

IN DEFENSE OF ATHEISM

*The Case Against Christianity,
Judaism, and Islam*

Michel Onfray

Translated from the French by Jeremy Leggatt



Contents

Preface xi

Introduction 1

Part One: Atheology

- I. Odyssey of the Freethinkers 11
- 1. God is still breathing 11*
 - 2. Seeking a name for freethinkers 14*
 - 3. The fruits of anti-philosophy 17*
 - 4. Theology and its fetishes 19*
 - 5. Naming infamy 21*
- II. Atheism and the Escape from Nihilism 27
- 1. The invention of atheism 27*
 - 2. Planned obscurity 29*
 - 3. Philosophical earthquake 32*
 - 4. Teaching the case for atheism 35*
 - 5. Plate tectonics 38*
- III. Toward an Atheology 41
- 1. Spectrum of nihilism 41*
 - 2. A Judeo-Christian epistemology 43*
 - 3. Vestiges of empire 46*
 - 4. Garden-grown torture 49*
 - 5. On Christian ignorance 51*
 - 6. Christian atheism 55*
 - 7. A postmodern atheism 57*
 - 8. In Defense of Atheism takes on three challenges 59*

CONTENTS

Part Two: Monotheisms

- I. The Tyranny of Afterlives 65
 1. *Monotheism's somber vision* 65
 2. *Down with intelligence!* 61
 3. *Litany of taboos* 69
 4. *Obsession with purity* 72
 5. *Respecting the body* 74

- II. Bonfires of the Intelligence 77
 1. *Producing the holy books* 77
 2. *The book's bias against books* 78
 3. *Hatred of science* 81
 4. *Negation of matter* 83
 5. *Bakeshop ontology* 86
 6. *Epicurus: not an enthusiast for Hosts* 88
 7. *Forever missing the boat* 89

- III. Seeking the Opposite of the Real 95
 1. *Inventing the afterlife* 95
 2. *Birds of Paradise* 96
 3. *Seeking the opposite of the real* 98
 4. *Solving the woman problem* 101
 5. *Celebration of castration* 104
 6. *Down with foreskins!* 106
 7. *God loves the maimed* 109

Part Three: Christianity

- I. The Construction of Jesus 115
 1. *Enter the forgers* 115
 2. *Hysteria crystallized* 111
 3. *Catalysis of the miraculous* 120
 4. *Construction outside history* 124
 5. *Tissues of contradictions* 126

CONTENTS

II. The Pauline Contamination 131

1. *Ravings of a hysteric* 131

2. *Infecting the world with neuroses* 132

3. *A weakling's revenge* 134

4. *In praise of slavery* 137

5. *At war with intelligence* 138

III. The Totalitarian Christian State 141

1. *Hysteria (continued)* 141

2. *Constantine's coup d'état* 143

3. *From victims to victimizers* 146

4. *The name of the law* 148

5. *Vandalism, autos-da-fé, and the culture of death* 150

Part Four: Theocracy

I. Selective Exploitation of the Texts 155

1. *Historical extraterritoriality* 155

2. *Twenty-seven centuries in the making* 156

3. *Monotheistic grab bag* 159

4. *Cherry-picking the scriptures* 161

5. *The whip and the other cheek* 164

6. *Hitler, Saint John's disciple* 166

7. *Allah's problems with logic* 167

8. *Roster of contradictions* 169

9. *Everything and its opposite* 170

10. *Contextualization and sophistry* 172

II. In the Service of the Death Fixation 175

1. *Selective bones of contention* 175

2. *The Jewish invention of holy war* 178

3. *God, Caesar & Co.* 180

4. *Christian anti-Semitism* 182

5. *The Vatican admired Adolf Hitler* 184

6. *Hitler admired the Vatican* 187

CONTENTS

7. *Christianity and National Socialism: points in common* 188
 8. *Wars, fascisms, and other pursuits* 189
 9. *Jesus at Hiroshima* 191
 10. *Love of one's neighbor (continued)* 192
 11. *Colonialism, genocide, ethnocide* 195
 12. *Repressions and the death fixation* 197

- III. *Toward a Post-Christian Secular Order* 199
 1. *Muslim thirst for blood* 199
 2. *The local as universal* 201
 3. *Yellow stars and Muslim tattoos* 203
 4. *Against the closed society* 204
 5. *Muslim fascism* 206
 6. *An ayatollah speaks* 207
 7. *Islam: structurally archaic* 208
 8. *Fascist thematics* 210
 9. *Fascism of the fox, fascism of the lion* 213
 10. *Against "religious" secularism* 215
 11. *Substance and forms of the secular ethic* 216
 12. *Toward a post-Christian secularism* 218

Introduction

1

Keeping company with Madame Bovary. In Flaubert's novel, Madame Bovary relieved her despair by pretending. Many people do the same. Without romantic daydreams, their lives would be utterly desolate. A man can certainly avoid facing tragic reality by imagining himself as somehow different from the being he truly is — but only at the cost of turning himself into something unrecognizable. I do not despise believers. I find them neither ridiculous nor pathetic, but I lose all hope when I see that they prefer the comforting fairy tales of children to the cruel hard facts of adults. Better the faith that brings peace of mind than the rationality that brings worry — even at the price of perpetual mental infantilism. What a demonstration of metaphysical sleight of hand — and what a monstrous price!

