

# GOD AND TOTALITARIANISM

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PHILIP VANDER ELST

Whilst the Soviet empire overshadows the globe, the ideological revolt against totalitarian socialism and its secular roots gathers momentum on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Two men, in particular, have recently bored beneath the foundations of socialist materialism and discovered their rottenness: Igor Shafarevich, a dissident Soviet mathematician, and Bernard Henri-Levy, perhaps the best known figure among “les nouveaux philosophes”, that chastened band of ex-Marxists who have so disturbed the French Left over the past decade.

In his great book on *The Socialist Phenomenon*, Shafarevich not only exposes the cultural nihilism behind its hostility to property, hierarchy and individuality but also emphasises the theophobia of collectivist revolutionaries and the link between their loathing for religion and their compulsion to reduce human society to the level of an ant-hill. Like Dostoyevsky before him, Shafarevich draws our attention to the interaction between the attempt to eradicate the vision of Man made in God's image, and the attempt to construct an “anonymous society”. In a similar fashion, Bernard Henri-Levy, in his latest work, *Le Testament De Dieu*, underlines the inevitability of mass terror and concentration camps in a world which proclaims that “God is dead”. His book calls instead for a passionate resistance to totalitarianism based on the monotheistic ideal of an eternal and universal Moral Law, transcending

history and indifferent to the sordid imperatives of power politics. The Divine Word must be held aloft as a banner against the Fates.

These reminders of the conflict between monotheism and totalitarianism are especially refreshing after an era in which so many thinkers - both on the Left and the Right - have asserted the opposite. From Bakunin and Swinburne to Bertrand Russell and Ayn Rand, there has been no shortage of atheists arguing on the one hand that God does not exist, and on the other, that He is a sadistic cosmic tyrant consumed with a hatred of life, joy, freedom and creativity. Rand's infatuation in *The Fountainhead* with the myth of Prometheus, for example, is very revealing in this respect, as is Bakunin's defiant description of Lucifer as “the liberator of worlds”, in his pamphlet on *God and the State*. We see here the reflection of a distorted view of God, largely rooted in a total misunderstanding of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Fall. To Rand and her ilk, the idea of Original Sin is associated with the portrayal of a Divine puppet-master determined to keep Man in bondage to fear, superstition, and ignorance. The Fall is therefore reinterpreted in a positive way: as a metaphor describing Man's heroic emancipation from primitive obscurantism and oppression. This helps to explain Bakunin's comment: “If God existed, it would be necessary to destroy him.”

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Theophobia of this kind is further characterised by a lopsided libertarian perspective in which God appears as an arbitrary lawgiver, demanding and receiving the blind adulation of his downtrodden creatures. Monotheism is thus identified as a form of power-worship, or totalitarian idolatry. Hence Bertrand Russell's belief that the very idea of God is "quite unworthy of free men". Once that position has been reached, all attempts to prove the existence of God naturally encounter fierce opposition. God-haters have no more wish to meet their Maker than the mouse has to find the cat. And who can blame them?

The defence of monotheism is, however, too important to the struggle against tyranny to be abandoned lightly. While we can admire the motives and the rhetoric of our theophobic 'freedom-fighters' - past and present - we must be careful to avoid their errors and illusions. Our verdict on their grievance against Heaven should echo that of the French army officer observing the charge of the Light Brigade: *c'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la vérité*. And the reason is obvious. The noble atheist's revolt against God presupposes not only His existence, but also His goodness.

God cannot be denounced as cruel, oppressive and unjust unless cruelty, oppression and injustice are considered to be real evils. However, they can only be so regarded in the light of a prior, objective standard of kindness, freedom and justice. This is commonsense, since a deviation necessarily implies a norm. But if, as in this case, prosecution presupposes law, what is the *origin* of the Moral Law? It cannot be explained away along utilitarian grounds, as something man-made, since the desire to use it in the service of humanity, or in order to assure social harmony, it itself motivated by the Moral Law. Goodness, then, has a transcendent quality which suggests that it has an extra-human and non-material inspiration. In other words, it is rooted in God and is an expression of His character. The only alternative to this conclusion is to assert the subjectivity of all values, but that destroys the very criteria according to which God was condemned in the first place. As C. S. Lewis put it in *Christian Reflections*, if we reject our Creator: "we ought also to reject all His works. But one of His works is this very moral standard by which we reject Him. If we accept this standard then we are really implying that He is not a Brute and Blackguard."

Once God's existence and goodness has been acknowledged, His sovereignty over creation has to be reconciled with the presence of suffering and evil within it, which brings us back to where we started in our analysis of theophobia: Original Sin. However shocking it may appear to the twentieth century mind, the theology of the Fall offers the only convincing solution to this conundrum, as a little thought will demonstrate.

God created Man with free will because only a creature so endowed could know love, and thus experience the joy of sharing the Divine Life. This inevitably left open the possibility, subsequently realised, that Man

would reject his Maker and cut himself off from Heaven - with literally mortal consequences. God's warning not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil ought therefore to be understood in this context. And here we come to the point which has so eluded our libertarian atheists. Innocent Man could learn the difference between good and evil in only one way in an unblemished world: by actually *bringing evil into being* and then *experiencing* its effects. The Divine prohibition was therefore more than just a test of Man's trust in his Creator's love and wisdom; it was also meant to preserve Humanity from the decay and death inseparable from sin. That is the true message of the Biblical story, and it is hardly consistent with the picture of a Celestial Scrooge implacably opposed to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

Having reclaimed monotheism from one species of theophobia, we can turn our attention to a very different variety, whose rationale confirms the validity of Levy's thesis. As Whittaker Chambers pointed out years ago, in the opening pages of *Witness*: "The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God." To irreligious enemies of Marxism, like Sidney Hook or the late Max Eastman, this kind of statement has always seemed preposterous, yet it goes to the heart of the matter. The Divine Law, and the eternal sanction behind it, is permanently at loggerheads with the dictatorship of the proletariat, since the latter recognises no external limit on its writ. Totalitarian ideologies cannot breathe the pure air of a moral universe. That is why they try to abolish God and persecute His children. Consequently it is entirely right to view the atrocities of Communism as a logical development of its atheist philosophy, even though that is only one of their causes.

To put the matter in another way: totalitarianism expresses the conviction that rulers can do what they please with power, because God is a phantom, and morality a bourgeois illusion. It is thus the hedonism of tyrants, and as such, it degrades its votaries by abandoning them to their basest appetites. When all restraint, moral and spiritual, is thrown to the winds, men do not step out into a more perfect freedom. On the contrary, they become the slaves of their lower nature. The war against Heaven is consequently as destructive to those who wage it, as it is to their innocent prisoners. The seductive whispers of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, "Ye shall be gods", beckons Man down the road that can only lead to ruin.

Can it be denied, then, that monotheism is the rock on which the barrier to tyranny must be erected? Those who persist in their scepticism should meditate upon Lord Acton's observation that: "When Christ said: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's, those words ... gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom."