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THE HUMAN BEING IS NOT THE ABSOLUTE*
An interview with the Rev. Prof. Stanisław Kowalczyk, Ph.D., The Chair-person of Social Philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.
by Marian Pilka

Pilka: More and more often one hears a claim that we are already living in the post-atheistic epoch, that is, in a period in which the problem of God is not only being decided negatively but it has altogether ceased to be a problem. Indifferent neutrality has taken the place of the struggle against God. The nineteenth century dispute about the existence of God, about the nature of the creation and universe, about the sense of existence, came to an end with the exit of the main actors from the stage, leaving it empty.

Kowalczyk: During one of the meetings of European Catholic bishops somebody said that we were living in both post-Christian and post-atheistic Europe. At the very beginning it should be noted that wide-spread atheism, which appeared in the 19th century, was an heir of Christianity and that is why in a post-atheistic period Christianity cannot be declared as "a clean slate"; it cannot simply be treated as nonexistent. For example, such values as justice, humanism, freedom, or equality, are actually incorporated by atheistic doctrines from the Christian ethos. We can see it quite clearly in the ideological dependences of and influences on Hegel, then in Hegel's influence on Feuerbach and the latter's philosophy of human being as well as on Marx's social philosophy. For those thinkers the problem of god had a fundamental nature. Hegel himself "translated" theology into the language of philosophical pantheism. Feuerbach went one step further: he deified the human being and interpreted God as a product of human imagination. Marx negated the existence of the Deity, as if transferring its attributes to the collective as a creator of the human being. Atheistic doctrines are unable to free themselves not only from the cultural heritage of the Gospel but also from the very idea of God. Nineteenth-century atheism, which went down in history as a challenge to Christianity, not only constituted a threat to it but also partly caused its purification; it led to the death of the God of deformed Christianity.

Pilka: But this nineteenth-century theology of atheism is in fact dead. No emotion is any longer aroused by the propagators of atheism who are regarded as maniacal doctrinaires. There are no more great "theologians" of atheism.

Kowalczyk: It is true, yet although atheism did not survive, some of its forms have remained. Dead is the atheism that was fideistic, aggressive-factional, arrogant and optimistic, based on scientism and rationalism, assuming a possibility of constructing an ethics and

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explaining the sense of the world on the basis of the advances of natural sciences and a possibility of realizing a socio-economic utopia. Today it is more and more commonly acknowledged that it was the god of the atheists that died, Nietzsche's god—superman, Feuerbach's god—the human being, Marx's god—social class, Sartre's god—apotheosis of individual existence and its freedom, the god—of national socialism—race. It is becoming obvious that the human being cannot be the Absolute; the faith in the "divine" attributes of the human being or the collective, in the omniscience, omnipotence, all-goodness has disappeared. "The king has proved to be naked", for it is not God that alienates the human being, but a degraded god, an idol which is the surrogate of God. What was recognized as liberation in the previous century has now turned out to be a curse or a blind alley. The words of Sartre's protagonist, Goetz, are characteristic in this context: "I killed God because He had driven me away from people. And now His death drives me still further away from them." [In the "Devil and Good God"]. The world "freed" from God becomes an empty and homeless world, plunged into the absurd or into a struggle wasting people away.

**Pilka:** It seems that the most characteristic contemporary attitude towards religion is the agnostic attitude.

**Kowalczyk:** Yes. However, atheism and agnosticism are in fact significantly differed: atheism negates the existence of God, while agnosticism suggests that we cannot say anything certain about God. Yet, in practice, both attitudes are similar in existential experience. An example may be found, for instance, in the English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who formally declared himself an agnostic, while actually opting for atheism with abandonment. The teaching of the latest Vatican Council regards agnosticism as a form of atheism. The classification is valid on the psychological, pastoral plane. The agnostic attitude leads to practical and doctrinal atheism. Epistemological agnosticism is very important in the shaping of atheistic attitudes and doctrines. Its roots go back to two thinkers, Hume and Kant. The former gave birth to empirical agnosticism, granting the status of scientific cognition only to sensory experience. Kant, in turn, joining the trend of idealism, closed himself within the compass of one's own subjectiveness and subjectivism, from which there is no passage to real God. Both forms of agnosticism restrict the range of human cognition to the world of events, while renouncing the study of the inner nature of the world and man. This ontological phenomenalism and epistemological relativism give no real basis for the search of God. Closing itself within the circle of empirically cognizable phenomena and subjective experiences, agnosticism leads to the self-mutilation to the human mind and makes it impossible to reach the mysterious presence of transcendental God.
Pilka: Touching the problem of agnosticism, which functions as common awareness rather than as an intellectually considered theory of knowledge, you have mentioned the question of the philosophical premises of atheism.

Kowalczyk: It is true that in common atheism intellectual constructions have no essential significance. Still, one should remember that it is the philosophy predominant in a given period—or rather those elements of this philosophy that penetrate into popular consciousness—that constitutes one of the main factors determining the paradigm of every culture in which the human being grows up and develops his/her vision of reality, his/her sensibility and his/her feeling of his/her own sense. That is why the problem of the philosophical background of atheism has a character which is not only a theoretical but also practical.

Pilka: You have also mentioned the epistemological causes of atheism.

Kowalczyk: It should be added that such systems as analytical philosophy or neopositivism, while rejecting all philosophical methods other than those of exact and formal sciences, negate the reasonableness of metaphysical theses, while the acceptance of God is regarded by them as an attitude resulting from irrational impulses. The nineteenth century developed a way of thinking called scientism which was an unjustifies extrapolation of scientific cognition into the domain of philosophy. Negating transcendent cognition, scientism itself created a specific metaphysics in which the possibilities of human cognition were raised to the status of the absolute. Representatives of scientism believed that in time empirical sciences would take over the functions of ethics, metaphysics, and religion.

Pilka: Yet atheism has not only epistemological but also ontological causes.

Kowalczyk: Yes and also causes derived from anthropology and comparative religion. The original sin of ontological atheism is the temptation of monism, namely, a desire to reduce all reality to one proto-element, matter or idea. Spinoza and Hegel, who depersonalized and deindividualized God by identifying God with the visible world, succumbed precisely to this temptation. The temptation of monism, bewitching the human being with a unidimensional solution of the enigma for the world, leads to a logical contradiction. For if reality is a homogeneous being, then at the same time it is both matter and consciousness, change and durability, essence and attribute, etc. The internally contradictory being cannot be understood because the absurd is incomprehensible. The most frequent form of monism is precisely materialism which leads to the objectification of the human being depriving the human being of all the "human attributes." For matter is incapable of creating a sense of being. Nor can it be a creator of values and properties which go beyond its nature, such as spiritual life, truth, love, good.
Pilka: But by proving the philosophical invalidity of atheism you have not specified what atheism actually is.

Kowalczyk: Perhaps one should first of all ask if atheism is at all possible. Many thinkers, such as Kierkegaard, Scheler, Blondel or de Lubac, are of the opinion that every person believes in something, in God or in gods. Nineteenth-century atheism was a religion of created gods. Every person looks for points of reference in his/her life. He/She looks for something absolute, which would resist the wave of changes. Rejecting God, he/she deifies either the human being or human products. In this sense it is possible to speak about the religious dimension of atheism. In the philosophical sense, atheism is a negation of God, but as a phenomenon it is very complex, not only doctrinally but also psychologically, sociologically, etc. For these reasons atheism may be defined in various terms, in philosophical, theological, sociological, pastoral. I think that the best definition of atheism has been formulated by Vatican II, i.e. the severance of living ties with God or the negation of their possibility. For a sociologist atheism means the disappearance of religious practices, while in comparative religion it means the absence of a religious cult.

Pilka: Contemporary atheism is connected with the idea of freedom and the liberation of the human being from religion which is reputedly a cause of his/her alienation. Hence, at its basis we find a very characteristic humanistic element.