Having realized all this, I experience the feeling that always arises deep within me when I am confronted with the symptoms of indoctrination and deception: compassion for the sufferer, coupled with burning anger toward those who perpetuate the deception. No hatred for the man on his knees, but a fierce resolve never to collude with those who urge him to adopt this humiliating posture and keep him there. Who would not sympathize with the victims of fraud? And who would not approve of battling the perpetrators?

Spiritual poverty engenders self-renunciation; it is just as significant as other deficiencies, whether sexual, mental, political, or intellectual. How ironic that other people's credulity should bring a smile to the face of the man who is supremely unaware of his own! The Catholic who eats fish on Friday derides the Muslim who refuses pork—who in turn scoffs at the Jew for refusing shellfish. The Lubavitcher swaying at the Wailing Wall looks askance at the Christian kneeling on a prayer stool and at the Muslim laying out his prayer mat in the direction of Mecca. Yet none concludes that the mote in his neighbor's eye might be smaller than the beam in his own. No one reaches the opinion that the critical mind, so relevant and always so welcome when applied to others, would be put to good use in a scrutiny of one's own beliefs.

Human credulity is beyond imagining. Man's refusal to see the obvious, his longing for a better deal even if it is based on pure fiction, his determination to remain blind have no limits. Far better to swallow fables, fictions, myths, or fairy tales than to see reality in all its naked cruelty, forcing him to accept the obvious tragedy of existence. *Homo sapiens* wards off death by abolishing it. To avoid solving the problem, he wishes it away. Only mortals have to worry about death's inevitability. The naive and foolish believer *knows* that he is immortal, that he will survive the carnage of Judgment Day.

2

Profiteers waiting to pounce. I cannot fault those who need a metaphysical crutch in order to bear their lot. On the other hand, I am diametrically opposed to those who preach the ascetic ideal—and who also care for themselves in so doing. We are on opposite sides of the existential barricade. The traffic in

afterlives benefits the men who engage in it by providing them the means to bolster their faith, for they find in it the material essential for reinforcing their own need for mental help. Just as psychoanalysts often treat others in order to avoid questioning themselves too closely about their own weaknesses, so the vicars of monotheist gods foist their vision of the world on the faithful — and day by day their own convictions become more secure.

Masking one's own spiritual poverty while exaggerating the same weakness in others, avoiding the display of one's own shortcomings by dramatizing those of the world at large, are tactics crying out to be denounced. No one is faulting the believer. But with the man who claims to be his shepherd, the case is different. As long as religion remains a purely private matter, we contend simply with neuroses, psychoses, and other personal factors. We deal with what aberrations we can, provided they do not threaten or endanger the lives of others . . .

My atheism leaps to life when private belief becomes a public matter, when in the name of a personal mental pathology we organize a world for others. For between personal existential anguish and management of the body and soul of our fellow human beings, there exists a whole world in which those who profit from human anguish lurk in concealment. Redirecting their own death fixation toward the world at large neither saves sufferers nor alleviates their suffering—but it contaminates the universe. The attempt to avoid negativity merely spreads negativity around like manure—ushering in a wholesale mental pandemic.

In the name of Yahweh, God, Jesus, and Allah — those convenient excuses — Moses, Paul of Tarsus, Constantine, and Muhammad exploit the dark forces that penetrate them, that work so powerfully within them. By projecting their somber visions on the world they blacken it still further—and with impunity. The pathological grip of the death fixation does not heal

itself through chaotic and magical muckspreading but by philosophical work upon oneself. Well-conducted introspection dispels the dreams and delirium on which gods feed. Atheism is not therapy but restored mental health.

3

Rekindling the Enlightenment. This work on oneself requires philosophy. Not faith, belief, fables, but reason and properly directed thought. We must fight against obscurantism, that fertile loam of all religions, with the weapons of the Western rationalist tradition. Sound use of our understanding, rational ordering of our minds, implementation of a true critical will, general mobilization of our intelligence, the desire to evolve while standing on our own feet—all these are strategies for dispelling phantoms. In other words, we need a return to the spirit of Light, of Enlightenment, that gave its name to the eighteenth century.

