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Atheisms and the purification of faith

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Philosophers of religion have distinguished between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ atheism. This essay considers further conceptions of atheism, especially the idea that atheism can facilitate a faith in God purified of idolatrous assumptions. After introducing Bultmann’s contention that a ‘conscious atheist’ can find something transcendent in the world, this contention is interpreted through reflection on Ricoeur’s claim that the atheisms of Nietzsche and Freud serve to mediate a transition to a purified faith – a faith involving heightened receptivity to agapeic love. The troubling question of what differentiates atheism from belief in God is then discussed in the light of Simone Weil’s meditations on God’s secret presence.

Keywords: atheism; faith; love; Rudolf Bultmann; Paul Ricoeur; Simone Weil

[A]theism may take a variety of different forms. The varieties, however, are more diverse than is dreamt of in the pages of many philosophical journals and texts. (Stewart Sutherland)¹

1. Beyond ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ atheism

However sceptical we might be about the purported newness of the ‘New Atheism’, it can hardly be denied that its vociferous representatives have given new prominence, if not necessarily new sophistication, to debates over atheism both inside and outside the contemporary academy.² A common problem with such debates is a tendency to suppose that we already know perfectly well what theism or belief in God is on the one hand, and what atheism is on the other. This supposition leads to oversimplification and an unduly constrained appreciation of the range of conceptual possibilities that exists.³ Moreover, given

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its potential to prematurely close off possibilities both of belief and of unbelief, which might otherwise be realized in people's lives, it is imperative that the supposition in question be scrutinized and challenged.

There is, of course, an obvious sense in which atheism stands in opposition to belief in God. Indeed, one might say that it is true by definition, and hence trivially true, that atheism and belief in God are opposed to one another. After all, if we take 'theism' to mean 'belief in God' and 'a-' to be a negating prefix, then a-theism must be something that stands opposed to belief in God. Or must it? In fact, the negative prefix is ambiguous, allowing 'atheism' to mean either absence of a belief in God or belief that there is no God. Some philosophers, following Antony Flew, have designated these 'negative atheism' and 'positive atheism' respectively.⁴ In view of this distinction, we might want to say that it is really only positive atheism that stands in opposition to belief in God. Negative atheism, meanwhile, merely occupies a neutral territory, wherein belief in God is neither endorsed nor explicitly opposed. So perhaps there is an obvious sense in which something that is designated 'atheism' stands in opposition to belief in God, while there is also another sense of the term that does not involve a straightforward relation of opposition.

Having begun to notice that there are different types of atheism, it becomes worth asking whether 'positive atheism' and 'negative atheism' succeed in capturing all the varieties there are. Many who have thought carefully about the issue have maintained that these two categories are not exhaustive. The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the further categories that have been proposed, elucidating them by bringing into dialogue pertinent ideas from several major twentieth-century European thinkers, most notably Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Ricoeur and Simone Weil. An especially rich and surprising, and yet underexplored, contention that emerges from the work of these authors in particular is that atheism of a certain sort can facilitate a deepening and purification of faith. Without seeking to positively advocate the mode of faith arrived at by way of such a purificatory process, my task is to make a case for its intelligibility and, moreover, its spiritual profundity as one among other possibilities of sense.⁵ Making this case will require, crucially, calling into question any naïve assumptions that an uncomplicated binary opposition obtains between atheism and belief in God.

2. Atheism and the transcendent

A point that has often been noted – but is still all-too-easily overlooked by philosophers of religion who use homogenizing terms such as 'standard theism' – is that there are as many

varieties of atheism as there are types of belief in God (or gods).⁶ It is common for people to believe in the God of one religion while not merely refraining from believing in other gods but positively disbelieving in them. Thus the same individual can be a believer in God with respect to one religion (or with respect to one conception of God) and an atheist with respect to the gods of other religions (or with respect to other conceptions of God).⁷ In other words, someone can be both a believer in God and a positive atheist at the same time. There is, of course, no contradiction here, because the attitudes of belief and disbelief are not being directed at the same object. This indicates that the categories of positive atheism and belief in God are not mutually exclusive. However, it does not show us that they, along with negative atheism, are not jointly exhaustive.