Kowalczyk: This "humanistic atheism" links such different thinkers as Nietzsche, Marx, and Sartre. But many other things divide them. In Nietzsche there is biologism and vitalism in his perception of the human being; in Marx—economism; in Sartre—idealistic subjectivism. Nietzsche and Sartre endorsed extremist individualism, while Marx—extreme collectivism. Yet, in spite of all that, they share the same attitude: the negation of God in the name of the human being and his/her autonomy, for the sake of social progress. They share humanism without God and against God. The Absolute was regarded by them as human projection and the submission to it led to human alienation from the domain of mundane affairs. Most often God has been rejected for the sake of human freedom. Especially Nietzsche and Sartre demanded unlimited freedom for the individual. But the apotheosis of the human individual cannot be identified with the proper appraisal of the human being as the person. Unlimited external freedom does not yet mean internal freedom. The latter is a freedom of spiritual maturity and responsibility for the fate of the next of kin, of serving them by creating the necessary values. Ego-centric individualism does not see a neighbor in another person but only an enemy. On the other hand, in Marx's collectivism the "liberation" from God exacts a considerable price to be paid, namely, becoming dependent on the human being, relying on the good or bad will of the collective. Marx looked at God through the
prism of Greek Zeus and that is why the dethronement of God was regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* of full humanism in which the human being was the only god. That Greek image of the deity has nothing in common with Christ who gave His life for us. The conception of the human being "liberated" from God for his/her own sake, although it gave rise to various socio-political systems, was an element of their ideological and philosophical affinity. A consequence of this affinity is the fact that many former Marxists pass over to the attitude of liberal individualism while, for instance, an adherent of extreme individualism, Sartre, sympathized with the doctrine of Marxism. The common feature of both these trends is the questioning of the personal nature of the human being. It should be added that in time the slogan of liberation served as a screen for human exploitation. Thus understood freedom leads to "the dictatorship fo the capital," "the dictatorship of the race," or "the dictatorship fo the proletariat." Freedom without God degenerates into human enslavement, internal or external.

**Pilka:** In its foundations each. culture is a certain religious-moral order. How does contemporary atheism, negating this order, influence its shape and character?

**Kowalczyk:** Christianity undoubtedly constitutes the foundation of European culture. Leszek Kolakowski, at that time still a Marxist, was quite right when he said: "Any attempt to nullify Jesus, to eliminate Him from our culture, is ridiculous and barren. The person and teachings of Jesus Christ cannot be removed from our culture, if this culture is to exist and be still created." Contemporary atheism has an evident anti-Christian profile. Nietzsche declared war against the Galilean. Thus understood atheism means tearing away Europe from its own roots. And this uprooting is identical with the death of European culture. The threat to European culture posed by atheism is manifold. First of all, both in the materialist version and in idealistic existentialism, it means a departure from the personalist conception of the human being. The human being is regarded as "thinking matter" by Marxism, and "a tamed animal" by Nietzsche, "the seat of the subconscious" by Freud, or "ontological absurdity" by Sartre. The consequence of the depersonalization of the human being is to be found in his/her degradation to the role of a producer to a consumer. John Paul II speaks about the materialistic civilization which accepts the primary of things over person. In this complex conception of the human being the sense of life is found in "having" rather "being." Therefore, it is not surprizing that in some atheistic doctrines there appear element of pessimism, nihilism, and despair.

**Pilka:** The influence of atheism is perhaps most evident on the plane of ethics.

**Kowalczyk:** It concerns not only doctrinal atheists but also multitudes who are Christians in name only. They even speak about the so-called "atheism of the faithful," that is, about the permanent neglect of the norms of religious ethics by the faithful. The primacy of economy or of
"having" over ethics unavoidably leads to the relativization of the latter. That is why Nietzsche spoke of "the shattered table of Moses," juxtaposing traditional ethics, "the ethics of the slave," to his own ethics of "supermen." Historical materialism regards ethics as a form of ideological superstructure, as a historically relative product of economic base. A characteristic feature of the ethics of contemporary "secular humanists" is found in the permanent separation of the ideas of love and of justice. The latter is considered to be a sufficient basis for "the humanistic ethical conception." It should be emphasized that many socio-political trends, which describe themselves as "humanistic," often violate the basic human rights and of nations. Love without justice is an empty slogan, but justice without the support of love may merely become a pretext for human destruction. How often are people killed in the name of humanity, appealing to the demands of justice! Thus, the desacralization of life and ethics leads to dehumanization.