There is certainly much to be said on the historiography of that luminous century. With the French Revolution fixed firmly in their memories, and writing in its wake, the historians of the following century gave retrospective preference to whatever seemed to have contributed to that still recent event. They invoked the ironic deconstructions by Voltaire, by Montesquieu with his separation of the Three Powers, by the Rousseau of the *Social Contract*, by Kant and the cult of reason, by d'Alembert the master builder of the *Encyclopedic*, etc. But these dazzling Enlightenment figures—respectable, indeed politically correct—are the boldest that nineteenth-century historians could stomach.

I prefer sharper, more direct, and much bolder shafts of light. For behind their seeming diversity, all the revered figures mentioned above were united in deism. They strenuously rejected atheism. And they added an equal and sovereign contempt for

materialism and the sensual. In other words, contempt for a host of alternative philosophical options that effectively constituted a "left wing" of the Enlightenment, a pole of radicalism that was soon forgotten but which might be usefully invoked today.

Kant is a monument of timid audacity. The six hundred pages of his *Critique of Pure Reason* contain the ingredients for blowing Western metaphysics sky-high, but the philosopher ultimately shrinks from the task. His separation of faith and reason, of presiding deities and concrete phenomena, is a step in the right direction. A little more effort would have obtained for one of these two world — reason — the right to claim precedence over the other—faith. It would also have made possible an un-sparing analysis of the whole question of belief. But Kant stops short. In declaring the two spheres separate, he allows reason to abdicate its powers: he lets faith go scot-free, and religion is saved. Kant can then *postulate* (why did he need so many pages in order merely to postulate . . .) God, the soul's immortality, and the existence of free will, three pillars (along with the death drive) of all religion.

4

Once again, what was the Enlightenment? We know that Kant wrote a 1784 essay entitled *What Is Enlightenment?* Is it still readable over two centuries later? Yes. We can and we must subscribe to the Enlightenment project, which remains as viable as ever. It aims to lift man out of his infantile condition and set his feet on the path to adulthood; to remind him of his own responsibility for his infantile state; to inspire him with the courage to use his intelligence; to give himself and others the capacity to attain self-mastery; to make public and communal use of his reason in every field, with no exception; and not to accept as

revealed truth what emanates from public authority. A magnificent project . . .

Why then did Kant have to be so un-Kantian? For how can we permit the attainment of adulthood and at the same time prohibit the use of reason in the religious sphere, which prefers the faithful to have the minds of children? We may of course think, says Kant; we must have the courage to ask questions, including of the teacher and the priest. Why then should we stop there, having reached such an encouraging point? Full steam ahead, surely! Let's postulate the nonexistence of God, the death of the soul, the nonexistence of free will!

So a final push is needed to rekindle the flames of Enlightenment. A little more Enlightenment, more and more Enlightenment! Let's be Kantian in opposition to Kant, let us pick up the gauntlet of boldness he throws down—without daring to act boldly himself. His mother, an austere and rigorous pietist if ever there was one, must have been holding her son's hand when he finished his *Critique of Pure Reason*. It must have been Frau Kant who helped defuse the unparalleled explosive potential of Kant's argument.

5

Atheology's dazzling light. The luminaries who succeeded Kant are well-known: among others, Ludwig Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. The "age of suspicion" gave the twentieth century a genuine decoupling of reason and faith, and then redirected the weapons of rationality against the fictions of belief. At last the battlefield was cleared and a new space set free. On this virgin metaphysical terrain an untested discipline saw the light of day. It is time to introduce *atheology*.

The term is to be found as early as March 29, 1950, in a let-

ter from Georges Bataille to Raymond Queneau. In it, Bataille wrote that he would like to see a new edition of his books, previously published by Gallimard. For the three-volume collection, he proposed the overall title *Summa Atheologica*. In 1954, Bataille embarked on another project involving several texts announced four years earlier but not yet written, others still in the outline stage, and the internal integrity of the whole in constant flux. A fourth volume was announced, *Pure Happiness*, and then a fifth, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. None would see the light of day in the form envisioned. These works exist today only as a collection of incidental writings and selections from his notebooks.

The unfinished state of this important body of work, the abundance of plans and projects, the obvious equivocations in Bataille's correspondence on architectonics, his fierce insistence that he really did not want to be a philosopher—all this is evidence of an abandoned construction site. Above all, he gave up the project—founding a new religion—that had inspired his early reading, thinking, and writings. Atheology was left an orphan. Yet it is a brilliant concept.

Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault understood concepts as instruments in a toolbox at the disposal of anyone aspiring to philosophical work. That being so, I am adopting Bataille's term "atheology" for my own use. I am not, however, advocating Bataille's version of atheology—especially since it would require a tremendous amount of painstaking research and would likely yield only unsatisfying results. I am proposing the concept of atheology as a countercurrent to theology, a channel to carry us past discourse on God and flow upstream to the source, where we may examine the mechanisms of theology up close. On a world stage saturated with monotheism, it is high time to expose the back side of the theological scenery. This is an opportunity for philosophical deconstruction.