More interesting than the fact that one can be both an atheist (in a certain respect) and a believer in God is the fact that some religious believers have asserted that atheism can be positively beneficial, and perhaps even essential, in promoting a deeper mode of faith or at least in preventing one from slipping into shallow or idolatrous modes. What is meant by this is not necessarily that one must become an atheist – perhaps temporarily or merely partially – in order to, as it were, come out the other side with a deeper faith. But it does mean that faith in God can be deepened through taking certain forms of atheism extremely seriously and coming to recognize that the conception of God rejected by those forms of atheism is one that ought also to be rejected by the person of faith. In this respect, as the nineteenth-century French philosopher and psychologist Jules Lagneau put it, ‘Atheism is the salt that prevents faith in God from being corrupted.’⁸ This idea of atheism as a safeguard against a corrupted or superficial faith is a theme that emerges in the thought of several modern theologians and a few philosophers who are familiar with recent theological thought. In this section I shall consider Rudolf Bultmann’s contention that there is a type of atheism that is very close to genuine Christian faith insofar as it is capable of seeking and finding something transcendent within the world.

Bultmann makes a distinction similar to that between positive and negative atheism, instead using the terms ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ atheism.⁹ In common with certain other theologians, Bultmann sees the principal threat to religious faith within society as coming from unconscious atheism, which consists in an indifference not only to questions of religion but to vital existential questions more generally.¹⁰ Bultmann’s notion of conscious atheism appears on the face of it to be like Flew’s positive atheism. But Bultmann identifies two varieties of conscious atheism, and one of these comes close to being a kind of faith, if not in God then at least in a transcendent something. The first type of conscious atheism –

perhaps the most straightforward type – consists in ‘the categorical denial of the reality of God as this is encountered in church dogmatics’.¹¹ Bultmann, being hardly a neutral observer in the discussion, associates this type of atheism with a nihilistic loss of values. He cites with approval both the declaration of Nietzsche’s madman that the death of God amounts to the wiping away of the horizon of values and Jean Paul Richter’s asseveration that ‘No one is so very alone in the universe as the one who denies God’.¹² This aloneness involves, as Bultmann and Richter see it, a casting adrift of the individual self, away from the stability of eternal values. Those who consciously embrace Flew’s style of positive atheism would typically not concede that it inevitably results in such a disastrous separation from ethical or existentially viable values, and many religious thinkers would concur with the atheists on this point. But it is not my purpose to pursue that particular contention here.¹³

Bultmann is more sympathetic to the second type of conscious atheism that he describes, even expressing some uncertainty over whether it counts as atheism at all. Like the nihilistic atheism, it rejects ‘the dogmatic doctrine of God, which understands him as a being’.¹⁴ But this in itself is insufficient to indict it in Bultmann’s eyes. Indeed, as is well known, Bultmann himself maintained that a good deal of mainstream Christian discourse is overburdened by mythological narratives that ought to be pruned away in order to allow the true message of Christ to be properly comprehended in our contemporary world.¹⁵ Thus, insofar as atheism stands opposed to what he sees as the outdated mythology of institutional religion, Bultmann feels a closer affinity with it than with much of what goes by the name of Christianity. In particular, he considers atheists to be right in rejecting a God conceived of as standing outside the world; paraphrasing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bultmann asserts that ‘the transcendent is to be sought and can be found not above or beyond the world, but in the midst of this world.’¹⁶

The non-nihilistic conscious atheist described by Bultmann is capable of sharing with the genuine Christian an acknowledgement of a transcendent reality, and of seeking its presence in the world as opposed to outside it. It is for this reason that Bultmann is doubtful whether ‘atheism’ is quite the right designation here.¹⁷ Unlike in the case of nihilistic atheism, however, Bultmann offers little in the way of examples or elaboration. In one place he invites the reader to see what John Robinson, in *Honest to God*, has written about Julian Huxley and Albert Camus,¹⁸ but it is questionable whether Robinson’s text really serves Bultmann’s purpose. For Robinson does not cite Huxley and Camus to illustrate how an atheist might be said to seek the transcendent within the world or the unconditioned within the conditioned; he cites them in order to draw a contrast with the Christian outlook. Admittedly, in the case of

Huxley, Robinson sees a parallel between his rejection of supernaturalism and that of Bonhoeffer. But Robinson then proceeds to contrast Christian faith with Huxley's 'Evolutionary Humanism' by observing that, 'For the humanist, to believe in a "religion of love" is to affirm the conviction that love ought to be the last word about life, and to dedicate oneself to seeing that it everywhere prevails', whereas for the Christian, it is to affirm 'not simply that love ought to be the last word about life, but that, despite all appearances, it is.'¹⁹

