

## **‘I’M AN ATHEIST, THANK GOD!’**

### **On the Spiritual Life of Atheists**

*Jean-Guy Saint-Arnaud*

**T**HERE ARE ATHEISTS who lay claim to a spiritual life, but is it possible for an atheist really to have a spiritual life? Should we not rather think of them as condemned to live without spirituality? Can spiritual experience be possible if there is no reference to something transcendent and no recognition of the existence of God?

Such questions are not just of current theoretical interest. They have been raised for many years. We have all heard people say that, although they have no time for the Church, they are not therefore cut off from the experience of an inner life: ‘It is spiritual, but not religious’. This dichotomy between the spiritual life and religion has increased gradually as the movement towards the secularisation of social life has gathered strength and the attachment to traditional ecclesial institutions has grown weaker.

#### ***New Trends in Spirituality***

As early as 1966 Charles Taylor had noted, in an article that summarised the characteristics and trends of spiritual life at the time, that there was a sharp contrast between the spirituality of former times and the spiritual currents now at work:

For someone brought up in one of the mainline religious traditions, today’s spirituality seems wild and varied beyond the widest stretches of imagination. It appears to find its sources in all the religions of the earth—and also in depth psychology, folk traditions, therapies of healing and much else besides. Old-timers are tempted to shake

their heads and declare that the younger generation has quite lost its way.<sup>1</sup>

According to Taylor, the new trends in spirituality are characterized by three contrasts. In the first place, there is a clear emphasis on the present life as opposed to what lies beyond this life. Attention is concentrated on the self, on individual needs, on self-development and personal growth rather than on a life after death which requires, here and now, austerity, detachment and the overcoming of self. The transcendent is either absent or made into a tool; it is not a part of my life, but lies beyond it. It is very easy to recognise New Age tendencies here.

The second contrast is to be found in the affirmation and pre-eminence given to ordinary living, with its values of justice, equality and kindness, in sharp contrast to the extraordinary exaltation once given to a contemplative elite made up of monks and nuns. This second characteristic is a consequence of a critical approach to religions in which one can glimpse the arrival of a new secularism.

Finally, these spiritualities, centred on the present life and on the day-to-day, bear witness not only to the eclipse of the transcendent in today's world, but also to feelings of dissatisfaction and disenchantment about this world. They are a denunciation of its narrowness and of the present dominance of utilitarian, demeaning preoccupations, with their monotony and also their subordination of all values to material prosperity. Here one sees the shadow side, the darkness of the new spiritualities, often to be recognised in the teaching they foster about emptiness, death and nothingness. No doubt the influence of Nietzsche can be discerned in this. When religion is not there to open up the transcendent for us, the fascination of death and violence becomes stronger. When humanity cannot reach beyond into the heights, it turns, so it would seem, to what is below.

In pointing out these three characteristics, Charles Taylor is in agreement with several contemporary atheists who claim the right to speak of the spiritual life and who identify similar tendencies. One can cite, among others, Luc Ferry, formerly the French minister responsible

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Spirituality of Life—And its Shadow: Today's Spiritual Innovators Turn Away from the Transcendent', *Compass*, 14/2 (May–June 1966), 10–13.

for Youth, Education and Research, and André Comte-Sponville. The latter presents himself as a sort of 'Christian atheist', or 'atheist with faith'. He claims solidarity with a history, a tradition and a community. He accepts such concepts as the 'infinite', 'eternity', the 'absolute', 'mystery' and 'love', but he rejects all dogmatism, fundamentalism and fanaticism. According to him, it would be false to say that atheists lack morality and ethics. They share 95 per cent of the values respected by believers, and they consider that they can just as well have a spiritual life outside the faith.

