New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12540

"We Confess that we are Atheists"

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Abstract

In the immortal words of Herbert McCabe, 'Whatever we are referring to when we use the word "God" it can no more be a god than it can be a model aeroplane or half-past eleven' (*God Still Matters*). This striking idea – the "atheism" of true Christianity – has, in fact, a long pedigree. This paper traces its history from the early Church to the Angelic Doctor himself. The essential point is this: if our God really is who Christians claim God is, then all our words about God – *including the word "god"* – must necessarily fall short.

Keywords

Atheism, Negative Theology, Justin Martyr, Herbert McCabe, Idolatry

The title I have chosen is "We confess that we are atheists".[1] This is, of course, a quotation (or rather, *half* a quotation) from St Justin Martyr, a second-century convert, who is described in one leading textbook as the "First Christian Theologian".[2] What I want to do is to use Justin's confession as a springboard to explore two things: first, the way in which the term "atheist" was used of and by the early Christians, and second and more broadly, the import that this provocative little phrase, "we confess that we are atheists", if carefully understood, has for Christian theology as a whole.

The "Atheism" of Christianity

Picture the scene. It's festival day in a provincial Roman city in the mid-second century. People have come from far and wide to

[1] An earlier version of some of this paper was published in *Faith and Unbelief* (London: Canterbury Press, 2013).

[2] A. Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (London: T & T. Clark, 2018), p. 201.

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witness a group of local Christians being put to death. A young man called Germanicus stands in the arena, not just bravely facing the savage beasts, but actively urging them on. Irritated by the youth's composure, the crowd who have gathered to see him torn apart cry out: "Down with the atheists!". Slightly later, the venerable bishop Polycarp is brought into the arena, and is ordered – on pain of death – to denounce himself and his fellow Christians in the same way. Whereupon, we are told: "Polycarp's brow darkened as he threw a look round the turbulent crowd of heathens in the circus; and then, indicating them with a sweep of his hand, he said with a growl and a glance to heaven 'Down with the atheists!'" (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9).[3]

St Polycarp, whom ancient tradition assures us was a disciple of St John the Evangelist, was Bishop of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir on the west coast of Turkey) for much of the first half of the second-century. The riproaring, eyewitness account of his and his companions' martyrdom around the year AD 156 is the earliest such report we have, and hence offers invaluable insights into ancient Christian life, thought and practice.

For our purposes, the word translated as "atheists" here is the Greek word *atheoi*, the plural of *atheos*. It appears only once in the New Testament. Paul chides the Christian converts at Ephesus, reminding these former pagans of when they were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and *atheoi* in the world" (Ephesians 2.12). The literal meaning of *atheos* is simply "without God" – the prefix *a-*, alpha, signifying an absence of something (as in asexual, amoral, anarchy, anaerobic), and *-theos* being the normal Greek word for a "god". And "without God" is how, from Tyndale and the King James Version onwards, most English translations render it. (St Jerome, incidentally, did the same thing in his Latin Vulgate: *sine Deo*, 'without God'). In practice, however, *atheos* could carry a range of more specific meanings, at least in classical Greek. Thus Socrates was denounced as an *atheos* at his trial in 399 BC, for (allegedly) denying and dishonouring the gods of Athens. In Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus is also described as *atheos*, but the meaning *there* seems to be that he has been abandoned by the gods ("godforsaken" is perhaps the nearest we have in English). In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, meanwhile, *atheos* is used of Orestes in the sense of immoral (as with the traditional English connotations of "godless" or "ungodly"). Either way, *atheos*, 'atheist', is hardly meant as a term of endearment.

[3] The translation used here (slightly amended) is taken from Maxwell Staniforth (trans.), *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 153-67.