In the case of Camus, Robinson quotes from the ending of his novel *The Outsider* to again illustrate a viewpoint that, though similar to Bonhoeffer's in one respect, is strikingly different in another. While the prisoner in Camus's novel and Bonhoeffer in his prison letters each acknowledges his situation to be one in which 'the consolations of religion [...] are dead beyond recall', Bonhoeffer exemplifies the 'Christian [...] who in that situation still knows that "home" is Christ and that to be "in him" is to lay himself open, not to the benign indifference, but to the divine agape, of the universe'.²⁰ So, with reference both to Huxley and to Camus, what Robinson is primarily doing is showing how the Christian's affirmation of the ultimate nature of the universe as love – a love of the kind that is 'disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' – is starkly at odds with those conceptions of reality that are available to the atheistic humanist, who can, at most, affirm a willingness to promote love despite the indifference of the world.

What, then, does Bultmann mean when he asserts that the conscious atheist can seek and find the transcendent within the world? Our response to this question can be deepened if we return to it after reflecting upon a discussion by Paul Ricoeur of the benefits to be gained from engaging with the critiques of faith offered by Nietzsche and Freud.

3. From accusation and consolation to the love of God

Railing against the supposed consolations of religious faith is a potent theme of certain atheist critiques. Yet it can also be a feature of a conception of faith itself. We see this in Bonhoeffer, for example, and also in Ricoeur. Using the term 'religion' to denote 'a primitive structure of life [...] which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection',²¹ Ricoeur contrasts this with a faith – a 'tragic faith' – of the sort exemplified in the Hebrew and Babylonian wisdom literature, especially the Book of Job.²² Such a faith is one that rejects both the notion of God as a divine accuser, rewarding the righteous and condemning sinners, and the notion of God as a source of consolation, whose providential power will ensure that everything turns out for the best. It is 'tragic' in the sense that it is

faith in the face of tragedy – in the face of the recognition that, not only do things not always turn out for the best, but they often turn out horrendously.

Ricoeur sees atheism – in particular the atheisms of Nietzsche and Freud – as potentially mediating between the stale religion of accusation and consolation and a revived and purified tragic faith.²³ According to Ricoeur, just as Nietzsche rejects the ‘god of morality’, ‘conceived as the origin and foundation of an ethics of prohibition and condemnation’,²⁴ so should the person of faith reject such a god; and just as Freud rejects the image of God as a fatherly protector, so again should this be rejected by the person of faith.²⁵

Like Robinson, Ricoeur understands the characteristic of true faith that carries it beyond these atheist denials to be its affirmation of love. While Nietzsche affirms ‘the love of fate’ (*amor fati*), Christianity (or ‘the Judeo-Christian faith’) affirms ‘a love of creation’. This love is, Ricoeur admits, ‘a form of consolation’, but it is one that ‘depends on no external compensation’, and so too is it free of ‘any form of vengeance’, including the residual vengeance that, on Ricoeur’s view, persists in Nietzsche’s ‘accusation of accusation.’²⁶ ‘Love finds within itself its own compensation; it is itself consolation.’²⁷

John Robinson, as we have seen, distinguishes Christian faith from the atheism of Camus’s prisoner and from the humanism of Julian Huxley by emphasizing its perception of the universe as imbued with love. The movements of Ricoeur’s thought are harder to follow, not least because he relies heavily on a complex analogy between the writing of a poem and the broader sense of *poiēsis* as an act of (divine) creation.²⁸ Drawing upon Heidegger’s reflections on a poem by Hölderlin, Ricoeur contends that poetry can enable us ‘to dwell on earth [...] when [one’s] normal relationship to language is reversed, when language speaks.’ ‘Thus,’ he continues, ‘man responds to language by listening to what it says to him.’²⁹ In the context of Ricoeur’s discussion as a whole, one way of reading this is as the suggestion that poetry, though it is a creative activity, can be understood as an act of creation that happens through the poet rather than by means of the poet’s individual will: instead of, as it were, stamping her will upon the world, the poet becomes a conduit for the breath of inspiration. Analogously, on this interpretation, when one’s activity in the world is understood as the activity of God’s Word, then one becomes a vehicle for the divine will on earth.³⁰ This analogy, taken on its own, falls short of the idea that the nature of the divine will, and hence of creation itself, is love. But it nevertheless conveys the thought that when the divine will is conceived of as love, and one opens up to its being the divine will and not one’s own that ought to be done (‘on earth as it is in heaven’), then one may find oneself to be a participant in God’s love: one participates in the love of God to the extent that one is receptive to it. This

is a way of understanding God, as one commentator has put it, as ‘absolute love rather than absolute authority’.³¹ No longer is surrendering to God construed as obedience to a tyrant who will punish you in this world or the next if you fail to conform to his dictates; instead, it becomes an acceptance of self-effacing love – *agápē* – acting through the medium of one’s own humanity.

