

### The Problem of Combating Atheism

The existence and the general nature of the problem of combating atheism may be gathered from the letters sent from various parts of the world to the preparatory commission for the general congregation (CPCG Relationes Informativae, Number 4, letters A to H).

That the problem lies in the general area of unbelief and is to be met by "the service of faith" seems to be the view of the general congregation itself. Not only is such an interpretation substantiated by the decrees of the congregation, but the whole issue has been lucidly handled by R. P. Jean-Yves Calvez in a paper intended for the quarterly, Ateismo e Dialogo, but also distributed privately.

With these opinions and analyses I am entirely in agreement. What from the viewpoint of believers is atheism, from the viewpoint of unbelievers is named secularism and, even more commonly, modernity. Such secularist modernity in its genesis and initial propagation was explicitly atheistic. But once it had become established in the mainstream of thought and commu<sup>n</sup>ications, denying God seemed as superfluous as denying that the earth was flat. So it was that the Jesuits assigned to combat atheism did not at first succeed in identifying their adversaries. So too the general congregation saw fit to transpose the issue to unbelief and the service of faith.

With so much attention already devoted to the matter, I should not venture to voice any views of my own, were it not for a charming and pressing letter from R. P. Calvez<sup>1</sup> followed up by the insistence of my own provincial, Very Reverend Terence G. Walsh. It then occurred to me that, from an extremely catholic viewpoint, the main cause of my hesitation and reluctance might perhaps be regarded as an advantage. For while my thinking suffers from what is thought characteristic of Anglo-Saxon influences, this very oddity might prove a helpful clue in piecing together the jigsaw<sup>puzzle</sup> of modern perversity.

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Permit me then to begin abruptly with a quotation from an eminent Christian historian, Herbert<sup>r</sup> Butterfield.<sup>2</sup> He wrote:

.. the so-called 'scientific revolution'... overturned the authority in science not only of the middle ages but also of the ancient world.... .. it (the scientific revolution) outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and the Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom.<sup>3</sup>

For Prof. Butterfield, then, the decisive event since the rise of Christianity has been, not the Renaissance, not the Reformation, not even the discovery of America, but the scientific revolution. It is a view assimilated without difficulty by any well educated person in the English-speaking world. But it is hardly an opinion disseminated by the respected schools of continental philosophy or by Roman Catholic canonists and theologians. Yet that very fact may be not without significance. Of it, as of Paul Ricoeur's symbol, perhaps it can be said that il donne à penser.

From this viewpoint then one would distinguish two aspects of the scientific revolution. On the one hand, it has brought to light what previously was not known. On the other hand, it has provided the basis for a fuller and much more accurate account of what human knowledge is.

The former aspect may be treated quite briefly. It is true that modern science has been the source of new knowledge in many different areas: in the material realm of physics and chemistry, of astronomy and geology; in the biological realm of plant and animal life; in the human realm of the Geisteswissenschaften, of interpretative and historical studies. In each of these realms it is true that the new knowledge conflicted or was thought to conflict with Christian truth: witness Galileo, Darwin, the Higher Criticism. But by and large, especially since the Second Vatican Council, these real or supposed conflicts are matters of the past.

In contrast, the second aspect of the scientific revolution calls for prolonged attention. Its history is quite complicated. Its effects are at once far-reaching and profound. One cannot anticipate in the near future a commonly accepted solution of the endless theoretical issues that might be raised. But the broad facts of the matter are clear enough and, while courses of action are objects not of demonstration but of free choice,<sup>4</sup> at least the broad lines of practical conclusions will readily emerge.

~~problem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit~~  
~~(Berlin 1906, 1907, 1920)~~ It illustrates in detail the mutual  
~~interdependence of science and philosophy at a time when, on~~

The broad facts that seem clear enough may be indicated under four headings: (1) modern science as interpreted philosophically; (2) modern science as interpreted scientifically; (3) science as contrasted with belief; and (4) modern science as solidary with belief.

Up to this century modern science has been interpreted philosophically rather than scientifically, first, because the current distinction between science and philosophy was itself a product of modern scientific development and, secondly, because it has been only during this century that modern science began to exhibit fully its distinctive features.

The earlier fusion of science and philosophy is represented by Galileo's insistence on a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, by Descartes' deduction of the conservation of momentum from the immutability of God, by Newton's title for his masterpiece on mechanics as Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica. When Prof. Butterfield speaks of a 'scientific revolution' that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we all know what he means. But what he means is the same complex of events as was treated by Ernst Cassirer in his first great work, Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit (Berlin 1906, 1907, 1920; New Haven 1950). For even those then rebelling against Aristotle did their thinking in Aristotelian categories. Science was one. Its constituent parts were distinct but not separate. A hierarchy<sup>of</sup> procedures dealt with a hierarchy of objects, with being as being, with being as in movement, with being as alive, with being as sentient, with being as intelligent,....

It remained that the new science was something quite distinct from the ideal construct set forth in Aristotle's Posterior Analytics. Reconciliation was sought. First, philosophy was adjusted to the new science, with rationalists following the Aristotelian deductivist ideal, and with empiricists imitating the style of the new science. Next, philosophy was emasculated, with Kantians restricting human knowledge to the phenomena of this world, and with positivists asserting the <sup>1</sup>validity of science and the invalidity of philosophy. A third alternative was embraced by the Hegelians who reaffirmed the supremacy of speculative reason and bade scientists be content with mere understanding.

But while philosophers were concerned with the scientific fact, scientists went their own pragmatic way. It had been formulated early in a rule of the Royal Society in England to consider only questions that could be settled by an appeal to observation and/or experiment. It has been repeated in many ways, perhaps in none more strikingly than in Einstein's advice to epistemologists: 'Pay no attention to what scientists say; watch closely what they do.' The result has been that science continued to development, and the result of that development has been that in our century science stands revealed as something quite distinct from earlier suppositions.

It had been thought that Newton did for mechanics what Euclid had done for geometry. But in the nineteenth century the achievement of Euclid was reassessed by Bolyai, Lobatchevski, Riemann, and at the beginning of the twentieth Minkowski's interpretation of Einstein's special relativity was verified in physical reality. Again, by demonstrating the periodicity

of planetary systems Laplace had substantiated the determinist view that in theory any past or future state of the universe could be inferred from a sufficiently known present. But Heisenberg's indeterminacy negates determinism. The necessity of classical laws gives way to statistical probabilities. The same shift brings about a reformulation<sup>o</sup> of Darwinian theory: 'chance variation' gives way to probabilities of emergence, and a callous 'survival of the fittest' is replaced by probabilities of survival.