

ATHEISM, NON-BELIEF, AND RELIGIOUS

INDIFFERENCE IN THE



by Howard J. Hubbard

Talk given by Howard J. Hubbard, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Albany, New York, at the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for Non-Believers, Rome, March 20-24, 1985.

At the outset it would be helpful to mention that religiously the population of the United States represents a map as wide and as varied as the physical map of the landscape. It ranges from strict fundamentalism with strong and sometimes intransigent religious commitments to indifference and even hostility toward religion. Between these two extremes there are various degrees of religious beliefs. Over twenty years ago, Will Herberg in his sociological study, Protestant, Catholic, Jew (Rev. Ed. N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960) maintained from statistics that the United States is a religious nation. He used various criteria to make this determination — belief

in God, in life after death, prayer, church membership and attendance, the status of religion and religious leaders, intellectual prestige, and interest in religion on college campuses. Though this study would have to be revised in light of changing times, Herberg's general analysis would, I believe, hold up today.

For example, the Gallup Poll, a popular and respected barometer of the pulse, life, faith and values held by Americans, asked in January, 1985 which of several statements came closest to their beliefs about God. Sixty-nine percent chose, "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it." Only three percent chose, "I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out." Twelve percent chose, "While I have my doubts, I feel that I do believe in God." Eight percent chose, "I don't believe in a higher power of some kind," and five percent chose, "I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times." Three percent did not answer or had no opinion.

Regarding religious practice itself, a 1983 Gallup survey revealed that forty-six percent of Americans attend some church or synagogue regularly. While this percentage of participation is down a few points from a similar survey conducted a decade ago, it still reveals a high level of religious practice on the part of Americans.

Certainly, United States citizens are intensely interested in religion as evidenced by the attention given in the news media to pronouncements of religious leaders here and abroad and to the statements of public officials. The travels and statements of the Pope, for example, receive extensive media coverage. His pronouncements on theological issues such as liberation theology, his teaching on human sexuality and the role of ministry in the church receive as much attention as his comments on world events such as the Mid-East conflict, Central America, Poland, etc. Also, the relationship between religion and politics was a major story of the 1984 presidential election campaign. All the major newspapers and news magazines have a religion editor and most small papers have a weekly religion page. Reaction to such news coverage has been at times friendly and receptive, at times hostile and abrasive, but, in the main,

such reports on religious issues are received with careful and serious reflection.

Though much more could be said about religious belief in the United States, let us turn our attention to the focus of this paper: Atheism, Non-Belief and Religious Indifference.

That these attitudes characterize a large segment of the population is without question, although it is difficult to estimate just how wide-spread they are. It would not be entirely inaccurate to say that such attitudes are found, for the most part, in the large population centers of the East and West, while one is more likely to find a stronger sense of religious commitment in the Mid-West and South.

Father Alvin Illig of the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Center suggests that approximately 80 million Americans are unchurched, that is, belong to no organized religious group. It certainly would be unfair, however, to suggest that all unchurched Americans are irreligious or non-believers. Most would be horrified to be so regarded. Some of them believe in Christ in some way and in the Scriptures. What is beyond doubt is that most accept the existence of God (as evidenced from the 1985 Gallup Poll cited above). What is also beyond doubt in many cases is that they live a life which measures up to the highest demands of Christian charity, particularly in love of neighbor.

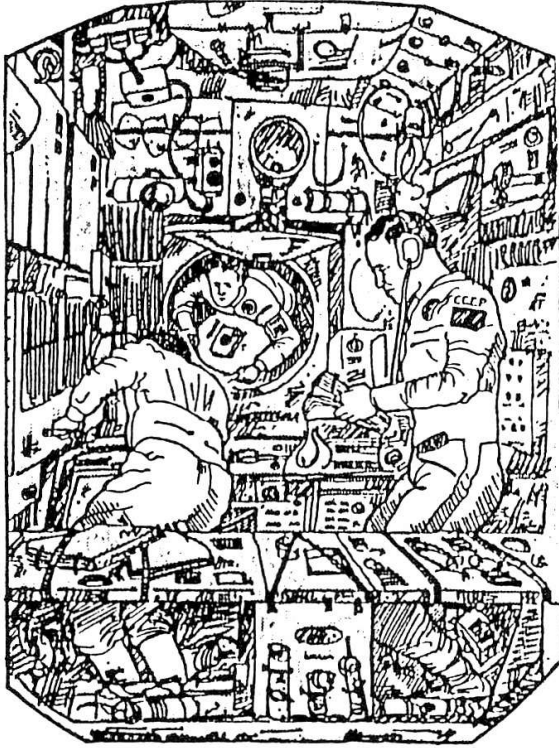
Father Illig also estimates that 15 million Catholics are inactive. Many of these may be regarded as "cultural Catholics", people who continue to identify with the church for major life-milestones like baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage and burial, or for Easter and Christmas celebrations, but for whom Catholic Christianity is not really a strong motivating influence in their lives.