In *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*,<sup>2</sup> Comte-Sponville raises two questions, 'Can we do without religion?' and 'Does God exist?', and devotes the whole of the last section of his work to a third: 'Can there be an atheist spirituality?' He begins this section as follows:

Let us conclude with what, to my mind, is most important of all—not God, not religion, not atheism, but spiritual life. Some will express surprise: 'What? You, an atheist, take an interest in spiritual life?' Of course I do. Not believing in God does not prevent me from having a spirit, nor does it exempt me from having to use it . ... Renouncing religion by no means implies renouncing spiritual life . ... Spirituality is the life of the spirit. But what is the spirit?<sup>3</sup>

What is important is 'to discover a spirituality without God, without dogmas, without a Church, something that will defend us from both fanaticism and nihilism'.<sup>4</sup>

And he continues with a further clarification:

Is there such a thing as an atheist spirituality? Thinking back to the three theological virtues of the Christian tradition, I would readily answer that it can be described as a spirituality of fidelity rather than faith, of action rather than hope ... and, naturally, of love rather than fear or submission.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere he writes of 'a spirituality of immanence rather than transcendence, of openness rather than interiority'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008). French original: André Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme. Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Comte-Sponville, *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 134–135.

<sup>4</sup> Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, back cover.

<sup>5</sup> Comte-Sponville, *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 140–141.

<sup>6</sup> Comte-Sponville, *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 201.

### ***To Believe or Not to Believe***

So, what is one to think of all this? Can an atheist really have a spiritual life? There are others better qualified than myself to reply to this question and carry on the debate. Among them, of course, are the atheists themselves. It is they who can explain what they mean by a spirituality without transcendence, just as Comte-Sponville tries to do. Among our own religious thinkers, Jacques Grand'Maison is certainly the best suited to define the point of view of believers in relation to the problem of a spiritual life without God. One may mention in particular his latest work, *Pour un nouvel humanisme*.<sup>7</sup> No other work seems better suited to cast light on this problem. I would strongly recommend it.

For my own part, I can claim to be a believer who is fascinated by the lack of faith, just as there are atheists fascinated by the problem of God. On one occasion the famous biologist Jean Rostand confessed to Jean Guitton:

How lucky you are to believe in God! For you it is possible not to think about God, but I, who do not believe in God, am continually obliged to think about Him! ... What scandalizes me is that those who believe in God think about Him less passionately than we, who don't believe in Him, think about His absence!<sup>8</sup>

If there are unbelievers who are tempted by faith, it should also be acknowledged that there are believers who are tempted by unbelief. One has to ask oneself if there is after all such a big difference between an atheist and a believer. As Jean Guitton remarks,

Such a dense fog creeps in between what one thinks one believes and what one really believes—and even more between what one thinks one does NOT believe and what one sincerely and silently does believe.<sup>9</sup>

This last reflection now allows me to offer some remarks that seem necessary so as to cast light on the relationship between believers and unbelievers.

<sup>7</sup> (Montreal: Fides, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Jean Guitton, *Portraits et circonstances* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1989), 283.

<sup>9</sup> Guitton, *Portraits*, 283.

In the first place, it is important to grasp that we are all 'committed', as Pascal noted.<sup>10</sup> We all share the same human limitations, the same enigmatic situations, the same difficulties in life—suffering, evil, death. We are all faced with the same three fundamental questions: where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? All of us, depending on our different temperaments, are searching for the meaning of life or for happiness. We respect the values of freedom, creativity, beauty, truth, goodness, love, generosity, justice. There is a very fine book by Jacques Leclercq entitled *Le jour de l'homme*:<sup>11</sup> it contains a preface by Roger Garaudy and an afterword by Francis Jeanson. Both of these unbelievers agreed to enter into dialogue with Leclercq on the fundamental questions raised by being human: God, human existence, freedom, suffering, death and resurrection. As Jacques Leclercq explains:

The contribution of these two writers at the start and at the end of the book is itself proof that a meeting is possible between belief and unbelief, provided that the meeting takes place at a level where sharing can take place on what it means to be human in relation to the world, to life, to tenderness, to freedom and to intelligence.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, one has to acknowledge that nobody has a monopoly on truth and understanding as regards our shared humanity. A believer has every right fearlessly to raise any sort of question, but it is not true that a believer is in possession of all the answers. And I am convinced that exactly the same holds true for atheists, given that both believers and atheists have the same obligation to reject intolerance, dogmatism and fanaticism. Would anyone disagree with Pascal that atheism is a sign of 'a powerful mind, but up to a certain point only', and that 'there is nothing so much in conformity with reason as this rejection of reason'?<sup>13</sup> The point of these remarks is to say that there are enough reasons for believing as there are for not believing. 'Religion and belief

<sup>10</sup> Blaise Pascal, 'The Wager', in *Pensées*, translated by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Classics, 1966), 150. The French version reads: 'Nous sommes tous embarqués'—'We are all in the same boat'; see *Pensées* (Paris: Librairie Generale Française, 1962), fragment 451. In the English translation the word 'committed' does the job of the French expression 'embarqués'.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Leclercq, *Le jour de l'homme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> 'Au coeur de la ville, Jacques Leclercq accueille le tout-venant', *Nouveau Dialogue* (September 1978), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 81, 85.

in God do not depend on irrefutable evidence, but on a free attitude, one open to other plausible attitudes, be they agnostic or atheist.’<sup>14</sup>

In this context it is no longer appropriate to think of atheists as enemies. Admittedly they refuse to believe in God; they call in question and oppose our own faith; but they are adversaries, not enemies. Their different points of view and different choices represent, surely, a richness and not a threat for believers. In any sport, whether it be tennis, golf or hockey, the opponent has a very important role. It is by playing against someone that we can give of our best.

For the martial arts, the adversary is not the enemy; he or she is the person who is there to make us discover an unknown dimension of ourselves. Through losing our stability we are enabled to bring forth ourselves ... we fight not against, but with, our demons.<sup>15</sup>

Like Jacob with the angel, we say: ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me’ (Genesis 32:26). As Saint-Exupéry said, the human being is revealed when face-to-face with an obstacle.<sup>16</sup> It is well known that the energy of the human intellect grows with opposition. ‘For lack of a mirror, you cannot see your face. For lack of adversaries, you do not know your failings.’<sup>17</sup> Consequently it is a good thing to be interrogated by atheists: ‘Where is your God?’ (Psalm 42:3).

A further remark, inspired by the Viennese psychiatrist Victor Frankl, is important: one underestimates people if one takes them as they are, given that they are called to change and evolve. Atheists, as much as believers, are people in process of becoming, living a narrative. If we pin them down to what we can see—often superficially—caught in a particular moment of their stories, we cut off their future and the transformations they carry within them. So we have to consider, beyond their professions of belief or unbelief, the basic principles and internal logic that controls the lives of these people, what dynamic forces are at work within them and, above all, the fundamental

<sup>14</sup> Grand'Maison, *Pour un nouvel humanisme*, 151–152; see also 246–247. He quotes Pascal, ‘There is light enough for those who want to believe, and contrary reasons enough for those who do not want to believe’ (*Pensées*, 50).

<sup>15</sup> Annick de Souzaenelle, quoted in Frederic Lenoir, *L’alliance oubliée, la Bible revisitée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), 53.

<sup>16</sup> See Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 153.

<sup>17</sup> Nichiren, *Kaimokusho*, quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 134. French original: *Paradoxes suivis de nouveaux paradoxes* (Paris: Seuil, 1959), 101.

orientation of their becoming. What lies behind the verbal affirmation 'I'm an atheist' or 'I'm a believer'? What is the goal at which, deep down, they are aiming: is it life or death, fullness of being or the void? Is there, in the depths of a particular person, that 'basic trust in being',<sup>18</sup> in Frankl's phrase, that solid core of confidence that bears witness invisibly at our very centre, as in the case of Etty Hillesum, that in spite of everything and against everything, life has beauty and meaning?<sup>19</sup> It is in relation to this basic orientation towards life, much more than from any verbal declarations, that we can judge a person's belief or unbelief. I may well proclaim that I believe in God and still place myself, in fact, on the road to atheism. I may well affirm that I am incapable of acknowledging the existence of God, and yet find myself moving without really knowing it towards God. Only as my life story unfolds, with all its infidelities and recoveries, can I make explicit and bring to fulfilment that which is solidly established in the depth of my heart. It will then appear in the purpose, the horizons, the dynamic overall thrust of my whole person.