With Ricoeur’s account of the love of God in view, we can see a plausible way of understanding what Bultmann has in mind when he speaks of seeking and finding the transcendent within the world. At one place, Bultmann introduces the notion of the ‘transformations of God’ by proposing that this notion has tended to be concealed, both in Christianity and in other traditions, ‘in the mythological representation of the metamorphosis of the deity or of gods, who visit a mortal incognito and unrecognized.’³² To illustrate this theme in the Christian tradition, Bultmann cites the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46), wherein Jesus distinguishes between those who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, shelter to the homeless and so on, and those who did none of these things. Since, in the discourse, Jesus identifies himself with the one who is in need of nourishment, shelter, etc., Bultmann sees in it an illustration of the doctrine of the transformations of God, adding that it also illustrates the doctrine of ‘the presence of eternity in time.’³³ By this, Bultmann may simply mean that the depiction of Jesus as the one who was in need illustrates both of these doctrines. But another way of reading the point is to see eternity as entering into time not merely in the person of the one who needs help, but in the acts of benevolence that are bestowed upon that person. To perceive an act of selfless benevolence in these terms is, we might say, to perceive it as a miracle – without thereby implying that it defies any law of nature. This is, in fact, close to Simone Weil’s understanding of the parable. But she goes further and proposes that Christ is present primarily in the one who gives and only secondarily in the one who receives. ‘The text of the Gospel is concerned only with Christ’s presence in the sufferer’, she writes,

Yet it seems as though the spiritual worthiness of him who receives has nothing to do with the matter. It must then be admitted that it is the benefactor himself, as a bearer of Christ, who causes Christ to enter the famished sufferer with the bread he gives him.³⁴

Although atheists are precluded from perceiving acts of benevolence of the sort alluded to in the parable of the sheep and the goats as instances of divine love, there is nothing to prevent their performing such acts under a different description. If, therefore, one grants that

these acts can be described as something transcendent or unconditioned, then there is room for acknowledging Bultmann's point, that it is possible for atheists of a certain sort to seek and find transcendence within the finite world. Drawing this conclusion more explicitly than Bultmann, Robinson remarks that the 'utter openness in love to the "other" for his own sake' (which is illustrated by the parable in question) is 'the only absolute for the non-Christian' as well as for the Christian.³⁵ 'He may not recognize Christ in the "other" but in so far as he has responded to the claim of the unconditional in love he has responded to him – for he is the "depth" of love.'³⁶ The suggestion here is not that there is nothing to distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian: it remains true that the Christian recognizes something that the non-Christian does not; namely, the fact that Christ is the depth of love. Even so, the suggestion from Robinson, and perhaps implicit in what Bultmann says, is that non-Christians, including atheists, need not be incapable of recognizing the depth of love: it is just that this depth will not be recognized as Christ – and hence, as God.

4. Purificatory atheism

We have seen, then, a way of understanding Bultmann's contention that there is a type of atheism that involves both a rejection of the God of 'church dogmatics' and, at the same time, the capacity to find something transcendent, something unconditioned, in the midst of the world; the transcendence that is sought and found is – or, at any rate, one of the things it can be is – transcendent agapeic love. It is transcendent not in the quasi-spatial sense of being located 'outside' the universe, but in the sense of exceeding world-oriented values: it transcends, and is unconditioned by, anything that the agent could want for herself. To that extent, it becomes feasible to describe the source of benevolent love not so much as the will of the agent herself; rather, it derives from somewhere so deep that, in contrast with actions motivated by self-regarding ends, the self becomes a vehicle for and a participant in its expression, without being the originator or creator of the act.³⁷ These modes of description are available to the atheist. What remains unavailable is the perception of the love that inspires and flows through the action as the love of God, an encounter with God. From the Christian perspective, this perception is something that the atheist is missing; yet the Christian who responds to the call of God in the way illustrated in the parable of the sheep and the goats is apt to feel a stronger affinity with an atheist who responds with love in comparable situations, than with those who, while professing to be Christians, fail to heed the call.

