

Forms of Atheism

Michael Polanyi

[**Editor's Note:** Neither the Key Words nor the Abstract were part of the original article. We have preserved the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation of the original typescript even when there are questions about its correctness.]

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ABSTRACT

This brief and provocative 1948 essay by Michael Polanyi was produced for discussion by a group of religious intellectuals convened by J. H. Oldham. Polanyi outlines the sources and contours of modern social and political ideas in terms of the interaction of four types of "substitute deities" that have emerged in modern society and displaced what Polanyi identifies as the "God manifested in the Bible."

(1) I agree with P re Lubac in his "*Drame de l'Humanisme Ath e*" that we need not concern ourselves with the atheism that is merely verbal. There were always people who made fun of priests or doctors, and yet continued to fear the gods and take medicines. We are concerned with the convinced repudiator in modern times of God as manifested in the Bible, rejecting him in favour of other gods. There is a wide range of these substitute deities, but they can be reduced for convenience to four types: Athene, Clio, Dionysus and Prometheus.

Belief in the God of the Bible was first overthrown by the followers of Athene, the goddess of reason. They were horrified by the religious wars and disgusted with clerical obscurantism. They believed that the spirit of doubt would destroy fanaticism and establish the rule of tolerance. For the past 300 years (since Collins and Bayle) this belief has been consistently upheld. Though it declined on the continent of Europe during the 19th century, it is still powerfully held in Britain and America. Bertrand Russell is its most distinguished active interpreter today.

The horror of religious fanaticism which animates this oldest form of atheism (its roots go back straight to Lucretius, and then to Democritus) remains one of the most powerful forces opposing the acceptance of any theological authority, based on revelation. I am, myself, very responsive to this kind of horror and never feel at my ease when told that religion "*is the blessed sacrament*" or that the decisive fact of Christianity is that "the tomb was empty." May I explain this a little.

(2) I reject doubt as a supreme guide, because it logically cannot justify the empiricism which it wishes to promote. Yet in my view all categorical forms of assertion are misleading (no matter whether they assert a certainty or a probability). Only the fiduciary mode, used in the first person "I believe this or that" can be self-consistently upheld. I am ready to claim universal validity for my beliefs, even though I recognize that such commitment inevitably transcends evidence. I take this jump, trusting that God demands it of me and hoping that I may succeed for reasons that pass my limited understanding.

Such is the paradox of faith: it demands that we do now what on further reflection must seem unjustifiable. The same antinomy is reflected in the simultaneous demand for self extinction. The rigorous fulfillment of my responsibility as a believer requires that I reduce to zero the part played by my own will as a finite person in the making of my fiduciary decision. My beliefs are surrenders, accepted to avoid further delay which I believe unjustifiable. They simply represent a collapse at the point where I have loaded myself with responsibility to the breaking point. Knowing (or believing) that my beliefs are thus achieved, I shall try always to apply them in a manner consonant with their origin. I cannot hope that they carry report of more than one aspect of reality and would fully expect that this may appear flatly to contradict other true reports on different aspects. I hope it to be fully consistent with my belief in the transcendent origin of my beliefs that I should be ever prepared for new intimations of doubts in respect to them. I have seen how young students of science wrestle in vain with meaningless questions which they cannot help raising in view of the elementary stage of their knowledge, but which could not be asked at all in terms of a more precise formulation. I may add that even in their most profound presentation, our present physical theories tend to break down when pursued to certain ultimate consequences, known as the “infinities”. Yet nothing more recondite is involved here than the interactions of inanimate particles. I believe, therefore, that when we come to the central mysteries of Creation and Incarnation the texts on which we rely for our knowledge of them can give only one aspect of the truth and may well be compatible with other apparently contradictory reports. Nor can I believe that these texts can be strictly interpreted to answer a great many far-reaching questions. The number of questions we can ask about God in their context seems to me greatly in excess of the range that is likely to possess meaning. Indeed I often wonder whether a consistent application of the doctrine of Encounter might not reduce all references to God, that are not addresses in the form of prayer, to the secondary status of crude statements. Those who accord final theological authority to the words of the Bible clearly do so in a sentiment of true submission, but they must realize that the moment they meet other minds their position turns into a claim of their own infallibility, expressed in the rigid finality of their beliefs. I believe that when we pray “Thy will be done” we should offer to surrender to the will of God all our specific beliefs, excepting only what is logically implied in this act of surrender. In this sense I concur with much of the tendencies that find expression in rationalist atheism of the kind I have put down to Athene.

