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# THE DRAMA OF ATHEIST HUMANISM

CHAPTER I

TRAGEDY

FEUERBACH AND NIETZSCHE

1. A Tragic Misunderstanding

*from God the liberator  
to God the antagonist*

A wonderful piece of sculpture adorning the cathedral of Chartres represents Adam, head and shoulders barely roughed out, emerging from the earth from which he was made and being molded by the hands of God. The face of the first man reproduces the features of his modeler. This parable in stone translates for the eyes the mysterious words of Genesis: "God made man in his own image and likeness."

From its earliest beginnings Christian tradition has not ceased to annotate this verse, recognizing in it our first title of nobility and the foundation of our greatness. Reason, liberty, immortality and dominion over nature are so many prerogatives of divine origin that God has imparted to his creatures. Establishing man from the outset in God's likeness, each of these prerogatives is meant to grow and unfold until the divine resemblance is brought to perfection. Thus they are the key to the highest of destinies.

"Man, know thyself!" Taking up, after Epictetus, the Socratic *gnôthi seauton*, the Church transformed and deepened it, so that what had been chiefly a piece of moral advice became an exhortation to form a metaphysical judgment. Know yourself, said the Church, that is to say, know your nobility and

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*, 17, c. 3; Basil, *Homilies*. Cf. De 159. Cf. André Jean Resnais, *L'Idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1932), pp. 23-24; Étienne Gilson, *La Théologie mystique de saint Bernard* (Paris: Vrin, 1934), pp. 91-93 and 181-82; *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), vol. 2, pp. 6-8.

day—though we neglect their implications all too often. It is difficult for us to imagine the disturbance they created in the soul of man in the ancient world. At the first tidings of them humanity was lifted on a wave of hope. It was stirred by vague premonitions that, at the recoil, sharpened its awareness of its state of misery. It became conscious of deliverance. To begin with, needless to say, it was not an external deliverance—not that social liberation which was to come, for instance, with the abolition of slavery. That liberation, which presupposed a large number of technical and economic conditions, was brought about slowly but surely under the influence of the Christian idea of man.<sup>7</sup> “God”, says Origen, in his commentary on Saint John, “made all men in his own image, he molded them one by one.”<sup>8</sup> But from the outset that idea had produced a more profound effect. Through it, man was freed, in his own eyes, from the ontological slavery with which Fate burdened him. The stars, in their unalterable courses, did not, after all, implacably control our destinies. Man, every man, no matter who, had a direct link with the Creator, the Ruler of the stars themselves. And lo, the countless Powers—gods, spirits,

<sup>7</sup> We can subscribe to the following reflections of Commander Lefebvre des Noettes, *L'Atelier; le cheval de selle à travers les âges* (Paris: Picard, 1931), p. 178: “Moral factors are not alone in governing human destinies; there are, in addition to them, pressing material conditions and, in our opinion, it would be impossible to understand the social movement of the Middle Ages, one of the most profound humanity has known, if one were to ignore the brilliant invention that, under the first Capetians, revolutionized methods of transportation, endowed industry with new and almost unlimited possibilities and, made man a powerful force.” But, in his conclusion, the author exceeds the limits of his own thought by writing that the study of this invention makes us penetrate “into the profound area of causes”. Robert Aron and Armand Dandieu put it better in *La Révolution nécessaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1933), p. 78: “Thanks to those technical inventions that have remained anonymous, the tendencies proper to the new society can be freely developed.” Cf. Hegel, *Philosophie de l'histoire* (French trans. by Gabelin of *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*), vol. 2, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Saint John*, vol. 13, no. 28 (PG 14, 468).

demons—who pinioned human life in the net of their tyrannical wills, weighing upon the soul with all their terrors, now crumbled into dust, and the sacred principle that had gone astray in them was rediscovered unified, purified and sublimated in God the deliverer! It was no longer a small and select company that, thanks to some secret means of escape, could break the charmed circle: it was mankind as a whole that found its night suddenly illumined and took cognizance of its royal liberty. No more circle! No more blind destiny! No more *Moral*! No more *Fate*! Transcendent God, God the “friend of men”, revealed in Jesus, opened for all a way that nothing would ever bar again.<sup>9</sup> Hence that intense feeling of gladness and of radiant newness to be found everywhere in early Christian writings. It is much to be regretted that this literature for so many reasons, not all of which are insuperable, should be so remote from us today. What wealth and force our faith is forfeiting by its ignorance of, for instance, the hymns of triumph and the stirring appeals that echo in the *Protrepticus* of Clement of Alexandria!<sup>10</sup>