Therefore, what we find in Bultmann, and in Robinson and Ricoeur, is a conception of faith not as assent to a proposition or set of propositions, but as constituted by a certain perception of reality and a readiness to act in ways that flow from that perception. To express the point in these terms need not be to strip faith of conceptual content or doctrinal commitment. As Mark Wynn has recently argued, the concepts articulated in doctrinal claims may themselves inform and make possible a renewal of sensory perception and emotional feeling.³⁸ It is, however, to place the emphasis squarely on the roles of ethical receptivity and responsiveness in constituting a resolutely faithful mode of life.³⁹

If we turn now to some further thoughts of Simone Weil's we shall find there ideas that, though often paradoxical on the surface, become more intelligible in the light of considerations brought forward so far. 'There are', she writes, 'two sorts of atheism, one of which is a purification of the notion of God.'⁴⁰ As one commentator has observed, 'There are, of course, more atheisms than two. But behind Simone Weil's remark lies an awareness that atheism may be prophetic against the illusions of religious belief and behaviour, and that as such it may be cathartic.'⁴¹ Although Weil does not spell out in her remark what the other sort of atheism is, we know from things she says elsewhere that she had strong misgivings about the sort of materialistic atheism espoused by Marxists and other revolutionary thinkers or activists in her day, and also about the scientism – the 'overly zealous reverence for science'⁴² – that she saw around her. We can, then, reasonably surmise that the contrast she is making is between an idolatrous atheism that puts its faith in such things as technological progress or the revolutionary struggle, and another sort that, as Ricoeur maintains, is capable of forming a bridge for crossing over from idolatrous religion to a purified faith.

Like thinkers such as Meister Eckhart before her and Paul Tillich after her, Weil voiced the thought that speaking of God as 'existing' can be misleading.⁴³ She proposes, as a 'method of purification', praying to God 'not only in secret as far as men are concerned, but with the thought that God does not exist.'⁴⁴ Commenting on this remark, Gustave Thibon, the editor of a collection of Weil's writings, notes: 'God does not in fact exist in the same way as created things which form the only object of experience for our natural faculties. Therefore, contact with supernatural reality is at first felt as an experience of nothingness.'⁴⁵ The inclusion of the phrase 'at first' here might be taken to imply that, as one's spiritual acuity is refined, it then becomes possible to encounter or feel God's supernatural reality as something other than nothingness. But this does not appear to be Weil's point. For Weil, the purification that is brought about by acknowledging that God does not exist is not a prelude to replacing a false conception of God with one that is closer to the truth – a more nuanced and accurate

conception that may then remain permanently in place as an object of love and worship. Her writings imply that any conception, merely insofar as it is a conception ('an object in my mental world', as Rowan Williams puts it⁴⁶), will remain contaminated by one's own desires and aspirations. The believer in God must therefore always be on her guard in order to avoid the idolatry of supposing that she is capable of conceiving of God.

The image that emerges from Weil's thought, therefore, is that of a tension, or a fine balance: the task of the spiritual life being to hold in balance a profound faith in and love of God while refraining from imposing any positive description upon the God to whom one's love and faith are directed. It may be something akin to this thought that is expressed by Wittgenstein when, in a notebook entry from 1948, he describes 'The honest religious thinker' as being 'like a tightrope walker': 'It almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.'⁴⁷ The support is so slender because, in the case of an honest and self-reflective religious thinker, the object of faith has been stripped down to its barest features; even the claim that God exists is in question, due to the risk of supposing God to be an entity alongside other existent things – a 'being' that loves, rather than the depth of love itself.⁴⁸

5. What, if anything, is the atheist missing?

The foregoing discussion has brought into dialogue with one another ideas from several thinkers – most notably Bultmann, Ricoeur, Robinson and Weil – in order to elucidate a cluster of closely connected ways of conceptualizing the relationship between faith in God and certain types of atheism. Two of the main contentions to come out of this are the following. The first is that both the believer in God and the atheist are able to seek and find transcendence in the world – in the act of selfless love – but only the believer is able, or has the potential, to see such acts as instances of the presence of God, and only the believing Christian has the potential to see in them the presence of Christ. The second contention is that the purest kind of faith requires, and perhaps is partially constituted by, a variety of atheism: the believer in God performs a delicate balance between affirmation of God and recognition that even that affirmation runs the ever-present risk of degenerating into idolatry.