There are no statistics or even reliable estimates of the number of atheists in the United States other than the five to ten percent surveyed by the Gallup Poll who did not acknowledge belief in the existence of God or who seriously question His existence. Such atheism or non-belief ranges from militant anti-religious sentiments (although such a position is relatively rare) to careless indifference

and unconcern regarding religious questions. At times, however, people in these categories will join forces to oppose what they take to be the efforts of religionists to break down the so-called wall of separation between church and state or to impose the belief of a particular religious sect upon the rest of the citizenry.

But more important than the number of atheists and non-believers are the causes of these attitudes. Again, no hard statistics are available on the question and one is left to make one's own evaluation on the basis of study and personal observation. Let me share my own reflections regarding the causes of atheism, non-belief and religious indifference in the United States.

First of all, mention should be made of the rise of science and technology in the United States beginning roughly in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. One could cite the growth of scientific interest in universities and in government, as well as the phenomenal developments in technology. The United States experienced a sense of exhilaration in becoming acquainted with the work done in other countries in the natural sciences and it took pride in its own contributions to the growth of these sciences. Even more powerful was the sense of satisfaction, not to say euphoria, that resulted from the technological advances made in the United States. People everywhere began to feel that they were gaining control over the forces of nature, that phenomenon, once unknown and mysterious and hence attributed to God's power, now came under the domination of man's ingenuity. People became more convinced that through science and technology they could control the forces of nature and use them for man's purposes. There was hardly anything that could not be accomplished by human creativity and enterprise. While not ready to look upon themselves as "like unto gods", they found less and less need of a God in the direction of human affairs. In looking back over the past century of United States history, one can see a growth of a frame of mind not unlike that of 18th Century Europe, the period of the so-called "Age of the Enlightenment" or the age of reason when human reason, largely under the impact of scientific development, usurped unto itself abilities and powers that were formerly allocated to God.



The United States took pride in its own contributions in the natural sciences.

a means of avoiding temptation rather than as a means of developing oneself more fully as a human person and as a child of God. Surely one should not exaggerate these dimensions of religion nor overlook the exhortations to love and to commitment to this world's concerns. It is easy also to forget that religion went through successive modifications of the gloomier side of its doctrinal positions. But it must be acknowledged that stress was given to man's alienation from God and his powerlessness to achieve any good by his own resources. It must also be recognized that this was the understanding of religion that was shared by a large portion of the population well into the present century.

Consequently, two opposing tendencies came into conflict during the first few decades of the 20th Century. The one, quite new, was the rise of science and technology which emphasized man's power to unveil the secrets of nature and to control and direct man's destiny; the other, deeply

The phenomenon would have been significant in its own right, but it was furthered by another development within religion itself. Religion in the United States had been strongly influenced by Calvinistic Protestantism that stressed heavily the sinfulness of man and his powerlessness to save himself. It teaches that man is born in sin, alienated from God, and unable to achieve salvation. He needs God's special election freely to decide who will be saved and who will be condemned. Added to this was the stern warning that engagement in the things of this world was an obstacle to union with God. Involvement in worldly concerns was looked upon merely as