Pilka: Is the vision of the civilization based on the atheistic paradigm, excluding the absolute and universal status of values, capable of providing answers to the basic existential questions?

Kowalczyk: What are these questions? These are question which involve the totality of the person and which, therefore, concern such values as freedom, happiness, friendship, love, sense of life. These questions concern the depth of the human person and its inner mystery. Asking them, a person goes beyond the domain of the world of things and enters the realm of absolute and universal values. Modern civilization, based on the advances in natural sciences, has worked out an empirical-mathematical model of the human being, which is a mutilated vision of the person. That is why these sciences are incapable of providing an adequate description of the person—of a free, thinking subject—and even less can they indicate its sense. The sense of human life goes beyond the world of matter dealt with by natural sciences. Modern civilization is directed towards the conquest and transformation of the cosmos and the reality surrounding us, hence it is restricted to the realm of the world of things. However the person uses things but cannot perceive in them the sense of its existence, since it would then mean its ontological self-degradation.

Pilka: It seems that modern civilization not only avoids basic existential questions but actually tries to exclude asking them.

Kowalczyk: Here we return to the problem mentioned by you at the beginning of our conversation. Personally, I am of the opinion that indifference to the problems of the ultimate conditioning of human existence is a superficial phenomenon. At present we are observing a strong revival of at least the problem of giving sense to human existence, if not of the question of the absolute. I do not think that this century can be characterized by the extinction of religious feelings. Marx prophesized that "the atheism of negation" would be followed by "factual atheism."
that is, by the burning out of transcendental aspirations in human minds and hearts, but his prophecy has not come true.

Pilka: But it is a fact that contemporary culture, especially in its mass-scale variant, does not favor the development of religious or even reflective attitudes.

Kowalczyk: It is true, yet its influence does not have a doctrinal character but is mainly limited to the shaping of existential attitudes. The threat—to religion as well as to deeper dimensions of culture—consists in making shallow human problems, in stripping the human being, in practice, of the transcendental dimension and restricting the human being to the realm of sensory experiences. The accumulation of sensations, especially through the mass media to which contemporary people are exposed, causes an inhibition of their inner growth. The superficial treatment and the trivialization of human existence, so characteristic of modern times, lead not so much to doctrinal atheism but rather to practical atheism, to a lasting conflict between moral norms and the life style of modern generations: they lead to the atrophy of prayer and philosophical-ethical reflection, to indifferent, neutral attitudes. In this respect we observe phenomena which may be described as post-Christian and, at the same time, post-atheistic. The negative influence of the mass media on religious-moral life is particularly emphasized in those countries in which the media are monopolized by the state proclaiming an atheistic ideology.

Pilka: The conduct of people is conditioned by norms created by the environment in which they live. Since the times of the French Revolution we have observed tendencies to secularize not only culture but also various institutions of social life.

Kowalczyk: The idea of the secularization of the state in France was realized in 1905 when the separation of the Church from the state was proclaimed. The revolutionary movements in many countries went still further, till the appearance of atheism was elevated to the status of state ideology. Hitlerism was also a manifestation of this phenomenon. As was rightly noted by Vatican II, the autonomy of culture, politics, and economy is valid within the borders of unchangeable ethical principles. Apart from imposing doctrinal atheism, the most frequent form of state atheization is the propagation of legal norms contrary to religious ethics. It causes the diffusion of the so-called "atheism of the faithful," already mentioned previously.

Pilka: But is God rejected only for conformistic-opportunistic reasons? For Camus the cause of atheism is an acute experience of evil which he could not explain in any other way than by the absence of a "good God."