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In Polycarp, the meaning of atheist, given the context, is reasonably transparent. In effect, what we have is the Christian Polycarp and the pagan crowd mutually denouncing each other as "infidels". As far as the crowd is concerned, the Christians deny and dishonour the *real* Roman gods, while affirming their own false one. At one point, for example, the crowd cry out that Polycarp is a "destroyer of our gods, who is teaching whole multitudes to abstain from sacrificing to them or worshipping them".[4] But as far as Polycarp is concerned, the crowd do precisely the opposite: they deny the *real* God, in favour of their Olympian idols.

Polycarp's exchange with the arena crowd expresses in dramatic form something that was quite common in Christianity's first few centuries. As Professor Mark Edwards puts it in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, "Christian apologists ... repeatedly complained that they were called atheists by men who might more justly have stood in the dock upon the same charge".[5] Thus in the late second-century, Athenagoras of Athens, in his *Plea for Christians*, argues at great length that it is "absurd to apply the name of atheism" to Christians "since our doctrine acknowledges one God, the Maker of this universe, who is Himself uncreated (for that which is does not come to be, but that which is not) but has made all things by the Logos which is from Him". Athenagoras also directs a vast array of arguments, and indeed insults, against "these so-called gods" of traditional Greco-Roman piety. And in (probably) the early third century, Minucius Felix, in his dialogue *Octavius*, puts into the mouth of his (possibly fictional, but possibly not) pagan lawyer Caecilius Natalis the following attack on the Christians:

> Is it not a thing to be lamented, that men ... of a reprobate, unlawful, and desperate faction [i.e., the Christians], should rage against the gods?
>
> Who, having gathered together from the lowest dregs the more unskilled, and women, credulous and, by the facility of their sex, yielding, establish a herd of a profane conspiracy, which is leagued together by nightly meetings, and solemn fasts and inhuman meats – not by any sacred rite, but by that which requires expiation – a people skulking and shunning the light, silent in public, but garrulous in corners. They despise the temples as dead-houses, they reject the gods, they laugh at sacred things ... Oh, wondrous folly and incredible audacity! (8)

In response to Caecilius, the Christian Octavius argues in great detail against (as he puts it) "Saturn himself, and Serapis, and Jupiter, and whatever [other] demons you worship" (27), while contrasting these

[4] The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 12 in Staniforth op. cit.

[5] M. Edwards, 'The First Millennium' in ed by S. Bullivant & M. Ruse, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford, OUP, 2013), p. 155.

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with the "true God" (*passim*) of the Christians. At the end of the dialogue, you will be pleased to learn, the pagan Caecilius admits defeat.

My all-time favourite example of this, however, come from the fourth-century Emperor Julian – "the Apostate" – who renounced his Christian upbringing in order to restore the old Roman gods. In a letter of AD 362 to the pagan high-priest of Galatia, he complains about the (then) new evangelization:

> Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase *atheism* [i.e., Christianity]? ... For it is disgraceful that ... the impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well.[6]

Now, on one level, these are all simply early instances of the quite common phenomenon of "atheist" being used as a term of abuse throughout most of western history: it is always one's *enemies* who are the "atheists". And, of course, the feeling is often mutual. There are, I might add, several examples from the Early Church of groups of Christians denouncing groups of other Christians as "atheists". Thus Theodoret quotes a letter from Arius himself, complaining that Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, "has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches" [*Ecclesiastical History* 1, iv]. Sozomen records that another Arian bishop, Aëtius, "reasoned so boldly concerning the nature of God, that many persons gave him the name of Atheist" [*Ecclesiastical History* 3, xv].

People calling *themselves* atheists is really a rather modern phenomenon – *almost* unheard of before the last couple of centuries or so. I say *almost* because, of course, you no doubt will be already familiar with one of the very few exceptions.

"We Confess that we are Atheists"

Born in Palestine, perhaps around AD 100, Justin was a younger contemporary of Polycarp, though unlike Polycarp, Justin was not brought up as a Christian. But he was attracted by philosophy and, like Augustine a few centuries later, he worked his way through a succession of different philosophical schools – Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, Aristotelianism, and Platonism – before finally settling on Christianity, which he came to regard as the "true Philosophy". Not

[6] M. Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts* (Harrisburg, Trinity Press, 2001), p. 183.

