Gal. 4, 8); but, on the contrary, what they worshiped and honored as deities since their forsaking of the natural knowledge of God (Rom. 1, 19 ff.), were demons (1 Cor. 10, 26), so that with them, spite of all their superstitions, God was really wanting, and they, apart from connection with God's grace and help, lived on in a *God-forsaken* state." The world of men among whom they were living had this character of God-forsakenness stamped upon it: it was the standing mark of "the unhallowed domain," the Gentile world outside of the commonwealth of Israel. The apostle's readers at Ephesus had once belonged to this world.

In Rom. 1, 30 the apostle characterizes the heathen as *θεοσυγείς*, which Luther renders "*Gottesverächter*"; the translators of the English Bible, adopting Luther's view, render the term "haters of God." Meyer wants *θεοσυγείς* understood in the passive sense, "hated by God," as the Vulgate does, which translates the term by *Deo osibiles*. But the active meaning has been adopted by a long line of commentators from Theodoret down to Tholuck, all of whom render the word by *Dei osores*. Some, like Grotius and Reiche, point out that wrath against the gods was a common heathen vice. Tholuck refers to Prometheus, whom Jove chained to a rock for his opposition to the

gods, and regards these God-haters as "Promethean characters." Ewald views these men as "blasphemers of God"; Calvin as men "who have a horror of God on account of His righteousness." Luther in a gloss to this text calls them "the real Epicureans, who live as if there were no God." The Scriptures have elsewhere recorded instances of defiance of God, and the state of antitheism as well as atheism was known to the holy writers.

The Gentiles are referred to in 1 Thess. 4, 5; 2 Thess. 1, 8; Gal. 4, 8; Rom. 1, 28; Eph. 2, 20, as people "who know not God," that is, the only true God, whom the prophets, Christ, and His apostles had proclaimed. Origen did not hesitate to call the polytheism of the pagans atheism.

As a matter of fact, then, the Scriptures recognize atheism, just as they recognize heresies, insanity, diseases, and the like. While no man in his senses and with the approval of his conscience will deny the existence of God, or while no one professing himself an atheist can really believe in his atheism, still the attempt to rid the mind of the thought of God is made. Religions like the Buddhist are built up on atheism, and atheistic movements have sprung up even in certain parts of the Christian world and have developed an astonishing strength. Accordingly, the actual existence of atheism, understood as men's voluntary divorcement from the notion of God, cannot be denied.

Ps. 14, 1, to which reference was made previously, is useful in another way, *viz.*, as showing how atheism originates. The fool "has said in his heart, There is no God"; that means, in his secret, private cogitations he begins to embrace this delusion. It is that way with every other sin; is it not? Man's fancy begins to cherish some forbidden thing; the fancy is not bridled, but nursed; the person wants that particular wrong thing and finally gets it. This text, then, does not set forth atheism as "a fixed theory or an understood and conscious opinion," a religious system of non-religion fully reasoned out,—all that follows much later, and in most instances it does not follow at all, because most atheists do not take that much trouble with their atheism,—but it describes the rise of the disposition to atheism, which then becomes revealed in the atheist's practise, or life. The psalmist therefore adds: "They are corrupt; they have done abominable works." A person's morals are always determined by his inward convictions, his heart's creed. In this case which the psalmist has reviewed the desire for an unrestricted, unrestrained mode of living has induced the desire: Wish there were no God! Next came the thought: Possibly there is no God. Finally, the person decrees to his own satisfaction: There is no God. The personal history of atheists, if it were written, would bring out in most instances the correctness of the psalmist's view.

**898 Wie muß Gottes Wort gepredigt werden, damit Glaube entstehe?**

Hollazius sums up the case of these atheists very aptly, thus: "It is possible that there are atheists who are such in a speculative manner. They are such, not by nature, but because God has justly abandoned and the devil blinded them. Not that their natural light as regards the habitual knowledge of God has been totally extinguished in them, but it has been smothered as far as its actual exercise is concerned. Nor does this take place for the entire space of a person's life and permanently, but only for a season, due to some passing paroxysm. For a law of nature does not permit the valid and firm belief that there is no God to become lodged in any one. Although the mind of a wicked person may drop off into a lethargic sleep, so that the person gives no thought to God, still there cannot be any one in whom the conscience does not finally vindicate itself and, at least in the hour of death, accuse the person of his neglect of God." (*Examen*, etc., P. I, c. 1, q. 5, p. 194.)

While closing this article, the *Oakland Tribune* for June 8 arrives, with the following interesting editorial:—

Church statistics recently released proved definitely that during the years of greatest economic stress enrolment in places of worship steadily increased. The churches have larger attendance now than ever.

An opposite story is told with the announcement that the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism has been hit so sharply by the depression that it is threatened with extinction for want of funds. The annual report shows membership has declined steadily and income has been reduced by one half.

All of this, says the *Stockton Record*, sheds an interesting little side-light on human nature. It's easy enough to be an atheist, militant or otherwise, when everything is going swimmingly and every stock-market flurry increases the size of your bank account. But when the bottom falls out of things and you find that you weren't quite as all-wise and eternally lucky as you had thought—well, atheism becomes a non-essential luxury then, in short order.

Berkeley, California.

W. H. T. DAU.

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**Wie muß Gottes Wort gepredigt werden, damit Glaube  
entstehe in den Herzen der Zuhörer?**

Eine Reihe von Vorträgen von D. F. Pieper.

**Sechster Vortrag.**

Jeder Mensch ist von Natur ein Ungläubiger und im Unglauben verloren. Ihr Amt als Lehrer der christlichen Kirche wird darin bestehen, daß Sie den Menschen das Wort sagen, wodurch sie aus dem Unglauben errettet, gläubig und so selig werden; denn der Mensch ist