In response to this discussion, an atheist might well be puzzled about what exactly she is allegedly missing out on. If there is a type of atheist who is fully able to engage in acts of benevolent love of the profoundest sort, then what is she lacking – what is the extra quality that faith in God is supposed to bring? A Christian, following Robinson, might address this question by reaffirming that it is only the Christian who can recognize Christ as the depth of

love, the source from which the benevolent act derives, and who can see the universe as a whole, despite all the evil and suffering it contains, as an expression of that depth. Still, however, the atheist – and indeed many believers in God – may be left wondering what these forms of words are really saying: what does it mean to ‘recognize Christ as the depth of love’ and to see the universe as an ‘expression’ of that love? How would one tell whether someone, even oneself, is in fact perceiving things in this way?

It is far from clear what would count as a straightforward answer to these questions, or indeed what would count as any answer at all. If someone were to propose, for instance, that there must be some kind of phenomenological differentiator – a qualitative shade of first-personal experience that discloses the true nature of the universe to be love – would this clarify anything? Or would it merely reiterate the claim that there is a difference between seeing the universe’s nature as love and not seeing this, without saying anything useful about what that difference consists in, other than, perhaps, ‘You’ll know it when you see it!’?

A more meaningful answer would indicate how recognizing Christ as the depth of love in benevolent acts, and perceiving the nature of the universe as a whole to be love, affects the kind of life that the believer leads. In a letter to her spiritual adviser Father Perrin, Weil makes some pertinent remarks concerning what she calls ‘the implicit love of God’. She speaks of this as an implicit love because, she maintains, God cannot be a direct object of one’s love: one can love God only indirectly, implicitly, through the love of objects in which ‘God is really though secretly present.’⁴⁹ Weil initially cites three such objects – ‘religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world and our neighbour’ – and then to these adds friendship, which, ‘strictly speaking [...] is distinct from the love of our neighbour.’⁵⁰ The mention of these objects, or phenomena, is helpful insofar as it begins to direct our attention away from the idea that there must be some specific experience, or quality of experience, that constitutes ‘seeing the ultimate nature of the universe as love’, and redirects it towards the life and activities of the believer as a whole, and perhaps to a range of attitudes displayed in that life.

Again, however, there is no obvious reason why someone who does not believe in God should be precluded from appreciating the beauty of the world or from loving her neighbours (her fellow human beings) and participating in deep friendships. Of the objects, or activities, that Weil mentions, it seems to be only religious ceremonies that are more specific to the life of the believer. The crucial difference between the believer and the non-believer, it might be said, is that although each of them can love the world, neighbour and friend – and can even, to some extent, partake in religious ceremonies – it is only the believer who can love God through or by means of these indirect forms; it is only the believer who can understand acts of

selfless love as, themselves, sacraments. This difference of understanding is both conceptually and perceptually inflected: the act is conceived as being of God and directed towards God, and hence is perceived with a reverence that eludes the atheist.

These attempts to refine the description of what distinguishes the believer from the one who, as an atheist, finds transcendent love within the world are, admittedly, tentative and imprecise. Their ultimate inadequacy reminds us that there may be no convenient way of characterizing the difference other than by looking at the details of particular lives, and hence that the difference may itself take different forms in different cases. Perhaps the skills of a novelist or biographer are needed, rather than (or in addition to) those of a theologian or philosopher, to bring out the qualities of a given form of life – the qualities, for instance, that render it such as to be describable in terms of an awareness of the nature of the universe as love and of Christ as being the depth of love disclosed in acts of benevolence.⁵¹

It might even be the case that such qualities can be revealed only through the physical presence of one who embodies them.

6. Concluding remarks

This essay has sought to problematize the assumption that atheism falls into two discrete categories, positive and negative, which are exhaustive of atheism's possibilities. When one looks beyond debates within much that goes by the name of philosophy of religion, and ventures into the thought of certain theologians and religious thinkers, one finds not only discussions of the nuances between a variety of atheisms, but also the intriguing suggestion that atheism of a certain sort can facilitate or perhaps even be partially constitutive of a deepened and purified faith in God. Ricoeur presents the role of atheism in this process as that of throwing into question the picture of God as an accusing punisher and granter of consoling compensation for the trials of life. The person of faith, on Ricoeur's view, should concur with the likes of Freud and Nietzsche that these conceptions of God are, in the end, delusory projections, and should seek instead to recognize God as the love that flows through us in the moments when we participate in acts of beneficent creativity. This, I would add, is a normative theological averment that cannot be underwritten by philosophy, though philosophical analysis can assist in bringing out its integrity and intelligibility.

