

Catholic-Atheist Dialogue: The Unfinished Business of Vatican II

By

Peter A. Huff
Centenary College of Louisiana

Abstract

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) issued a call for “sincere and prudent” Catholic dialogue with atheists. Pope Paul VI’s Secretariat for Non-believers gave dialogue with atheists official status in the Catholic Church’s institutional structure. The unprecedented Vatican department, however, was discontinued in 1993. Today, the record of the church’s dialogue with unbelievers is virtually unknown, and its outreach to the world’s non-religious is overshadowed by higher-profile initiatives in ecumenical and interreligious affairs. Meanwhile, atheism increasingly becomes one of the most dynamic forces on the global cultural landscape.

This essay addresses Catholic-atheist dialogue in two ways: historical and critical-constructive. First, it investigates evolving Catholic views of the origins, nature, history, and varieties of atheism, as well as atheism’s complex relationship to Christianity. Second, based on an analysis of data demonstrating the pervasiveness of atheism in contemporary society, the essay argues for a renewal of Vatican II’s commitment to dialogue with non-believers. Without serious and respectful Catholic-atheist encounter, Vatican II’s vision of a church in dialogue remains unfulfilled.

Key Terms: Vatican II, dialogue, Catholic-atheist encounter, new atheists.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) made history with its vision of the Roman Catholic Church in dialogue. Dialogue with “separated brethren” in Orthodox and Protestant traditions and believers and practitioners in all world religions is a major part of the council’s legacy. We can rightly identify dialogue—along with *aggiornamento*, collegiality, reform, and *ressourcement*—as one of the principal themes of the church’s twenty-first ecumenical council.¹

¹ For an interpretive survey of the Second Vatican Council, see John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008). See also Peter A. Huff, *Vatican II: Its Impact on You* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2011).

Vatican II did not limit its dialogic mission to religious believers. At the heart of the conciliar experience was an impulse toward “dialogue with the world and with people of all shades of opinion.”² The council was especially interested in dialogue with atheists. Many of the council bishops knew firsthand the systematic and coercive atheism of twentieth-century communist regimes. Others were intimately acquainted with the more organic atheisms of the secularizing West. The council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World identified atheism as “one of the most serious problems of our time.” It spoke of the need for “more thorough treatment” of the phenomenon and issued a call for “sincere and prudent” dialogue with atheists. “For our part,” the bishops said, “our eagerness for such dialogue, conducted with appropriate discretion and leading to truth, by way of love alone, excludes nobody; we would like to include those who respect outstanding human values without realizing who the author of those values is, as well as those who oppose the church and persecute it in various ways.”³ During the council, Pope Paul VI even established a new Vatican department charged with fostering Catholic dialogue with non-believers.

Today, a half century after the opening of Vatican II, the council’s connections with atheism have been largely forgotten. The record of the church’s dialogue with non-believers is virtually unknown, and its outreach to the world’s non-religious is overshadowed by more high-profile initiatives in ecumenical and interreligious affairs. Meanwhile, atheism increasingly becomes one of the most dynamic forces on the global cultural landscape.

In this essay, I will address Catholic dialogue with atheism in two ways: historical and critical-constructive. First, I will trace the development of Catholic engagement with atheism from the early twentieth century to the Second Vatican Council, and from Vatican II to the present. Second, based on a recognition of atheism’s increasingly vital place in contemporary culture, I will argue for the renewal of Vatican II’s commitment to dialogue with non-believers. My perspective is that of a Catholic theologian dedicated to the work of dialogue—what Pope John Paul II once called “a path toward the kingdom.”⁴ Without serious and respectful Catholic-

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 43. Quotations from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996). Citations refer to the Latin title of the document and the relevant section of the text.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19, 92.

⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 57. The texts of papal encyclicals in Latin and multiple translations may be found on the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/index.htm.

atheist encounter, I am convinced, the Second Vatican Council's vision of a church in dialogue remains unfulfilled.