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incidentally, he was also impressed by the composure and dignity of the Christian martyrs: "I delighted in [hearing] the Christians slandered, but when I saw them fearless of death, [I] perceived that it was impossible they could be living in wickedness and pleasure' (*Second Apology*, 11).[7] Roughly a decade after Polycarp met his fate in Smyrna, Justin was himself beheaded by the Romans around AD 165.

Among the many common misunderstandings about Christians, Justin, in his two *Apologies*, tackles the charge of "atheism". Justin, however, in a novel way, chooses to side with *both* Polycarp *and* the crowd, declaring in his *First Apology* that "we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort [i.e., the Greco-Roman ones] are concerned, but not with respect to the Most True God" (*First Apology*, 6). For Justin then, there is at least one sense in which Christians are, and must be, *atheists*: they are indeed atheists with respect to *all* the gods, with just a single exception.

Incidentally, Richard Dawkins makes almost the same point in *The God Delusion*. He writes: "I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further".[8] So, Justin and Dawkins agree about far more gods than they disagree about.

Justin's remark is, of course, rather clever and witty. It was also, let us not forget, a daring and brave one. The *First Apology*, addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, was probably written in the same decade as Polycarp and his companions were executed *as* atheists. But I believe there is a lot more to it than simply a neat soundbite. In fact, if poked around and stretched a bit, I think it can help us to understand something vital and fundamental about Christian believing – and Christian *unbelieving* too. So I would like now to delve into this idea of Justin's – that "we confess that we are atheists" – a little more deeply.

God and "The Gods"

Justin's point is to drive a wedge between the authentic *God*-with-a-capital-G whom Christians proclaim as Lord, and the false, so-called "gods" of the Roman world. "We not only deny that they ... are

[7] This, and all other quotations from Justin's and Pseudo-Justin's (see below) writings, may be found in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers – Justin Martyr – Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996). These and a huge number of other translated texts from the early Church fathers can also be found online at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/.

[8] R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 53.

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gods, but assert that they are wicked and impious demons" (*First Apology*, 5) as he puts it. The point is made more explicit in another (and perhaps also second-century) text, *On the Sole Government of God*, sometimes ascribed to Justin himself, but now considered more likely to be the work of a Justin-inspired disciple. For Pseudo-Justin, as its author has come to be known, the "true and invariable Name" (*Sole Government*, 6) – that is, "God" – is correctly "applicable to the only true God" (*Sole Government*, 1). Any others given the name, including those whom the pagans *call* gods, receive it unworthily. Hence referring to Greco-Roman mythology, he speaks dismissively of "those who think that they shall share the holy and perfect Name, which some have received by a vain tradition as if they were gods" (*Sole Government*, 5).

A very similar idea, although expressed slightly differently, appears in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 8. In the course of giving practical advice on the eating of food sacrificed to idols, Paul also distinguishes between the "so-called gods in heaven or on earth" and the "one God" (8.5-6). Paul seems to oscillate between implying that these so-called gods are simple fictions ("no idol in the world really exists"), and affirming that though real enough in themselves, these "many gods and many lords" certainly do not deserve to share the divine name. But regardless of whether they are demons or mere figments, Paul's basic point is clear: "for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8.4-6).

For Paul, as for Justin, Christians must be atheists regarding "the gods". Nor is this for him merely a highfalutinly abstract, theological point. Rather, he is anxious that the Corinthians be vigilant against lapsing, or inadvertently causing others to lapse, into idolatry – that is, diverting the offering of worship due to "the Most True God" to those who are falsely called "gods". Recent converts, in particular, might be fooled into thinking that "the gods", though falsely so-called, are actually deserving of the name: "Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (1 Cor. 8.7). (On the plus side, this suggests that crises of catechesis are not a new phenomenon within the church.) Lest the practice of eating food sacrificed to idols, though in itself innocuous enough, become "a stumbling-block to the weak", Paul advises against doing it. Better to go without cheap meat than to confuse others about the distinction between the misnamed "gods", and the Most – and, for that matter, *only* – True one.