Beyond this preliminary *In Defense of Atheism*, then, the effort requires a mobilization of multiple disciplines. *Psychology* and *psychoanalysis*: consideration of the mechanisms of the fable-generating function. *Metaphysics*: plotting the genealogy of transcendence. *Archaeology*: giving a voice to the substrata beneath the surface geography of religions. *Paleography*: establishing archival texts. *History*, of course: acquainting ourselves with the epistemologies and their development in the areas where religions were born. *Comparative psychology*: establishing fundamental principles of thinking, learning, and behavior in various time periods and widely separated regions. *Mythology*: research into the details of poetic rationality. *Hermeneutics, linguistics, languages*: stressing local idiom. *Aesthetics*: tracing the iconic propagation of beliefs. And then of course *philosophy*: for philosophy seems best fitted to preside over the organization of all these disciplines. And the stakes? A physics of metaphysics, a true theory of man's inherent nature (immanence), a materialist ontology.

I

Odyssey of the Freethinkers

1

God is still breathing. Is he dead or not? The question is still undecided. However, such glad tidings would surely have generated cosmic events — which haven't yet transpired. Instead of the fertile field such a death would have opened up, we seem confronted today by nihilism, the cult of nothingness, the passion for nonbeing, a morbid relish for the twilight of waning civilizations, a fascination with the abyss and with bottomless pits where we lose our souls, our bodies, our identity, our being, and all interest in anything whatsoever. A lugubrious picture, a depressing apocalypse . . .

God's death was an ontological gimmick, a conjuror's trick. It was consubstantial with a twentieth century that saw death everywhere — the death of art, of philosophy, of metaphysics, of the novel, of music, of politics. So let's announce the death of all these fictional deaths! Tongue-in-cheek obituaries that once served certain thinkers — before they turned their metaphysical coats — as a dramatic setting for the paradoxes they uncovered. The death of philosophy engendered works of philosophy, the death of the novel generated novels, the death of art produced works of art, etc. As for God's death, it has released an outpouring of the sacred, the divine, the religious. Today we swim in these purgative waters.

Clearly, the announcement of God's death was as world-shaking as it was false—trumpets blaring, news bellowed from the rooftops, drums thundering in an orgy of premature rejoicing. Our era staggers under the weight of revelations solemnly hailed as the authorized utterances of new oracles. Abundance holds sway, to the detriment of quality and truth: never have so many false tidings been celebrated as so many revealed truths. For God's death to be certified, irrefutable facts, clues, and courtroom exhibits should have been produced. Yet none has emerged.

Who has seen the corpse? Apart from Nietzsche (and even then . . .). Like that of the *corpus delicti* in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, we should have felt its presence, its dominion, it would have been all-pervading, defiling, malodorous, it would have fallen apart little by little, day by day, and we would have witnessed a process of real decomposition—in the philosophical as well as the physical sense of the term. Instead of which God, invisible while alive, has remained invisible even when dead. And we are still without proof of his death. But who could furnish it? What new lunatic for this impossible task?

For, *pace* Nietzsche and Heine, God is neither dead nor dying because he is not mortal. A fiction does not die, an illusion never passes away, a fairy tale does not refute itself. Neither hippocgriff nor centaur is bound by the laws governing mammals. A wildebeest or a horse, yes; an animal from the mythological bestiary, no. And God too (listed somewhere between "Gnome" and "Golem") is of that mythological bestiary, like the thousands of other creatures enumerated in dictionaries with numberless entries. The oppressed creature's sigh will endure for as long as the creature itself, in other words forever.

Besides, where would he have died? In Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*? Murdered at Nietzsche's summer home in Sils-Maria by an inspired philosopher—tragic and sublime, haunted and hag-

gard — in the second half of the nineteenth century? And what was the weapon? A book, books, a life's work? Imprecations, analyses, proofs, refutations (the cold steel of writers)? Was the killer alone? Did he lurk in ambush? Or was he one of a group, along with the Abbé Meslier and the Marquis de Sade as guardian forebears? If he existed, would God's murderer not himself have been a superior God? And doesn't this noncrime mask an Oedipal urge, an impossible desire, an irrepressible ambition powerless to carry through a task essential to the creation of freedom, of identity, and of meaning?

You cannot kill a breeze, a wind, a fragrance, you cannot kill a dream or an ambition. God, manufactured by mortals in their own quintessential image, exists only to make daily life bearable despite the path that every one of us treads toward extinction. As long as men are obliged to die, some of them, unable to endure the prospect, will concoct fond illusions. We cannot assassinate or kill an illusion. In fact, illusion is more likely to kill us — for God puts to death everything that stands up to him, beginning with reason, intelligence, and the critical mind. All the rest follows in a chain reaction.

