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Is Religiousness an Inevitable Condition of Man or Might It Disappear in Future?

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Abstract

Sociology of religion views religion and religiousness as a social phenomenon, something that exists due to alleged social or psychological functions. Religion is believed to exist to sustain social cohesion or to express identity of groups or nations. These widely assumed contentions do not fit the principle of sufficient reason, they do not explain religion and religiousness. The article points out that the laws of psychological development alone account to the existence of the whole phenomenon, Feuerbach being the first to outline this developmental theory of religion. Nowadays sciences have better possibilities to pinpoint a developmental approach with this regard. This cognitive-developmental approach predicts the future of agnosticism and atheism different from views which see religion as an eternal buttress of mind and society.

Classics of sociology such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber described a strong and vibrant role of religion in pre-modern societies¹. At the same time, they depicted a decline in the influence of religion on the structure and development of modern societies and even more: a decline in the religiosity of modern people. Comte and Durkheim believed that science was replacing religion and Marx even predicted the future extinction of religion. Today's religious studies and sociology of religion are rather cautious on this issue. Sometimes they even deny the process of demystification and secularization claimed by the classicists. They speak more of "invisible religion" or the "individualization of religion", but not of the extinction of religion. Other authors, on the other hand, predict that the decline in religiosity will continue, meaning that the extinction of the entire phenomenon remains a possible option in the distant future.

A close examination of the history of godlessness is quite interesting in this context. Have atheists and atheistic positions always existed? If not, when did they emerge historically and how did they develop? Answering these questions helps to clarify the issue of whether religiosity under the conditions of cultural modernity is only subject to a change in form or even a progressive loss of substance.

First of all, the terms should be defined. Following Mensching, I define atheism as the "denial of the existence of any deities and supernatural powers". I define agnosticism as the uncertainty as to whether supernatural powers exist or not and the lack of any communication with them. Of course, even more internal differentiations are possible, but these definitions should suffice at this point.

The Greek Enlightenment was characterized by criticism of religion and theories that claimed to explain the origin of religion. The existence of the Olympic gods was doubted. In ancient times, people were called atheists if they refused to believe in certain gods or simply had different ideas. However, if one examines the accusations, one realizes that a strictly atheistic person or position seems to be missing in antiquity. Even the best-known critics of religion, such as Philodemus, Prodicus, Lucretius or Epicurus, did not state that supernatural powers did not exist in principle. Winiarczyk carried out a comprehensive examination of the people known from antiquity as atheists and came to the conclusion: "But we know of no radical atheists by name." Many other philologists have come to the same conclusion. The most radical critics of religion in antiquity are therefore at best close to agnostics, but usually not even that. Rather, they favor a kind of rational religion and deny only fairy-tale legends of the gods. However, it should be noted that it is impossible to know what the Hellenistic scientists, such as Archimedes, thought about the gods as they did not write about these topics at all. Only by looking at the written documents can we conclude that radical atheism was absent in antiquity.

In his 1942 book on Rabelais, Lucien Febvre decisively diagnosed the absence of any atheistic person and position in the Middle Ages. He believed that, like antiquity, the Middle Ages were mentally incapable of thinking atheistic positions due to a blockage. In fact, no medieval philosopher wrote a strictly atheistic treatise denying the existence of supernatural powers. Klausnitzer comes to the following conclusion: "Various attempts to prove atheism in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance have so far been unable to produce any convincing evidence of an explicit denial of the existence of God."

In the research literature, French writers from the second half of the 17th century are regarded as the first true atheists in world history. These are around 200 texts of underground literature that were passed from hand to hand. Most of these were only published more recently, in the 1980s. A text written in 1659 by an unknown Frenchman entitled *Theophrastus redivivus* is considered to be the first atheistic text in world history. However, the most famous text from this scene was the will of the priest Jean Meslier, published around 1730. This text became widely known in Enlightenment circles.

The French writers were inspired to their atheism primarily by René Descartes, but also by Isaac Newton. The mechanical model of the world largely drove God out of the natural world. The authors took Descartes' materialism further by understanding *res cogitans* as *res extensa* and thus overcoming Descartes' dichotomy. Descartes understood the mind of animals as automatism, i.e. as *res extensa*, but not the mind of man and God. By also interpreting the spirit of man materialistically, the early atheists eliminated the role of the Creator and thus the existence of God and created a purely materialistic world view. These ideas of the underground literature were then further elaborated a few decades later by Lamettrie, Condillac and Helvétius.