Like Ricoeur, the other authors that I have discussed – most notably, Bultmann, Robinson and Weil – all in their own respective ways break down the idea of a sharp division between atheism and belief in God while nevertheless maintaining that there is something particular, something unique, about a purified faith. Articulating this difference remains a difficult task;

I have expressed scepticism that it can be done satisfactorily by means of the conceptual tools typically utilized by philosophers and theologians. There is, undoubtedly, something religiously profound in the thought that the Christian affirms ‘not simply that love ought to be the last word about life, but that, despite all appearances, it is.’ But no matter how many times phrases such as this are reiterated, questions are liable to remain over exactly what is meant. There are no easy answers here, and I have suggested that, if answers are to be found, it may be only through attentiveness to the lives of those who manifest an awareness of the love of God, as revealed either in the works of great narrative authors or in life itself.⁵²

Note on the contributor

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Notes

¹ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, 1.

² For critical discussion of New Atheism, see, for example, Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, and Amarasingam, *Religion and the New Atheism*.

³ Among the exceptions to this oversimplifying trend is Moore, “Varieties of Sense-Making,” along with several of the other contributions to French and Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37, which is a special issue on ‘The New Atheism and Its Critics’.

⁴ See Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” esp. 14. See also Martin, *Atheism*, passim, and “General Introduction.” These uses of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ atheism ought not to be confused with an earlier usage coined by Jacques Maritain in his “On the Meaning of Contemporary Atheism.”

⁵ My use of the phrase ‘possibilities of sense’ owes much to the work of D. Z. Phillips. See, for example, Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 57: ‘The aim of the hermeneutics of contemplation is [...] not a matter of apologetics, but of contemplating possibilities of sense. Whether those possibilities are appropriated, personally, is another matter.’ Cf. Burley, “Approaches to Philosophy of Religion.”

⁶ See, for example, Hyman, “Atheism in Modern History,” 29; Turner, *How to Be an Atheist*, 9. The term ‘standard theism’ has been especially prevalent in the work of William L. Rowe. See, for instance, Rowe, “Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis,” 95, and “Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil,” 83–84. This and similar terms have also been used by others, however. See, for example, Leftow, “Immutability,” section 3; Andre, “Was Hume an Atheist?” 142. Although Rowe himself is patently aware that there are ‘varieties of atheism’ (see, most indicatively, Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism”), his and others’ uncritical acceptance of the notion of ‘standard theism’ tends to obscure the conceptual complexities at issue.

⁷ Cf. Williams, “Analysing Atheism,” 5: ‘To come to the point where you disbelieve passionately in a certain kind of God may be the most important step you can take in the direction of the true God.’

⁸ Jules Lagneau (1851–94), quoted in Evdokimov, “Christ in the Church,” 178; cf. Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, 69. See also Gleason, *The Search for God*, 14: ‘Curiously enough, the atheist is often a great help to the believer, unintentionally cooperating in the necessary purification of faith by providing the salt that prevents the believer’s idea of God from becoming corrupt.’

⁹ Bultmann, “Protestant Theology and Atheism.”

¹⁰ That indifference is the greatest threat is a point on which many Christian thinkers agree. As Cardinal Paul Poupard put it in 2004, ‘The Church today is confronted more by indifference and practical unbelief than with atheism. Atheism is in [d]ecline throughout the

world, but indifference and unbelief develop in cultural milieus marked by secularism' (Poupard and Pontificium Concilium de Cultura, *Where Is Your God?*, 12). Cf. Bullivant, "Atheism, Apologetics and Ecclesiology," 95.

¹¹ Bultmann, "Protestant Theology and Atheism," 332.

¹² Jean Paul Richter, "Discourse of the Dead Christ from Atop the Cosmos: There is No God," in his *Siebenkäs* (1796–97), quoted in Bultmann, "The Idea of God and Modern Man," 84. For discussion of this essay of Bultmann's, see Staten, *Conscience and the Reality of God*, 2–10. For Nietzsche's famous madman passage, see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125.

¹³ For discussion of the viability of atheist moralities, see Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*; for a theological perspective sympathetic to the view that belief in God is not essential for morality, see Holloway, *Godless Morality*; and for contemplation of both religious and non-religious perspectives on morality, as represented in works of literature, see Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*.