<sup>18</sup> Victor Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism: Selected Papers on Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square, 1967), 156.

<sup>19</sup> See Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941–43*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Persephone Books, 1999), 177, 196, 218–219. French edition: *Une vie bouleversée* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 143, 156, 169–170. And see Sylvie Germain, *Etty Hillesum* (Paris: Pygmalion, 1999), 46. Mention may also be made of that 'primal or fundamental trust' in life that Hans Küng talks about (*My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs*, translated by John Bowden [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 90, 93–95, 146).

### ***To Be An Atheist for All False Gods***

There are many attitudes that trouble me greatly when I consider the religious landscape. I feel ill at ease, if I may use a euphemism, when I encounter fundamentalist attitudes, whether they are those of believers or unbelievers. There is the fundamentalist approach of some scientists who refuse to acknowledge any method different from their own, and thus, quite unscientifically, eliminate whatever fails to fit.<sup>20</sup> But their attitude is no worse than that of certain 'believers', the Pharisees who take themselves as God and want to impose their own particular outlook upon all. Both forms of fundamentalism—exaggerated esteem for unbelief and for belief—are detestable and have to be opposed.

Equally worrying, however, are the immature and superficial attitudes that give excessive importance to social pressure and lean towards what is the fashion, what is commonplace, or simply the nonchalance of 'everybody does it, so why not I?' It is no more a sign of intelligence to go to church because everybody goes, than not to go because nobody does so. Fortunately we have been liberated from the sociological type of religion of former times. The present-day religious situation appears more healthy than the former one; we are forced back on our convictions and free decision.

Yet another cause of disquiet for me is the type of superficiality that Pascal termed *divertissement* ('diversion').<sup>21</sup> This has the sad effect of making us oblivious to what is really at stake in our lives, both as individuals and as members of a community. Gilles Vigneault was not far from the truth when he claimed, perhaps with tongue in cheek, 'An atheist is a believer on holiday: it's hard work to believe. There is a void if one does not believe in anything!' It is worth reflecting on what is being covered up by the massive influx of the media: the TV soaps, the 'just-for-a-laugh' programmes, the lotteries with their mirage of instant millions.

There is reason to rejoice when atheists reclaim for themselves, and wish to share with believers, the riches of the spiritual life. Some

<sup>20</sup> 'If the only tool you have is a hammer, all problems look like nails.' See Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Comment je suis redevenu Chrétien* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 43. There is no evidence that this is actually a saying of Mark Twain; it has also been attributed to Abraham Maslow.

<sup>21</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 67–72.



will be astonished, as André Comte-Sponville noticed—'What? You, an atheist, take an interest in spiritual life?' And what I have to say now will also astonish some atheists. Their atheism has a role to play on the religious stage; it forms part of, and constitutes an important element in, the spiritual life. One cannot escape from religion, just as one cannot escape from politics. The refusal to take part in politics is itself to adopt a political stance. In my opinion the same holds good for religion. As Olivier Clement has written 'Kindly permit me to postulate that everything is included in religion, even the denial of religion'.<sup>22</sup> Belief is the bedrock of everything; one cannot do without convictions.<sup>23</sup> Atheism then appears as a faith, but a different faith. Comte-Sponville agrees: 'I do not claim to *know* that God does not exist, but I believe he does not exist'.<sup>24</sup> It is just as difficult to believe that God does not exist as it is believe that God does exist. Pascal Bruckner rightly claims, 'the more our philosophers and sociologists proclaim themselves to be agnostics, atheists, and free-thinkers, the more they take us back to the religious belief they are challenging'.<sup>25</sup>