The last god will expire with the last man. And with him fear, terror, anguish, those devices designed to create divinities. They include horror of death's void, the inability to integrate death as a natural process with which we must come to terms, in whose presence intelligence alone can have any effect. And there is denial, the absence of any meaning beyond what we ourselves have to offer, with absurdity as a starting point. These are the genetic bloodlines of the divine. A dead God would imply a vanquished void. We are light-years away from such ontological progress . . .

2

Seeking a name for freethinkers. Thus, God will endure for as long as the reasons that brought him into being; and so will those who deny him . . . All attempts at establishing a family tree are a sham: God has no date of birth. Nor does practical atheism (atheism in the abstract is another matter). The first man (yet another fiction) to affirm belief in God must simultaneously, or successively and alternately, not have believed in him. Doubt is coeval with belief. The religious impulse, along with uncertainty or denial, have probably coexisted in one and the same individual from the beginning. Affirming and denying, knowing and not knowing: a time for kneeling, a time for rebellion, depending on the need either to create or immolate a divinity.

God thus seems immortal. On this point his standard-bearers prevail. But not for the reasons they imagine, for the neurosis that impels men to forge gods results from the usual workings of the psyche and the subconscious. Creation of the divine coexists with terror of the void in a life that must end. God is born of the rigor, rigidity, and stillness of dead members of the tribe. At the sight of a corpse, the dreams and smoke clouds that nourish gods take on more solid substance. When a soul collapses before the cold body of a loved one, denial takes over and transforms this ending into a beginning. The completion of the cycle becomes instead the start of a new adventure. God, heaven, and spirits come forth to dispel the pain and violence of death.

And what of the atheist? Denial of God and of afterlives probably shared the stage with faith in the soul of the first believer. Revolt, rebellion, refusal of the evidence, rejection of the decrees of fate and of necessity: the genealogy of atheism seems just as simple as that of belief. Afterlives and denial of God no doubt shared space in the mind of the first believer. Even as he rejected the evidence and refused to accept the dictates of fate

and necessity, the seeds of doubt were sprouting and rebellion was brewing: the development of atheism was simultaneous with that of belief. Satan, Lucifer the light-bearer (that emblematic philosopher of the Enlightenment), the one who says no and refuses to submit to God's law, was created in the same gestational period as God. The devil and God were opposite sides of the same coin, like atheism and theism.

Atheism rejects the existence of God as a fiction devised by men desperate to keep on living in spite of the inevitability of death. The word "atheist" entered the French and English languages in the sixteenth century. Thus the word itself and the position it came to stand for arrived late in the West. But the idea of "godlessness" is old. The Bible alludes to atheists: Psalm 10:4, Psalm 10:13, and Jeremiah 5:12 speak of the wicked who will not seek after God, who despise God, who belie the Lord. The Greek term "atheos" dates from the seventh century BCE, was later incorporated into Latin, and thus was in use throughout Greek and Roman antiquity. It was an expression of severe censure and moral condemnation. Sometimes, indeed often, "wrong belief" was equated with "unbelief." The accusation of atheist could be leveled not only at the man who did not believe in God, but at the man who did not worship the dominant deities of the moment, the local, socially prescribed forms of divinity. Even a person deeply committed to a god—if it was a foreign, unorthodox god—might find himself condemned as an atheist. The word described not the individual who emptied heaven of its inhabitants, but one who peopled it with his own fabrications.

Throughout history, the authorities of a particular time and place have pledged allegiance to God or gods in the interest of consolidating their power. "Atheism" has served politically to thrust aside, label, or castigate individuals who believe differently. God himself is invisible, inaccessible, and therefore silent about what he can be made to say or endorse, but he makes no

objection when people claim to be vested by him with the right to speak, ordain, and act (for better or worse) in his name. God's silence enables his ministers to exploit and abuse that title. Whoever does not believe in their god, and therefore in them, automatically becomes an atheist. The worst of men: immoral, loathsome, unclean, the incarnation of evil. Someone to be locked up on sight or tortured or put to death.

It is dangerous in such circumstances to proclaim oneself an atheist . . . But others say it, and always from the deprecatory standpoint of an authority bent on condemnation. The word's very structure makes this clear: a-theist. An exclusionary prefix, implying a negation, a lack, a void, an antagonistic stance. We possess no positive term to describe the man who does not worship phantoms of the imagination. All we have is this linguistic construction suggestive of amputation: so we have a-theist, but also mis-creant, a-gnostic (but no a-dieu!), un-believer, ir-religious, in-credulous, a-religious, im-pious, and all the words that flow from them: irreligion, unbelief, impiety, etc. Nothing that conveys the solar, affirmative, positive, free, and healthy aspects of the individual standing beyond magical thinking and fables.

"Atheism" is thus the product of a verbal creation by the manufacturers of gods. The word does not flow from the deliberate and sovereign decision of a person who defines himself historically by this term. "Atheist" describes the Other, the man who spurns the local god when everyone else, or almost everyone, believes in him. (And is well-advised to do so — for theology exercised behind closed doors is always buttressed by armed militias, existential police, and ontological soldiers who exempt us from thinking and instead demand the swiftest possible transition to belief and very often to conversion.)

