

What is Wrong with God?

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Some thoughts about modern
atheism

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Come to think of it, Nietzsche's famous phrase: God is dead, has a peculiar ring to it. It is not an unqualified statement of atheism, a simple denial of the existence of God; it is rather the announcement that someone who was alive at some time has died. God existed, he exists no more. A straight atheism would have tried to prove that God is not, does not exist, cannot exist. Not so Nietzsche: for him God has died. The one who is acclaimed by a long tradition as the Immortal, has disappeared from the scene, his time is over. God is dead.

It would be too easy an answer if we decided that, in any case, Nietzsche is dead. We can perhaps qualify Nietzsche's statement and say that in view of the faith of ever so many theists, God is not really dead yet. But, somehow, we have to agree that something is wrong with God. It would be accurate to say, resuming Nietzsche's imagery, that if God is not really dead, he is at any rate sick. If he has not disappeared yet, it is at least clear that his appearance is not quite what it should be. And it seems timely to ask: what is the matter with God? Or, again more closely to Nietzsche's language: what has become of God?

I think we can dispense with arguing the actuality of the problem. Ever since the Bishop of Woolwich wrote his *Honest to God*, it has been clear that God has become a problem generally, also within the fold of the Christian churches. Bonhoeffer's program of a life in a world come of age 'as if God did not exist' also finds a rather amazing following. And it has been reported from the United States that a whole school of young theologians is emerging who try to develop a christianity without God. The notable thing about these authors is that here too, as in Nietzsche, connection is sought between the new problem of God and *modern* man. If not all these writers go all the way to a straight affirmation of God's death, the problem seems to be very much linked to specific characteristics of man of our times. If the God of our fathers hasn't died, he is at any rate not quite fit for an age of space flights, technological civilization, world unification, pragmatic politics – for modern man.

The historical dimension which is brought in in this way is indeed so prominent that it seems hardly possible any more to discuss atheism, or any other religious problem, apart from an explicit reference to the type of man who is asking the question. This is in

itself the most peculiar feature of the present quest for clarity in matters religious. Modern atheism, too, is not so much a denial of God's existence in itself, it is much more a statement of modern man's inability to believe that there is a God or to believe in God. That is why we can speak with some significance of God's death. The historical connotation implied in the concept of death points to the kind of life God once had: in the faith or in the conviction of man. God is dead because man is not able any more to believe in God in the same way as former generations did.

We have to go even farther. If, for historical analysis, the growth of atheism can be explained by modern man's inability to believe, modern religious thinkers appear to be very much aware of this inability and are trying to build a kind of conceptualization that would be acceptable to modern man. This means that we are turning the tables, so to speak. There has been a time when the atheist turned away from the Church or was ousted from the Church; now the Church herself is – or at least some of her theologians are – struggling with the problem how to formulate a faith that would fit the mind of the modern unbeliever or atheist. It would seem that man's willingness and capacity to believe have become the norm of faith. This is, as I hope is evident, far too rash a statement to be taken seriously, but it should help to make clear that the present situation is an intricate one indeed.

It is perhaps advisable that, before entering upon a discussion of modern atheism, we remind ourselves of some of the basic features of the problem as such. The problem 'whether God exists or not' is obviously a fake one, or at any rate, it does not seem to be the proper way of asking the question. For one thing, in order to ask the question meaningfully we would have to explain first what these concepts stand for, what we mean by 'God' and by 'exists'. But, furthermore, we would have to explain what the thrust of the problem is, why we think the question is worth asking. What if, after our long exposition of the arguments for the existence of God, someone told us: So what? What difference does it make? What I am trying to say here is that as far as I can see most of the proofs for the existence of God and most arguments about this age-old problem really miss the point when it comes to deciding the question. St Thomas is obviously not really asking whether God exists, but how God's existence can be proven, and so are most of his followers. And it is beyond doubt that St Thomas and Kant are not talking about the same kind of thing, even if they both presumably talk about God. Thus we should say that there is a whole set of problems that should be treated before we can arrive at the stage of rationally arguing God's existence. This is not to say that the question whether such a God exists in the sense that he has being of himself and in himself objectively, independently of our belief that he exists, is meaningless. But the matter is not really decided on the level of rational and philosophical reasoning. The

latter functions far more as a process of taking account of one's position in life, of being aware, and reflexively aware, of what really carries one on. It also helps to control one's attitude, to be consistent, to bring order, to rise above the level of passing moods, and to bring life to a focus, and we should be very careful not to devalue the functions of reason in human life – but part of being rational is being rational about one's own rationality. And it is good to be aware of the fact that when talking about God we are talking about much more, we are talking about ourselves too.

