

# THE RANGE OF REASON

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## THE MEANING OF CONTEMPORARY ATHEISM

THE subject discussed in this chapter involves many deep and intricate problems. I do not pretend to dogmatize about them; the views that I shall put forward are no more than tentative views, which originate in a desire to look for the hidden spiritual significance which lies within the present agony of the world.

### I. VARIOUS KINDS OF ATHEISM

Let us try, first, to establish in a more systematic way the distinction, indicated in the two previous chapters, between the diverse forms of atheism. This distinction can be made from either of two points of view: from the point of view of the attitude of the human being who professes himself to be an atheist; or from the point of view of the logical content of various atheistic philosophies.

From the first point of view, or with regard to the manner in which atheism is professed, I have already remarked that there are, in the first place, *practical atheists*, who believe that they believe in God but who in actual fact deny His existence by their deeds and the testimony of their behavior. Then there are *pseudo-atheists*, who believe that they do not believe in God but who in actual fact unconsciously believe in Him, because the God whose existence they deny is not God but something else. Finally there are *absolute atheists*, who really do deny the existence of the very God in Whom the believers believe—God the Creator, Savior and Father, Whose name is infinitely over and above any name we can utter. Those absolute atheists stand committed to change their entire system of values and to destroy in themselves everything that could possibly suggest the name they have rejected; they have chosen to stake

their all against divine Transcendence and any vestige of Transcendence whatsoever.

From the second point of view, that is, with regard to the logical content of various atheistic philosophies, I would divide atheism into negative and positive atheism.

By *negative atheism* I mean a merely negative or destructive process of casting aside the idea of God, which is replaced only by a void. Such a negative atheism can be shallow and empirical, like the atheism of the *libertins* in the XVIIth century—then it digs a hollow in the center of the universe of thought which has taken shape through the centuries around the idea of God, but it does not bother about changing that universe; it is merely concerned with making us live a comfortable life, enjoying the freedom of doing exactly as we please. On the other hand, negative atheism can be lived at a profound and metaphysical level: in which case the hollow it creates at the heart of things extends to and lays waste our whole universe of thought; the freedom it claims for the human Self is absolute independence, a kind of divine independence that this Self, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, has no better way of affirming than by suicide and voluntary annihilation.

By *positive atheism* I mean an active struggle against everything that reminds us of God—that is to say, antitheism rather than atheism—and at the same time a desperate, I would say heroic, effort to recast and reconstruct the whole human universe of thought and the whole human scale of values in accordance with that state of war against God. Such positive atheism was the tragic, solitary atheism of a Nietzsche; such is today the literary, fashionable atheism of existentialism; such is the revolutionary atheism of dialectical materialism. The latter is of special interest to us, because it has succeeded in getting a considerable number of men to accept whole-heartedly this new kind of faith, and to give themselves to it with unquestionable sincerity.

Now when I speak of contemporary atheism, I have in mind atheism seen under the last aspect I have just mentioned; I consider it the most significant form of atheism, one which spells a new and unheard of historic event because it is an atheism at once *absolute and positive*. Human history has been confronted, for almost a century now, with the stormy bursting forth of an atheism which is both *absolute* (making man actually deny God Himself) and *positive* (anti-theism, demanding to be lived in full by man and to change the face of the earth). I have outlined in the preced-

ing chapter\* the ideological process which terminated in this atheism which is both absolute and positive.

## II. THE TWO-FOLD INCONSISTENCY OF CONTEMPORARY ATHEISM

### *An Act of Faith in Reverse Gear*

After these preliminary signposts I should like to point out that today's absolute-positive atheism involves a dual inconsistency.