But if we look down the course of the ages to the dawn of modern times we make a strange discovery. That same Christian idea of man that had been welcomed as a deliverance was now beginning to be felt as a yoke. And that same God in whom man had learned to see the seal of his own greatness began to seem to him like an antagonist, the enemy of his dignity. Through what misunderstandings and distortions, what mutilations and infidelities, what blinding pride and impatience this came about would take too long to consider. The historical causes are numerous and complex. But the fact remains, simple and solid. No less than the Early Fathers, the great medieval scholars had exalted man by setting forth what the Church had

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Festugière, pp. 101-13 and 161-69, Louis Bouyer, *Le Mystère pascal*, pp. 111 and 115. The Apostles of Christ were “the apostles of freedom”. Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, I, 3, c. 13, and I, 4, c. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Mondésert translation, in the *Sources chrétiennes* series (1943). See particularly the first and last chapter.

always taught of his relation to God: "In this is man's greatness, in this is man's worth, in this he excels every creature."<sup>11</sup> But the time came when man was no longer moved by it. On the contrary, he began to think that henceforward he would forfeit his self-esteem and be unable to develop in freedom unless he broke first with the Church and then with the Transcendent Being upon whom, according to Christian tradition, he was dependent. At first assuming the aspect of a reversion to paganism, this urge to cut loose increased in scope and momentum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until, after many phases and many vicissitudes, it came to a head in the most daring and destructive form of modern atheism: absolute humanism, which claims to be the only genuine kind and inevitably regards a Christian humanism as absurd.

This atheist humanism is not to be confused with a hedonist and coarsely materialist atheism—a commonplace phenomenon to be found in many periods of history. It is also quite contrary in principle—if not in its results—to an atheism of despair. But it would be dangerous to call it a critical atheism and let it go at that. It does not profess to be the simple answer to a speculative problem and certainly not a purely negative solution: as if the understanding, having, on the attainment of maturity, set itself to "reconsider" the problem of God, had at last been obliged to see that its efforts could lead to nothing or even that they were leading to an end that was the opposite of what they had long believed. The phenomenon that has dominated the history of the mind during the last few centuries seems both more profound and more arbitrary. It is not the intelligence alone that is involved. The problem posed was a human problem—it was *the* human problem—and the solution that is being given to it is one that claims to be positive. Man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness that, it seems to him, is being unwar-

<sup>11</sup> Saint Thomas, *De malo*, q. 5, a. 1; *Contre gentiles*, l. 3, c. 147. François Tolet, *In primam partem S. Thomae*. All the Scotists, etc.

rantly withheld by another. In God he is overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom.

Modern humanism, then, is built upon resentment and begins with a choice. It is, in Proudhon's word, an "atheism". In Proudhon, this atheism operated first of all in the social field, where it was chiefly a struggle against a false idea of Providence.<sup>12</sup> It was a refusal to be resigned to the "economic contradictions", productive of poverty, for which a more or less conscious conspiracy on the part of economists and property-owners claimed the sanction of heaven and which they sometimes even went so far as to extol as "harmonies". Thus Proudhon laid the blame not so much upon God himself as upon a certain form of recourse to his authority. Subsequently extending his conception to the metaphysical field, he still thought that God was "inexhaustible": the struggle in which man necessarily wrestled with God was an "eternal struggle"; "the hypothesis of a God" was reborn every time "from its resolution in human reality"; always, after the denials and exclusions, there was a resurgence of something beyond man—Proudhon for the most part called it Justice—which imposed itself upon man and prevented him from ever taking himself for God.

Thus Proudhon, even when undergoing the influence and appropriating the language of those whom he calls "the humanists" or "the new atheists", expressly refuses to follow them.<sup>13</sup> Atheism, as conceived by them, is something more radical. They go farther in opposition and denial because they set out from a more complete refusal. The story is a dramatic one. At its maximum point of concentration, it is the great crisis of modern times, that same crisis in which we are involved today and which takes its outward course in disorder, begets tyrannies and collective crimes, and finds its expression in blood, fire and ruin.

*→ Freedom in the modern world? or no?*

<sup>12</sup> He says: "The myth of providence".

<sup>13</sup> *Philosophie de la misère*, vol. 1, pp. 253, 388-89, 397-98, etc.