Kowalczyk: The evil which terrifies and strikes people has often been a cause of the loss of faith. In fact, it would be difficult to question the reality of evil. Using Camus' words, the world is "plague-stricken." That is why explanations undermining or diminishing the reality of evil are
unacceptable. And there have been many such explanations in the history of human thought. Oriental religions treat evil on a par with the visible world, an appearance hiding the inscrutable core of being. Spinoza tried to persuade us that evil is an effect of the superficiality and faultiness of human cognition. Saint Augustine explained evil as "a complementary color" of good. Finally, Leibniz, speaking about the best of possible worlds, may also provoke atheism. The theodicies of this type are unacceptable. How then should evil be explained? Christian philosophy treats evil as a lack of appropriate good. According to this philosophy, evil is not independent, primeval, substantial-autonomous. Evil is real, but as a property "accompanying" finite being. Ontic evil which people encounters in their lives—illness, natural calamities, death—does not destroy spiritual life and the eschatological sense of human existence. On the other hand, moral evil is an unavoidable consequence of human freedom; it is a "risk" of this freedom. By transferring people's evil on God, Kotarbinski treats people as puppets. Yet, there is no way of explaining evil till the end; for a Christian, it remains a mystery. A response to evil cannot be limited merely to an effort of reason alone but it must also be an act of love: Arthur Beyzim fought with the evil of leprosy and Father Kolbe with the evil of the tormentors of the concentration camp. By the sacrifice of his life Christ gave himself for the sins of the world. These are personal answers to this problem.

Pilka: Poland belongs to that small group of European countries in which we observe a growth of religiosity. Has atheism ceased to be dangerous for Polish Catholicism, then?

Kowalczyk: In the four post-World War II decades Christianity in Poland has retained its dominant position, although immediately after the war some part of the intelligentsia and youth succumbed to the fascination with the social ethos of Marxism. This fascination was decreasing with each successive socio-political crisis. At present only a small fraction of our nation still adheres to the atheistic world view.

Pilka: Yet, doctrinal distance to atheism does not exclude its indirect influence on the shape of our religiosity.

Kowalczyk: Yes, but it is most frequently an unconscious process, shaping mentality and the family and social ethos. For instance, the relativity contained in the conception of Marxist ethics spreads the sense of the relativity of Catholic moral norms. Yet, if Marxism places stronger emphasis on the relativism of the norms of individual ethics, then in some part of Polish society the ethics of social life undergoes atrophy. A consequence of this fact is a drastic deterioration of the ethics of labor, frequent encroachment on social property, etc. The resistance of Polish society to theoretical-doctrinal atheism constitutes a strong contrast to the same society yielding to atheism in the domain of the ethics of everyday life. The sensitivity of the conscience becomes eroded and the criteria of good and evil undergo a change. The nation especially seems to yield to
relativism and skepticism, particularly harmful in the case of young people who accept Christian ethics in a selective-situational manner. The Marxist postulate of making religion a private affair leads to the impoverishment of the conception of religious life, among others, by stripping it of significant ethical duties. This could perhaps explain the strange contrast between the mass scale of some manifestations of religious life and the growth of social moral vices—abortions, divorces, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc. The ideology of secularism blurs the value of sacramental life, prayer, and grace in the consciousness of many Catholics. In Poland atheism seems to enter as if "by the back door." One cannot ignore these symptoms because to an increasing extent they shape the moral image of the nation, threatening not only its sensitivity but also its religious consciousness.

Pilka: Thus, coming back to the question put at the beginning about the character of the present epoch, do we really live in a post-atheistic period?

Kowalczyk: Atheism has made a strong impression on the modern epoch. On the one hand, it led to the formation of totalitarianisms, while on the other, it deprived people of higher values, leaving an existential void. Also the attempt to lead an easy life, avoiding fundamental existential questions, gives access to nihilism. Escaping from God, the human being tries to escape from his/her own call, from his/her own destiny. Contemporary culture tries to facilitate this escape, but the results are only too evident. For these reasons, apart from a strong atheizing tendency, we also observe a reverse phenomenon, a certain religious revival. The disappointment with scientistic philosophy particularly favors an intellectual rebirth of religious problems in modern culture. This may lead to a re-Christianization of Europe. Thus, one cannot say with full conviction that atheism, especially of a doctrinal sort, has been the principal feature of the modern epoch. The tendency to a religious revival is first of all a fight for the human being, for human dignity. This fight has not been decided definitely, as yet. The pontificate of John Paul II is characterized by confrontation with the atheizing tendencies of modernity. The Pope's efforts are determined by the defence of the person from idols which degrade human beings.