Denis Diderot and Baron Paul-Henri Thiery d'Holbach were the first atheists to be generally known to the public and therefore prominent. These two were the first people to profess to be atheists in public. Hyman states that Diderot must be described as the first explicit and self-confessed atheist and that Paris must therefore be regarded as the birthplace of official atheism. The anecdote of David Hume's visit to the Baron d'Holbach's salon in Paris in 1765 is famous in this context. Hume claimed that there were no atheists, at least not in England, and certainly not in France either. To this, d'Holbach replied that there were 18 people at the table, 15 of whom were atheists, while the remaining three were still undecided.

Diderot and d'Holbach went further than the previous underground literature, as they presented comprehensive atheistic theories. D'Holbach presented his work *Système de la nature* in 1770, which was considered the main work of early atheism. It not only provided a comprehensive materialist theory of nature, but also a comprehensive theory of religion. This was not just a critique of religion, but rather a theory that aimed to explain the origins of religion from its foundations.

However, the first atheists were still in the minority throughout the Age of Enlightenment. Criticism of the church and Christianity was socially acceptable, but not of religion. Many Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and revolutionaries such as Robespierre were followers of a religion of reason. Most Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Locke rejected atheists and Robespierre even had them executed for their godlessness.

Nevertheless, the advance of atheistic thought continued in the 19th century. In 1845, Ludwig Feuerbach provided an anthropological theory of religion with his *The Essence of Christianity*, which was equipped with extensive explanatory claims. He saw religion as a childish stage of human consciousness that modern man would overcome as a result of mental maturation. Accordingly, he believed that religion would perish in the industrial age. Marx and Nietzsche were among those who promoted atheistic thinking. In particular, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, published in 1859, caused theological positions to waver. Leading natural scientists such as Helmholtz and du Bois-Reymond were atheists.

An empirical survey conducted by James Leuba among the members of the *American Academy of Sciences* shows just how far atheism had progressed in the minds of scientists at the beginning of the 20th century. As early as 1914, only a third of sociologists and psychologists believed in God and less than half of natural scientists. Among the eminent members, the proportion of believers was even lower. In 1933, only 12 to 13% of sociologists, psychologists and biologists still believed in the existence of God.

Larsen and Witham repeated Leuba's survey in 1998 among members of both the *American Academy* and the *Royal Society of London*. Only 7% of the members of the *American Academy* could be identified as believers. Only 3% of the members of the *Royal Society* were believers, while 78% rejected religion altogether. In other words, four out of five members of the *Royal Society* were outspokenly opposed to religion in 1998. If you consider that 250 years ago atheists were limited to France and there to a group of only a few hundred people, that in 1914 they already made up the majority of members of the *American Academy* in the USA and that in 1998 almost all members of the *American Academy* and the *Royal Society* could be described as atheists, then the question arises as to how a replication study would turn out today or in 2050.

However, the development of atheistic thinking is not limited to scientists, nor to those with higher educational qualifications. Statistics from industrialized countries show a steady decline in religious belief in the 19th and 20th centuries across all sections of the population. Regardless of whether one measures church membership, Sunday school attendance, frequency of church attendance or other religious practices, the figures have been declining for many generations. Surveys on beliefs such as belief in God or the immortality of the soul show the same trend. Only around two third of Western, Northern and Central Europeans still believe in God or the immortality of the soul. Similar figures can be found in other most advanced countries. The development of mass atheism is a phenomenon that we can only speak of

historically since the 20th century. A new surge in agnostic and atheistic thinking can be observed, particularly since around 1965.

Atheism is therefore most pronounced among top scientists, followed by the masses of people in the most advanced nations. It is weakest among populations from the developing world and virtually absent in strictly pre-modern environments. Buckley claimed in 1990 that more than one billion people worldwide did not participate in religious practices. Zuckerman, in his 2007 overview, concludes that the number of agnostics and atheists worldwide is between 505 and 749 million.

250 and 350 years are the blink of an eye in world history. Nevertheless, a considerable decline in religious thought has taken place in this short period of time. It is possible to identify the origins of this decline and its first protagonists. If one considers that atheism and agnosticism have not always existed, but have only gradually developed to expand so explosively today, then it is conceivable that the projections of Feuerbach, Freud and Nietzsche could come true, with regard to the advanced countries more quickly, with regard to the globe probably only in a few centuries. Furthermore, that the development-theoretical explanatory models in the sense of Feuerbach could be more accurate than the secular theories or functionalist theories of other origins that are often put forward today. Finally, that the assertion of some sociologists of religion that the process of secularization and disenchantment is a modern myth, since religion has only individualized itself and thus made itself invisible, cannot exactly be described as adequate to the problem.

Footnotes

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