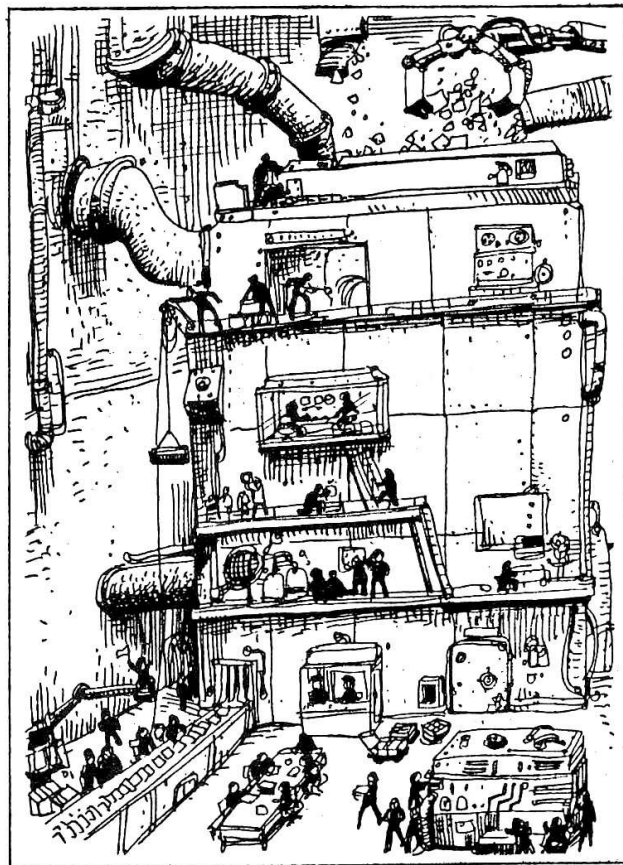
imbibed from earliest colonial days, was the belief that man by himself was powerless to achieve anything worthwhile in this life. It is difficult to assign a date when this conflict between the two tendencies reached its climax. It was a slow growth rather than a sudden emergence.

Quite significant was an event, almost unprecedented in United States history, that focused the attention on the nascent atheism and non-belief. It was the "Humanist Manifesto" of 1933 which was signed by leading figures among the more liberal groups within Protestant Christianity and Judaism. It claimed that changes caused by science and increased knowledge rendered obsolete belief in theism, supernaturalism and traditional forms of religion. It maintained that man is the result of evolution and hence a part of nature, that his destiny is confined to this life, and that human goals and purposes must be pursued through science alone. The "Humanist Manifesto" was widely publicized and it has been reprinted many times. Its significance for the United States in the 1930's resided in the fact that religious and intellectual leaders stated publicly and forthrightly that religion in its traditional form no longer had a place in society and its future. The public affirmation of this view constituted a major breakthrough in the intellectual atmosphere and in the thought and practice of many citizens.

One more reason could be cited briefly as a cause of atheism and non-belief. It is not peculiar to this country but its influence is felt nevertheless. It is the concern of many for achieving the "good life" of prosperity and self-improvement. Certainly poverty has always affected many citizens, but at the same time there has always existed the belief and, indeed, the reality that by ingenuity and industry one could achieve a comfortable and even affluent way of life. This goal is given strong impetus by advertisers who hold up before the public a utopian dream of a life of prosperity and luxury. All this has constituted a serious obstacle to religious leaders in their efforts to draw the attention of their congregations to a concern for a higher life.

These, then, are the major causes of atheism and non-belief in the United States, at least as far as I can discern—

the growth of science and technology with its emphasis on man's power to determine his destiny, the somber and dark side of religion accentuating man's powerlessness and alienation from God, and the pursuit of the "good life" directing man to become immersed in achieving material comforts and conveniences. If my analysis is correct, it would seem that the citizens of the United States, at least initially, did not turn away from religion because of an open hostility to it but because the world as viewed by religion as they knew it did not satisfy their craving either for a God who loves and protects them nor for a world in which they could reach a measure of achievement and satisfaction.



They believed that by ingenuity and industry one could achieve a comfortable and even affluent way of life.

We can ask, then: "What is the solution to this problem," or perhaps we can ask in another way: "What should religion of the future look like if the minds of men and women are to be turned once more to God and religion?" To answer this question, one must be bold enough to play the role of a prophet for the future, a role even more difficult than that of reporter of the past. Let us attempt the task and express some broad principles.

First of all, religion in the United States must make clear that one's engagement in the concerns of the world is not and need not be an obstacle to one's religious growth. Though there is considerable merit to the metaphor of pilgrim as applied to man's journey through this world, it should

not obscure the fact that what man does in this world has a meaning in terms of religious commitment and growth. This is a large topic in itself and it has been amply developed in the Documents of Vatican II, especially Gaudium et Spes. Here we see a new spirit emerging which, while reaffirming the fact that we have not a lasting city, still celebrates the possibility that the earthly condition of Church and humanity can be a source of spiritual and religious growth. Consequently, religion must show that it is not opposed to involvement in this world's concerns but that man is more truly religious to the extent that he heeds the mandate "to subject to himself the earth and all that it contains" (Gaudium et Spes, #34). This mandate applies not only to science and industry but also to the most ordinary activities of everyday life. In this way, human activities are not only not opposed to the divine plan but rather are the very means by which mankind continues God's creative influence in the world. Unless some religious meaning is given to the enterprise of living in this world, modern man is not likely to be attracted to religion to any significant degree.