Baal and Yahweh, Zeus and Allah, Ra and Odin — but also Gitche Manitou, the Great Spirit of the Algonquin tribes — owe their names to geography and history. In accordance with the

metaphysics that made their existence possible they simply assume different names for one and the same fantasized reality. Yet none of them is truer than another. They all live in a pantheon of fictitious revelers where Ulysses and Zarathustra, Dionysus and Don Quixote, Tristan and Lancelot of the Lake — so many magical figures, just like the Fox of the Dogon or the Loa of voodoo — sit down to feast together.

3

The fruits of antiphilosophy. Lacking the perfect word to express the inexpressible, to name the unnamable—the madman with the audacity not to believe in God—we must therefore make do with *atheist*. There are of course roundabout ways of referring to nonbelievers without using the word, but it was Christians who invented such circumlocutions, introducing them to the intellectual marketplace with the same disparaging intent. After Pascal's death a Memorial he had written was discovered sewn into the lining of his coat. It spoke of the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars ..." In that context, Pascal used the word "philosophers" to mean *deists*. Terms then used in place of nonbeliever included *freethinker* and *libertine*, not in the sense of one leading a dissolute life but rather in the sense of one who doubts or denies religious dogma. Today, Belgian authors have coined the phrase "partisans of free examination."

Antiphilosophy—that eighteenth-century school of thought located on the dark side of the Enlightenment medal—is a current we wrongly neglect, but one on which we should train the light of current experience. For it demonstrates how far the Christian community will go in deploying means (including the most morally indefensible) to discredit the thinking of inde-

pendent temperaments not blessed with belief in its fables. Indeed, antiphilosophy fights with unthinkable violence against freedom of thought and against all thinking that deviates from the path of Christian dogma.

Witness, for example, the work of Father François Garasse, the Jesuit who invented modern propaganda in the seventeenth century. His *Curious Doctrine of the Beaux-Esprits* [figures rightly or wrongly celebrated for their wit and learning] of *Our Times, or Those who Claim to be Such* (1623) is an overstuffed volume of more than a thousand pages. In it he heaps abuse on the lives of independent philosophers, depicting them as debauchees, sodomites, drunkards, fornicators, gluttons, pedophiles (poor Pierre Charron, Montaigne's friend), and other satanic labels in order to dissuade people from looking into their progressive works. The next year that same Jesuit propaganda minister published a *Justification for His Book against the Atheists and Libertines of Our Times*. In it, Garasse adds another layer along the same lines, equally full of lies, calumny, villainy, and ad hominem attacks. Love of one's neighbor knows no limits.

Garasse used character assassination to undermine the influence of freethinkers. His tactics were not new. In the fourth century BCE, Epicurus was vilified by bigots and by the great and powerful. Today, the same tactics are still being used against any philosopher who (often without rejecting Christianity) does not think the Bible represents the ultimate truth—God's word, wholly inspired and infallible. Certain philosophers attacked by Garasse have yet to recover: they languish in obscurity. Some have undeserved reputations as immoralists and social outcasts, and those labels also stick to their works. For centuries, atheist thought was not presented in a fair light, and atheists were prevented from making their mark on the world. In philosophy, the term *libertine* still carries derogatory and polemical implications and libertine works encounter closed minds.

Because of the dominance of antiphilosophy in the official historiography of thought, a vast number of philosophical works remain unknown even to professional philosophers (apart from a handful of specialists). Many of these works are vigorous, powerful, and compelling, but they remain unread simply because their authors were anti-Christian, irreverent, or outside the mainstream belief system. Who for example, in the case of the century of France's Sun King, has read Pierre Gassendi? Or La Mothe Le Vayer? Or Cyrano de Bergerac—the philosopher, not the fictional character? So few . . . Yet an understanding of Pascal, Descartes, Malebranche, and other practitioners of the official philosophy is inconceivable without some familiarity with these philosophers, who strove for the autonomy of philosophy in relation to theology—to the Judeo-Christian religion, as it happens.

4

Theology and its fetishes. This dearth of positive terms to describe atheism, and the refusal to consider possible substitutions, goes hand in hand with the wealth of the vocabulary surrounding believers. There is not a single variation on this theme lacking its descriptive epithet: theist, deist, pantheist, monotheist, polytheist, to which we might add animist, totemist, fetishist, and even, in the case of historically established forms, Catholics and Protestants, Evangelicals and Lutherans, Calvinists and Buddhists, Shintoists and Muslims, Shiite and Sunni of course, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox and Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians—the catalog is endless.