This essay should be not a personal statement of faith, or unfaith, or doubt, but an attempt at analysis of the modern problem of God. We should try to explain why modern man has so much more trouble to believe in God and how it is possible that atheism has become a quite respectable attitude in modern society. Thus we are faced not with a properly theological or philosophical question, but with a cultural-historical one. And we have to use sociological and psychological rather than theological concepts and modes of expression. We are dealing with man and his unbelief, not with God and his rights in this world or the sin of unbelief.

The Roots of Belief

Now, why should man believe in God? What in his life would induce him to accept the existence of something or someone beyond the reality of his life and this world, which or who would have an influence on his life and on his way of life, bind him morally, be his ultimate concern? Why should not he just accept the reality of human life as it comes, try to enjoy it, and accept the fact that it is a transitory thing? Why should man try to reach beyond himself, and seek a reality more stable than his own, and centre his life around a reality other than his own? Why, in fact, should he look away from the joys and pleasures of his life and from the fulfilment he can find on this earth, and sacrifice them to a kind of life and happiness and fulfilment that he can never be sure will come? Why should not man be content with what life has to offer?

These, and similar, questions sound very reasonable and perhaps we should take them more seriously than we usually do. But that is not the point here. The strange thing is that we have to accept as sheer evidence that in fact, in a long long history, man has always developed some sort of belief in a world other than his own and found life in this world lacking in wholeness and meaning. Atheism, as a culturally defined and respectable stance, is a newcomer on the scene of history with an as yet rather short past. This is, of course, no argument against atheism. Electricity too is a new phenomenon (the technical use of it, that is) so is atomic power, and democracy as a widely accepted system of government, and science as a means of improving man's life situation, and the world-wide network of communications, and international traffic. Atheism too could turn

out to be a cultural achievement of modern man. It has been described in such terms, as the final victory of man over his anxiety and as a sign of his coming of age. Nietzsche's solemn declaration that God is dead is the proclamation of man's triumph. But this should not prevent us from trying to understand why, then, man has always believed that he should seek refuge in the reality of the superhuman, and why he should not do so any more.

Human life is really an open-ended question, a question which does not contain its answer. And this question is not asked academically, by the people in the universities and schools, but it is a question to which the answer must be given by every man. There are many many attempts to define human existence, to define man; some of these definitions are optimistic, some rather gloomy, some funny, some serious, some very deep, some mysterious, some flippant. But somewhere along the line all these descriptions have to acknowledge the basic fact that man knows about himself. They are all self-definitions. They are all attempts to say what we are. And, therefore, they are all saying in one way or another that man is a problem to himself. This is a basic feature about us which we cannot avoid, and which makes us, whether we want it or not, more than just living creatures. We should note this well. This is not a condition we can choose. Life, human life, comes to us as a self-conscious life, a life that knows about itself. We could add this one to the list of definitions of man: man is the animal that asks questions about himself.

Life as Task

There is more to this: the life man knows about is not of his own making. It comes in a certain way – it comes as a finite thing, a life that has to end in death, a life that is insecure *vis-d-vis* the powers of nature, a life that is threatened even from within. It is a life that imposes itself on man as a task but does not bring with it the kind of satisfaction and fulfilment man would ask from it. In a way, we could say, life does not keep its promises, it is stacked with frustrations. We can also say that we are too big for the smallness of the life we have received. Our hopes are always more than can come true, our demands on life larger than life is willing to give. There is little help in being more realistic about it all – facing life as it comes makes it look like an odd enterprise, an absurd undertaking, or it makes us live at a subhuman level, denying the very fact that we are human. There is a strange kind of discrepancy between what we know our lives are and what we are inclined to think they should be.

Nevertheless, life is a task, it imposes itself upon us. Life cannot be lived if it is not accepted, if man does not take it upon himself to live it. To live it in face of the frustrations that beset it, to make it human, means to live it actively, to make something of it. Human life as it comes is an invitation, a challenge. It demands a sort of

devotion, an active commitment, an acceptance of the task of living. What it will be depends on this willingness to make it work. Thus it requires the courage to be, the courage to live – in the face of death, of nothingness, of failure, of suffering.

These are quite common insights, nowadays, as is the insight that on the basis of this kind of analysis of the human condition we can account for the phenomenon of religion, of a religious faith, of belief in some god. What, in fact, is more natural, more understandable, than that out of his hope for the fullness of life and in the face of death man should develop a belief in a life beyond death? That out of his experience of life's goodness man should believe in a goodness that can conquer the evils that beset human life? That in his search for meaning man, not finding the full meaning of life in life itself, would call upon a source of meaning that transcends his own life, his own being, the smallness of his own existence?

We should be careful, though, not to make these connections too easily. The religious phenomenon, as found in history, is more complex and the human reality on which it rests is not so simple either. Notably one should be aware that religion is not only built on a human need for security, God being some kind of refuge, but also on the need for a motive to live, God being the ultimate concern, and it is by making this distinction that we can perhaps throw more light on this rather new thing in religious history: atheism.

The Problem of Life and The Problem of Living

When we go back to what we said before about the human condition, there are really *two* main problems, not just one. The first is the fact that life is beset with frustrations and that we should like life to be more in accordance with our own needs. The second is that whether we want it or not, we are called to live this life. We could say, perhaps, that there is a problem of the meaning of life and a problem of the meaning of living. The two problems are really quite distinct. It was Camus, I believe, who said that the basic problem for man was the question of suicide, i.e. why to live at all. That would illustrate the problem of living. It has also been suggested that the basic problem is whether man is alone in the universe. And this would perhaps illustrate the problem of life.

The two questions are not unrelated. Any good textbook on psychoanalytic theory will have some remarks about the need for relative security as a condition for an adult active life, but will at the same time define adulthood in terms of the ability to cope with the anxiety problem and to live an active and constructive life. That is, the anxiety problem, or the problem of wholeness, or – to take up our own terms – the problem of life, should be solved or dealt with before the problem of activity, creativity, living can be tackled, but the latter belongs to man's maturity, his coming of age. This is a remarkable theory because the suggestion is that maturity is not

reached when one has come to terms with the problems of life, but rather when one has acquired the ability to live without being hampered by the problems of life or the anxiety problem. One has passed a stage and enters upon active life. The problems of life are left behind in order to take up the problem of living.

We can perhaps bring this view into a larger scheme of reference. What we are thinking of here is a distinction more or less in line with the one Bergson made between open and closed religion, open and closed morality. One of the striking things of life, especially in an evolutionary perspective, is that it never really submits to being fully closed. At the moment that a form of life is fully integrated in itself the form is broken open or cast aside. Evolution, growth is not possible except when the form is torn apart. This is a law, I would say, of human life too. A life that is too well integrated becomes sterile. It is the people who are still struggling who make the real contributions to the wisdom of the race, to its technical achievements. We should go even further. The fact of evolution and growth itself is apparently as much a law of life as its attempts at integrated forms, but these two are, if not completely at odds, at least in constant tension with each other. Clear examples of this kind of tension one finds in the best observable instance of growth: in the human life cycle. Up to the age at which the human individual is able to decide for himself, life is growing at the cost of stages of relative integration. More than that: growth leads away from security, and into responsibility for one's own life.

By now the reader may wonder where I am trying to lead him, but we really have not strayed away very far. The point is that we may find the same kind of tension at the basis of man's religious life, that the problem of life and the problem of living are to be viewed in a similar perspective. And I think they should. Moreover, I am sure that with this approach we can throw considerable light on the modern problem of God.

If we try to understand what both tendencies lead to in the realm of religion we will see definite connections between certain religious attitudes and elements of religious systems and a primacy of one or the other of the two ways of asking the question of meaning. The problem of life seems to lead to magic, to use of the sacred for human purposes, to a man-centred kind of religion in which certainty and security are predominant, to a religion of consolation and comfort. The problem of living approach leads to a more open, courageous kind of religion, to an attitude of service and love, to a God-centred attitude, a religion of devotion and commitment. On another level, the level of conceptualization we will find the first attitude linked up with closed systems of ideas, with dogmatic thinking, with devotion-alism; the second with a searching mind, with openness to new ideas and discussions, with self-critical thought. These are, of course, very rough and unrefined characterizations which need to be worked

out, but the general tendencies are clear. In religious life we find indeed a continuation of the distinctions we made earlier. There is a kind of religious life which centres around man's attempt to make himself at home in this world and which consists in filling the gaps of natural existence with supernatural elements. There is also a kind of religious life that finds living a sacred duty, a holy adventure, a god-given challenge. And these two kinds of religious attitudes are in constant tension with each other, the latter breaking down the former as growing breaks down integration.

Now, in this perspective we can, I think, understand some of the most salient features of modern atheism.

Two Kinds of God

Atheism is, this should be clear at the outset, a negative sort of thing. It does not in itself consist in a positive affirmation. It is either a negation of God's existence or the absence of an affirmation of God's existence. There may be a very positive affirmation behind it, such as the conviction that man should be willing to live his life by his own powers, or that this world is sufficient to itself. But, then, this is not atheism yet, for atheism is a consequence or an implication which has no meaning except in the discussion with theism. The word itself has no significance but in the face of the possibility of an affirmation of God. It may be the case that in fact the atheism of a thinker is very much on the outskirts of his thought, and does not really play a role in the development of his thinking. Yet, he would be called an atheist only in confrontation with the question of God's existence.

This consideration leads to an interesting implication. Atheism apparently implies an idea of God. Just as the proofs for God's existence presupposes a certain conception of God, so does the denial of God's existence. And thus we are always justified in asking what kind of God it is whose existence is being denied, or is not affirmed. Most likely the real differences occur on this level of the pre-rational definition of the God we are talking about. Most probably the modern theist, someone like Bishop Robinson, does not believe in the God the modern atheist rejects. Therefore traditional theists have called him an atheist. But the discussion is idle and void. The question lies on another level, the level of what kind of God the talk is about.

It is on precisely this level that the distinction made in this article between the problem of life and the problem of living seems to play an important role. This distinction, to be sure, is between forms of human self-experience in this world, not conceptions of God, but the two seem to be very closely connected. It does make a difference whether one feels at home in this world and is ready to work on it, or feels threatened and anguished. The kind of God one needs must be quite different too: a God who gives man his blessing and lets

him work out his problems himself, or a God who is ever ready to help man in his needful existence.

For, whatever God be in his absolute being in himself, what we feel and think about him is related to the way we think and feel about ourselves. This is not to say, with Feuerbach, that all the talk about God is about man and about man alone, but it *is* about man too. And this phase of the argument interests us most.

I am aware of the dangers of bringing history into theoretical schemes. Yet, I would like to suggest that, very, very roughly, there is in human history a pattern of growth in human selfhood, man coming into his own, and that this pattern of growth reflects itself in the religious history of man. If this be granted – the space available here does not permit arguing the point – then we can indeed say that the development has been away from a problem of life attitude and toward a problem of living attitude. And in the line of the earlier discussion of these concepts we are justified in appreciating this development as a growth into maturity – which does not imply that we are at the end of the line! The processes involved here can be indicated very quickly.

The God of Precarious Life

Anyone who has some acquaintance with primitive religion – either among actually ‘primitive’ people or among people living in this modern age — knows that it is marked by a high degree of concreteness and of a mainly magical approach to the sacred. The world of these people is filled with Sacred Presences, and qualities of the sacred inhere in almost everything. There is probably nothing in this world which has not, at some time and at some place, been considered as Holy. Trees, lakes, rivers; animals of all sorts, people of distinctive quality or social status, places and times, even human excrements, have been bearers of sacred power. Primitive man is surrounded, his whole life is ordered by these Sacred Presences. On the other hand, much of his religious behaviour is an attempt at dominating these sacred powers, at putting them to his own use. He tries to get the Powers to give him rain, to bless his marriage with offspring, to heal the sick. To most of us, moderns, this world of the primitive is rather far off and almost unintelligible, but it *is* a human world, a human way of life, a possibility within the range of human conduct and self-understanding. So it should be possible to enter into it and this might help us to see better where we are ourselves.

What then characterizes this primitive man? Perhaps the best way to approach him is to say that he really does not know, does not understand, the world he is living in, that is: the world of his concrete everyday life. He gives the impression of being bewildered most of the time, of not finding his way, of not being able to control his life. Life itself is very much a mystery to him, and not knowing, e.g. how to locate the parts of the body, the meaning of blood, the

function of the heart, he loads them with a mysterious meaning related to the mystery of life itself. Trees, lakes, rivers, delineate the world he lives in, and are related to the powers that brought him to live this life. Not understanding causal connections he links things together which we now know don't belong together. In all sorts of rituals he expresses his will to live and to control his destiny at the same time as his powerlessness to do so effectively. His lack of understanding and control makes him feel subject to the powers that rule his life. And these powers are very concrete: famine, lack of rain, the river, the fish in the lake, the animals in the forest. The primitive lives by the grace of his surroundings. And in his effort to see meaning in it all, to create some order, he 'dreams' it together into some sort of mysterious universe in which at least he can feel at ease.

Thus, it would seem primitive man is very much engaged in the task of living and in overcoming the anxieties that beset life. And there is a primary concern with life's security. It's not that the problem of living itself is not present, but it is like a hidden motive behind it all, an instinctive will to live that leads to efforts to come to terms with life's precariousness. It is out of this insecurity, this anxiety, this being subject to uncontrollable powers, that primitive religion grows. It is the need of human existence that makes man reach out to, and, in his magic, try to master these powers beyond his control, powers that he fears and wants to keep friendly, powers that in their mightiness fill him with awe, powers that are mysterious but visible, powers he has to come to terms with if he is going to live. Primitive religion, therefore, can be described rather closely in terms of the immediate experience of life's precariousness. I'm not willing to explain it fully as a projection of man's needy situation, but very definitely the forms it takes, the sort of symbols it uses, the concretizations of the sacred that characterize it, are to be seen in close relation to the experience of existential need.

The God of the Challenge of Living

Modern man looks quite different. Here we have to do with a type of man who knows fairly well how to cope with life's immediate problems, whose life is, if not fully, at any rate to a large extent secure. Perhaps it's difficult to be actually aware of some of these things since we have grown too accustomed to most of the ordinary amenities of life to see them as real accomplishments. But the food supply is not a basic problem any more, ill-health is not such a threat any more, and so on. The most important thing about it, however, is not that modern man has all these things and will have more, but that he is aware of making them himself. If anything, modern man is master over nature and in control over his life. Life's precariousness is not an every-day problem and man knows it to be his own task to make it less of a problem. Nature is not a great mystery surrounding us, but a reality which in principle is open to

man's understanding and control. We may perhaps be vaguely aware that somewhere deep down it is really a mystery, and at some peculiar moments we may actually undergo a very lively experience of this mystery, but it does not enter into our every-day lives. It's not concrete, not omnipresent, not continually threatening or awe-inspiring. In fact, modern man feels quite at home in this world and he knows his way around in it. The mystery of life and nature is pushed back to the fringes of life, and disquieting facts like death and incurable illnesses really do not enter into the scheme of day-to-day living. Even such phenomena as guilt feelings are often successfully dealt with in psychotherapy without explicit reference to the brokenness of man's existence. Life, indeed, seems to be less precarious.

These characteristics of modern man are commonly known and do not need any further elaboration. What I would like to point out, though, is that the developments which have led up to this modern way of life are to be seen in terms of what I called earlier the challenge of the problem of living. Modern times have not come about all by themselves. Behind it all is the will of man to grow, to expand, to develop himself. The historical process that lies between the primitive situation and our own days is a process in which man has gained control over nature, in which, gradually, he has overcome his fears and anxieties and dared to go new ways by leaving the old syntheses behind. In this process, at every point of importance, man has preferred living courageously to living securely. His tendency to grow has prevailed over his tendency to seek safety.

In the realm of religion too this has been a dramatic process in which systems of belief have been broken down in order to free man to live out his own life and to follow new insights and new possibilities. The relative security of the observation of certain tabus had to be given up in order to enquire into their real nature, sacred customs had to be violated, cherished beliefs to be undermined, sacred usages to be sacrificed. For wherever a religious system tends to be closed it really stands in the way of those who vaguely see a reality beyond the system, another way to explain this world. It is the man who dares give up this relative security, who brings about the possibility of a new stage of growth.

In fact, this process has meant a steady desacralization of this world. The sacred, omnipresent, and realistically concrete in the primitive world had to be removed so that this world could become man's world. The sacred animal had to become plain food, the sacred tree had to be sacrificed to a new road, the confidence in magic ritual had to make room for more rational or, later, scientific devices to further the fertility of the land. The sacred had to become more abstract, less concrete. It had to be redefined so it would not hamper man in his efforts to make human life secure in this world. And, in fact, we see, in the history of man's religious life, a gradual spiritualization of the sacred, the emergence of an ever higher and

more spiritual conception of the powers beyond, culminating in the monotheistic conception of the one God, or the removal of all sacred realities except the one God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, who is not part of this world but beyond it.

Hand in hand with the process of desacralization goes another development: the decrease of magical elements in religious attitudes and practices. That is to say, that, on the one hand, the higher conception of the sacred, leads to an attitude of awe and service rather than to attempts at using the sacred, and, on the other, the very growth in understanding and control over the world one lives in leads to a sort of self-reliance and self-confidence rather than to reliance on attempts to control ineffectively uncontrollable powers. To the extent that man learns to live in this world, he becomes more at ease in it, feels better at home in it, and learns, indeed, to live himself, to rely on his own work and effort. And where he begins to understand the practical working of things, where he gets a glimpse of the laws of nature, the mystery of the uncontrollable might falls away. The sacred loses therefore more and more of its concreteness and omnipresence, it is located differently, and, most of all, it is not so much the frightening power that constricts and threatens man by holding him in a rather arbitrary dependence, but slowly becomes the Father who blesses man in his efforts to live. And then, less and less, man turns to the sacred for help in concrete emergencies or tries to put the mysterious power to his use, but relies on his own power: the power of reason and technical skill.

The System and the Heretic

The struggle which we indicate here, is, this should be clear, a struggle between integration and growth, between relative security and the will to live better and more intensely. On the religious level this becomes the struggle between established religious systems and the religious duty to live out human possibilities – between a sacred order of life and a sacred order to live – in which the latter carries the day. We should be quite honest about this. Where religion, historically, has furthered human progress, it was by breaking down earlier established forms – and it helped only as long as it had not become a system itself. Every religious innovator of importance has been a heretic in the system he denied. Socrates was ordered to kill himself on the charge of atheism, and Jesus too was the victim of late Judaism in its introverted systematized form. And, whether founded explicitly on a religious basis or not, we find in every creative movement in history some of the elements of a religious devotion to a great cause. It is commonly accepted now that Marxism in its prime was, and still is a quasi-religious movement. The kind of dedication it asks and is able to evoke, the enthusiasm of its devotees and their willingness to suffer for its ideals have often been noticed as being basically religious in nature. We can hardly deny either that in

fact it has been a very progressive movement which has changed Western society rather deeply and for the better. Would the injustices of the capitalist system have been overcome without it? It would be hard to prove that the most significant parts of modern social legislation are not related to the Marxist protest. And it would be sheer intellectual dishonesty if we did not evaluate this Marxist initiative as a real contribution to human progress.

One may have the feeling that at this point I am leading the reader astray. Marxism clearly is an explicitly atheist movement and should not be called a religion. I agree, no orthodox Marxist would accept the epithet. But there is in the Marxist movement, and in other atheist movements for that matter, a strong motivation that, at any rate, looks very religious. And we should acknowledge that they are appealing to value apprehensions that are basic to the Christian movement too. Their atheism looks very much like a protest against a belief in a God who stands in the way of real human progress – which is progress in a Christian view also: the furtherance of social justice in the community of man. We have a right, I think, to interpret this particular social movement and, more generally, a good deal of modern atheism as a religiously inspired protest against an established form of religion, i.e. the Christian Church, at a time when the Church really stood in the way of human progress, of the growth of man into maturity, which was experienced as a sacred duty.

To explain this further we have to go back again to the distinction we made earlier between the problem of life and the problem of living, or between the problem of man's insecurity and of man's task of living. The few remarks we made about primitive and modern man pointed to an important historical fact: in the course of history man has indeed managed to conquer a great deal of his insecurity, and this was because he accepted the task of living. The implication for man's religious life is that one of the basic problems on which it builds is of less and less importance. The security-pole in the subjective motivation to believe in a supernatural reality which sustains man has, if not fallen away, lost much of its force. It is the other pole, the call to commitment and courageous acceptance of the challenge of living that has gained. And this change, basic to the understanding of modern man, has made necessary a full reconsideration of the problem of man's religion and of the conception of God. A reconsideration which, in the Christian churches, is only now getting on its way.

Of course, it would be too much of an overstatement to say that modern man has fully conquered his insecurity. Life is precarious, death is a fact, and the brokenness of man's life and existence, the discrepancy between his ideals and his actual living, his guilt problem, are there to stay. But there is something in this modern type of man that refuses to take an easy way out. He would rather face

the reality of his death than take refuge in the expectation of a life after death. He would rather learn to live with his brokenness than believe in some mysterious healing grace that does work apart from his own efforts. There is a great deal of honesty and realism in this man who does not want to be anything more than he is: a mortal man, who knows that he has to build his own world, his own life, to die his own death. And thus life's insecurity and precariousness are not a reason to believe in another, a larger world, but a challenge to live notwithstanding these last limits which, as we remarked already, are not as central to day-to-day life as they were to pre-modern man.

Part of this attitude is due to the structure of modern man's rationality. First of all, most of this man's thinking capacity goes into the actual organization of life itself, is practical and highly rational, and deals much less with mysterious realities than with very concrete and technical problems. But, also, modern man's mind does not stand still before the mystery where he meets it. The unknown is a challenge, the universe is open to his imaginative mind and he has learned to live with the expectation that some new discovery will open up even further perspectives, even farther reaching possibilities. He does not live in a closed universe, does not even want to close his view on it, to round it off. He does not need to fill the gaps in his understanding. Something might be discovered which would solve the problem and in principle there is no limit to his understanding. He may be vaguely aware of limits, but he is fairly sure we have not reached them yet. He has seen too many victories over nature to believe that he cannot solve some of the riddles that seem to go beyond his powers at the present time. To bind himself to a God who would fill the gaps of his knowledge would be counter to his experience that these gaps could be filled otherwise.

Doing without God

Even more incisive perhaps than these two characteristics of modern rationality is the insight man has gained into his own being. Philosophy, psychology, sociology have brought him to distrust his own thoughts. He is aware of his basic irrational nature and of the danger that his affirmations, if not controlled by serious self-criticism, might be just projections of his deeper wishes. Believing in God might be a father-projection or an hypostatization of society. He has seen and studied the history of man's religious life and understood some of the human realities that were objectified in religious symbol systems. It is not impossible; on the contrary, it is most likely that some of man's religious ideas and beliefs are in fact sheer projections of man's own frustrations. I have referred to this view earlier in this article and accepted it. But how could one firmly believe in a God if one cannot be sure that he is really there? His existence is not controllable, not a fact. We can never really point to him, say where he is,

and it is only too likely that we believe in him because we are not willing to face the real facts of life. We would perhaps like him to exist and to be a Father to us, but is not this escapism? Does not life itself teach us the hard lessons of illness and death? And once you have accepted these facts and learned to live with them, it is amazing how life can still be exciting and good. It is amazing indeed how well we can do without God. We do, most of the time, all of us. This world is man's world, and we can and should be at peace in it.

All of this really comes down to denying, one way or another, man's need for God, for a God to fill the gaps. I think that this is what Bonhoeffer meant when he said that in a world come of age, in a world that can do without the god-hypothesis, we should live as if there were no God. God is not there any more where he was necessary to round off this world: the by definition inexplicable Being that was brought in to explain the inexplicable, the comforter who would take away the edge of life's harshness, the refuge that would make life seem less serious than it is. This God man does not need because he has become aware of himself and would rather be just what he is: man, man in this world. That is also what Nietzsche felt: this God prevented man from being really himself, and man won by killing God. God is dead, so man can live. It is the God who was said not to allow medical treatment of children, and the God who was said to have declared that the sun turned around the earth, and the God who had created all people equal except the Negroes and the Jews and the working class, and the God who made evolutionary evidence a lie. It was, in one word, the God who urged man to accept his life and made it unnecessary to work for its betterment.

It may seem that I am overstating the case in this way. And, in a way, indeed I am. The picture is indeed more complicated. Not all atheism is a real fight against this God. Much of it, statistically perhaps most of it, is rather simply not asking the question. But, apart from the fact that this might be true of much traditional theism too, it should not be forgotten that this widely spread atheism is, in fact, the consequence of not needing this God any more, of lives whose security is ascertained in a world that seems to be able to cope with its own problems. This atheism appears often as a system as closed as the religious systems against which the protest was directed. And there is also an atheism that suffers under itself, an atheism that is not triumphant at all, for which human existence is indeed absurd and tragic but that cannot overcome intellectual doubts and cannot arrive at faith. But here we have to do with an atheism for which God is the one we characterized, for which God is the miracle worker who has become unbelievable or a refuge unworthy of man, and which does ask the question, more basic than ever, of the problem of living but does not arrive at an answer, does not dare to arrive at an answer. And lastly, there are theists for whom God is not the kind of God I characterized above, for whom God is

not an easy refuge or an inhibition on man's growth, or a well-defined key to the problems of the universe we live in. It is of these I want to speak now.

He who orders man to be man

All through this article runs the distinction between man's need to see meaning in his life as a given situation and man's need to find a motive to live out his life, to grow. I have tried to argue that modern atheism is linked up with the conflict between these two in the sense that where religious conceptions, and the conception of God, are too much bound up with the first side of the dichotomy, they are likely to be the victim of man's growth. I've maintained also that this process of growth itself is or can be a religious event. I should show now what conception of God would be at the basis of this religious orientation.

If the 'God of security is dead' (as Verhoeven expresses it) it does not mean that God is dead. God may enter a life by way of making it into a sacred duty. God may be conceived of as the Commissioner, as the Creator who by making man able to carry responsibility, calls him into responsibility. God may be the one who puts man in charge and orders him to be man. God may be the one who demands justice and love in this world and who orders man to explore the universe and to conquer it. God may be the answer not to the quest for wholeness and security, but to the question why I should go on and live this life. The Creator may be not the one who structured the universe so that man might live happily, but who gives the universe to man to live in and who is now creating with man. God may be the one who pushes me on, who plagues my conscience when humanity is violated, who gives me that thirst after justice and righteousness, who needs man to make this world into his kingdom of peace and justice and love. God may be the one whom we see behind all those who really could take up their lives courageously and die for their fellows' sake or go beyond their peaceful lives to consecrate themselves to their fellows' salvation. God may be that mysterious power that we see at work in human history which makes for growth, strength, maturity, courage, love, justice, righteousness, greatness, self-sacrifice, endurance, wisdom, freedom, honesty.

It is, of course, a dangerous course, and a methodologically false one at that, to try and build a conception of God which would fit modern man's mind. We cannot create the convictions we want to live by. Convictions grow out of our essential experiences, our realistic thinking, our lives. And realistic thinking is not to construct a world I would like to live in, but to take account of real experiences, to order them and to bring them into some sort of relationship. Talking about God also means separating out some experiences and naming them and recognizing their special meaning. Talking about God means: to say *when* God is, what kind of experiences we have in mind

when we say that God is. God is but a name, a name which has no meaning if it is not related to a reality which enters into man's life. And what we mean by the name of God is that sort of presence that is not really our own presence to ourselves, but a presence that is greater than we are, a presence which transcends us and takes us up into being more ourselves than we are by ourselves. And thus we should be able to enter into our own lives and discover what we can, really, mean by God, and by daring to name Him, we would give more importance to what makes us better and more human, we would focus our lives on what is best in us. In this way we are not constructing a concept of God that would fit modern man, but trying to take account of how God is still with us in a modern world in which we have learned to live without magic, without a God who would give rain and health and a good business deal and cheap forgiveness, without a God who would not take man seriously.

This does not solve all the problems. It does not pretend to. But it is a way into a more open thinking about God and modern atheism. It is a way of finding God in the centre, at the very base of life, and not at its fringes. It is a way to make faith a living reality and not a Sunday affair. And if one objects that I am not really talking about God, I can only say that when you take the Bible and read the scriptures again in this light, you may make some very curious discoveries. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who sent his prophets to Israel to protest against the injustices of the social order, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, is very much the God who calls man into obedience and responsibility, who challenges man to go into all the depths of his own being, to meet face to face with the ugliness of sin, with the hypocrisy of a religion that turned God into a handyman and had domesticated the Lord of Creation, with death in all its terror. Jesus is the one who on the Mount held before us a moral code which still is a challenge we have hardly tried to meet but which still appeals to the very best in us.

Does God exist? Or is God dead? What does it matter if it does not make any difference in this world? It is important that God is dead when he really is the one who justifies pettiness and injustice, who hampers human freedom and honesty, who kills the just and saves the unjust, who keeps alive ecclesiastical bodies that do not really help man to live a better and more beautiful life. It is important that he lives if he is the one who calls man to make this world more human, who prevents it from closing upon itself, from stifling into self-sufficiency, who makes himself felt in the conviction of a sacred duty to live this life as best we can, who calls us into service, service of God and of man in the realization of this world's destiny.

But this latter God, does he exist? Can we prove that he is, can we prove it sufficiently and convincingly? Can we say who he is or what he is? Can we reach so far beyond ourselves and this world, beyond the limits of our experience and understanding that we can

claim to know him? Can we dare to assert the reality of someone who by definition is not part of this world and beyond our comprehension? I think the best moments of our lives are when we do not feel closed upon ourselves, or concerned about ourselves and when we see this life as a task before us, when we are aware that self-concern hampers honesty. These are the moments when we know that life is good, embedded in a mystery of goodness and love, and that we have to make our own lives such messages of goodness and love.

But then we also know that life can be different, that it is precarious also in this respect, in its moral quality. There is a mystery beyond our own mystery, a mystery that is not a mixture of love and hate, but that is love and brings love and calls for love, a mystery before which we want to keep silence because it judges us and puts us to shame, but at the same time summons us to start anew. It is a mirror of identity before which we all stand and that tells us what we are and should be, before which we are not really free to choose but that intrudes upon our lives forcefully, as a Socratic demon, yet at the same time, gives us strength to try and be honest and truthful. Perhaps we cannot say much more about it without running the risk of defining too closely and again domesticating it, but it says that at the limits of our existence there is a mystery of love that is turned toward us, giving life and the commission to live, to live in love, in creative love. I call this mystery God.

And thus, finally, we can go back to the main question we asked in these pages: what is wrong with God? And the answer is, very shortly, that man has used God until he was of no use any more. But God is never only a solution to man's problems. At the point where man's problems are answered, God is the one to ask the new questions. And the less we need God the more he asks. We have learned to know him better now that he is not hiding behind man's little needs. But knowing him better means that he appears to be calling to deeper honesty and better service. And thus we have to end with another question: will modern man grow up to serve God?

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