How does absolute-positive atheism come to birth in the mind of a man? At this point we are faced with a remarkable fact. A man does not become an absolute atheist as a result of some inquiry into the problem of God carried on by speculative reason. No doubt he takes into account the negative conclusions afforded in this connection by the most radical forms of rationalist or positivist philosophy; he does not neglect, either, the old platitude which will have it that the scientific explanation of the universe purely and simply got clear of the existence of God. But all that is for him a second-hand means of defense, not the prime propelling and determining incentive. Neither those philosophical conclusions nor that nonsensical commonplace does he submit to any critical examination. He takes them for granted. He believes in them. And why? By virtue of an inner act of freedom, in the production of which he commits his whole personality. The starting point of absolute atheism is, in my opinion, a basic act of moral choice, a crucial free determination. If at the moment when he takes stock of himself and decides upon the whole direction of his life, a man confuses the transition from youth to manhood with the refusal not only of childhood's subordinations but of any subordination whatsoever; if he thus considers the rejection of any transcendent law as an act of moral maturity and emancipation; and if he decides to confront good and evil in a totally and absolutely free experience, in which any ultimate end and any rule coming from above are cast aside forever—such a free moral determination, dealing with the primary values of existence, will mean that this man has entirely excluded God from his own universe of life and thought. Here is, in my opinion, the point at which absolute atheism begins in the depths of a man's spiritual activity.

But what is this I have just been describing if not a kind of act of faith, an act of faith in reverse gear, whose content is not an

\*See pp. 96-97.

adherence to the transcendent God but, on the contrary, a rejection of Him?

Thus it is that absolute atheism is positive atheism. As I stated above,\* and this must be stressed once again: "It is in no way a mere absence of belief in God. It is rather a refusal of God, a fight against God, a challenge to God." The absolute atheist is delivered over "to an inner dialectic which obliges him ceaselessly to destroy any resurgence in himself of what he has buried. . . . In proportion as the dialectic of atheism develops in his mind—each time he is confronted with the natural notion of and tendency to an ultimate End, or with the natural notion of and natural interest in absolute values or unconditioned standards, or with some metaphysical anxiety—he will discover in himself vestiges of Transcendence which have not yet been abolished. He must get rid of them. God is a perpetual threat to him. His case is not a case of practical forgetting, but a case of deeper and deeper commitment to refusal and fight." He is bound to struggle against God without pause or respite, and to change, to recast everything in himself and in the world on the base of that anti-theism.

Now what does all this mean? Absolute atheism starts in an act of faith in reverse gear and is a full-blown religious commitment. Here we have the first internal inconsistency of contemporary atheism: it proclaims that all religion must necessarily vanish away, and it is itself a religious phenomenon.

### *An Abortive Protest and Rupture*

The second inconsistency is very like the first one. Absolute atheism starts as a claim of man to become the sole master of his own destiny, totally freed from any "alienation" and heteronomy, made totally and decisively independent of any ultimate end as well as of any eternal law imposed upon him by any transcendent God. According to atheistic theorists, does not the idea of God originate in an alienation of human nature separated from its true subject, and transmuted into an ideal and sublimated image whose very transcendence and sovereign attributes ensure man's submission to an enslaved state of existence? Is it not by getting rid of that sublimated image and of any transcendence, that human nature will achieve the fullness of its own stature and freedom and bring about the final "reconciliation between essence and existence?"

But what is the actual end-all of the philosophy of absolute

\*Chapter VII, p. 98.

Immanence which is all one with absolute atheism? Everything which was formerly considered superior to time and participating in some transcendent quality—either ideal value or spiritual reality—is now absorbed in the movement of temporal existence and the all-engulfing ocean of Becoming and of History. Truth and justice, good and evil, faithfulness, all the standards of conscience, henceforth perfectly relativized, become radically contingent: they are but changing shapes of the process of History, just as for Descartes they were but contingent creations of divine Freedom. The truth, at any given moment, is that which conforms with the requirements of History's begettings. As a result truth changes as time goes on. An act of mine which was meritorious today will be criminal tomorrow. And that is the way my conscience must pass judgment on it. The human intellect and moral conscience have to become heroically tractable.

