

Why I am not an atheist

“If you have God, what do you lack? And if you lack God, what do you have?” (Teresa of Ávila)

The French thinker Foucault observed that in too many debates the protagonists regard their opponent as an enemy to be defeated. This is precisely the kind of attitude I wish to avoid in the lines that follow. Faith is the most important treasure in my life. That is why I want to share this “pearl of great price” remembering the words of Teresa of Ávila that head this article.

I have chosen four reasons why I am not an atheist. I could mention others, but these are the most important ones in my personal evolution towards faith.

1. It does not meet the deepest human needs: it is existentially frustrating

“Infelicissimus” (“very unhappy”). These are the words that the philosopher Herbert H. Spencer ordered to be inscribed on his grave. Scientific materialism occupied a primary place for this British thinker. Judging by this sad epitaph, the atheism of his philosophy did not meet the deepest needs of his being. At the end of his life, facing death, when doubts are no longer silent and sincerity emerges, he declared himself profoundly unhappy.

Every human being asks certain essential questions whose answers constitute the basis of our existence. They are the columns that support our existential and emotional well-being. In my experience, the authentic significance of human life is inseparably linked to God. In God man finds the true meaning of his existence. On the contrary, atheism generates frustration because it cannot provide satisfactory answers to the **basic questions of life** which reflect the deepest needs of human beings:

- Who am I? Where do I come from? The need for **identity**.
- What is life? What am I here for? The need for **purpose**.
- What is there after death? Where do I go? The need for **hope**.

Without God, the answer is that of the wise preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, possibly the first existentialist treatise in history: «Vanity of vanities! All is vanity... So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind» (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:17 ESV).

When you honestly contemplate life and death outside of God, frustration -a feeling of emptiness and absurdity- is the most likely conclusion. The meaning of life becomes nonsense because atheism is a discourse without hope. Nor can it provide solid answers about our identity and purpose. This is how the French thinker Edgar Morin recognizes it: “We feel perplexed and disoriented since we know that we are just a small spinning top that travels round a ball of fire in space”.

I have always wondered to whom an atheist gives thanks when contemplating a beautiful landscape, a wonder of nature or the order of the cosmos. Is there any satisfaction or joy in exclaiming “Thank you, chance, how well have you done it”? I am impressed by the words that E. Hemingway put in the mouth of one of his characters in an atheist paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer: “*Our Nothing in the Nowhere, Nothing is your name. Your Nothing come*”. In the light of so much emptiness, the tragic end of the great American writer is not surprising. If we come from nothing and go to nothing, life is also full of nothing.

The lack of hope is indeed the main deficit of atheism. A world without God is a world without hope, a desert that sooner or later leads to **pessimism** and **scepticism**. Are these not the hallmarks of contemporary Europe? The philosophy of life of our postmodern society is a faithful mirror of its profound scepticism: “it is not worth thinking about the future because I don't know what this future holds”.

The absence of hope is an existential toxic that ends up poisoning all areas of life. When you look at life face to face without masks, atheism leads to despair. This has been the experience of illustrious atheists such as Jean-Paul Sartre when in his book “Nausea” he affirmed in a fit of sincerity: “Nausea will never leave me, I myself am nausea”. On another occasion he said: “The path of atheism is long and painful”.

Another significant example is the attitude towards death. **A life without God leads to a death without hope, a life full of faith leads to a death full of hope.** As a psychiatrist I have been a privileged witness of the great difference in the way believers and non-believers face death. The believers approach it with serenity and peace; those who have no faith use to face the end with much more uneasiness sometimes dressed in irony or cynicism.

In my experience, the eyes of faith lift my vision to look higher and further, where I find the *God of all hope*. It is my inner conviction that atheism can never take me to these heights because it cannot provide a «firm and secure hope» (Hebrews 6:19 NIV).

2. Believing in the materialistic origin of the universe requires a lot of faith

Sir Fred Hoyle, renowned cosmologist and non-believing physicist stated: *“The possibility that the universe was formed by chance alone is equivalent to a hurricane entering a scrap heap and at its passing leaving a fully formed aeroplane”*.

The faith of the atheist, frankly, requires an effort of credulity much greater than Christian faith. It is hard to believe that *“evolutionary mechanisms have made us human after millions of years of mutations, errors, successes and selection”* (Erwin Neher, Nobel Prize in Medicine). Isn't this faith in chance and absolute trust in evolutionary mechanisms far greater than faith in a Creator God? Voltaire, a convinced atheist, sincerely stated: *“The Universe troubles me, and I cannot conceive that this watch exists without its watchmaker”*.