¹⁴ Bultmann, "Protestant Theology and Atheism," 332.

¹⁵ The literature on Bultmann's 'demythologization' project is vast. The primary source is Bartsch, *Kerygma and Myth*. A concise overview is provided by Boisclair, "Demythologization."

¹⁶ Bultmann, "The Idea of God and Modern Man," 90. Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 282: 'The transcendence of epistemological theory has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. God is beyond in the midst of our life.' Bultmann, in the same essay, also cites with approval Paul Tillich, Gerhard Ebeling, Gabriel Vahanian, Ronald Gregor Smith and John Robinson.

¹⁷ Bultmann, "Protestant Theology and Atheism," 333.

¹⁸ See Bultmann, "The Idea of God and Modern Man," 88 n. 22.

¹⁹ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 127–128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 129–130.

²¹ Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," 441.

²² *Ibid.*, 455.

²³ 'To think is to dig deeper until one reaches the level of questioning that makes possible a mediation between religion and faith by means of atheism' (*ibid.*, 460; cf. 447).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 446–447.

²⁵ It should be noted, however, that Ricoeur distinguishes between 'the image of the father' as idol and this image as symbol: 'Once overcome as idol, the image of the father can be

recovered as symbol' (ibid., 467). When taken to symbolize God's love for creation, the image becomes valid.

²⁶ Ibid., 466–467.

²⁷ Ibid., 467.

²⁸ Ibid., 466–467.

²⁹ Ibid., 466.

³⁰ 'In terms of its total extension and radical comprehension, poetry is what locates the act of dwelling between heaven and earth, under the sky, but on earth, within the domain of word' (ibid., 467).

³¹ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 132.

³² Bultmann, "The Idea of God and Modern Man," 95.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 96.

³⁵ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 114–115.

³⁶ Ibid., 115.

³⁷ Compare Rowan Williams' paraphrase of Simone Weil: 'It is I who must become a "tool", a passive instrument in the hands of love' (Williams, "The Necessary Non-existence of God," 58).

³⁸ See Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*.

³⁹ Contrary to so-called 'non-cognitive' conceptions of religious belief (à la Richard Braithwaite, for instance), this conception is committed to the truth of faith; the renewed perception of the world, manifested in ethical receptivity and responsiveness, is treated as revelatory and not as a mere edifying fiction. Contrast Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief." However, in case it is not already clear, I should add that none of what I am arguing here is intended to imply that those who do not believe in God are somehow precluded from manifesting forms of ethical receptivity and responsiveness. I am arguing merely that, from the religious point of view that I am elucidating, those forms will be qualitatively different from the ones that constitute the life of faith.

⁴⁰ Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, Vol. 1, 126. See also Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 114.

⁴¹ Webster, Eberhard Jüngel, 79.

⁴² Von der Ruhr, "Christianity and the Errors of Our Time," 210.

⁴³ '[T]o argue that God exists is to deny him' (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 205). On Meister Eckhart, see for example Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox versus

Dialectics,” 190–191. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 296: ‘God does not exist, He is eternal.’

⁴⁴ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 20; also in *idem*, *Notebooks*, Vol. 1, 136.

⁴⁵ Thibon, editorial footnote in Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 20 n. 1.

⁴⁶ Williams, “The Necessary Non-existence of God,” 54.

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 84e. This passage from Wittgenstein is put to a slightly different, though related, use in Winch, *Simone Weil*, 205–206.

⁴⁸ ‘Love must therefore direct itself at what is not – at the reality of unconditional love itself’ (Williams, “The Necessary Non-existence of God,” 60). A fuller treatment of Weil’s thought on these matters would require more detailed discussion of Rowan Williams’ careful essay than I have space to attempt here.

⁴⁹ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 95.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Here I have in mind Stewart Sutherland’s argument that an ‘artistic picture’, such as that presented in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, may be needed to reveal the ‘diversity’ and ‘coherence’ of a religious form of life. See Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, esp. 87.

⁵² An abridged version of this paper was presented at the Tenth Conference of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion, University of Oxford, on 12 September 2013. I am grateful to those who engaged me in discussion on that occasion, notably Richard Amesbury, Gorazd Andrejč, Max Baker-Hytch, Vincent Brümmer, Daniel Gustafson and Mark Wynn. The essay has also benefited from the insightful comments of two anonymous referees for this journal.