Catholic Views of Atheism Before Vatican II

Before Vatican II, three views of atheism enjoyed currency in Catholic intellectual culture. One rather irenic approach can be found in the entry on atheism written for the original English-language *Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1907. Here atheism is an ideal type, not an actual worldview according to which people order their everyday lives. History provides very few self-styled atheists, the author suggests, and most individuals who live "godless" lives do so for reasons other than intellectually compelling syllogisms.

For centuries, the word "atheist" has normally functioned as a term of derision or polemics. Diagoras, Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, and Socrates anciently, and Huxley, Darwin, and Spencer, more recently, are examples of unconventional thinkers charged erroneously with positive atheism. "Of the few who have upheld an indubitable form of positive theoretic atheism," the writer concludes, "none has been taken seriously enough to have exerted any influence upon the trend of philosophical or scientific thought."⁵

A second, more troubled, Catholic understanding of atheism associated unbelief with communism. Atheism was not simply one philosophical option among others but the ideology driving a brutal assault on human freedom. Pius XI (Achille Ratti) endorsed this approach in his encyclical letter *Divini Redemptoris* (1937), the first full-length papal critique of Marxist-Leninist communism, released just days after the promulgation of the anti-Nazi encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*. "During Our Pontificate," Pope Pius said, "We . . . have frequently and with urgent insistence denounced the current trend to atheism which is alarmingly on the increase."⁶

A distinctive feature of this view of atheism was its supernatural dimension. In the decades prior to Vatican II, Catholic opposition to communist atheism exhibited an otherworldly quality, thanks largely to the 1917 Marian apparition at Fatima, Portugal. Ratti's successor Pope Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli) highlighted this mystical

⁵ Francis Aveling, "Atheism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02040a.htm>.

⁶ Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, 5.

element in his apostolic letter *Sacro Vergente Anno* (1952), consecrating the people of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary: “And we address our supplication to this most merciful Mother, that she may obtain from her divine Son heavenly light for your minds, and for your souls the supernatural strength and courage which will enable you to avert and overcome all error and godlessness.”⁷

A third Catholic approach to atheism began to emerge in the 1930s and ‘40s. Like anti-communism, it portrayed atheism as a direct competitor with Christianity. At the same time, it recognized and even admired to a certain extent the heart of the modern atheist impulse. From this vantage point, atheism is largely a romantic quest for human liberation and an almost prophetic protest against injustice.

This position was best articulated in Henri de Lubac’s 1944 book *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. “Beneath the numerous surface-currents that carry contemporary thought in every direction,” the Jesuit theologian maintained,

it seems possible to detect a deep undercurrent, by no means new—or rather a sort of immense *drift*, through the action of a large proportion of its foremost thinkers, the peoples of the West are denying their Christian past and turning away from God. This is not the everyday type of atheism that crops up in all ages and is of no particular significance; nor is it the purely critical atheism so fashionable in the last two hundred years . . . Contemporary atheism is increasingly positive, organic, constructive. . . . Man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness that, it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another.⁸

De Lubac’s achievement was remarkable for its grasp of the motivations for and varieties of atheism. His essay on “Nietzsche as Mystic” represented nothing less than a sea change in Catholic understandings of the modern rejection of God.⁹ De Lubac’s appreciation of the spiritual nature of atheism and his acknowledgement of the justice of its critique of Christianity paved the way for Vatican II’s unique insights into modern unbelief.

⁷ Quoted in Timothy Tindal-Robertson, *Fatima, Russia and Pope John Paul II*, rev. ed. (Still River, MA: Ravengate Press, 1998), 237. See Pius XII, *Sacro Vergente Anno*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-xii_apl_19520707_sacro-vergente-anno_it.html.

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Anne Englund Nash, Edith M. Riley, and Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1995), 11, 24-25. Italics in original.

⁹ See de Lubac, 469-509.