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God, Falsely So-called

Let us push this line of thinking a little farther. As far as Pseudo-Justin is concerned, the word "God" is not a description of something, but is rather a proper name. For him, the classical gods and goddesses – Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Aphrodite and the rest – are imposters. They are not actual gods at all, but are masquerading under a false name and an assumed identity.

Let us agree with Pseudo-Justin that, for Christians, *God* is first and foremost the name of someone: a someone quite unlike any other someone, it is true, but a someone (or somethree?) nonetheless. Though we may, on occasion, use the word as though it were primarily a description or definition – "God, *noun*. An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, Creator of the universe", or whatever – this does not affect the basic point. Pseudo-Justin assumes, however, that the use of "God", *theos*, as a *name* for the Jews' and Christians' "Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them" (Acts 4.24) somehow *precedes* the use of "god" as a *description* for a class of vastly inferior, supernatural beings domiciled on Mount Olympus. He thinks that it was the Greeks who stole the name *Theos* from the Jews. In truth, of course, the original borrowing was the opposite way around: Hellenized Jews stole the already-existing Greek descriptive noun *theos* as a *name* for Yahweh. As such, a converse case can be made for arguing that it is the Judeo-Christian *God* who is falsely, or at least misleadingly, so-called. If so, then Christians "confess that we are atheists" in a still deeper sense than Justin himself envisaged.

This is a point that Herbert McCabe was at pains to stress. To quote a characteristic passage from *God Still Matters*:

> We do not know what we are talking about when we use the word 'God' . . . When Jews and Christians came to use the word 'god' it was already lying around meaning something else – I mean it meant something that God certainly could not be, a god. Whatever we are referring to when we use the word 'God' it can no more be a god than it can be a model aeroplane or half-past eleven.[9]

This idea is fleshed out more fully in a different essay, slightly earlier in the book:

> 'God', 'Theos', 'Deus' is of course a name borrowed from paganism; we take it out of its proper context, where it is used for talking about the gods, and use it for our own purposes. This is quite a legitimate piece of borrowing and quite safe as long as it does not mislead us into thinking that the God we worship (or don't) is a god . . . He is

[9] Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 55.

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> always dressed verbally in second-hand clothes that don't fit him very well. We always have to be on our guard against taking these clothes as revealing who or what he is.[10]

What McCabe is doing here, of course, is effectively turning Pseudo-Justin's argument on its head. McCabe points out that, in its original context, "god" (*theos*) denotes a class of personal, superhuman, supernatural beings, who collectively possess a wide range of impressive, though limited, super powers. Now, as a *description* of the One worshipped and glorified by the ancient Israelites, and thus latterly by the early Christians too, that is a fairly awful one. To give just one example, while Zeus, Hera, and Aphrodite may well be very powerful (and certainly more powerful than any human) they are still things *within* the universe. By contrast, the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is considered to be the all-powerful creator and sustainer of the universe *itself*.

By choosing to refer to this One with the word "god", Greek-speaking Jews – including, most influentially, those translating the Hebrew scriptures – were using it as a name, rather than as a literal description. Transferred to this new context, then, the proper noun *God* became a kind of metaphor. There is a sense in which the Christian God is *like* one of the "gods" God too is powerful, for example, albeit both far more so, and in a qualitatively different way. Similarly, there is a sense in which God is *like* "a mighty fortress", as the Lutheran hymn puts it (he is steadfast, and protects those who "dwell within" him). But the Judeo-Christian God cannot be an actual mighty fortress. And God cannot be, as McCabe reminds us, an actual "god".