Nietzsche

your dignity, understand the greatness of your being and your vocation, of that vocation which constitutes your being. Learn how to see in yourself the spirit, which is a reflection of God, made for God. "O man, scorn not that which is admirable in you! You are a poor thing in your own eyes, but I would teach you that in reality you are a great thing! . . . Realize what you are! Consider your royal dignity! The heavens have not been made in God's image as you have, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor anything to be seen in creation. . . . Behold, of all that exists there is nothing that can contain your greatness."<sup>2</sup> Philosophers have told man that he is a "microcosm", a little world made of the same elements, given the same structure, subject to the same rhythms as the great universe; they have reminded him that he is made in its image and is subject to its laws; they have made him into part of the mechanism or, at most, into an epitome of the cosmic machine. Nor were they completely mistaken. Of man's body and of all that, in man, can be called "nature", it is true. But if man digs deeper and if his reflection is illuminated by what is said in Sacred Scripture, he will be amazed at the depths opening up within him.<sup>3</sup> Unaccountable space extends before his gaze. In a sort of infinitude he overflows this great world on all sides, and in reality it is that world, "macrocosm", which is contained in this apparent "microcosm" . . . *in patto magnis*. That looks like a paradox borrowed from one of our great modern idealists. Far from it. First formulated by Origen, then by Saint Gregory

<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *In cantica*, homily 2; *De mortuis*; Pseudo-Nyssa, *First Homily on the Creation of Man*; Basil, *In psalmum 48*, 8, etc. "The masters", Meister Eckhart also says, "teach that the least noble part of the soul is more noble than what is loftiest in the sky": "Le Livre de la consolation divine", in the French trans.: *Traité et sermons* (1942), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of Man*, c. 16; John Damascene, *De divinis voluntatibus*; Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, *Amblygonium liber*, etc. Cf. Isaac de Stella, sermon 2: "Redi ad cor. Foris pecus es, ad imaginem mundi; unde et minor mundus dicitur homo. Intus homo, ad imaginem Dei: unde potest deificari" (PL 194, 1695).

Nazianzen, it was later repeated by many others.<sup>4</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas was to give much the same translation of it when he said that the soul is in the world *continens magis quam contenta*—containing it rather than contained by it—and it found fresh utterance through the lips of Bossuet.<sup>5</sup>

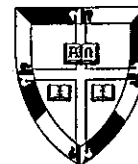
Man, to be sure, is made of dust and clay; or, as we should say nowadays, he is of animal origin—which comes to the same thing. The Church is not unmindful of this, finding a warrant for it in the same passage of Genesis. Man, to be sure, is also a sinner. The Church does not cease to remind him of that fact. The self-esteem that she endeavors to instill into him is not the outcome of a superficial and ingenuous view of the matter. Like Christ, she knows "what there is in man". But she also knows that the lowliness of his origin in the flesh cannot detract from the sublimity of his vocation, and that, despite all the blemishes that sin may bring, that vocation is an abiding source of inalienable greatness. The Church thinks that this greatness must reveal itself even in the conditions of present-day life, as a fount of liberty and a principle of progress, the necessary retaliation upon the forces of evil. And she recognizes in the mystery of God-made-man the guarantee of our vocation and the final consecration of our greatness. Thus in her liturgy she can celebrate each day "the dignity of the human substance"<sup>6</sup> even before rising to the contemplation of our rebirth.

These elementary truths of our faith seem commonplace to-

<sup>4</sup> Origen, *Fifth Homily on Leviticus*; cf. *First Homily on Genesis*, n. 12. Gregory of Nazianzen, *38th Discourse*, c. 11. Andrew of Crete, *First Sermon on the Assumption of Mary*; Jacob of Edessa, *Hexaemeron*. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon sur Luc 1, 26", in the French trans. by Paul Petit: *Sermons-traités* (1942), pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Bossuet, *Sermon sur l'Annonciation*.

<sup>6</sup> Roman Catholic Mass, Offertory: "Deus, qui humanae substantiae dignitatem mirabiliter condidisti. . . ." Bruno of Segni: "Magnus honor, magna nobilitas, ad Dei imaginem et similitudinem esse hominem factura!" *Traictus de interiori domo*: "Intelligence dignitatem tuam, nobilis creatura!" (PL 184, 547). Cf. Arnold of Bonneval (PL 189, 1334), etc.



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Dr. Randall Smith  
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Dear Professor Smith:

I give permission for the publication of a book tentatively entitled *Metaphysics and the Information Explosion* co-authored by Reverend Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., of the Dominican Province of Saint Albert the Great and you, Professor Randall Smith, of the University of St. Thomas, with any profits of the book to be divided between Father Ashley and you 50%-50%.

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

*V. Rev. Michael A. Mascari OP*

Very Reverend Michael A. Mascari, O.P.  
Prior Provincial