

THE NINETEENH CENTURY: THE RELIGIOUS ATHEISTS

Atheistic Philosophers

Aguste Comte 1798-1857)

Aguste Comte was born in Montpellier, France, in very unstable political and intellectual times. He reflected his environment like a mirror. At age fourteen, he "naturally stopped believing in God."¹ His family were devout Catholics. Much of their faith remained within Comte's thinking, although wherever God appeared, He was replaced by "man," a foggy concept of man in ideal proportions. Comte rejected the existence of God.

Comte rebelled against the tendency on the part of the philosophers of his time to speculate metaphysically upon reality, ignoring or disregarding the "facts of nature and society."² Among the current philosophers that he had read, there was the tendency of endless speculation, assumptions, and controversies.³ In his six-volume masterpiece, which accumulated over a period of time,⁴ he commented on man's understanding of reality which evolved over a long period of time. He named three stages of that process: (1) the theological explanation of reality; (2) the more acceptable, but unacceptable, metaphysical understanding of reality; and (3) the positive and final stage of conceiving reality. This latter stage outright rejects the theological stage as superstitious and uninformed. It allows some credence and sense of "progress" to the metaphysical stage, but rejects it also on the grounds that it ignores the "facts" of science. It is, therefore, irrelevant to reality. He bases "positivism" on the study of mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and "sociology," a term which Comte himself created.⁵

Comte dedicated his best talents to sociology which he divided into categorical studies on social statics and social dynamics. He sought to deal with social equilibrium in the former category and social progress in the latter. In his later years, Comte tried to begin a "religion of humanity."⁶ Vague "humanity" took the place of God in his system as *the* object of worship. Religion is relegated and confined to be a natural phenomenon.

¹Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 141.

²Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 61.

³Ibid.

⁴*Cours de philosophie positive*.

⁵Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 186.

⁶Ibid.

Comte was born in unstable _____ and _____ times.

(political, intellectual)

Is the following statement true or false?

Comte rebelled against the tendency on the part of the philosophers of his time to speculate metaphysically upon reality ignoring or disregarding the "facts" of nature and society. _____

(true)

List three stages of the evolution of man's understanding of reality given by Comte.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

The latter stage rejects the theological stage as _____ and _____.

(superstitious, uninformed)

The sciences were used by Comte as the basis of his "_____."

(positivism)

UNDERLINE the subject to which Comte dedicated his best talents.

astronomy mathematics

chemistry sociology

psychology biology

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Comte replaced God with a vague "_____."

(humanity)

Ludwig A. Feuerbach (1804-1872)

Ludwig A. Feuerbach was born in Landshut. He studied theology at Heidelberg,⁷ and philosophy with Hegel at Berlin. He studied natural science privately. Unlike Comte, he wanted to put "nature" in the place of God. "Whereas Hegel had said that all reality was a manifestation of the Absolute Spirit, Feuerbach calmly (affirmed) . . . that this spirit was none other than nature. Nature is thus the ground of man."⁸ He with Schleiermacher believed that the core of religion is a sense of absolute dependence—but Feuerbach insisted that man depends on nature.

Furthermore, man in his religion objectifies and projects his own nature. The divine being is purified man freed from the limitations of the individual, contemplated and revered as another distinct being.⁹ "The knowledge of God (is) nothing else than a knowledge of man."¹⁰ He called Hegelianism the "last rational prop of theology." Feuerbach's understanding of God is not in the least Christian. He has no knowledge of the God who is the Creator and a Spirit. Hegel had confused himself about the evolution of things through the dialectic of his "objective idealism." The Creator of the Bible is the source of material things, and they are not becoming "Spirit." The God of Christianity is the source of nature and the controller of the same. When Feuerbach tried to deal with the "dialectic tension" between spiritualism and materialism in an Hegelian fashion, his categories were speculative non-entities. His logic had to fail automatically. But his philosophy became a formidable force in Marxist materialism and many other atheistic or agnostic systems.

Feuerbach's philosophy ruined his personal career in Germany. He was never allowed a paid professorship anywhere.¹¹

Charles R. Darwin (1809-1882)

If Comte replaced God by man (humanism) and Feuerbach sought to replace God by nature (naturalism), Charles R. Darwin, who "suspended his judgment in regard to questions of theology,"¹² dealt the religious thought of his time a terrible blow. His notes on Natural Selection¹³ set up the great debates between evolution and creationism that last until this day. Since evolution was embraced as a scientific reality it became all the more possible and likely that scientific minds would replace God with Nature, and that Humanism would flourish in this intellectual climate. Even though Darwin refused to write on theology, his presuppositions in his *The Descent of Man* deny the historical and factual account of Creation; they also deny

⁷Colin Brown, p. 133.