And what of the Self, the person, the problem of human destiny? A total rejection of Transcendence logically entails a total adherence to Immanence. There is nothing eternal in man; he will die in the totality of his being; there is nothing to be saved in him. But he can give himself, and give himself entirely, to the Whole of which he is a part, to the boundless flux which alone is real and which bears the fate of mankind. By virtue of his decisive moral experience itself, and of that primary moral choice—against any ultimate End—which I have tried to describe, and which commits the human personality far more profoundly than individualistic egoism or epicureanism can do, the absolute or positive atheist hands himself over, body and soul, to the ever-changing and all-engulfing Whole—be it the social or the cosmic totality. It is not only that he is satisfied to die in it, as a blade of grass in the loam, and to make it more fertile by dissolving in it. He is also willing to make of his own total being, with all its values and standards and beliefs, an offering given, as I said above, to that great Minotaur that is History. Duty and virtue mean nothing else to him than a total submission and immolation of himself to the sacred voracity of Becoming.

Here we are confronted with a new variety of mystical "pure love"—giving up every hope for personal redemption—a real unselfishness, self-denial and self-sacrifice, a total and absolute disinterestedness—but a monstrous one, paid for at the price of the very Self, and the existence and dignity of the human Person: at the price of that which, in each one of us, is an end in itself and

the image of God. Christ had said: "He who loses his own soul for Me, shall find it,"\* because losing one's own soul for God is delivering it over to absolute Truth and Goodness and Love, to the eternal Law itself which transcends all the contingency and mutability of Becoming. The positive atheist delivers over his own soul—and not in order to save it—to a worldly demiurge crazy for human minds to bend and bow and yield at the event's sweet will.

I am not belittling the spiritual significance of the moral attitude of the absolute atheist. On the contrary, I am emphasizing the kind of mystical disinterestedness, and the elements of greatness and generosity which are implied in it. But I say that this moral attitude also involves a basic inconsistency, and that the whole process is in the end a failure. That rupture with God began as a claim to total independence and emancipation, as a proud revolutionary break with everything that submits man to alienation and heteronomy. It ends up in obeisance and prostrate submission to the all-powerful movement of History, in a kind of sacred surrender of the human soul to the blind god of History.

### III. THE ATHEIST AND THE SAINT

#### *The Initial Act of Rupture Brought About by the Saint*

The failure I have just mentioned reveals to us a fact which has, to my mind, a deep significance: I mean the fact that absolute atheism has a revolutionary power which materially speaking is exceedingly strong, but spiritually speaking is very weak indeed, minute, and deceptive; I mean the fact that its radicalism is an inevitably self-deluded radicalism, for a genuinely revolutionary spirit does not kneel before History, it presumes to make history; I mean the fact that absolute atheism falls short of that uncompromising protest, of that absolute non-compliance the semblance—and the expectation—of which make it seductive for many people.

Thus, we arrive at the point I should like especially to discuss. Which of these two, the Atheist or the Saint, is the more uncompromising and thorough-going, the harder, the more intractable; which has his axe more deeply embedded in the root of the tree? Which brings about the more complete and far-reaching, the cleaner and more radical break?

Let us try to imagine what takes place in the soul of a saint at the crucial moment when he makes his first irrevocable decision.

\*Matth. 10, 39.

Let us consider St. Francis of Assisi when he threw away his raiment and appeared naked before his bishop, out of love for poverty; or St. Benedict Labre when he decided to become a verminous beggar wandering along the roads. At the root of such an act there was something so deep in the soul that it hardly can be expressed, I would say a simple refusal—not a movement of revolt which is temporary, or of despair, which is passive—rather a simple refusal, a total, stable, supremely active refusal to accept things as they are: here it is not a question of knowing whether things and nature and the face of this world are good in their essence—to be sure they are good; being is good insofar as it is being; grace perfects nature and does not destroy it—but these truths have nothing to do with the inner act of rupture, of break, that we are now contemplating. This act is concerned with a fact, an existential fact: Things as they are are not tolerable, positively, definitely not tolerable. In actual existence the world is infected with lies and injustice and wickedness and distress and misery; the creation has been so marred by sin that in the nethermost depths of his soul the saint refuses to accept it as it is. Evil—I mean the power of sin, and the universal suffering it entails, the rot of nothingness that gnaws everywhere—evil is such, that the only thing at hand which can remedy it, and which inebriates the saint with freedom and exultation and love, is to give up everything, the sweetness of the world, and what is good, and what is better, and what is pleasurable and permissible, in order to be free to be with God; it is to be totally stripped and to give himself totally in order to lay hold of the power of the Cross; it is to die for those he loves. That is a flash of intuition and of will over and above the whole order of human morality. Once a human soul has been touched by such a burning wing, it becomes a stranger everywhere. It may fall in love with things, it will never rest in them. To redeem creation the saint wages war on the entire fabric of creation, with the bare weapons of truth and love. This war begins in the most hidden recesses of his own soul and the most secret stirrings of his desire: it will come to an end with the advent of a new earth and new heaven, when all that is powerful in this world will have been humiliated and all that is despised will have been exalted. The saint is alone in treading the winepress, and of the peoples there is no man with him.\*