Atheism and Preparation for the Council

The documentary evidence clearly shows that atheism was in the forefront of the Catholic imagination on the eve of Vatican II. In the first phase of preparation for the council, the Roman Curia sent questionnaires to thousands of Catholic bishops, theologians, canon lawyers, and heads of religious orders around the world, seeking input on issues that needed to be addressed. Many replies mentioned atheism. Most referred to the communist version.¹⁰

And rightly so. Vatican II would be a Cold War council. The Berlin Wall was going up during the planning phase, and the Cuban missile crisis would occur during the council's first session. State-mandated atheism was a cruel fact of life behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. Some bishops, such as Poland's Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, brought personal memories of communist show trials and prison life to the council. Others—in the People's Republic of China and North Korea—were prohibited from attending the meeting altogether. Hungarian cardinal József Mindszenty spent the council years confined to the U.S. embassy in Budapest. These leaders represented what Pope Paul VI called the parts of the church “that still live in the Catacombs.”¹¹

The roots of Vatican II's interest in atheism, however, reach back far beyond Pope Paul and even the council's curial phase of preparation. Pope John XXIII (Angelo Roncalli), the originator of the council, identified modern atheism as one of the main reasons for calling the council in the first place. In his apostolic constitution proclaiming Vatican II, *Humanae Salutis*, issued on Christmas Day, 1961, he spoke of “something new and frightening” in the world: “There has arisen a whole party of men who deny the existence of God and are organized on what amounts to a military basis, and it has extended its influence to many nations.”¹² In his first social encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), John had already referred to the modern age as “penetrated and shot through by radical errors.” “No folly,” he said, “is more

¹⁰ See Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Council Fathers and Atheism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), 11-23 and James L. MacNeil, *A Study of Gaudium et Spes: The Second Vatican Council Responds to Contemporary Atheism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 9-28.

¹¹ Paul VI, Homily, September 12, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/homilies/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19650912_catacombe_it.html.

¹² John XXIII, “Proclamation of the Second Vatican Council,” *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII*, ed. Staff of *The Pope Speaks* Magazine (Washington, DC: TPS Press, 1964), 387.

characteristic of the modern era than the absurd attempt to reconstruct a solid and prosperous temporal order while prescinding from God, the only foundation on which it can endure.”¹³

Atheism and *Gaudium et Spes*

Appropriately, then, atheism did become an important part of the deliberations at the council. Vatican II was the first council to reckon seriously with modern unbelief. Never before had the denial or rejection of God been so widespread and seemingly so normal. Other councils have contended with competing faiths. Vatican II was the first to face the phenomenon of no faith.

None of the *schemata* or draft documents slated for review during the council, however, focused specifically on atheism. As things turned out, the council fathers addressed atheism in the context of their Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*—Vatican II’s longest and arguably its most daring document. For decades, critics have found fault with what they call its overly optimistic view of humanity and its naïve assessment of modernity. Many readers, popes included, have praised its affirmation of hope in an age of anxiety.

The constitution’s prologue is one of the most frequently quoted passages from the sixteen official documents of the Second Vatican Council: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”¹⁴ When we read this first paragraph, we are not surprised to see that the document addresses atheism as an essential feature of the modern experience. Nor are we surprised to learn that Henri de Lubac was a *peritus* or theological expert serving the commission charged with writing the document or that Poland’s young philosopher-bishop Karol Wojtyła was an important member of that same commission. Years later, as Pope John Paul II, Wojtyła would make *Gaudium et Spes* a pillar of his signature defense of human dignity. For him, the document was the council’s way of saying that “the mystery of redemption should be seen in light of the great renewal of man and of all that is human.”¹⁵

¹³ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 217, 260.

¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 48.