(3) Athenic Reason would have had a fair chance of dissolving God or at least attenuating him to an imperceptible residue, if the deity it was opposing had been any other than the God of the Bible. The 18th century might have led us back to Stoicism or the cult of politeness after the manner of Confucius. But the vision of salvation had opened men’s eyes and they could no longer achieve that indifference to human suffering at the price of which the mind of antiquity (from Socrates to Marcus Aurelius) secured its serenity. Thus Athenic reason failed to dissolve God and merely succeeded in chasing him underground. He embodied himself in various human aspects such as History, Individuality, Political Reform (Clio, Dionysus, Prometheus), each of which may truly claim to be part of the divine process, but turns into a demon if it demands to be the whole. The tragedy of atheism is that it makes this hybris inevitable.

For the most part this is familiar ground. Yet great questions remain looming unsolved. The apparently most innocuous of the three new gods, Clio, is perhaps the most intractable. Historic forces do exist which largely control our destinies. And some of these do appeal to all my heart. I believe that the British sense of national brotherhood is among the most potent forces of salvation today. I believe that in cultivating that brotherhood British people are obeying the will of God. Yet the claims of German brotherhood under Hitler were denied. And what about Zionists? Or the great Socialist Fatherland?

Where nations are struggling for their existence and this leads to mortal conflict between them, what is then the right? We do not really know.

The least dangerous of the trio is in my view the riotous Dionysus. Nietzsche's attempt to shout down the claims of human mercy are comparatively harmless in an age whose chief vice lies in moral perfectionism.

(4) Prometheus the planner of the Good Society is in fact the most potent embodiment today of God among unbelievers, and Christians are prepared to go with them a long way in this. Since to avoid the torments of Hell has ceased to be their greatest concern, they are inclined to agree that the ability of Christianity to eliminate the evils of this world is a test of its validity. Or at any rate, this is one prevailing Christian mood. Another—which is complementary to the first—is to plunge into the perfectionists' hatred of existing institutions and thence turn away angrily to a wholly transcendent conception of Christianity.

The potency of the modern Prometheus is derived from his combination with Clio. The revolutionary historicism which they produce together is an apt substitute for the Christian hopes of Salvation. It embodies the paradox of faith, by identifying our own actions with something that is happening to us. In its perspective History, Prophecy and Command are all one, and right action is always submission. The doctrine of Marx that freedom is the acceptance of historic necessity, stands in close parallel to the Gospel's teaching that freedom is the service of God. The parallel enables Marxism to absorb and transform into hatred the hopes of Christianity and likewise fortifies Christian Marxists with a vein of materialistic truculence. Acceptance of the utopian hopes of Marxism allies such Christians to the great humanitarians, like Shaftesbury, Lincoln, Gandhi, while the sinister machinery of Marxist dialectic assures them against Pelagian weaknesses to which humanitarians are prone. Thus Marxism has come to appear to an important section of Christian thought as a true and indeed an indispensable introduction to the Christian faith.

This seems to me like using a fan to drive a windmill by which the fan is powered. For I can see little truth in Marxism apart from its perverted content of Christian hope. This brings me to the main point of this ever-lengthening note. I would like to urge a radical break with belief in Progress, and ask that we consider the position of atheists as well as Christians—and of the body of humanity in general—after the elimination of this belief.

(5) About 1820 Fourier wrote that in the Phalanstere every child will easily master twenty different industrial arts—both physical and intellectual—by the age of four. From this crazy statement to those of our own time, announcing that science had solved the problem of abundance and that we had now to plan an Age of Plenty, we find an uninterrupted series of similar paranoid manifestations. We must now vigorously shake off this whole swarm of daydreams.