This point may perhaps be more easily grasped if one considers two parents giving their daughter the name of "Poppy". They may, of course, have many reasons for doing so. Possibly it is a family name, or simply be because they like the sound of the word. Feasibly, however, there is something about *actual* poppies that makes them think it would be a fitting name for a daughter: their beauty, or gracefulness, for example. Perhaps, due to some small but fondly remembered moment in their lives, poppies make the couple smile – and they think this will be true of their Poppy too. They are not, of course, using this word as a straightforward description: she is not, and will not be, an actual member of the botanical family *Papaveraceae*. Instead, the word functions as a kind of metaphor or analogy: by naming her thus, her parents are intimating that they think (or hope) that she will be like a poppy *in some way*. Seen objectively, this link may seem somewhat tenuous. There will, after all, be vastly more ways in which the child is not at all like a poppy, than there

[10] Ibid., p. 3.

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are ways in which she is: she won't photosynthesize, she won't be a symbol of Remembrance Sunday, she won't be a major ingredient in the production of heroin … But nevertheless, there *is* a link, however slight, and one that is, to her parents at least, a significant one.

Naturally, there is no danger whatsoever of anyone in their right mind mistaking Poppy's metaphorical name for a literal description, as my silly examples above are intended to show. Yet, as McCabe points out, and as Paul and Pseudo-Justin were all too aware, such is not the case with the Christian God. While God may have some points of contact with the Olympian gods, he is not, and could not be, simply a super-powerful "thing" within the universe: "Whatever we are referring to when we use the word 'God' it can no more be a god than it can be a model aeroplane or half-past eleven." To think otherwise – to suppose that God is simply one of the "gods", even if God is the biggest and best one of them all – is to commit idolatry. This is, moreover, a point that applies far more widely. Without delving too deeply here into a fraught and complex area, suffice it to say that it is not just the word "god" that, if mistaken as a literal description, comes up insultingly short. Certainly, a strong case can be made that *all* human words about the Most True God are condemned to be egregiously lacking. Witness, for example, St Augustine's famous comment on our use of the word "person" within orthodox Trinitarian theology:

> Because the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, and the Holy Spirit … is neither the Father nor the Son, then certainly there are three … But when it is asked 'Three what?' then the great poverty from which our language suffers becomes apparent. But the formula "three persons" has been coined, not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it, but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.[11]

Thomas Aquinas seems to take a similar line. Early on in the *Summa Theologiae*, he too freely admits that: "God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him" (1a, q. 1, a. 9), but actually *advises* that we speak of God in metaphors "drawn from things farthest away from God", *lest we forget this fact*. That is, in our terms, it is *better* to compare God to "a mighty fortress" than it is to compare him to Zeus, since one is unlikely to be misled into thinking that he actually *is* a defensive fortification. Or it is better to liken God Incarnate to, say, asbestos – as St Athanasius does, by the way – than to a celestial

[11] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5.10; quoted in G. O'Collins, 'The Incarnation: The Critical Issues' in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed by S. T. Davis, D. Kendall & G. O'Collins, 2004, p. 141.

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body like the Sun, because of course, some people really do worship the Sun, and Christians really don't.