At first, the *schema* that evolved into the Pastoral Constitution on the Church did not mention atheism. Speeches on the drafts from bishops during the council business meetings quickly turned things in a different direction. Bishops from Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Asia, and North and South America insisted that the constitution include a robust treatment of atheism. Some called for an explicit condemnation of communist atheism. Others stressed the importance of distinguishing among the varieties of unbelief, especially if atheists were to be included in the document's audience. A few bishops even argued for a full council document on atheism—a separate declaration on atheism comparable to the council's decree on ecumenical dialogue and its declaration on interreligious relations.¹⁶

The Impact of Pope Paul VI

One person who made a big difference in this process was Pope John's successor Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini), known before the council as the "Red" Archbishop of Milan because of his support for Catholic dialogue with communists (as pope he would promote an *Ostpolitik* policy of détente with the nations of the Soviet bloc). Pope Paul's interventions into the conciliar proceedings are well known and still controversial: adding an "Explanatory Note" to the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, postponing a vote on the council's religious liberty document, appointing a special commission to handle the birth control issue, removing the topic of priestly celibacy from the conciliar agenda, among others. Three of Paul's initiatives profoundly influenced the council's approach to atheism.

First, he issued an encyclical that dramatically expanded the concept of Catholic outreach. Pope John, of course, opened the door to dialogue when, in his first encyclical (1959), he emphasized the need to restore the "seamless garment of the Church."¹⁷ His creation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1960 and his decision to address his second social encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), to "all men of good will" were milestones on the way to a Catholic theology of dialogue.

Paul, however, must be acknowledged as the first true pope of dialogue. He elevated dialogue to the level of an official goal for Vatican II and made it a defining

¹⁶ See Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Council Fathers and Atheism*; James L. MacNeil, *A Study of Gaudium et Spes*; and Gilles Routhier, "Finishing the Work Begun: The Trying Experience of the Fourth Period," *History of Vatican II*, vol. V, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Belgium: Peeters, 2006), 49-184.

¹⁷ John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 81.

theme of his pontificate. His encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) was the first papal text ever dedicated to the topic of dialogue. Its image of four concentric circles of dialogue—within the Catholic community itself, with non-Catholic Christians, with non-Christian people of faith, and with the world at large—established dialogue as a permanent fixture of magisterial thought. “Our dialogue,” Paul said, “should be as universal as we can make it. That is to say, it must be catholic, made relevant to everyone, excluding only those who utterly reject it or only pretend to be willing to accept it.”¹⁸

Ecclesiam Suam is also the first church document to endorse dialogue with atheists:

They are sometimes men of great breadth of mind, impatient with the mediocrity and self-seeking which infects so much of modern society. They are quick to make use of sentiments and expressions found in our Gospel, referring to the brotherhood of man, mutual aid, and human compassion. . . . We do not therefore give up hope of the eventual possibility of a dialogue between these men and the Church¹⁹

Next, in April of 1965, Paul founded a new Vatican agency to pursue Catholic-atheist dialogue: the Secretariat for Non-Believers. John’s Secretariat for Christian Unity had already marked a turning point in Catholic mission and identity. It led to the council’s historic Decree on Ecumenism, fostering intra-Christian dialogue. Paul’s first addition to the Vatican bureaucracy, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, announced on Pentecost Sunday, 1964, seemed to be the most radical next step imaginable. Its charter was the landmark document *Nostra Aetate*, the council’s Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Now, the pope appeared to be going beyond the conceivable. His new dicastery or ecclesial department targeting non-believers endowed dialogue with atheists unprecedented status in the church’s institutional structure.

Third, Pope Paul sought to enhance Catholic scholarship on atheism and strengthen the theological response to unbelief. To accomplish these ends, he turned to the Society of Jesus—holding its thirty-first General Congregation in Rome between the third and the fourth sessions of Vatican II. The pope addressed the meeting on May 7, 1965 and directed the Society to give top priority to the study of atheism. He assigned atheism to the Jesuits as a special apostolate:

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 76.

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 104-105.

We bid the companions of Ignatius to muster all their courage and fight this good fight, making all the necessary plans for a well-organized and successful campaign. It will be their task to do research, to gather information of all kinds, to publish material, to hold discussions among themselves, to prepare specialists in the field, to pray, to be shining examples of justice and holiness, skilled and well-versed in an eloquence of word and example made bright by heavenly grace²⁰

The Text of *Gaudium et Spes*

All of these factors contributed to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church's noteworthy treatment of atheism. Comprising sections 19-21 of the text, the analysis represents the Catholic Church's first systematic study of atheism. The document outlines types of atheism in modern culture: rationalist, humanist, practical, and militant. It seeks to identify their causes, especially injustice and the forces that make human beings "a question to themselves." It also makes it very clear that Christians must take their fair share of responsibility for the rise of unbelief: "To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teachings falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion."²¹

Most importantly, the constitution includes a plan of action. Catholics should answer atheism with credible presentations of Christian doctrine and upgrade their "witness of a living and mature faith." The significance of dialogue is particularly emphasized: "Although the church altogether rejects atheism, it nevertheless sincerely proclaims that all men and women, those who believe as well as those who do not, should help to establish right order in this world where all live together. This certainly cannot be done without a dialogue that is sincere and prudent."²²

After Vatican II

Since Vatican II, engagement with atheism has struggled to define its place in Catholic intellectual life. Catholic scholarship on atheism has advanced significantly.

²⁰ "Address of His Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Members of the 31st General Congregation" in John W. Padberg, ed., *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st-35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 231.

²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

The effects of Jesuit concentration on the papal mandate were evident early on. John Courtney Murray's Yale lectures on *The Problem of God*, Karl Rahner's essay on "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," and a second book on atheism from de Lubac, based on his lectures on *Gaudium et Spes*, showed great promise.²³ Michael Buckley's recent researches into the origins of modern atheism suggest that the Ignatian imagination's insight into the phenomenon of unbelief is far from spent.²⁴ (Of course, Jesuits have not been the only Catholic scholars making important contributions to the discussion. Hans Küng's work, for example, continues to set a high standard for the endeavor.²⁵)

The post-conciliar popes have also enriched the Catholic-atheist encounter. John Paul II appears to have been providentially prepared for his vocation in the age of atheism. Five of his fourteen encyclicals directly address atheism, and an entire chapter in his best known book is devoted to the question "Does God Really Exist?"²⁶ "The Church," John Paul declared, "is particularly sensitive to the attitude of those who cannot reconcile the existence of God with the . . . experience of evil and suffering."²⁷

Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) also seems to have been destined for service in the post-Christian era. Like a contemporary Pascal, he has invited the Western world to ponder what it might mean to live "*veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God did indeed exist."²⁸ Benedict published a dialogue with Jürgen Habermas and initiated the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" dialogue project for young people of different

²³ John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). Karl Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX, trans. Graham Harrison (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 145-164. Henri de Lubac, *Athéisme et sens de l'homme: Une double requête de Gaudium et spes* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), vol. 4 in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Cerf, 2006); an English translation of a section of de Lubac's text is "The Total Meaning of Man and the World," trans. D. C. Schindler, *Communio* 35 (Winter 2008): 613-641.

²⁴ See Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See also Michael Paul Gallagher, *What Are They Saying About Unbelief?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

²⁵ See his *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980) and *Freud and the Problem of God*, enlarged ed., trans. Edward Quinn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

²⁶ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 27-31.

²⁷ John Paul II, "The Problem of Unbelief and Atheism," General Audience (June 12, 1985), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19850612en.html.