And I would say that in that war of which I have just spoken his God has given him the example. For, in calling the intellectual

\*Isaiah, 63, 3.

creatures to share in His own uncreated life, God uproots them from the very life of which they are possessed as rooted in nature. And Jews know that God is a hidden God, Who conceals His name and manifests Himself to mankind in prodigies and in the stormy visions of the prophets, in order to renew the face of the earth, and Who has separated for Himself His people from all the nations of the world. And Christians know that God is both so dissatisfied with that lost world which He had made good and which evil has ruined—and at the same time so carried away by love—that He has given His Son and delivered Him over to men, in order to suffer and to die, and in this way redeem the world.

### *The Great God of Idolaters*

To this true God the saint is entirely given. But there are false gods; even, as I shall shortly say, there is a spurious and distorted image of God that can be called the King or Jove of all false gods, the great god of the idolaters. With regard to *this* god, the saint is a thorough atheist, the most atheistic of men—just because he adores *only* God.

Let us dwell a moment on this point. And let us consider the merely rational, merely philosophical concept of God. This concept is twofold: there is the true God of the philosophers, and there is the false god of the philosophers. The true God of the philosophers is but the true God Himself, the God of the saints, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—imperfectly and inchoatively known, known in those attributes only which can be reached by our natural forces: Such a merely rational notion of God is in actual fact open to the supernatural.

But now suppose for yourselves a merely rational notion of God which would know the existence of the Supreme Being, but would disregard at the same time what St. Paul called His glory, deny the abyss of freedom which is meant by His transcendence, and chain Him to the very world He has made. Suppose for yourselves a merely rational—and warped—notion of God which is closed against the supernatural, and makes impossible the mysteries that are hidden in God's love and freedom and incommunicable life. Here we would have the false god of the philosophers, the Jove of all false gods. Imagine a god bound to the order of nature who is no more than a supreme warrant and justification of that order, a god who is responsible for this world without the power of redeeming it, a god whose inflexible will, that no prayer can reach,

is pleased with and hallows all the evil as well as all the good of the universe, all the trickery, wickedness and cruelty together with all the generosity which are at play in nature, a god who blesses iniquity and slavery and misery, and who sacrifices man to the cosmos, and makes the tears of the children and the agony of the innocents a stark ingredient of, and a tribute offered without any compensation to the sacred necessities of eternal cycles or of evolution. Such a god would be the unique supreme Being but made into an idol, the *naturalistic* god of nature, the Jupiter of the world, the great god of the idolaters and of the powerful on their thrones and of the rich in their earthly glory, the god of success which knows no law, and of mere fact set up as law.

I am afraid that such was the God of our modern rationalistic philosophy, the God perhaps of Leibniz and Spinoza, surely the God of Hegel.

Such was also, in quite another mood, not rationalistic, but magical, the God of Pagan antiquity, or rather one of the countenances of that double-faced God. For the pagan God was ambiguous; on the one hand he was the true God of nature and reason, the unknown God of Whom St. Paul spoke to the Athenians; and on the other hand he was the false god of naturalism, the self-contradictory god I have just described, and who does get on very well with the Prince of this world.

It could be added that among Christian sects, some wild Gnostics, especially the followers of Marcion, who regarded the God of the Old Covenant as an evil world-maker in conflict with the Redeemer, mistook for the Creator the same false god I have been discussing, the same absurd Emperor of the world.

And this brings me to the point I want to drive home. The saint, when he brings about the great act of rupture which I stressed earlier, rejects by the same stroke, breaks and annihilates, with an irresistible violence, this spurious Emperor of the world, this false god of naturalism, this great god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich, who is an absurd counterfeit of God, but who is also the imaginary focus whence the adoration of the cosmos radiates, and to whom we pay tribute each time we bow down before the world. With regard to this god the saint is a perfect atheist. Well, were not the Jews and the first Christians often called atheists by the pagans at the time of the Roman Empire? There was a hidden meaning in this slander.\*

\*St. Justin said: "We are called atheists. And yes we confess it, we are atheists of those so-called gods." 1st *Apology*, VI, n. 1.

### *The Case of the Absolute Atheist*

But let us turn at present to our modern atheists, our true and actual atheists—what can we say about them? I would suggest that, in the sense I have just emphasized, the absolute atheist is *not atheist enough*. He, too, is indignant against the Jupiter of this world, against the god of the idolaters, the powerful and the rich; he too decides to get rid of him. But instead of hurling against that false god the strength of the true God, and of giving himself to the work of the true God, as the saint does, the atheist, because he rejects the true God, can only struggle against the Jupiter of this world by calling on the strength of the immanent god of History, and by dedicating himself to the work of that immanent god.

It is indeed because he believes in the revolutionary disruptive power of the impetus of History, and because he expects from it the final emancipation of man, that the atheist delivers over his own soul to the blind god of History. Yet he is caught in a trap. Wait a while, and the blind god of History will appear just as he is—yes, the very same Jupiter of this world, the great god of the idolaters and the powerful on their thrones and the rich in their earthly glory, and of success which knows no law, and of mere fact set up as law. He will reveal himself as this same false god in a new disguise and crowned by new idolaters, and meting out a new brand of power and success. And it is too late for the atheist. As we saw at the beginning, he is possessed by this god. He is on his knees before History. With respect to a god who is not God, he is the most tractable and obedient of the devotees.

And so his break with this world of injustice and oppression was but a shallow and temporary break. More than ever he is subservient to the world. In comparison with the saint, who consummates in his own flesh his initial rupture with the world, and every day dies unto himself, and is blessed with the beatitudes of the poor and the persecuted and all the other friends of God, and who enjoys the perfect freedom of those who are led by the Spirit, the atheist is, it seems to me, a very poor replica of the liberated mind and the heroic insurgent. Nevertheless, as I have tried to point out, it is by an ill-directed longing for inner freedom and for non-acceptance of things as they are that he has been led astray. A somewhat paradoxical, yet, in my opinion, true statement about absolute atheism would be to say that it deprives God and mankind of some potential saints, in bringing to bankruptcy their attempt at heroic

freedom, and turning their effort to break with the world into a total and servile subservience to the world. With all his sincerity and devotion, the authentic, absolute atheist is after all only an abortive saint, and, at the same time, a mistaken revolutionist.

#### IV. THE SAINT AND TEMPORAL HISTORY

##### *A Lost Opportunity*

There is now another paradox, this time in an opposite direction. If we look at the saint, it seems that the inner act through which he achieves his total break with the world and total liberation from the world, making him free from everything but God, will inevitably overflow from the realm of spiritual life onto the realm of temporal life. Thus, if he is not dedicated solely to a contemplative state of existence, he will be led to act as a ferment of renewal in the structures of the world, as a stimulating and transforming energy in social matters and in the field of the activities of civilization.

And this is true, of course. As a matter of fact, it is what has been taking place for centuries. The Fathers of the Church were great revolutionaries. Thomas Aquinas in the order of culture, St. Vincent de Paul in the social field, were eminent examples of genuine radicals, whose initiative brought about decisive changes in the history of civilization. For centuries temporal progress in the world has been furthered by the saints.

Yet, here is the paradox that I just mentioned—the day when, in the course of modern history, a particularly inhuman structure of society, caused by the Industrial Revolution, made the problem of social justice manifestly crucial; when, at the same time, the human mind became aware of the *social* as a specific object of knowledge and activity, and when the first attempts to create workers' organizations provided the beginnings of a historical force capable of acting upon social structures—then was it not the moment for the saints to take the lead in the protest of the poor and in the movement of labor toward its historical coming of age? In actual fact, except for a few men of faith, like Ozanam in France and Toniolo in Italy (they are not yet canonized, but some day they might be), the task, as we know, was not conducted by saints. It even happened that atheists, instead of saints, took the lead in social matters, much to the misfortune of all.

Why such a tragic vacancy? It seems difficult not to see in it a

kind of punishment of the Christian world, which for a long period has more or less failed Christianity in its practical behavior, and despised the lessons of the saints, and abandoned to their fate, here below, that great flock which also belongs to Christ, that immense herd of men whom destitution and unlivable conditions of existence kept chained to hell on earth. Let us not be mistaken. During the time of which I am speaking, the saints were not lacking on the earth; there was a considerable flowering of saints in the last century. But they did not pass beyond the field of spiritual, apostolic or charitable activities: they did not cross the threshold of temporal, social, secular activity. And thus the gap was not filled, because in the historical age which is ours, the indirect repercussion of the inner renewal of conscience upon the external structures of society is definitely not enough, although it answers a basic need and has made progressively more possible such social changes as the abolition of slavery. A specifically social activity, an activity which directly aims at improving and recasting the structures of temporal life, is also needed.

Why has this kind of activity been neglected by a great many Christians in the past? Is it on account of their supposed contempt for the world, as people say? Nonsense! The saints break with the world, but they have no contempt for creation; that they leave to apprentices. As for the general run of Christians, one need but look at them—at ourselves—(as François Mauriac reminded us rather bluntly in the second *Semaine des Intellectuels Catholiques*)\* to be assured that we do not despise the world in the least and that we are “of the earth,” as it is said in the new devotional jargon. No; the reason for which activities directly aiming at the structural changes required by social justice have been lacking for so many centuries, is quite simple: the means of exercising such activities were non-existent. In the seventeenth century Saint Vincent de Paul could found hospitals but he could not found trade unions. It was only after the Industrial Revolution and the way in which it developed that the possibility of directly social activity could enter people’s imaginations, and that such a directly social, and not only spiritual or charitable, activity has become a crying need.

Perhaps a concrete example will help to make clear the difference between the two kinds of activity I have mentioned. A poor priest named Cottolengo, who was a saint (though his name is not to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) founded in Turin, in

\*See *Foi en Jésus-Christ et Monde d’aujourd’hui*. Editions de Flore. Paris, 1949.

the first half of the past century, a hospital that rapidly grew into a sort of huge city of all kinds of infirmity and human misery; hundreds of the poor were fed and cared for every day. But Cottolengo had established the rule that none of the money contributed for the support of his Institute should ever be saved and invested. Money each day received from the Providence of God should be spent each day, for "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."\* There is even a story that one evening, as he saw that his assistants had set aside a certain amount of money for the morrow, Cottolengo threw that money out of the window—which in our modern world is the height of insanity, and perhaps of sacrilege. This course of action was in itself perfectly revolutionary, and all the more revolutionary in that it succeeded (Cottolengo's work has thrived in an astounding manner; it is now one of the most important institutions in Turin). Yet such a course of action, for all its spiritual significance, remained of no social consequence. It transcended the social problem. The social problem must be managed and solved in its own order. For half a century men of good will have realized better and better that the temporal mission of those who believe in God is to take over the job. Still, we must not forget that, even in the simple perspective of the temporal community, Christian social action is not enough; political action is even less so, however necessary both of them may be. What is required of those who believe in God is a witness of God; and what the world demands and expects of the Christian is first and foremost to see the love of truth and brotherly love made genuinely present in and through man's personal life—to see a gleam of the Gospel shining in the one place where the crucial test and crucial proof are to be found, namely the obscure context of relations from person to person.

*The Christian World is Neither Christianity Nor the Church*

I have just spoken of the historical deficiencies of the Christian world. Parenthetically, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, I should like to point out that by these words, "the Christian world," I am designating a sociological category, which is involved in the order and history of temporal civilizations, and is a thing of this world. The Christian world is neither Christianity nor the Church. The failures of the Christian world have no power to tarnish the Church or Christianity.

There has been, moreover, a good deal of confusion on this score.

\*Matth. 6, 34.

Neither Christianity nor the Church have a mission to make men happy, their business is to tell them the truth—not to bring about justice and freedom in the political society, but to give mankind salvation and eternal life. No doubt this lays upon them the additional task of quickening the energies of justice and love in the depths of temporal existence and thus making that existence more worthy of man. Yet the successful accomplishment of such a task depends on the way in which the divine message is received. It is at this point that we are confronted with the responsibilities of the Christian world, that is, of the social groups of Christian denomination at work in secular history.

It is nonsense to reproach the Christians, as we often see it done today, with not having baptized "the Revolution," and with not having devoted their whole energies to "the Revolution." The messianic myth of "the Revolution" is a secularized perversion of the idea of the advent of God's Kingdom; it is apt to warp the course of human history, and to turn into failures the particular, genuine and genuinely progressive revolutions—the revolutions without a capital R—that are bound to follow one another as long as human history endures. But it is not nonsense to reproach Christians in the world with having failed to bring about at certain given times such needed particular revolutions. It is not nonsense to reproach them, more generally, with being sinners—they know very well that they are—who more or less always betray Christianity. Most important of all, it is certainly not nonsense to reproach the many people in modern times who are paying lip-service to the God in Whom they think they believe, with being in fact practical atheists.

### *Men Today Need Signs*

According to one of our previous remarks,\* if a new age of civilization is to come rather than a new age of barbarism, the deepest requirement of such an age will be the sanctification of secular life, a fecundation of social, temporal existence by spiritual experience, contemplative energies and brotherly love.

I dare say that we have not yet reached that stage. For the moment we are at the lowest point; human history today is in love with fear and absurdity, human reason with despair. The powers of illusion are spreading all over the world, throwing all compasses off direction. The faculty of language has been so dishonored, the

\*Chapter VII, pp. 94-96, 101-102.

meaning of words so thoroughly falsified; so many truths, met with at every corner in press or radio reports, are at each moment so perfectly mixed with so many errors similarly advertized, and trumpeted to the skies, that men are simply losing the sense of truth. They have been lied to so often that they have become addicted, and need their daily dose of lies as a daily tonic. They look as if they believed in all this; but they are beginning to lead a kind of clandestine mental life in which they will believe nothing they are told, but will rely only upon savage experience and elementary instincts. They are surrounded on all sides by spurious marvels and false miracles, which dazzle and blind their minds.

Things being as they are, it seems clear that the wisest reasonings and the most eloquent demonstrations and the best managed organizations are definitely not enough for the men of this time. Men today need *signs*. They need deeds. Above all they need tangible signs to reveal to them the reality of things divine. Yet there is everywhere a considerable shortage of thaumaturges, though they probably are the kind of a commodity we need the most.

At this point I should like to bring back to our minds a saying of Pascal. "We always behave," Pascal has said, "as if we were called upon to make the truth triumph, whereas we are called upon only to struggle for it."

It does not rest with us to give men miracles. It is up to us to practice what we believe.

Here it seems well to stress one of the deepest meanings of absolute atheism. In so doing we shall but be brought back to the conclusion of the preceding chapter. As I put it, absolute atheism is "a translation into crude and inescapable terms, a ruthless counterpart, an avenging mirror, of the practical atheism of too many believers who do not actually believe." It is both the fruit and the condemnation of practical atheism, its image reflected in the mirror of divine wrath. If this diagnosis is true, then we must go on to say that it is impossible to get rid of absolute atheism without first getting rid of practical atheism. Furthermore this has become clear to everyone that from now onwards a decorative Christianity is not enough, even for our existence in this world. The faith must be an actual faith, practical and living. To believe in God must mean to live in such a manner that life could not possibly be lived if God did not exist. Then the earthly hope in the Gospel can become the quickening force of temporal history.