

## THE NEW CRUSADERS

As Religious Strife Grows,

Europe's Atheists Seize Pulpit

Islam's Rise Gives Boost

To Militant Unbelievers;

The Celebrity Hedonist

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CAEN, France -- With 40 minutes to go before show time, the 500-seat Alexis de Tocqueville auditorium was already packed. A fan set up a video camera in the front row. A sound engineer checked the microphones.

The star: Michel Onfray, celebrity philosopher and France's high priest of militant atheism. Dressed entirely in black, he strode onto the stage and looked out at the reverential audience for his weekly two-hour lecture series, "Hedonist Philosophy," which is broadcast on a state radio station. "I could found a religion," he said.

Mr. Onfray, 48 years old and author of 32 books, stands in the vanguard of a curious and increasingly potent phenomenon in Europe: zealous disbelief in God.

Passive indifference to faith has left Europe's churches mostly

empty. But debate over religion is more intense and strident than it has been in many decades. Religion is re-emerging as a big issue in part because of anxiety over Europe's growing and restive Muslim populations and a fear that faith is reasserting itself in politics and public policy. That is all adding up to a growing momentum for a combative brand of atheism, one that confronts rather than merely ignores religion.

Karen Armstrong, a former Catholic nun and prominent British author on religion, calls the trend "missionary secularism." She says it mimics the ardor of Christianity, Islam and Marxism, all of which have at their core an urge to convert nonbelievers to their worldview.

Mr. Onfray argues that atheism faces a "final battle" against "theological hocus-pocus" and must rally its troops. "We can no longer tolerate neutrality and benevolence," he writes in "Traité d'athéologie," or Atheist Manifesto, a best seller in France, Italy and Spain. "The turbulent time we live in suggests that change is at hand and the time has come for a new order."

As with many fights involving faith, Europe's struggle between belief and nonbelief is also a proxy for other, concrete issues that go far beyond the supernatural. In this case, they involve a battle to define the identity of a continent.

Half a century after the 1957 Treaty of Rome laid the foundations for the now 27-nation European Union, Europe has secured peace and prosperity. But it is deeply uncertain about what binds the bloc together beyond mere economic self-interest. Says Ms. Armstrong: "There is a big fight going on to define European civilization."

In London last month, leading British atheists squared off with defenders of faith in a public debate on the motion, "We'd be better off without religion." Tickets cost nearly \$40 but so many people wanted to attend that the event was moved to a bigger venue with over 2,000 seats. It still sold out. The audience declared the atheists the victors, by a margin of 1,205 to 778, with a few score abstentions.

In Germany, a wealthy furniture manufacturer is funding a "think tank of Enlightenment," a group of scientists and others committed to debunking religion. It is named after Giordano Bruno, a 16th-century philosopher and cosmologist who was burnt at the stake as a heretic. In Italy, one fervent nonbeliever has gone to the European Court of Human Rights with a claim that the Roman Catholic Church is guilty of fraud: Jesus, he says, never existed.

Prime Catalyst

Alarm over Islam has acted as the prime catalyst for much of the polemic. Europe's Muslim populace, estimated at between 15 million and 20 million people, is growing more numerous, more vocal and, in some cases, more religious. The clash also feeds on a deeper confrontation that dates back to Europe's Enlightenment, the 18th-century intellectual movement that asserted the primacy of reason over superstition.

"The battle over religion is restarting. It is going to be a difficult one," says Terry Sanderson, president of Britain's National Secular Society, an organization that was founded in the 19th century but has now gained a new vibrancy. Membership has doubled in the past four years, to around 7,000, says Mr. Sanderson. For converts from Christianity, the society provides a certificate of "de-baptism."

"Make it official!" urges the society's Web site, [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk).

The atheist cause won a big-name endorsement late last year when pop star Elton John, in an interview, said organized religion turned people into "hateful lemmings" and should be banned.

The backlash against religiosity has even seeped into Europe's Muslim community. In February, Mina Ahadi, an Iranian-born woman in Cologne, Germany, set up the Continent's first Muslim atheist group: the National Council of Ex-Muslims. She immediately started getting death

threats and was put under police protection.

"Our main message is: 'We don't believe,' " says Ms. Ahadi, talking in a coffee shop next to Cologne Cathedral, a towering tribute to faith that took 600 years to complete. A police guard hovered nearby.

Atheism, Ms. Ahadi says, must confront religion head-on -- and adopt its methods. Her group started with just 30 members in February and a month later had more than 400. It is lobbying European Union officials for restrictions on the veil and organizing a public meeting at which ex-Muslims will explain why they quit. "If you want to work against Muslim movements, you have to be like them," she says. "We have to go outside and say what we're fighting for."

Europe's atheist campaigners have also made a splash in America. "The God Delusion," a book by Oxford Professor Richard Dawkins, has been on the New York Times hardcover nonfiction best-seller list for 28 weeks. Another British atheist, U.S.-based writer Christopher Hitchens, has written his own antireligious treatise, "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything," due out in May.

Christianity, once the bedrock of Europe's identity, has been losing worshipers on the Continent for at least half a century, though some opinion polls suggest the downward trend has bottomed out. Around three-quarters of Europeans still describe themselves as Christians.

But only a small minority go to church. In Western Europe, according to polls, fewer than 20% do.

The number of atheists is hard to pin down. Some surveys put the figure at under 3%, but others say it is much higher.

When the European Union asked citizens to rank values representing Europe, religion came last -- far behind "human rights," "democracy," "peace," "individual freedom" and other choices. Only 3% chose religion.

Religious leaders are pushing back against the assertive unbelievers. The Church of England's Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, complained in a December statement about "illiberal atheists who have joined forces with aggressive secularists." He was responding to demands that Jesus be removed from nativity plays and that Christmas parties be called "winter festival" gatherings.

Mr. Onfray's atheist tract, recently translated into English, has prompted three book-length rebuttals by angry Christians and a flood of articles. To counter Prof. Dawkins's "God Delusion," an Oxford theology professor wrote his own book, "The Dawkins Delusion."

Both atheists and their foes agree on one thing: God -- declared dead over a century ago by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche -- is

making a comeback, at least as a focus of controversy. "Faith is on the public agenda in a way that is unprecedented in recent times," proclaimed the founding manifesto of Theos, a new British-based Christian think tank.

Europe's atheist movement has no Vatican-like central command and springs from many different sources. Some adherents have personal grievance. Mr. Onfray spent part of his youth in a home run by Catholic priests, who he says mistreated him and abused others. Ms. Ahadi, head of the German ex-Muslims group, says her first husband was executed by Islamic revolutionaries in Iran.

Secular Europeans voice dismay at American religiosity and worry that faith-based reasoning is spreading in Europe, too. Many Britons, for example, believe the Christian faith of Prime Minister Tony Blair helped lead him to entangle Britain in America's war in Iraq.

### Deep Suspicion

There is also deep suspicion of Poland, a devoutly Catholic new member of the European Union. Its deputy education minister late last year urged the teaching of creationism, the Bible-inspired alternative to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

Celebrations last month to honor the 50th anniversary of the EU's

founding Treaty of Rome were marred by squabbling over whether Christianity, among other things, should be mentioned in a declaration defining the bloc's basic principles. Atheists and secularists who believe religion has no place in politics campaigned hard to prevent any nod to Christianity and drafted their own so-called Brussels Declaration affirming Europe's secular moorings.

The faithful lost, and the EU marked its birthday in Berlin without any mention of Christianity. Pope Benedict XVI was furious. "How can they exclude an element as essential to the identity of Europe as Christianity?" he asked at a conference organized by European bishops. Europe is committing a "peculiar form of apostasy."

The most potent force driving activist atheism is concern that Islam, Europe's fastest-growing religion, is jeopardizing the principles of the Enlightenment -- and emboldening other religions to raise their voices, too, and re-fight old battles.

"I have a big problem with Islam," says Mr. Onfray, the French philosopher. Last fall, he offered sanctuary at his house in northern France to a high-school philosophy teacher who had received death threats from Muslims. The teacher had denounced the Prophet Muhammad as a "merciless warlord" in a newspaper article. But Mr. Onfray says his basic beef is with all religions, not just Islam.



