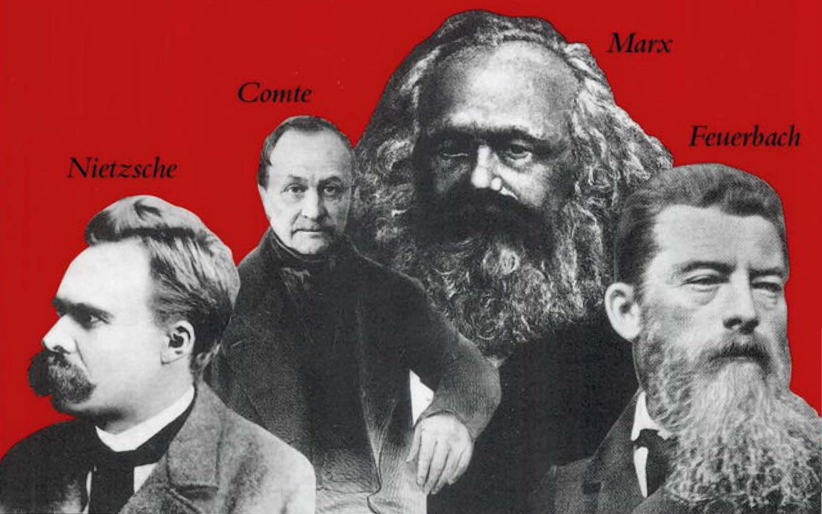


HENRI DE LUBAC

The Drama of Atheist Humanism



Nietzsche

Comte

Marx

Feuerbach

IGNATIUS

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THE DRAMA OF
ATHEIST HUMANISM

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collective death. . . . And as humanity does not have indefinite reserves, it is a strange anguish to think of the death of humanity."⁹⁹ In the perspectives of a historicism that refuses man, individually or collectively, any participation in any higher or more stable reality, what Mircea Eliade calls so well "the terror of history"¹⁰⁰ could not be averted. One can overcome the denial of an experience, by judging it temporary, but one cannot overcome indefinitely the logic of thought. Nothing, thus, is more dangerous than a poorly founded optimism: only despair can come from it.

Lie! The human collective is as fragile as I on the scale of Eternity. Seventy years or seven hundred years, it is the same. . . . The human collective will itself disappear as well. Everything is a mirage. . . .¹⁰¹

7.

It is then that Christianity, with its conception of man, comes once again to give hope to the world. Without intoxicating him with dreams, without presenting to him suspect novelties, today just as twenty centuries ago, strengthened by its unchanged doctrine, by its ever-new sap, it comes to save all, to accomplish all! What it did for the ancient soul recom-

⁹⁹ Charles Péguy, "Encore de la Grippe", *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, March 20, 1900, p. 7. — We know Nietzsche's apology: "In a lost, hidden corner of this glittering confusion of innumerable solar systems that is called the universe, there was once a star on which wise animals invented knowledge. This was the most pretentious and deceitful second of 'universal history': but it was only a second. After a few sighs from nature, the star went to sleep and the wise animals had to die." "Verité et mensonge au sens extra-moral", translated by Bovard-Simond, in *Europe*, September 15, 1934, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Mircea Eliade*, chap. 4.

¹⁰¹ These were, according to the *Journal de Krylon*, the last words of a fervent young communist on his deathbed in Moscow, December 31, 1940. Cf. *Journal de Genève*, July 12, 1949.

mends it for humanity today, with a power of assimilation intact. It comes to gather all that is sought in this humanity, the best of its effort and the best of its thought, in order to sublimate it again—and at the same time in order to give it foundation. A historical search would show us that in it we have the deepest source, the most certain origin of the current impulse of our race toward a new type of man. But it is much more. It is a force in the present as well as a source in the past. A force too often asleep but intact. This is due, first of all, to its realism.

This is a mark which cannot be overemphasized. Christianity is, of course, not realistic in the way those systems are which, able to see in man only the "real" that they have conceived, begin by changing his nature; which discern in him only a ready-made, wholly determined being; which, failing to recognize his essential characteristics, take no account, other than to diminish it by treating it as an illusion, of all that is plan, freedom, anticipation, thirst for transcendence in him, in brief, of all to which Christianity gives its true name: vocation, call. Christian realism is a realism of fullness. Without hiding man's misery from him, it shows him his nobility as well. There is therefore no point in asking it how to furnish additional arguments to the sceptics and disenchanters. It will never take sides with those who would sum up the whole possible history of our race in a "parable of the blind" à la Bruegel. It will never, in order to avoid mistakes, invite him back into the rut. It is not in the name of Christian wisdom that laziness of mind or consent to social alienations or the renunciation of dreams of greatness and unity can be preached. Does our faith not teach us that our humanity is one, that it has altogether the same destiny, that a Future is being prepared in which all are invited to collaborate, that the salvation of each is a function of the salvation of all, that the universe has a meaning to which man is the key, that we are all in progress toward a City set free from death and destiny, made for a free and brotherly society, and that we must here on earth serve our apprenticeship for

our future condition?¹⁰² That all this would have no effect on the temporal plane is not possible, or rather, not admissible. —But our faith reminds us, too, and with equal force, of two other things.