Continuing with our Dominican theme, the thirteenth-century German Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart writes in one of his vernacular sermons: "let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally".[12] Quite how this gnomic saying should be understood is a matter of controversy. Eckhart was never one to shy away from verbal pyrotechnics, and his daring and ambiguous phrasing of fundamentally orthodox ideas both landed him in hot water in his own times, and guaranteed him a wildly diverse array of afficionados in subsequent centuries. Few medieval theologians, for instance, can claim a list of twentieth-century devotees that is at once so impressive and so dubious as the following: the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, the New Age guru Eckhart Tolle, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning statesman Dag Hammarskjöld, the *avant-garde* composer John Cage, and the Nazi war criminal Alfred Rosenberg. One plausible interpretation, however, is that Eckhart is drawing a distinction here between the Most True God ("let us pray to God"), and our flawed human conceptions of who that God actually is ("that we may be free of 'god'"), in the interests both of truth and salvation ("that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally"). On this reading, Eckhart's utterance is radical enough to be fully orthodox, and a further instance of the kind of theological "atheism" that we have divined in the writings of Paul, Justin, Pseudo-Justin, and McCabe. For all of them, the worship of false "gods" in whatever form – whether Olympian super-things, demons, fictions, or naive theological constructions – amounts to the same: idol worship. Hence in the words of McCabe:

> The worship of [the] Creator is the only worship worthy of a human being. The Creator is the reason why there is a universe with or without gods in it. But if there *are* gods in it, it would be degrading for humans to worship them. This, you might say, was the great Hebrew discovery: human beings are such that they worship *only* the mystery by which there is anything at all instead of nothing ... And this Jewish discovery was surely a turning-point in the history of humankind. It implied, of course, a piece of self-discovery about humankind: the human being is now defined, if you like, as the Creator-worshipper, the atheist with no gods to worship, no gods to petition, no gods to pray to, no gods worth praying to.[13]

[12] *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister* Eckhart, translated by M. O'C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p. 422. Attentive readers may note here an echo of the title of Don Cupitt's 1984 book *Taking Leave of God*, and they would be right to do so. Cupitt took the title from this passage of Eckhart's (albeit in a different translation to the one I am using here), and gives a fuller quotation of it as the book's frontispiece.

[13] McCabe, op. cit., p. 56.

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"Only an Atheist can be a Good Christian"

The East German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, in his rich and remarkable 1972 book *Atheism in Christianity*, famously observed: "Only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist."[14] More recently, the Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek – once memorably described in a *Guardian* review as "the Ken Dodd of post-Lacanian Hegelianism"[15] – writes: "not only is *Christianity* (at its core, if disavowed by its institutional practice) *the only truly consistent atheism*, it is also that *atheists are the only true believers*".[16]

Bloch and Žižek are both atheists, at least in the "negative" sense of being without a belief in the existence of a God or gods, and the points that they are making here are largely political and ethical. For example, Bloch firmly believed that "the Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience"[17] (1972: 21), and he stands out among Marxist theorists for giving due attention to Marx's own observation that the working classes' religious yearnings are, among other things, a *protest* against unjust social conditions. (That's the bit of the "religion is the opium of the masses" passage that people tend to overlook.) Broadly similar ideas can, however, be found in the works of influential Christian writers also. So far in this chapter we have focused on the "atheism" of Christianity, albeit in a carefully qualified, subtle, though nonetheless significant, sense of the word: an "atheism" regarding the 'gods", but not an atheism regarding *God*. The obvious flipside to this, of course, is a consideration of the ways in which atheism, and indeed atheists, might have points of contact with these forms of Christian (non-)believing.

In the theological literature on atheism, it is possible to identify two main tendencies along these kinds of line. The first is rather negative – too negative, in my view – and dismisses atheistic ideas and arguments as being, at best, obvious and platitudinous, and at worst, wholly beside the point. The conceptions of God that (many) atheists deny have, it is claimed, no bearing at all on the God in whom Christians actually believe: such "so-called gods" are naive and idolatrous caricatures, and Christian thinkers have *already* made short (and rather more sophisticated) work of dismissing them in

[14] E. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: the Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, London, Verso Books, 1972, p. 9.

[15] L. Irvine, 'Slavoj Žižek's jokes are no laughing matter', *Guardian*, 6 January 2012, available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2012/jan/06/slavoj-zizek-jokes.

[16] S. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso Books, 2012), p. 116.

[17] E. Bloch, op. cit., p. 21.