Europe's disquiet over Islam soared after the November 2004 murder by a Muslim militant in Amsterdam of Theo van Gogh, an irreverent Dutch writer, filmmaker and antireligious polemicist. Then came a global furor over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten.

A French court in March ended a long legal campaign by Muslim groups to jail the editor of a satirical weekly that republished the cartoons. The court ruled that the editor had committed no crime. One of the groups that initiated the case immediately vowed to appeal.

"There is an identity crisis. We have to answer the question: Who are we? One answer is to say we're atheists," says Flemming Rose, the Danish journalist who first commissioned the drawings and now gets invited to speak to atheist groups.

Muslim activism is encouraging other faiths to be more assertive. University of London professor Anthony Grayling cites violent protests by British Sikhs that forced the cancellation of a play in Birmingham in 2004, and Christian protests against the television broadcast of a London opera that featured Jesus dressed in diapers. Christians and Muslims both campaigned vigorously, but without success, to torpedo elements of a new British law that bans discrimination against homosexuals. Such faith-based agitation, says Mr. Grayling, threatens a "dark ages for free enquiry and free

speech."

Atheism in Europe dates back to the ancient Greeks, who coined the word "atheos," meaning godless. Socrates was convicted of atheism and poisoned. Early Christians and their foes each branded the other "atheist."

Atheism as a philosophical system first took root in the 17th century. British philosopher Thomas Hobbes dismissed religion as "lies." He fled to France. There, Voltaire and other French thinkers took up the cause with gusto, though many did not entirely reject the possibility of some sort of deity. The Soviet Union enshrined atheism as a state creed.

Mr. Onfray, the French philosopher, says he believed in God as a child in the same way as he "believed in Santa Claus." His impoverished parents, a farm laborer and a cleaning lady, put him in a church-run home for orphans when he was 10. He developed a loathing of Christianity and now embraces what he calls "ethical hedonism." He's not married but has had the same female companion for 30 years. He says they have a "hedonist contract," which does not require monogamy. But, he says, hedonism is not "about cigars, vintage Bordeaux and expensive cars."

'Foundation of Morality'

"To enjoy and make others enjoy without doing ill to yourself or to others, this is the foundation of all morality," he says, citing an 18th-century French writer, Nicolas Chamfort.

After nearly 20 years teaching philosophy at a Catholic high school, Mr. Onfray in 2002 set up an experimental college in the Normandy town of Caen, near the beaches of the 1944 D-Day landing. Called the Université Populaire de Caen, it has no exams, no degrees and consists of public lectures by Mr. Onfray and a few friends.

The local government helps cover costs, and Caen's public university lets him use its main auditorium -- to the chagrin of its philosophy department, which is headed by a devout Catholic and takes a dim view of Mr. Onfray's diatribes against God. "Frankly, we think he talks a lot of garbage," says Emmanuel Housset, a philosophy lecturer.

Caen's Catholic theological college has tried to fight back. Maurice Morand, a priest, went on local radio to denounce Mr. Onfray's work. "He is a fundamentalist who hides behind the ideas of the Enlightenment," says Father Morand. "We can't defeat him, we can only denounce him."

Mr. Onfray's popularity shows no sign of flagging. At a recent lecture, the 100th so far, an adoring audience held aloft lit candles

and cigarette lighters in tribute. A middle-aged man took the floor to praise Mr. Onfray for providing "the key to life."

Pierre Andrieu, a 63-year-old former executive with BNP-Paribas, a French bank, travels up to Caen each week from Paris for the lecture show. He makes the trip, he says, because he shares Mr. Onfray's take on faith -- and fears that religion is making a comeback. "It is far more present than before," he says. "This need for religion is very, very strong. Religion is like magic. It is all about tricks."

Ahead of France's presidential election later this month, Philosophie Magazine arranged a meeting recently between Mr. Onfray and the front-running candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, who sometimes attends church. They argued about faith, politics and philosophy. As a gift, Mr. Onfray gave Mr. Sarkozy several books, including one by his favorite philosopher, Nietzsche. Its title: "The Anti-Christ."