⁸Ibid., p. 134.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion*.

¹¹Dagobert D. Runes, p. 108.

¹²Albert E. Avey, p. 200.

¹³Dagobert D. Runes, p. 73, *The Origin of the Species*.

Feuerbach wrote that _____ is the ground of _____.

(nature, man)

"The knowledge of God is nothing else than a knowledge of man" is _____'s view on _____.

(Feuerbach, religion)

Is the following statement true or false?

Feuerbach's ideas died out after his death and he made no significant contribution to other philosophical systems. _____

(false)

The great debates between evolution and creationism were brought about by Darwin's notes on _____.

(Natural Selection)

Is the following statement true or false?

Darwin's presuppositions in his *The Descent of Man* confirmed his faith in the biblical account of creation. _____

(false)

the feasibility and truth of the Christian faith. There are many Christian thinkers who prefer a coherent treatment of Darwin's thought. They seek to affirm that the Bible is not a scientific book and that Darwin wrote no theology.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Without a doubt the two most important minds of the nineteenth century¹⁴ are those of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. Marx was born in the Rhineland of Jewish parents who later became Lutherans.¹⁵ He was educated at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. He received the doctorate in philosophy at Berlin in 1841 writing his dissertation on *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Natural Philosophy* which he treated from the Hegelian point of view. He "early became a Left Hegelian, then a Feuerbachian."¹⁶ He wrote profusely in German, French and English. His *Das Kapital* is a basic work for Communism; but his *Communist Manifesto* (written in collaboration with Friedrich Engels) ranks historically with the *Magna Carta* if it is not even of more importance historically.

Marx's thought is known as *dialectical materialism* among philosophers. It is *communism* to politicians.

Dialectical Materialism adopts empiricism, humanitarianism, economic determinism and sociological classlessness. In economics, it considers capitalism to be evil which will eventually be replaced by socialism. "There is a 'labor theory' of value which includes the principle of 'surplus value' derived in the capitalistic mode of production."¹⁷ Communistic socialism will do away with the State by means of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and a classless society will evolve.¹⁸ The order of this economic-political evolution is: "from feudalism to capitalism, from capitalism to socialism, and from socialism to Communism."¹⁹ Marx rejected all religion as the "opium of the people."²⁰ But some have alleged that Communism itself is a religion.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Marx rejected the idea of God and denied His existence, but Friedrich Nietzsche *attacked God*.²¹ He was a militant atheist. To explain his atheism, this descendent of several generations of Lutheran pastors reasons as follows: he interpreted reality in terms of evolution. For him the biological urge was the result of the will to survive expressed in "a will to power."²² The "will to power" is what

¹⁴In terms of their influence on history.

¹⁵Colin Brown, p. 135.

¹⁶Dagobert D. Runes, p. 188.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁸Colin Brown, p. 137.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 136.

²¹Ibid., pp. 138, 139.

²²Albert E. Avey, p. 223.

In the author's viewpoint, who were the two most important minds of the nineteenth century?

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Marx became a Leftist _____ and then a _____.

(Hegelian, Feuerbachian)

Outline the principal ideas of dialectical materialism as presented in the adjacent paragraph.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Nietzsche attacked _____.
(God)

He interpreted reality in terms of _____.

(evolution)

life is made of and the criterion of value. He was a brilliant student and was advanced from student to professor at Basel without ever writing his doctoral dissertation. He was professor of philology there until he was forced to resign because he suffered constant ill health. But he continued to write brilliant materials though they were filled with bitter diatribes. He wrote his most famous work: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the unusual form of aphorisms. He was fascinated by the "Dionysian" (frenzied, spontaneous) contrasted with the "Apollonian" (measured and orderly) view of life. He was convinced of the superiority of the "Dionysian" view. In his treatment of morality he divided it into two categories: *Sklaven-moral* (slave morality) and *Herren-moral* (master-morality).²³ From the latter, the *superhuman* was to emerge. Power constitutes nobility. Struggle destroys the weak. Since Christianity has always protected the weak, the Bible and Christianity must be discarded in order for the superman to evolve.

"It is not difficult to see why Nietzsche was adopted as the philosopher of National Socialism. Of all the nineteenth-century atheists he was the most consistent. He had nothing but scorn for those who denied . . . God but sought to salvage Christian morality."²⁴ In *The Joyful Wisdom* he had declared that "God is dead." His starting point that God is non-existent leaves man to fend for himself. "Man must devise his own way of life."²⁵ and project his own system of morals. Of course the only acceptable model must be the *Herren-moral*.

In Nietzsche's aphorism on *What Belongs to Greatness* he wrote, "Who can attain to anything great if he does not feel in himself the force and will to *inflict* great pain? . . . But not to perish from internal distress and doubt when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of it—that is great, that belongs to greatness."²⁶ This is the "morality" behind the deaths of six million Jews and the horrible extinction camps in Germany during World War II. Obviously Nietzsche is the thinker behind the "God is Dead" theological school which included Van Buren, Hamilton, Altizer and others in the mid-twentieth century. But others were also deeply influenced by his works. Some of them were Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, André Gide, André Malraux, Shaw and Yeats.²⁷

Early in 1889 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche became insane. He spent eleven years in mental darkness until his death.²⁸ One can hardly close this short and incomplete review of his thought without asking whether the date assigned to his "insanity" is not a bit late.

Conclusion

The century of the Evolution Revolution, when science was enthroned and theology and philosophy were

²³Ibid.

²⁴Colin Brown, p. 140.

²⁵Ibid., p. 139.

²⁶*The Joyful Wisdom*, no. 325, p. 250, quoted in Colin Brown, p. 140.

²⁷Colin Brown, pp. 140, 141.

²⁸Ibid., p. 138.

Herren-moral was the foundation for the idea of the

(superman)

In *Joyful Wisdom* Nietzsche declared: "God is

(dead)

Is the following statement true or false?

The morality behind the death of six million Jews in World War II was Nietzsche's idea that the infliction of great pain is the way to greatness and nobility.

(true)

Nietzsche spent twenty years in

(mental darkness)

scorned, is studied by so many brilliant minds that it boggles the mind to try to sift through it and comment briefly on the representative thinkers it produced. (It is true that men modify their times, but their minds are molded by the possibilities made available to them in their particular corridor of time.) One painful aspect of this task is to be forced to pass over some of the very important and magnificent minds like Emerson, John Stuart Mill, Albert Ritschl, Spencer, Lange, Newman, Dilthey, and many others.

William James (1842-1910)

One person that must yet be given notice is William James. As it can be seen he also belongs to the twentieth century, unless one is willing to concede that the nineteenth-century thought was really prevalent until 1910 in the relationship between philosophy and the Christian religion. James secured his pivotal position as a philosopher and a psychologist when his *Principles of Psychology* was published in 1890.²⁹ For our study, his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is perhaps his most important work. He began a trend to dignify religious conviction based on personal experience. James' pragmatism and John Dewey's instrumentalism had a profound influence on the latter half of this turbulent century of thought.

The gamut of speculation and atheism had been examined by 1910, and the twentieth century opened with unlimited possibilities for Christian thought.

²⁹Dagobert D. Runes, p. 152.

The trend to dignify religious conviction based on personal experience was begun by

W_____ J_____.

(William James)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. In what way did Auguste Comte rebel against the philosophers of his time?

2. What were the three stages named by Comte in which he saw the evolution of man's understanding of reality?

3. What place did Comte give to the "theological stage"?

4. Upon what did Comte base his concept of reality?

5. In what way did Comte utilize his best talents?

6. What did Comte do with God?

7. According to Feuerbach, what is the "ground of man"?

8. What did Feuerbach do with God?

9. What effect did Feuerbach's philosophy have?

10. What effect did Charles Darwin have on religion?

11. What were Darwin's presuppositions in his *The Descent of Man*?

12. Name two philosophers who greatly influenced Karl Marx.

13. Summarize briefly the ideas of Karl Marx.

14. What did Nietzsche do with God?

15. How did Nietzsche interpret reality?

16. What did Nietzsche contribute to the idea of "supermen"?

17. What did Nietzsche write in his *Joyful Wisdom*?

18. Upon what morality was the extermination of six million Jews during World War II based?

19. How did Nietzsche end his life?

20. What was the contribution of William James?

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). Read pages 132-142 and 147-150 of Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Distinguish between "atheism" and "agnosticism."
2. Why did Feuerbach choose "religious atheism"? What effect did he have on European thought?
3. Was Karl Marx an Hegelian Idealist? Explain.
4. Why did Nietzsche attack God? What was his influence on Germany? How did Nietzsche die?

Advanced activity (Level 3).

1. Explain the doctrine of man in most of the religious atheistic thought.
2. What trend or trends in Christian theology led to "religious atheism"?
3. How has the nature of ethics been affected by this humanistic atheistic change-over?

Seminar Discussion

1. How has Dialectical Materialism and its rejection of religion affected countries where it is the official political creed?
2. Is a viable dialogue between Christ and Marx really possible? What about Liberation Theology? To what extent?
3. What is the relation between Christian Theology and the "revealed truth" of the Bible? Scientific Evolution?