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their strivings to apprehend the Most True God. A classic and elegant example of this comes from Denys Turner. In his inaugural lecture as Cambridge's Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, cheekily entitled "How to Be an Atheist", Turner teases atheists for trumpeting as hard-won conclusions what their theological counterparts take to be nothing more than basic and unremarkable premises:

> [Such atheists] lag well behind even the *theologically* necessary levels of negation, which is why their atheisms are generally lacking in theological interest … in the sense in which atheists of this sort say God 'does not exist', that atheist has merely arrived at the theological starting-point. Theologians of the classical traditions, an Augustine, a Thomas Aquinas or a Meister Eckhart, simply agree about the disposing of idolatries, and then proceed with the proper business of doing theology.[18]

The second tendency makes the same basic point, but gives it a rather more positive – too positive, in my view – spin. On this view, the atheist is cast as the anti-idolater *par excellence*, rejecting all (mis)conceptions of both God and the gods wholesale, and being, at least for the most part, right to do so: "atheism properly and effectively criticizes false and misleading images of God".[19] After all, so this argument sometimes goes, *all* human ideas about God must necessarily fall short of him. This is, as we have seen, the insight of such exemplary Christian thinkers as Augustine and Eckhart. In its strongest expressions, this strand of so-called negative theology, as it may be found in the writings of the enigmatic but influential fourth- or fifth-century writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, asserts that whatever it is that Christians call God, "It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being … It is beyond assertion and denial."[20] And if this is the case, then aren't atheists onto something very profound – and authentically Christian – after all?

Evidence of both these two tendencies (painted above with rather broad brushstrokes, I must admit) occur in the writings of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. As well as being one of the great geniuses of world literature, Dostoevsky is widely recognized among the nineteenth-century's most profound theological thinkers.[21] His wide-ranging and nuanced engagement with atheism, motivated and informed by his personal grappling with the subject – his notebooks

[18] D. Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 8.

[19] É. Borne, *Modern Atheism*, trans. S. J. Testier (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), p. 144.

[20] C. Luibheid & P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysios: the Complete Works* (Michigan: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 141.

[21] See G. Pattinson & D. O. Thompson, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge, CUP, 2001); and R. D. Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008).

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12540 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confide that his own "hosanna" had passed through "a furnace of doubt"[22] – is a case in point. For our purposes here, note the conviction of Prince Myshkin, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's 1868 novel *The Idiot*, that "there's something in [true religious feeling] that atheisms eternally glance off, and they will eternally be talking *not about that*". For Myshkin, atheists are condemned to always to "miss the point" when discussing God and religion: in our terminology, their criticisms of "god" are irrelevant to the Most True one. This is, of course, an instance of the negative, dismissive tendency we noted above.

However, compare the following from a slightly later novel, *Demons* of 1872. Here the Orthodox bishop Tikhon tells the unbeliever Stavrogin: "A complete atheist stands on the next-to-last upper step to the most complete faith." ([1872] 2000: 688) Here we see our second tendency in one of its boldest expressions. For Tikhon, the "complete atheist" is one who has rejected every single false "god", including everything and anything that takes, or tries to take, the rightful place of the true God (or to quote again the words of Pseudo-Justin: "those who think that they shall share the holy and perfect Name, which some have received by a vain tradition as if they were gods"). Such a purified position, which Tikhon places higher than all "incomplete" forms of faith – and thus, one assumes, above the faith of the vast majority of believers, past, present and future – is thus lacking only one thing.