Some worship stones—from the most primitive tribes to today's Muslims walking around the Black Stone in the eastern corner of the Kaaba. Others venerate the moon or the sun, some

an invisible god who cannot be represented on pain of idolatry, or else an anthropomorphic figure — white, female or male, Aryan of course. Another, a thoroughgoing pantheist, will see God everywhere, while another, an adept of negative theology, nowhere. By some he is worshipped covered in blood, crowned with thorns, a corpse; by others in a blade of grass, Eastern Shinto fashion. There is no man-made foolery that has not been dragooned into the ranks of putative divinities.

For those who still doubt the possible excesses of religions on the question of support media, let us consider the urine dance of New Mexico's Zuni, the manufacture of amulets of excrement of the Great Lama of Tibet, the cow dung and urine used for ritual ablution among Hindus, the Roman cults of Stercorius, Crepitus, and Cloacinus — respectively the divinities of filth, farts, and sewers — offerings of manure to the Assyrian goddess Siva, the consumption of her own excrement by Sushiquecal, the Mexican goddess and mother of gods, Ezekiel's divinely ordained recipe for the use of human fecal matter to cook food, and so many other impenetrable pathways or singular means of maintaining a relationship with the divine and the holy.

Faced with these multiple names, these endlessly varying practices, the immense vocabulary available for describing the unbelievable passion of believers, the atheist must be content with this single weak epithet, tailored to discredit him! Those who worship anything and nothing (the very ones who, in the name of their fetishes, justify intolerant violence and unending war against the godless) are thus the ones who reduce the free-thinker to the etymological condition of an incomplete being, truncated, fragmented, mutilated, an entity without God and therefore without real existence.

God's soldiers have even developed a whole discipline entirely devoted to the examination of his names, his deeds and

gestures, his memorable sayings, his thoughts, his words—for God speaks! — and his actions. It is the discipline of discourse on God, the province of loyal (and salaried) thinkers, his professionals, his lawyers, his spear-carriers, his contract killers, his dialecticians, his rhetoricians, his philosophers (yes, even those!), his henchmen, his servants, his representatives on earth and their institutions, his ideas, his diktats, and other nonsense—in other words, theology. The discipline of discourse on God.

The rare moments in Western history when Christianity has been manhandled—1793 for example—yielded a few new philosophical activities and therefore a handful of new terms (which were quickly consigned to oblivion). Admittedly, people still speak of *de-Christianization*, but they do so only as historians to identify that phase of the French Revolution in which citizens turned churches into hospitals, schools, orphanages, when revolutionaries replaced roof crosses with tricolor flags and crucifixes of dead wood with living, healthy trees. The *atheist* in Montaigne's *Essays*, the *attayists* of Monluc's *Letters* (chapter 137), and Voltaire's *atheistic* quickly disappeared. So did the *atheist* of the French Revolution.

5

Naming infamy. The poverty of the atheist vocabulary is rooted in the unshakable historical domination of God's liegemen. For more than fifteen centuries they have enjoyed undisputed political authority. Tolerance is the least of their virtues, and they use every weapon in their arsenal to make the phenomenon, and therefore the word, impossible. The word "atheism" dates from the middle of the sixteenth century. But "atheist" existed in the second century of the common era

among Christians who denounced and stigmatized the *atheos*—those who did not believe in a god raised from the dead on the third day. It was but a short step to conclude from their indifference to children's fables that they worshipped no god at all. Thus pagans—who, as their name tells us, worship the gods of the countryside—were seen as defying the gods and therefore God. No god, the wrong god, too many gods ... to early Christians, it made no difference. The Jesuit Garasse stamped Luther as an atheist (!), and the poet Pierre de Ronsard reserved the same treatment for France's Huguenots.

The word stands as an absolute insult: the atheist is the immoralist, the amoral, the unclean, further consideration of whose life and books becomes a crime once the epithet has been uttered. The word is enough to block access to the works. It functions as a cog in the war machine launched against everything that does not move in the purest register of Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman orthodoxy. Atheist and heretic: in the last analysis they are the same. Which amounts in the end to a great many people!

Epicurus was forced very early to face charges of atheism. Yet neither he nor the Epicureans denied the gods' existence. The gods of Epicurus and of his disciples were creatures made of subtle matter. They were numerous, they inhabited between-worlds, they were imperturbable, indifferent to men's and the world's fate, true embodiments of freedom from care. They well and truly existed . . . But they were not like those of the Greek *polis*, who through the mediation of their priests demanded compliance with communal and social norms. That was their only fault: their antisocial nature.

The historiography of atheism—rare, skimpy, and generally of poor quality—is thus wrong to date the phenomenon from the earliest days of humankind. Social crystallizations require

transcendence — order and hierarchy (etymologically, the power of the sacred) . . . Politics and the *polis* can the more easily function by invoking the vengeful might of the gods, officially represented on earth by the powerful (who happen most opportunely to wield the levers of political control).