First of all, that the current ills of man cannot be reduced to some poor organization of the city. "The ills of man are infinitely more profound, more mysterious, his situation infinitely more tragic and his alienation more rigorous."¹⁰³ If one is a Christian, it is impossible to forget this very simple, very commonplace little thing—this horrible, invasive leprosy—called *sin*. It is impossible not to take it into account if one is seriously seeking the liberation of man. Naturally egotistical, it is still too little to say: man, that very noble being, is, through something in himself, naturally malicious, and the "unhappy conscience" is first of all a bad conscience, even if it does not yet appear to be so to itself. Already one must observe that, because of free will, all progress is ambivalent; that even progress of conscience does not bring about automatically (far from it!) a growth or consolidation in the good, and that "the state of war", having its seed in all our hearts, will be the state of our earthly condition until the end. Crude or sublime, all dreams of Eldorado are harmful. —But it is another aspect of things that we would particularly like to bring out. To believe that we will dry up the poisoned wellsprings of the heart, or that we will purify it perfectly through any transformation whatever in the external economic, social or political relations between men, to believe that "the state of peace" achieved outside would suppress the whole "state of war" within is once more a utopia. It is disconcerting to note the extraordinary lack of spiritual depth indicated by such an assurance. Does a discovery made in one domain make it fatally blind in another domain of real-

¹⁰² On these themes in the patristic tradition, see my book *Catholicisme* [English trans.: *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988)], chap. 8.

¹⁰³ Émile Rideau, *Séduction communiste et réflexion chrétienne* (Éd. de la Proue, 1947), p. 232.

ity? What! Does all this evil that is in man and which so often makes one person, as has been said, a hell for someone else, does all this have no other causes at all except those of the social order? But who, then, first set down these causes? Does man himself count for nothing in the current functioning of society? If the division between exploiters and exploited is now—let us suppose—the sole thing responsible, must we not wonder how this division itself could have been created? The instinct for domination existed at the beginning of history, before there were exploiters and exploited. The instinct for domination and others besides, which have no fewer social repercussions, such as that instinct for intolerance, which is characteristic of masses even more than of individuals and which has been so furiously awakened once again in our century. . . . This is why there is no “guarantee of progress”. To the very degree that man takes charge of the direction of his own destiny, as we saw above, “his existence enters into an extreme danger zone”.¹⁰⁴ That is not to discourage us but must make us clear-sighted.

With Marx, as with all those who have seen the importance of the social question, we thus have no trouble understanding, in order to reject as pointless, any purely intellectual solution of the human problem. The “unhappiness of conscience” will not be suppressed, man will not be liberated by some intellectual process! But let us add that the realism of Marx is incomplete: an economic and social process will not suffice either! A very different force is necessary in order to overcome “the great machine of pride and pillage, as old as humanity”,¹⁰⁵ always clever at transforming its wheels in order to continue to crush its victims. Not of course that the historically given social structures are not responsible for many of the varieties of vices and do not carry many of the seeds of dissension. But the

¹⁰⁴ Romano Guardini, “A la recherche de la paix”, *Études*, May 1948, p. 252. Yesterday, the end of human effort still seemed to be the domination of nature; “tomorrow, it must be the domination of its own power.”

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Raison et raisons*.