No one would think that a spacecraft is capable of rising into the air, orbiting the earth and landing at the right place and time without the careful work of numerous engineers and experts who have planned everything in advance to the minimal detail. We accept this as normal, but then we believe that the multitude of stars that gravitate in the cosmos with rigorous precision are governed by the law of chance and necessity, and that this perfection has been reached by *“mutations, errors and spontaneous selection”*. It takes much more credulity –I am reluctant to call it faith– to believe that the universe came from nothing and is sustained by laws born of chance than to believe in a Creator God. In other words, I am not an atheist because for me it is much more logical to believe that life came from a wise living person –God- rather than from a blind impersonal force.

For this reason, I make mine the words of Robert Morey¹ when he refers to *“the seven leaps atheists have to explain: How...”*

*Everything ultimately came from Nothing
Order came from Chaos
Harmony came from Discord
Life came from Non-Life
Reason came from Irrationality
Personality came from Non-Personality
Morality came from Amoralty”*.

¹ Robert Morey, *The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom*, quoted in *Jesus among secular Gods*, R. Zacharias and Vince Vitale, Faith Words, New York, 2017, p. 5

3. Man can kill God, but he cannot quench his thirst for God

“I don't believe in God, but I miss him.”

With this striking statement Julian Barnes, English novelist, begins his autobiography “Nothing to be frightened of”. The experience of this writer reflects that of millions of people, just as the psalmist expressed in another famous quote: «As the deer pants for streams of water... My soul thirsts for God, for the living God» (Psalm 42:1-2 NIV).

Man can proclaim the death of God as Nietzsche did, but he cannot quench his thirst for God, which is distorted or repressed. “New faiths” with their **secular gods** emerge and people kneel before them. The churches are emptied, but secular temples are built where these new gods are worshipped with the fervour and devotion appropriate to a religion. They are the contemporary forms of a spirituality without God.

Many people today are fascinated by the occult, superstition, horoscopes, astrology, tarot, ecstatic experiences. These are the **mystery gods** that they worship without questioning anything while they question everything about the living God. Theirs is a **blind faith** in the most literal sense because they believe in a world of darkness. The move from atheism to mystery religions is a growing phenomenon in our post-Christian society.

It is quite significant that France, a country that boasts of its secularism, has more occult professionals (mediums and similar) than registered doctors. Sadly, Chesterton's observation becomes true: “When a person stops believing in God, it isn't that they believe in nothing but that they believe in anything”!

All this leads us to conclude that atheism is actually a form of religion. With the great difference that, instead of “reconnecting”² you with God, atheism “reconnects” you with the material world: “We are a piece of land... the truth is in the reality that surrounds you” affirms the renowned atheist Yuval Noah Harari.

4. I am not an atheist because the personal God of the Bible has captivated me

“I don't believe God exists, but if he exists he has no pardon from God” said a well-known Spanish actor. What sort of God did he know to reach this bitter conclusion? It saddens me to see how many people reject God without really knowing anything about Him. **God is the great unknown.**

² The word *religion* comes from *religare*, reconnect or link with something or someone.

As one digs deeper into the beliefs of an atheist and the process that led to their rejection of God, one is struck by their ignorance of who the personal God of the Bible really is. Unfortunately, the two meanings of the word ignore -*not knowing and not wanting to know*- often go together in the atheist experience: they do not know God and they do not want to know anything about God.

That is why I would like to conclude with a word of personal testimony, my own experience of faith. I have not rejected atheism only because of its limitations and shortcomings, but above all for a positive reason: I have found the light that illuminates the darkness of life.

How is my God?

My God is almost the opposite of what many atheists imagine: He is not a God of fear, but of love; He is not a harsh, repressive God but «slow to anger, and abounding in mercy» (Psalm 103:8 NKJV); He is not a God of capricious tyranny, but of precious freedom; He is a close God whom I can know with my head and love with my heart; a God who, being Almighty, delights to call himself “Father”; a God who is by my side and suffers with me in my afflictions; a God who, being the absolute Truth, delights in persuading rather than imposing; a God with mysteries and enigmas –the *veiled* God-, but also the God *revealed* in Jesus Christ, «the image of the invisible God» (Colossians 1:15). Christ is the mirror of God; in His person and His life the divine character is manifested without shadows.

I am not an atheist because I have found in Jesus Christ the full meaning of *life here* and a firm hope for *life there*. I have discovered that the ultimate answer to human frustration can only be found in the *abundant life* that comes from faith in Jesus: **«I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly»** (John 10:10 NKJV).

In the midst of the drama of a frustrated life in a frustrating world, the figure of Jesus rises up radiantly, opening the door to a new, magnificent life, a life abundant with meaning and hope. For all this I am not an atheist.

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