

ATHEISM, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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Atheism was a spectre that had haunted early modern Europe since the 16th century and finally materialized in 1670, when Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* appeared in print. With his unprecedented doctrine of the unique substance, infinite, necessary and devoid of any anthropomorphic attribute, Spinoza scandalized and fascinated the whole of Western culture for more than a century. Yet before and after Spinoza there was a whole world of authors who privately meditated on God and religion, their definition, their moral or political effects, and came to drastically negative conclusions. As the articles published in this monographic section will show, some of these authors were marginal thinkers, double-faced priests or friars, heretics of every kind, writers of clandestine manuscripts to be diffused covertly among friends and comrades. Others were better concealed, and occupied higher ranks in the cultural framework of early modern Europe.

Atheism maintained a difficult, but constant, relationship with the most relevant currents of early modern philosophy and theology. As Bonaventure des Périers' *Cymbalum mundi* (1537) shows, atheist thought is attested since the early Renaissance, linked in this case to an egalitarian political vision, whose target – quite unexpectedly – is not the church of Rome but the new protestant states of Northern Europe. From this standpoint, Des Périers's disappointment over Protestant politics is a sort of prototype of many future rebellions against the traditional alliance between the throne and the altar (see A. Mothu, "Athéisme et politique à la Renaissance : le cas du *Cymbalum mundi*, 1537"). However, Renaissance atheism addressed also the most profound themes of metaphysics: Paolo Sarpi, a monk of the Servite order

widely known for his devastating *History of the Council of Trent* – and one of the leading intellectuals of his time – developed a new system of mechanical naturalism founded on the infinity of matter. Thus, despite the hesitations of many scholars who fail to consider his obvious strategies of dissimulation, he certainly deserves a place in the history of early modern atheist thought (see G. Baldin, “Irenista, calvinista, scettico, o ateo nascosto? Il dibattito sulla religione di Paolo Sarpi”).

Sarpi died a few decades before the Cartesian revolution, which was to start a new era for both theism and its main enemy. The quest for a full rationalisation of the concept of God was indeed the foundation of most atheist arguments from the second half of the 17th century until 1800. The link between atheism and early modern philosophy is patent in Bayle, who argues for a sort of godless rationalism, based on the “common notions” of reason, eternal and unchangeable. He explicitly assimilates moral principles with logical and mathematical axioms. Thus, the patent incompatibility of theological dogmas not only with certain abstract principles of human science but also with the basic truths of morals, reduces Christian faith to a number of incomprehensible formulae to be accepted blindly without any examination (see A. McKenna, “Pierre Bayle, rationalism and religious faith: self-evident truths and particular truths”).

Clandestine philosophical literature was a typical early modern phenomenon: it was born in the second half of the 17th century and attained his apotheosis in the first decades of the *Siècle des Lumières*. While criticizing and apparently contesting early modern philosophy, the *clandestins* also used it, transforming and adapting it for their own anti-religious purposes. A large debate has dominated the studies on this subject over the last century, in three different stages: (a) the pioneering years of Lanson and Wade; (b) the period which goes from the early 1960’s to the 1980’s, when J.S. Spink launched the idea of a “French free-thought” whose origins are to be found in the second half of the 17th century; finally, in the last three decades, (c) the critical rediscovery of clandestine texts and the advent of a wider and more mature vision of the clandestine phenomenon from a geographical, sociological, and chronological point of view (see G. Paganini, “Enlightenment before the Enlightenment: Clandestine Philosophy”).

The main texts and authors of clandestine literature offer all the nuances of free thought: heresy, deism, anti-clerical propaganda, atheism. The potential opposition between these trends manifests itself initially in the English context. The case of Locke, who was a leading representative of Latitudinarian Anglicanism possibly attracted by the Socinian heresy, is paradigmatic. His

moralist soteriology denied the possibility of salvation to those who rejected Christ's moral and salvific message. Locke is also careful to exclude atheists from political tolerance: for him, atheists, being unable to recognize God's existence, are intrinsically devoid of morality and cannot be trustworthy members of society (see D. Lucci, "John Locke on atheism, Catholicism, antinomianism, and deism"). Nonetheless, it was precisely a friend and admirer of Locke, Anthony Collins, who was among the first British atheists to enter the theological debate, in the course of various controversies concerning both the metaphysical aspects of the issue and those more strictly political, or related to the political use of religion, such as miracles. Collins was followed on this point by David Hume, who, in his essay "Of Miracles", accepted and developed the same rationalist argument opposed by Collins to the belief in supernatural effects: "no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle" (see J. Agnesina, "Collins, Hume e i miracoli: il caso Saragozza").

The case of Hume deserves attention not only in that we are dealing here with one of the leading philosophers of the 18th century, but also from a more general and methodological point of view. In contrast to the overt campaign of contemporary French atheists (who were well known to him), Hume chose to publish his reflections on religion in an oblique manner. On many occasions, he holds the traditional view that the "proper office" of religion is that of maintaining social order and enforcing human morality. Yet in other writings he shows that it is precisely in this regard that religion fails miserably, and this is possibly the reason why his private views on the subject are much less ambiguous than his public declarations. Near the end of his life he mentions among the four events that will "fully establish our Prosperity": "that all the Churches shall be converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses". It is not religion, but philosophy, and most of all sceptic philosophy, that can restrain our passions: "Every Passion is mortify'd by it, except the Love of Truth; and that Passion never is, nor can be carry'd to too high a Degree" (see E. Mazza, "The broken brake. Hume and the 'proper office' of religion").

While Hume's opinion on historical religions can be clarified thanks to his private writings, his positions concerning deism are less transparent. Bolingbroke's deistical writings are certainly a secret source of Part XII of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, especially for the addition of 1757 on the "remote analogy" between God's and man's intelligence. But Bolingbroke's deism could hardly represent a real solution for Hume. Certainly, in the last addition of 1776 on the "verbal dispute" about God's attributes, he is close to Voltaire in arguing that the opposition between atheism and deism can be by-

passed if the concept of God is dissolved into that of the mere existence of an eternal order of things. But this was exactly the position of most atheist philosophers of the Enlightenment, from Toland to Fréret, Diderot and d'Holbach. Thus, after clashing for most of the century, the atheist and the deist finally discovered that they spoke the same language (see G. Mori, "Hume, Bolingbroke, and Voltaire: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Part XII").