threefold concupiscence is rooted more deeply. The unhappiness of the conscience cannot be reduced to a "reflection of the rifts in society", and the slavery of man is a quite different thing again from social slavery. This unhappiness, this slavery are due to a more primordial—and more internal—fact. Marxism proclaims with good reason the necessity to transcend all philosophy. Christianity has also proclaimed it these twenty centuries. For it, nothing happens in ideas: all is real for it. It does not appeal to principles: it brings us the power of Christ. Come to attack evil, Christ did not come to resolve a problem or dissipate a mirage: he came to destroy an adversary.¹⁰⁶ But philosophy is not the only thing that has to be transcended. Besides, we need not fail to recognize the value of either intellectual activity or social activity. For this latter, the belief in sin is itself another stimulus for us, since it deters us from thinking that an equitable and peaceful order can ever be established by a simple interplay of freedoms. The more one believes man to be naturally egotistical and unjust, the more one must seek to protect his peers from him through a closely woven network of institutions. Social organization is not, of course, composed uniquely of this defensive and negative aspect, but it assuredly involves it. In any case, in whatever way we understand it, it is nonetheless from a wholly different source that we expect the deliverance from evil. The latter can come only from the grace of the Redeemer, freely received. For the evil from which we have been delivered in order to be given back to ourselves, once again, is sin, which touches us and holds us at the root of our being. So, too, it is not indispensable to profess the Catholic doctrine of sin or even to be a believer in order to recognize in man a whole somber and malicious side, a demoniac vein, a power of self-destruction, a spiritual poverty that eats away at him in his depths. Is it not necessary to count among the most certain progress that man has made in our age in knowledge of himself this subterranean exploration

¹⁰⁶ This is one of the essential aspects of the mystery of redemption.

in which are joined scholars with the most positive methods and the most intuitive geniuses? We cite simply two symbolic names: Freud and Dostoevsky. Not that, on the other hand, the explanations drawn from psychology (often tied to those of physiology) are not as deficient as the explanation by social relations in the immoderation of their totalitarian ambitions, in which all "pure", theoretical or practical reason is engulfed.¹⁰⁷ Too often, in their respective philosophy of man, sociology and psychiatry prove equally "wrought". At least each of them can serve us, in what it offers us of the positive, to reduce what is exclusive in the claims of the other. Let us add merely that, if psychiatry offers us here the confirmation of its analyses by revealing to us certain "simple bodies" of our deep life,¹⁰⁸ it nevertheless does not succeed any more than its imitator in furnishing us the remedy. And if any man who humbly recognizes himself as a sinner gives proof of more perspicacity than our sociologues, any Christian who opens himself to liberating grace achieves an experience that our psychiatrists do not foresee in any of their categories. It will be enough to call to mind the perfectly clear line with which Augustine of Tagaste, who was a great sinner and a great saint, marks the impassable limit between repression and deliverance: "Multum interest utrum animi desperatione obruatur cupiditas an sanitate perlatur."¹⁰⁹

But there is another wound in man—a wound which, however completely mixed, concretely, with the first, is not, like it, an obstacle to his greatness: it is, on the contrary, the (in-

¹⁰⁷ On Freud's doctrine and on the psychoanalytical method, the best statement seems to me to be that of Fr. de Montcheuil, "Freudisme et psychanalyse devant la morale chrétienne", in *Mélanges théologiques*, "Théologie" series, pp. 297-317. More recently, Maurice Nédoncelle, in *Réflexions sur la psychanalyse* (1949).

¹⁰⁸ The image is from Jean Cassou, *Pour la poésie* (1935), p. 56.

¹⁰⁹ Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies*, I, 19: "There is a great difference between the repression of desire by a desperate soul and its expulsion from a healed soul."

tolerable) sign of it.¹¹⁰ The form in which it appears to the conscience is multiple. It is an ever-reborn uneasiness, an essential dissatisfaction which prevents man not only from being content with some stable form but from being content with a progress carried on in the same line. It is an impulse of thought that makes him break, one after another, all the circles in which the life of the human animal tends to enclose itself and that overcomes all critical systems, all the positivist wisdoms that believed themselves right. Without an object that is always definite, this can be an agony:

. . . aliis oppressa malis in pectore cura¹¹¹

an agony whose varieties or psychological substitutes would be infinite to describe. It is at times a presentiment, the presentiment of another existence. The one who experiences it at first communicates around him the taste for it, or at the very least the suspicion of it, thanks to the secret complicity which assures him that the same spirit is spreading everywhere, although numbed in many, and that it, too, is subjected to the mysterious laws of germination. It is what one philosopher recently called the "call of transcendence". One can try to give reassuring explanations for this universal phenomenon. One can also criticize man for its naïve manifestations; one can condemn many

¹¹⁰ Cf. Saint Ambrose, in *Psalmum* 43, n. 88: "Etsi avertis, Domine, faciem tuam a nobis tamen signatum est in nobis lumen vultus tui, Domine" (PL 14:1131).

¹¹¹ Lucretius, *De Natura rerum*, bk. 5, v. 1207. This verse occurs in the following context (translated from the version presented by Doctor Logre in his work on *L'Anxiété de Lucrèce* [1946], p. 151):

When, raising our eyes, we contemplate the immensity
Of celestial space and the firmament studded with stars
And when we think of the course of the sun and the moon,
An anguish, stifled until then beneath other miseries,
Awakens and lifts up its head: Is there not there, before us,
An infinite and divine power, which makes
All these white lights go round to different rhythms?

a distortion of it, denounce many a counterfeit. One can apply oneself to untangling many of the confusions that a rudimentary mentality entertains with regard to it. One can observe, besides, that it seems curiously whetted by certain unhealthy states of the physical or social organism. A very poor observer would be the one, however, who saw in it only a remnant of childhood or only a superficial illness, a kind of excrescence that could one day be rooted out, a phantom that could be dispelled, a strange voice that could be reduced to silence. A very poor realist, the one who imagined he could get rid of it through the development of science or through physical or social health at last fully acquired. He would fail to understand the very heart of the reason. He would fail to recognize what is most human in man and what at the same time makes "man pass man".

Let us suppose nevertheless that one succeeded in doing so. We do not hesitate to say: less health would then be better, if such health were to satisfy us to the point of settling us in a blissful humanism; if such an equilibrium were to be established that man were as if forever sated with it, that he were no longer a question to himself.¹¹² What ideal could be as miserable as that of an earthly existence henceforth without struggle, without contradiction, without suffering, but also without any momentum, any search for the Absolute! The ideal of a condition so perfect in its circumscribed reality, so totally adapted to the surroundings, having so well dried up the spring of all obstacles of conscience and all scruples, achieving so rigorous an equation between the objective and the subjective that not even the least weakness would remain through which to com-

¹¹² This would be the "entire homogeneity" dreamed of by Comte (*Cours*, vol. 6, p. 536). Cf. M. Nédoncelle, in *Réflexions sur la psychanalyse*, pp. 137-38: "There is no doubt that the life of the spirit, by introducing into our finite consciences the perspective of the infinite, makes us forever limp, like Jacob. Without a head and without a heart, humanity would be a happy beast. But who would truly want this placidity?"

municate any more with the mystery of being, no play in this great machine of the marvelously organized human universe, nothing that would still permit the debates of man without himself and the commitments of a personal choice!¹¹³ One could indeed still speak then of humanism, of culture or of spiritual life: but in what an insipid sense! In Christian terms, what a horror! But simply in human terms, what misery! Is it to this dungeon that the immense effort that is carrying us forward today must lead?¹¹⁴

But, in reality, we are not driven to such a dilemma. "God has entered into human life and has introduced into it the essential rupture which removes from all things the natural element with which they are arranged in the totality of the world."¹¹⁵ Such a rupture is definitive. The "roots of religion" are deep, moreover, in ways other than some still imagine, and it is not up to any social revolution to tear them up. Rather one should say that an excessively unjust or miserable social state—while favoring perhaps certain base aberrations—closes man to the life of the spirit. We can therefore, with full heart and without second thoughts, without fear of ever running the risk of going beyond the desirable limit, work for the rehabilitation of our race and its progress on all fronts: the success will never be such that the noble wound will be healed. Even if that "leap into the kingdom of freedom" that Engels prophesied were

¹¹³ When we say that society is for the person, we do not mean to say only that a good social organization must furnish each individual with laws, means to educate himself, to enjoy, as they say, the pleasures of the mind, to taste good music, etc. Man the refined animal, cultivating an "inner life" in new varieties of psychologism is no more the ideal than is man the beast of burden or the cog in a machine. If man does not have at all to decide, to act freely, to struggle, to sacrifice his inferior being for the Good and the True, to commit himself personally in relation to the Absolute, he is a debased being.

¹¹⁴ Louis Massignon is not wrong to speak in this respect of the "hideous mechanism of our collective incarceration, in which our hardened sins [are combined] as implements of scientific progress": *Dieu vivant*, cahier 7, p. 20.

¹¹⁵ G. van der Leeuw, p. 516.

to be achieved on earth, the wound would remain open. Our consciousness of it would be only livelier and more pure.¹¹⁶ We must say what we have already said about the wound of sin: what social disorder has not engendered, social order is powerless to cure.

Why, then, do we see in so many of our contemporaries, along with the persuasion that they themselves are cured, this will to cure our race? Why these cries of triumph at the idea that all metaphysical or religious anguish has drained from their heart? We understand the cry of a Lucretius, celebrating his victory over the fear of the somber Acheron. But after the call of the God of love has sounded directly among us, after a cloud of witnesses, from generation to generation, has never ceased to transmit it to us, do we not see that the situation has changed and that another, more positive way is open? We understand and approve of the struggle against a degrading or paralyzing superstition. But how can we not deplore the blindness of the one who does not know how to discern any prophetic significance in human anguish? There are two ways of being cured of it: by seeking to stifle it, to kill it, to have it removed "surgically"—but then one mutilates oneself, without stopping it from being reborn elsewhere; or else, in opening oneself to the One who assuages it, by changing it into hope. By decreeing that it corresponds to nothing, that there is no mystery at all; or else, taking note of the mystery, by seeking the key which is to open it to us. Now, it is precisely this key that Christianity offers us. It is not one of its dogmas that, in one form or another, reveals and explains us to ourselves. The complete meaning of the great adventure in which we are engaged is revealed to us through it. It shows us, and it alone can show us, the magnif-

¹¹⁶ If we were willing to speak the language of Marx for a moment, we would say that, the more man escapes his natural alienations, the more apt he becomes to understand that kind of alienation—it would be better expressed as ecstasy, promise of a higher and more blessed life—which is his fundamental nature and the movement of his very soul.

icent end of the whole human task. Work is not made to last forever: conceived and served in that way, it would still be an absurd, enslaving idol for him. The new *homo faber* who is being fashioned today will have to be coupled with a new *homo sapiens* as quickly as possible. The latter will not only have the constant concern of renewing with nature and life links that are constantly in danger of being strained. Reflecting on his work activity, he will understand that it cannot be an end in itself but that it has meaning, just like the work of the laborer and the sower, only through the harvest that it prepares: a harvest of eternity. In this temporal existence, it must be at the maximum service of a more pure, more immanent activity: an activity of contemplation.¹¹⁷ He will likewise understand that, if he enters every day a little more fully into possession of the universe, it is in order to have more to offer; that in the act by which it is achieved, he must not stop but must transcend himself; that only in this way does he accomplish the profound wish of his nature, which is neither to offer himself in a never-ending heroic effort nor to withdraw, satisfied at last, into an egotistical enjoyment, even if noble and collective, but, in contemplating, in offering, to adore.¹¹⁸

In the third century of our era, wishing to explain the role of Christians in the world, the author of the epistle to Diognetus compared them to the soul that animates the whole body. This was obviously a strange claim. The paradox today is scarcely less, and yet we affirm it with the same confidence: the disciples of Christ do not feel they are survivors of a shipwrecked world but pilots charged with guiding it into port. In this age when, bypassing the alternatives of optimism and despair, a new man is sought, they want to help him find his way and point out to him the conditions of success. Everything confirms them in

¹¹⁷ Cf. J. Lacroix, *Socialisme?*, pp. 57-62: "The role of work, of all work, is to free captive thought. . . ."

¹¹⁸ Cf. Émile Rideau, *Consécration* (1946), and J. Mouroux, *Sens chrétien de l'homme*, 4th ed. (1949).

the assurance that they alone have the power to do so. They have not been promised that they will always be heard; they must even usually expect the contrary. They know only too well, moreover, the failures of courage and clear-sightedness that make them individually inferior to their task. Yet, strengthened by the words of their Master and the action within them of his Spirit, nothing will make them renounce it. Tomorrow just as yesterday, they will prove to be effectively what they are by vocation: the conscience of the human race.¹¹⁹

8.

These are, one will say, very general considerations. At least some of them are, however, unfortunately only too practical and too immediate in application. But, above all, this has been a very incomplete picture of man according to Christianity. The inadequacy due not so much to the biases that an unavoidable distribution of subjects makes imperative as to the perspective adopted. How, in fact, can we penetrate to the depths some point of revealed teaching when, instead of studying the point in itself, we ask of it a judgment about facts, ideas, attitudes which, at least at first glance, are of a totally different order? Such confrontations are legitimate, they are even often necessary, if it is true that the great problems of our temporal life can be resolved only in the light of our total destiny and that Chris-

¹¹⁹ These truths were forcefully recalled by the pastoral letter of Cardinal Suhard in 1947, and in a more recent discourse Pope Pius XII bound all the faithful to fight against the wave of pessimism that is threatening to invade the world: a radio discourse in response to the wishes expressed by the dean of the Sacred College on the occasion of his feast (*Documentation catholique*, June 12, 1947). And already in the same sense, on Christianity coming to save human hope and to achieve the "new man" in human society: the letter of Cardinal Pacelli with respect to the *Semaine sociale* at Versailles in 1936. This text along with other similar ones will be found in J. F. Noubel, "L'Église, vivant modèle de sociologie d'après Sa Sainteté Pie XII", *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique*, 1949, pp. 3-25.