

BOOK DISCUSSION:
At the Origins of Modern Atheism
by Michael J. Buckley, S.J.

The discussion of Michael Buckley's seminal work on the origins of modern atheism was initiated by the author himself.¹ He explained that the *phenomenon* is of unprecedented proportions; its philosophic underpinnings belie the view that it is merely a cultural fad. Father Buckley's *perspective* is to approach atheism as an idea with its own ideational set of claims; it is not merely an epiphenomenon of the social, psychological, or economic orders. The *question* that unifies the inquiry of the book is twofold: (1) In the generation of ideas, how did so powerful, and unique, an idea as atheism arise? (2) Does the intellectual history of the idea of atheism (Nietzsche's "tremendous event") offer contemporary theology any lessons about theology's function, selection of data, or methods?

Buckley's approach was to begin with the first modern thinkers to claim atheism as a philosophic stance, Diderot and D'Holbach, and to work backwards into history. D'Holbach proposed to complete the philosophic projects of two theologians, Malebranche and Samuel Clarke. These, in turn, were the disciples of two philosophers: Descartes for Malebranche, and Newton for Clarke. The intellectual genetics suggests that natural philosophy had become physics, and ultimately, universal mechanics. Further, the theologians, taking their cues from Descartes and Newton, argued as philosophers when they dealt with the issue of the existence and nature of God. Both Diderot and D'Holbach generated their denial of God by synthesizing Descartes' reflexive principle of matter in motion with Newtonian universal mechanics. Dynamic matter had replaced God. The projects of the theists were brought to completion by the denial of their own theology.

These reflections led to a second line of inquiry. Why was the primary warrant for the existence of God taken from the data of ideas—especially the idea of the infinite—and ultimately from the data of nature? This led the author into the early 17th century work of the theologians Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne. Both wrote books against the atheists (although the actual existence of atheists in the later, modern sense of the term is questionable) and argued for the reality of God on philosophic grounds. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* thus begins with these two thinkers as symptomatic of a decisive theological settlement to be played out dialectically in the ensuing century and a half. The author concludes that the strength of the idea of atheism came out of the very forces marshaled against it. Religion looked outside itself for its own defensive foundations, thus admitting

¹Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

its cognitive emptiness. The origin of atheism in the *intellectual* culture of the West lies with the self-alienation of religion itself. Theology can learn much from this.

Lawrence Cunningham evaluated the book in positive terms, summarized the thesis of the book, and then asked several questions of it. Given the book's claim that religious experience and Christology were absent from the intellectual discussion about God in the 17th and 18th centuries, he asked whether Buckley would set out a program of a search for God grounded in a metaphysics derived both from an analysis of religious experience and rooted in Christology. Does the author think that other attempts to write a theology from within the Catholic tradition (such as those of Lonergan, Rahner and Küng) have not sufficiently appreciated the problematic he has delineated in *Origins*? Is the author, somewhat in the spirit of Pascal, trying to bridge the gap between spirituality and theology, to envision theology as systematic reflection on encounter, such that "the one who really prays is a theologian"? In response to the last question, Buckley held that one of the fundamental problems with natural theology is that persons ultimately become things. Theology must indeed be rooted in the personal (religious experience), which turns on the tripartate axis of self, others, and God.

Elizabeth Johnson also praised the book, then asked several questions about its argument. First, how could theologians of the Enlightenment period have used Christology as warrants for their theology of God, especially given the static state of Christology then, which was largely taken up with expositions of Chalcedon? Reply: Even the static categories of Chalcedonian Christology then in vogue had given way to natural theology, thus abdicating an essential field of data. Second, given his emphasis on Christology and religious experience (pneumatology), what becomes of the Trinity in this discussion? Reply: The Trinity is implied by Christology and pneumatology. It is not a doctrine added to the doctrine of God. Third, religious experience during the period in question was largely that of popular piety; Mary and the saints substituted much for God, who was thought to be absent or judgmental. Perhaps Buckley's view of the potential role of piety in theology is too sanguine and does not account for sociological data. Reply: the deep affective strain in intellectual life that provided a countervailing movement to rationalism is not to be underestimated, as the works of Lessius, Malebranche and Pascal attest. Fourth, is Buckley a Barthian? What becomes of natural theology? Why not look for common ground with atheists in a natural theology? Reply: Buckley is not a Barthian. Rather, he is influenced by Rahner. Natural theology is a valid enterprise, but not as the sole foundation of religious assent to God. Transcendental and historical experience must also be traced. Fifth, isn't a generating cause of atheism the God of patriarchy, who is rejected in the name of human freedom and in the face of the suffering which he permits? Reply: the claim may well be valid. Classical theism has become at points a parody of natural theology. The feminist critique thus shares ground with process critiques.

An animated discussion followed. One participant noted that atheism was caused also by sociological factors, such as disillusionment with Christianity because of religious wars. Divisions within Christianity accelerated the growth of atheism. Buckley indeed refers to these factors in Chapter 1, "Religion as Bankrupt." Another observed that atheism seems to have a life of its own, and is not simply parasitic. Buckley replied that it is both parasitic *and* becoming. If it seems

to have a life of its own, that is because it has become so widely accepted, at least in Europe. In the United States, it is especially evident among academic and professional elites. If one function of theology is the mediation of culture and religion, Father Buckley asked, is theology doing this with respect to the intellectual culture of the United States? The lessons learned about the origins of atheism among intellectual elites of the Enlightenment might give us pause.

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