In view of recent historic experience, I should outline the scope of social improvement as follows. We are committed to a mode of production based on a large number of highly specialized industrial plants drawing on a great variety of resources and catering for myriads of different personal demands. This method could be discontinued only at the price of reducing the population of the West to a fraction of its present numbers and would make the remainder miserably poor and utterly defenceless. I do

not feel that this is a possible line of policy. Marx was right on the whole in saying that the utilization of a certain technique of production is possible only within the framework of certain institutions. He rightly recognized, with the followers of Adam Smith, the system of private enterprise operating for a market as the adequate embodiment of industrialism, as it existed then. He was wrong in assuming that this technique of production was in the course of being replaced by another which would require to be embodied in a centrally directed economic system. His forecast of progressive capitalist concentration was clever, but extravagant. The followers of Adam Smith were wrong in letting their onslaught on protectionism grow into a glorification of capitalism as a state of economic perfection. They were doubly wrong in opposing regulative economic legislation on principle, instead of welcoming it as an essential condition for the rational operation of capitalism. Marx was right in attacking the evils of unregulated capitalism and closer to the truth than his opponents among classical economists in exposing the deep-seated economic disharmonies manifested in recurrent mass unemployment. His manner of evaluating these observations, however, was again fantastic. His blind faith in progress made him conclude that since capitalism was faulty, it would necessarily be supplanted by a new set of institutions, which would eliminate these imperfections. As Columbus inevitably identified the Antilles with India which he had set out to discover, Marx identified the new system of which he had thus thought to have proved the necessity with Socialism. This was the argument for which he claimed that it transformed Socialism from a Utopia into a science. The same manner of reasoning can be observed even today wherever the demand for Socialism is derived from an exposure of the shortcomings of Capitalism. It underlines the most advanced socialist theories which expose the general imperfections of capitalist competition and expect Socialism to restore the perfect competitive market.

Indulging thus in blind hatred of social evils and blind confidence in social salvation, Marx and his successors lost sight in effect of the truth which Marx had been pre-eminent in emphasizing, that social institutions must form an adequate framework for the existing technique of production. *Delirant reges, plectuntur Achaii*. Almost fifteen million Russians had to perish in the famines of 1923 and 1932 to impress on their rulers the conclusion that the allocation of resources to a modern industrial system can be conducted only through a market; that wages must be adequately graded and enterprises must be required to make profits. Each of these features of capitalist economy was introduced after desperate resistance against overwhelming economic necessity. No effort was spared to make them unrecognizable under a cloak of socialist terminology. The manner in which the system works has never been revealed in detail, but enough of it is apparent to show that the only important difference from private enterprise lies in the handling of all major investments by the State. The capital market is eliminated and replaced by the decisions of a large number of public authorities, loosely co-ordinated from the centre. Thus the chances of risk-bearing are carried by the general public, on whose behalf a number of public officials undertake to allocate capital for new enterprise.

The modern theory of Socialism, as developed in the last 15 years, confirms that the central management of a modern industrial system is impossible and leaves no reason to suppose that Socialism can differ from Capitalism in much more than its nomenclature of an identical set of economic functions. Deliria of abundance and perfect justice are dissolving. We are touching earth again. Or at any rate, we touch it so far as a century of sanguine and often sanguinary daydreaming has not finally unfitted us for the hard struggle of stepwise improvement.

Henceforth we shall have to face once more the fact that the condition of man is miserable and that social institutions are full of obvious defects which cannot be eliminated. We shall try to reduce particular defects, but shall know that it will make on the whole only a small difference if we succeed. We shall have to resign ourselves once more to the inevitability of such social evils as economic wastage, competitive struggle, inequality and oppression.

The question is, whether humanity can learn to live once more without the opiate of progress? This largely constitutes, in my view, the “Drame de l’humanism athée” today. Dionysian overbearing has happily lost its major appeal. With Clio and Prometheus reduced to infirmity, the Néant naturally tends to fill our perspective. Can we fall back once more on Athene? We cannot, for the reason why she proved insufficient before is still there. It is “the intolerable shirt of flame, which human power cannot remove”—as Eliot described Christian love.