Furthermore, the God that appeals to mankind must be shown to be a loving God who brings humans into being out of excess of divine love and who lovingly watches over their progress until they are united in love once more with their Creator. Whatever has been the image of God and religion in the United States in the past, this image must stress a God who is immersed in the world and who is deeply concerned with his creation. It must be shown that, though once alienated from God, man is now a child of God through the redemptive death and resurrection of the Son. Certainly this image of God has always been in the foreground of the Church's teaching and practice, but it must be even more forcefully stressed in order to overcome the lingering doubts that many have regarding God's love and care.

At the same time, religion must strenuously resist the temptation to accommodate its belief to purely human desires and tendencies. It is all too true that in the United States, as well as in other countries, many people have become religious to the extent that God serves them. As one writer expresses it:

... there is emerging a strange phenomenon called 'secularized religion', which has lost both the sense of a transcendent, holy God before whom man stands in awareness of his nothingness and that of his work, and the sense of an almighty God who judges, shatters, and reconstructs life itself. ... the primary object [of this secularized religion] is the good life, equated with the virtues of free enterprise, self-reliance, humanitarianism, and self-improvement.

(Robert J. Roth, S.J. American Religious Philosophy N.Y.: Harcourt, 1967, p.4)

Here, of course, is the seeming paradox facing religion for the future -- that of showing that God is both above the world and time, requiring his creatures to be subservient to his will and to keep their eyes on the celestial city of God, and still a God who loves man and the whole of his creation and who encourages us to work out our salvation in and through an engagement in the world.

Perhaps this situation should not be called a paradox but rather a challenge for religion. Certainly the church in the United States has the resources to meet this challenge.

Specifically, I would suggest that there are three factors or trends present within the fabric of contemporary American society which make the church and its teaching, practice and tradition more attractive to atheists, non-believers and those indifferent to religion: the rise of fundamentalism, growing skepticism about secular humanism and the search for community.

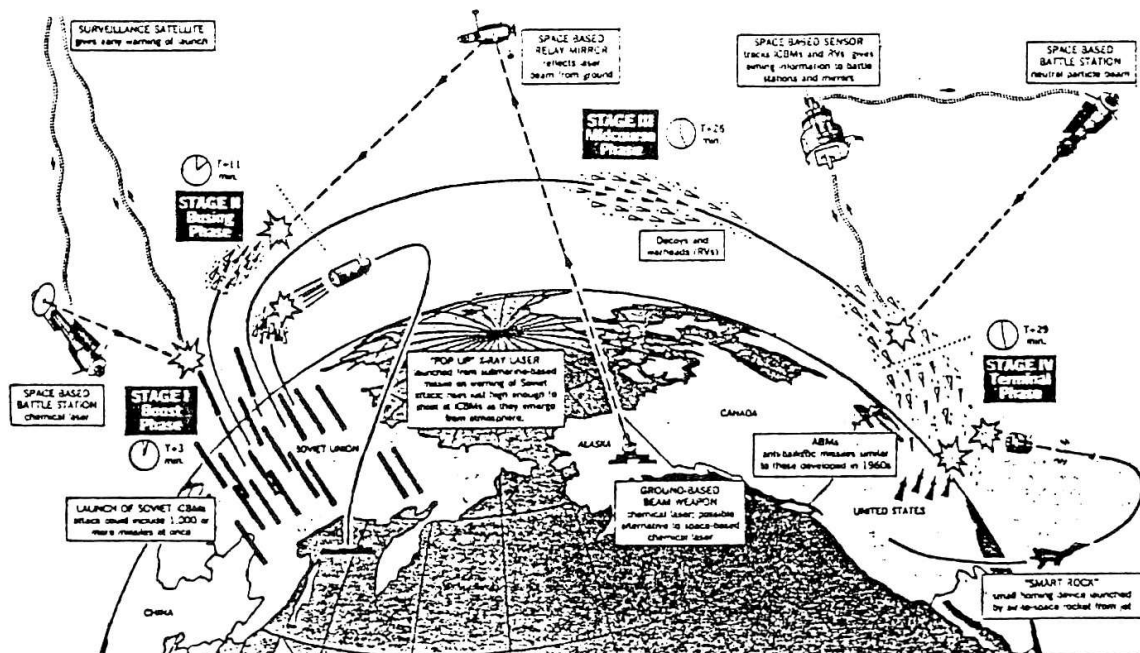
In the United States, the emergence of fundamentalist religious groups as rather powerful public forces have made even non-believers aware that religion cannot be neglected, scorned or dismissed. The same is true of the emergence of fundamentalist religious forces in the Middle East.

Some of the religious forces that have emerged recently, however, do not have a strong intellectual tradition: they do not cultivate theology or philosophy and they seem to

be hostile toward reason and science. As a consequence, scientists and intellectuals may be more interested in the Catholic tradition precisely because of its respect for reason and science.

On the other hand, if the church is to capitalize on this opportunity, it will be quite important for the church to cultivate its own intellectual tradition more effectively. There have been strong anti-intellectual currents in Catholicism in recent years, with a strong emphasis on emotional and psychological analysis rather than on reason and classical psychological and theological inquiries. It would be important for dialogue with non-believers that the Catholic church not appear to be on the side of highly-emotional and anti-scientific tendencies. A much greater stress on doctrine and analysis is desirable in Catholic education at both the high school and the college level as well as in adult education.

Second, the 'optimism' of the secular humanists and atheists, that man by himself is able to master nature and to control his destiny, has been challenged by the events of the past few decades. While this humanist vision of economic and material liberation still remains an important motive for the development of education, technology, and culture, this analysis is more and more being called into question.



The church, therefore, is in an opportune position to enter into dialogue with the secularists by demonstrating that progress and improvements in science, technology and culture need not be destructive of other human values. It seems to me, then, that the church in its moral teaching can make an important contribution to the world by providing a clear and effective presentation of the natural virtues and vices, and of human responsibility in the natural order.

The church can accomplish this by drawing on its own tradition of the validity of natural human goods. This would have two benefits: a) it would help people of good will, whether believers or not, to understand better their own moral responsibilities; b) it might well draw attention to the domain of grace as surpassing the natural order.

I would suggest that the recent pastoral letter of the United States Catholic Bishops, The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, and the pastoral letter on the economy presently under development, Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, serve this function well. The cogent analysis of the economic, scientific, technological and sociological factors involved with these complex issues, coupled with the logical cohesion of the philosophical and moral reasoning set forth in these documents, have made the church's teaching role more credible to believer and non-believer alike.

Third, there is a growing hunger within contemporary American society for a strong sense of community. In 1980, for example, as a delegate from New York State, I attended the White House Conference for Families. A host of social and family problems surfaced and a myriad of solutions were proposed, many of them contradictory in nature. Yet, there was one overwhelming consensus, namely, the need to form a sense of community on the part of our citizenry.

Recently, I talked with a number of men and women who were preparing to become members of the Catholic community through the catechumenate program envisioned by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. As adults, this was a major decision, a major step on their pilgrim journey of faith. I asked them what it was that attracted them and motivated them. They shared with me that it was the attraction of community that was the major factor in their decision to enter the church.

It seems to me, therefore, that one thing the Catholic church should be fostering is a warm, friendly community spirit in its parishes, so that people who are interested in religion will see the church as an attractive place, a place where they will find a friendly reception, and which they can approach without anxiety.

That is why the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults shows such great promise. This communal rite has enabled people to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance by praying together, by reflecting upon the Sacred Scripture, by discussing the fundamental concepts of the Christian life, and by sharing in an understanding and accepting atmosphere one's hopes and expectations, one's successes and failures, one's struggles and strivings in living out the Gospel message. From such community sharing there has emerged for pastors, catechists, sponsors, parishioners and catechumens alike new life, new vitality, renewed zeal, a sense of commitment, a new hope and vision for the future.

Also, community oriented evangelization programs, such as "Welcome to our Open House" sponsored by the National Catholic Evangelization Center or the 'Renew' process conducted in over 60 dioceses throughout the United States, have accounted for the return to the faith of over 700,000 adult Catholics during the past two years.

There are, therefore, many hopeful signs for effective religious dialogue and renewed evangelization in contemporary American society. With God's grace these trends will continue to grow and to produce a rich harvest both of conversion and revitalized religious practice.