**One cannot escape from religion, just as one cannot escape from politics**

The necessity to reject all false gods is obligatory and a fundamental need in the life of believers. This obligation appears overwhelmingly in the Old Testament, in the struggle against idols and false prophets. God, Godself, can be seen paradoxically as the most militant of unbelievers. Speaking of idols, Jeremiah writes:

For the customs of the peoples are false: a tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of an artisan; people deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good. (10:3–5)

<sup>22</sup> Oliver Clement, *L'autre soleil* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 80.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth consulting the text of Jacques Ellul quoted by Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La force de conviction* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 258: see Ellul, *Islam et judéo-christianisme: texte inédit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Comte-Sponville, *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 69. He gives six arguments for not believing in God, for believing that God does not exist.

<sup>25</sup> Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*, translated by Stephen Rendall (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 2.

Jesus continues the same war, at the cost of his life. He wants to free all human beings from false images of God (especially those constructed by the Pharisees) and from that oppression of the absolute that threatens to entrap all religions. His preaching and actions, bearing witness to a God of love, constitute a radical criticism of the deviant and illusory religious practices of his day. In the Gospels, Christ is insisting on the need, far beyond all fine words, to make love into a reality by one's deeds. As the parable of the two sons makes clear (Matthew 21:26–31), it is not a 'yes' or a 'no' that matters, but the putting into action of the will of God. That can take place, as Matthew's text on the Last Judgment testifies (Matthew 25:31–46), without one being aware of it.

In the early history of the Church, many of those who belonged to the first communities of Christians were condemned to the lions for their 'atheism', precisely because they refused to sacrifice to pagan gods. St Justin admits this in so many words, 'we are called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists with reference to gods such as these.'<sup>26</sup> 'How strange! Today Christians are accused of inventing illusions, whereas at the beginning they were accused of atheism, because they demolished illusions and destroyed false gods.'<sup>27</sup>

Anyone who has faith should reflect on that faith to make sure that it is authentic and such a faith as one may share with others. One has to be always ready to reply to 'anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15). Atheists, like the prophets, can become an inestimable help in the task of discernment. By forcing us to purify our images of God and to rid ourselves of false notions of the divine, they perform a great service for our faith. We can—and should, quite rightly—reject with them the false gods that they deny and oppose.<sup>28</sup> Surely there is no alternative but to reject with them a religion that is Jansenistic, guilt-ridden, moralising, despotic and demeaning. Atheists must always provide a challenge to Christians. They have to upset, to question, to prick our consciences. They have valid reasons to deny what they deny, and we are faithful to the truth when we acknowledge this. If, as Lucretius says, 'God is the fruit of our

<sup>26</sup> Justin Martyr, 'First Apology', 6, in *The First and Second Apologies*, translated by Leslie William Barnard (Mahwah: Paulist, 1997), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Bro, *Seul Dieu est humain* (Paris: Cerf, 1973), 50–51.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Guy Saint-Arnaud, 'Invitation à l'athéisme', *Nouveau Dialogue*, 15 (1976), 8–9; also *Aux frontières de la foi. Entre l'athéisme et le mystère* (Montreal: Médiaspaul, 2007), 29–38.

fear', then we have to join him in rejecting such a god. If, as Freud maintained, God is an illusion, the product of a collective obsessive neurosis, a sort of Oedipus complex that affects a humanity searching for a common father, then who would want to have anything to do with such a god? If, following the thesis of Durkheim, God is but the idealized expression of a society, then we have an idol that we would be well rid of. If the God-thought is simply a relic from a primitive stage of knowing, which needs to be replaced sooner or later by science, then let us abandon such a thought as quickly as possible. If God is the incarnation or a dream of power projected by the miserable state of human beings, an opiate of—or for—the people, to keep the lower orders in a state of somnolence, then one should oppose such a god along with the Marxists (Marx, Feuerbach, Lenin, Stalin and Co.). If God is but a vampire fattening himself on human weakness, the noble thing would be to deny such a perverse and sadistic god along with Nietzsche. Again, if God is but the unjust opponent of our freedom, we ought, like Sartre, to oppose him. And finally, it would be right to revolt with Camus against an executioner god, a torturer of innocent children, because such a god is inhuman and unacceptable.

### ***The Cloud of Unknowing***

It is not possible to speak about God except by analogy, having recourse to a language of symbols made up of comparisons and parables, as Jesus showed us in the Gospels. Thus, with religious psychology in mind, some precautions have to be taken: we must avoid thinking of God as made to our own measure (conceived in anthropomorphic terms) or, on the other hand, declaring a complete incapacity for any knowledge of God (agnosticism). Any knowledge of God has to pass through three stages linked dialectically to one another: (1) an initial phase of affirmation (the positive, kataphatic way); (2) a second phase of negation (the negative, apophatic way); and finally (3) a phase of surpassing excellence (the way of 'eminence'). For example, when I say that God is good, that God is my father, I have to add at once: 'No! God is not good nor a father according to the limited notion of goodness and paternity available to my human experience.' God is infinitely good, with a goodness that I am incapable of imagining or conceiving adequately. The fatherhood that is God's surpasses by infinity any idea that I could ever have of it.

The negative way can be found described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*,<sup>29</sup> and in the atheistic mysticism present in the works of Meister Eckhart. Spiritual writers often speak of the 'night' of the senses and of the spirit. This second phase is one of the most important in the growth of spiritual experience, signalling in some way the transition to maturity, rather like the adolescent's self-affirmation through opposition. However, the negative way is a necessary consequence and implication of God's very nature, more than of any considerations of religious psychology. God is always greater; God is the completely Other. God exceeds any grasp we may have of God and is truly, in this respect, 'a God who hides Himself' (Isaiah 45:15), a God who cannot be found except by constantly searching (as St Augustine liked to say). Here one has a sign that one is in the presence of God and not of an idol.

St John of the Cross noted this on one occasion, when someone asked him the question: 'How do we know it is really God we are encountering and not just our own imagination?' John's reply was this: The best proof that it is really God is that he is often absent when we seek him, and present when we are not seeking him or perhaps don't even want him present.<sup>30</sup>

In his essay 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit', Karl Rahner puts these words into the mouth of St Ignatius:

In the end this lack of God [= this atheism] simply eliminates the idols which the previous era, harmlessly and yet terribly, raised to the same level as the ineffable God. Why should I not say what I feel: it is a godlessness that affected even the Church, if the Church is intended ultimately, in union with the Crucified one, to be the cause of the fall of these gods through its own history.<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly this essay on the spiritual life of atheists will upset the familiar parameters used by some believers. It is unusual to discuss

<sup>29</sup> The title *The Cloud of Unknowing* belongs to an anonymous work that holds a prestigious place among the important texts of fourteenth-century mystical theology, both in general and particularly in relation to the English school.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Green, *When the Well Runs Dry: Prayers beyond the Beginnings* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2007), 101.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit', in *Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1978), p. 12.

spirituality from this point of view. Where Christians are concerned, the spiritual experience can hardly be imagined without reference to God and the Holy Spirit: 'if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25). But we would be unjust to atheists if we were too quick to categorize them as simply grave-diggers of the faith. In fact, they are not so much a menace as a treasure for believers. If we leave to one side their verbal profession of atheism, if we pay attention to their deeper orientation and their concrete options, we see that the 'faithful' atheists presented by André Comte-Sponville not only do not necessarily stand against faith in God but even provide, in paradoxical fashion, an essential safeguard of that faith. Clearly we are unable to be deeply Christian unless we are atheists with regard to all false gods. 'I'm an atheist, thank God!' is an ironic *bon mot* that has more ring of truth than appears at first sight.

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