Two things are, though, worth noting here. Tikhon speaks of "complete" atheism and "complete" faith, with the presumable implication that very few atheists are so completely, just as very few believers – i.e., the saints – are so completely. The suggestion is, perhaps, that the great majority of atheists aren't as thoroughgoing as they might like to think. Tikhon does not expand upon this point, though the lacuna here may perhaps be supplied by McCabe, for whom a "false god" is anything in which we mistakenly place our trust and worship:

> It would be tedious to list the well-known gods of this exceptionally superstitious twentieth century. Quite apart from surviving old ones like astrology, there are a lot of new ones like racism, nationalism, The Market, the Leader ... you name it.[23]

Also worthy of comment is Tikhon's choice of metaphor. Envisioning the Christian spiritual life as a series of ascending steps, or perhaps rungs on a ladder, is relatively common, especially in Eastern Orthodoxy. But viewed from this perspective, "the most complete atheism" is not simply next-best to the "most complete faith". Rather it is a

[22] See A. Pyman, 'Dostoevsky in the Prism of the Orthodox Semiosphere' in G.Pattinson & D. O. Thompson, op. cit., p. 103.

[23] H. McCabe, op. cit., p. 32.

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prerequisite for it: a stage that all those seeking complete faith must pass through *en route*. One is reminded of Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, in which he imagines his ascent of Mt Sinai as a journey into an ever-deepening darkness: "When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, 'Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.'"

Both of these tendencies, in Dostoevsky as elsewhere, provide us with considerable food for thought. And at least to some degree, both seem to have something going for them. Regarding the first one, it is surely true that positive atheists often reject specific conceptions of God that, frankly, do not pass muster in classical Christian theology. And regarding the second one, it has of course been the dominant theme of this chapter that there can indeed be authentically Christian forms of anti-idolatrous "atheism". But, at least in their bolder and least qualified expressions, both tendencies arguably tell us far more about Christian theology than they do about actual atheists. Regarding the former, for instance, let us accept that most unbelievers are not terribly well acquainted with the minutiae of the Christian doctrine of God. The same is, though, unquestionably true of a great many pious, practising, faith-*and*-works Christian believers. Theologians are, needless to say, rather slower off the mark to deride the conceptions of God in which they (explicitly) believe, or think they do, than they are to do the same to the conceptions of God in which many atheists do not. And *pace* Myshkin, it is surely not the case that all atheists must be condemned "always [to] be talking *not about that*" – at least not if it is possible for some people, some of the time, to be indeed talking *about that* (that is, if all theological language is not condemned to be irredeemably meaningless).

Furthermore, while there may well be a certain correlation between atheism and negative theology, it is surely rather a stretch to identify the two too closely. For all of McCabe's and Justin's legitimate distinction between *God* and "the gods" the fact remains that, unlike atheists, Christians do indeed affirm the existence of God – and a God whose name, howsoever metaphorically and requiring of qualification, does indeed convey at least *something* of significance about God: a significance underwritten, so to speak, by the fact that God himself, incarnate as "a man among men"[24] speaks of God in human speech – and in language which, as God the Holy Spirit confirmed at Pentecost, can be meaningfully translated into "other tongues" (Acts 2.4). So while it is true to say that there is a sense in which Christians are indeed "atheists" (regarding mere "gods"), it does not

[24] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20, 4.

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follow conversely that all unbelievers are but apophatic theologians of a Pseudo-Dionysian bent. For they – atheists *sans* inverted commas – are without a belief in the existence, not only of gods, but of the Most True God as well.

Conclusion

The point I've been trying to make is this: if God really is who Christianity claims he is, then all our words about God - *including the word "god"* - must necessarily fall short. Whatever it is we think we mean by descriptors such as good, merciful, powerful and so on, they cannot really come close to accurately describing God. That does not necessarily means that we should stop trying. The *Summa Theologiae* might well be "like straw" compared to Thomas' mystical experience of God himself. But if the *Summa* is the best and most accurate "straw-God" we have, then that is alright – just so long as we remember that this is so, and that we do not fail to recognize the Most True God when he appears. To again quote Denys Turner: "Negative theology does not mean that we are short of things to say about God; it means just that everything we say of God falls short of him".[25]

Or to put it another way, "We confess that we are atheists, so far as 'god' of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the Most True God."

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[25] D. Turner, op. cit., p. 11.

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