Commandeered into an exercise designed to justify secular power, the gods — or God — are seen as privileged interlocutors of tribal chieftains, of kings, of princes. Those terrestrial figures professed to hold their power from the gods, who confirmed this through signs decoded by the priestly caste, itself equally interested in the benefits of exercising a power for which it claimed legal sanction. Thereafter, "atheism" became a useful weapon for consigning this one or that one — providing that he resisted or protested a little — to jails, solitary confinement, even to the stake.

Atheism does not begin with those condemned and identified as such by official historiography. The name of Socrates cannot be decently included in a history of atheism. Neither can Epicurus and his disciples, any more than Protagoras, the first and most famous of the Greek Sophists, who contents himself in his *Concerning the Gods* with saying that he can conclude nothing about them — neither their existence nor their nonexistence. Which at the very least identifies a kind of agnosticism, an uncertainty, even a skepticism—but assuredly not atheism, which implies a frank assertion of the nonexistence of gods.

The God of philosophers often enters into conflict with the God of Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad. First because the former proceeds from intelligence, reason, deduction, argument, and second because the latter proposes instead dogma, revelation, and obedience — the fruit of collusion between spiritual and temporal powers. The God of Abraham tends to define the God of Constantine, and then the God of not very Christian

popes and warrior princes. That God had little in common with the extravagant constructions cobbled together out of causes lacking causality, out of motionless prime movers, innate ideas, preestablished harmonies and other cosmological, ontological or psychotheological proofs.

Any philosophical attempt to think about God outside the dominant political framework is usually reduced to atheism. Thus when the church cut out the tongue of the priest Giulio Cesare Vanini, hanged him, then burned him at the stake at Toulouse on February 19, 1619, it was murdering the author of a work entitled *Amphitheatre of the Eternal Divino-Magical, Christiano-Physical and Nonetheless Astrologico-Catholic Providence against the Philosophers, Atheists, Epicureans, Peripatetics, and Stoics* (1615).

Unless we choose to consider the above title meaningless, we must acknowledge that Vanini's oxymoronic wording rejects neither Providence, Christianity, nor Catholicism—but firmly opposes atheism, Epicureanism, and other pagan philosophical schools. Yet none of that makes an atheist (a man liable to the death penalty). He is more probably a kind of eclectic pantheist. But in any case, he is a heretic because he is unorthodox.

Spinoza, himself a pantheist—and of unequalled intelligence—was also condemned for atheism, or rather for insufficiently rigid Jewish orthodoxy. On July 27, 1656, the *parnassim* in session at the *mahamad*—the Jewish authorities of Amsterdam—read out in Hebrew, before the ark of the Houtgracht synagogue, a text of appalling violence. They charged him with horrible heresies, monstrous deeds, dangerous opinions, and evil conduct, with the result that a *harem* was pronounced against him—and never rescinded!

The community used language of extreme brutality: excluded, hounded out, execrated, cursed day and night, sleeping and waking, leaving home or returning ... The men of God invoked the wrath of their fiction and his explicit anathema in

time and space. To round out this gift, the *parnassim* asked that Spinoza's name be erased forever from the surface of the planet. The request was never granted, as we know.

Whereupon the rabbis, theoretical supporters of brotherly love, added to this excommunication a ban on any contact, verbal or written, with the philosopher. No one could help him, approach within six feet of him, or be under the same roof with him. It was of course forbidden to read his writings: Spinoza at that time was twenty-three, and had published nothing. His *Ethics* appeared posthumously twenty-one years later, in 1677. Today he is read all over the world.

Where is Spinoza's atheism? Nowhere. We could scour his life's work in vain for one sentence asserting the nonexistence of God. Admittedly, he denies the soul's immortality and asserts the impossibility of posthumous punishment or reward. He advances the notion that the Bible is a work composed by diverse authors and a work of historical — and therefore not "revealed" — facts. He refuses to subscribe to the theory of a chosen people, and proclaims this clearly in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*A Theologko-Political Treatise*). He taught a hedonist morality of joy beyond good and evil; he held no brief for Judeo-Christian hatred of self, the world, or the body. Although a Jew, he discerned philosophical qualities in Jesus. But none of all that made him a denier of God, an atheist.

The list of wretches put to death for atheism in the history of the planet — priests, practicing believers sincerely convinced of the existence of a one God, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman — is endless. So also is the roster of supporters of the God of Abraham or of Allah, they too executed in unbelievable numbers for failing to profess a faith bound by the accepted norms. The list of anonymous people who did not even rebel against the powers identifying themselves with monotheism, people who were neither refractory nor fractious — all these

macabre numbers bear witness. Well before it was used to describe the God-denier, the word "atheist" served to condemn the thinking of the man even marginally liberated from authority and social supervision in questions of thought and reflection. The atheist was a man free in God's eyes — and ultimately free to deny God's existence.