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 51.

philosophical persuasions.²⁹ In 2011, he broke with tradition and invited atheist “seekers of truth” to participate in the Vatican’s third interfaith gathering at Assisi.³⁰ “We must not forget,” Benedict said, “that in our cultural context, very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world.”³¹

On the institutional level, however, Catholic-atheist dialogue has been little more than lackluster. From the beginning, Pope Paul’s Secretariat for Non-Believers seems to have been governed by an ill fated star. Its first president, Cardinal Franz König, was admittedly unsure of the department’s specific mission, and its first statement of purpose, *Humanae Personae Dignitatem*,³² was unlucky enough to have been published just a month after Paul’s controversial anti-contraception encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968). The Cardinal’s insistence on running the secretariat from Vienna rather than Rome may also have contributed to the department’s ineffectiveness. It did organize meetings with international humanist organizations in 1966 and 1970 but largely failed to win the hearts and minds of either theists or atheists.³³

The election of Karol Wojtyła to papal office in 1978 appeared to mark a new beginning for the dialogic enterprise. The new pope elevated the Secretariat for Non-Believers to the status of a Pontifical Council. A little over a decade later, however, Paul’s unique dicastery—arguably the most unique in the history of the Roman Curia—was permanently suppressed and its task subsumed under that of the still relatively new Pontifical Council for Culture (created in 1982). John Paul II’s apostolic letter authorizing the merger in 1993 offered no real or satisfactory rationale for the decision.³⁴ In an interview with *Zenit*, an international news agency devoted to

²⁹ Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

³⁰ Julia Kristeva’s speech at the 2011 Assisi meeting, “Quelques Principes pour l’humanisme du XXIe Siecle,” can be found at <http://kristeva.fr/assisi2011fr.html>.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 10, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html.

³² See Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 2004), 1002-1014.

³³ See Paul Kurtz and Albert Dondeyne, eds., *A Catholic-Humanist Dialogue: Humanists and Roman Catholics in a Common World* (London: Pemberton Books and Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1972).

³⁴ John Paul II, *Inde a Pontificatus*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_25031993_inde-a-pontificatus_en.html.

coverage of Vatican affairs, Cardinal Paul Poupard, head of the Non-Believers dicastery during the 1980s, blamed the reorganization on the fall of the Berlin Wall.³⁵ Evidently some in the Vatican saw dialogue with atheists as a something of a Cold War relic.

Since 1993, the Catholic Church's dialogue with the non-religious has continued—but only in a muted fashion. One of the twelve official tasks of the Pontifical Council for Culture is “to establish dialogue with those who do not believe in God or who profess no religion.”³⁶ The Council sponsors periodic conferences on themes related to dialogue with non-believers—such as “Speaking of God to People Today” (1994), “The Christian Faith at the Dawn of the New Millennium and the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference” (2004), and “The Church and the Challenge of Secularization” (2008)—and its quarterly review, *Cultures and Faith*, regularly publishes articles on the interface between Christian values and contemporary cultures.³⁷ The Pontifical Council for Culture's record, however, is scarcely known outside an elite circle of UNESCO and Vatican insiders. It is safe to say that even most professional theologians are unaware of its activities and specific achievements in dialogue. While ecumenical and interreligious ventures flourish or at least continue to stimulate lively discussion, Catholic-atheist dialogue—one of the clearest mandates of the Second Vatican Council—competes with art and education for the limited oxygen in the Vatican's organizational atmosphere.

Catholics and the “Atheist Moment”

The year 2012 marked not only the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II's first session but also the 130th anniversary of the debut of Friedrich Nietzsche's unforgettable madman character.³⁸ Since the announcement of the “death of God” in 1882, human experience has been dramatically transformed. Atheism has become an increasingly significant force in a world where once it was only an eccentric—or even hypothetical—frame of mind.

³⁵ “Christ and Religions, According to Cardinal Poupard,” *Zenit* (March 17, 2006), <http://www.zenit.org/article-15559?l=english>.

³⁶ The Pontifical Council for Culture, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_pro_06061999_en.html.

³⁷ See Cardinal Paul Poupard and Pontificium Consilium de Cultura, *Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004).

³⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

Today, special purpose publishing houses, social action organizations, innovative academic programs, blockbuster Hollywood films, and a wide array of blogs, bumper stickers, and billboards grant atheism a social presence and level of acceptance it has never before enjoyed in human history. Approximately a quarter of all American young people self-describe as atheist or agnostic, and some estimates place the global atheist population as high as 700 million. If we imagine it as a secular form of faith, atheism ties with Buddhism for the fourth largest “religion” after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.³⁹

All of these factors signal something of an “atheist moment” in contemporary experience. Though the number of atheists worldwide may have been higher in the 1960s (nearly half the world’s population),⁴⁰ virtually all of today’s atheism is voluntary—and, since based on greater intellectual conviction, then arguably of much greater significance. In such a context, Catholics face an extraordinary opportunity to implement the directives of Vatican II and initiate the truly “catholic” dialogue that Pope Paul imagined.

Requirements for Dialogue

At least four things, however, must be done if Catholics are to help inaugurate a new season of Catholic-atheist dialogue. First, Catholics must raise their level of literacy in atheist thought. Even fluency in, say, the literature of Enlightenment-era or Victorian atheism or the works of the twenty-first-century so-called “new atheists” will not be enough to sustain a full and meaningful dialogue. Careful attention to the plurality of atheisms, including non-Western atheisms, is a basic requirement for honest and effective dialogue.

Second, Catholics must increase their awareness of the social and cultural dimensions of contemporary unbelief. Atheism is much more than an idea or a set of ideas. Like the *Logos* of Christian creed, it is embodied and embedded in the fabric of the phenomenal world. In order to be successful, Catholic participants in dialogue will have to take seriously the multi-faceted and expanding network of institutions that articulate atheist voices in mainstream culture, create communities for non-believers, and give shape to the values of a secular vision of life.

³⁹ Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns,” *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47-65.

⁴⁰ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), ix.

Third, Catholics would do well to apply the lessons of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to the Catholic-atheist project. A valuable outcome of interfaith exchange has been the discovery that dialogue can assume different forms in different contexts. Cardinal Francis Arinze, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue during the John Paul II era, identified four types of dialogue: (1) the dialogue of discourse, (2) the dialogue of action, (3) the dialogue of life, and (4) the dialogue of religious experience.⁴¹ To date, most experiments in Catholic-atheist dialogue have exemplified the first type: the dialogue of experts. Catholic activists who work together with atheists on issues of economic or environmental justice, for example, could open new avenues in the dialogue of action. Catholics who cultivate everyday relationships with their non-religious neighbors in educational, commercial, cultural, or recreational contexts could pioneer new forms of the dialogue of life.

Arinze's fourth type, the dialogue of religious experience, may be more difficult to replicate outside the interreligious milieu. Joint experiences of prayer may not be possible in the Catholic-atheist encounter, but shared experiences in meditation and other forms of ritual practice could profoundly enrich what at times threatens to be an overly cerebral exercise. Certainly aesthetic experience could be a useful prompt for rewarding dialogue.⁴² Catholics will especially benefit from familiarity with the arguments of a new generation of atheist intellectuals who express deep appreciation for the world's religious heritages and speak of spirituality as a necessary component of authentic human existence.⁴³

Finally, Catholics seeking new opportunities for dialogue would be guilty of intellectual dishonesty if they did not think more critically about the Christian sources of modern atheism and the curious migrations of unbelief in modern life. Relatively unstudied today is what Ernst Bloch and Hans Urs von Balthasar each called "atheism

⁴¹ Francis Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers: The Risks and Rewards of Interreligious Dialogue* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998), 17-20.

⁴² See Pontifical Council for Culture, "The *Via Pulchritudinis*, Privileged Pathway for Evangelization and Dialogue," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html.

⁴³ See Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012); André Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, trans. Nancy Huston (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion* (New York: Alpha Books, 2009).

in Christianity.”⁴⁴ The deliberate importation or accidental seepage of methodological atheism into all academic disciplines has been gradually transforming the very nature of Christian theology for the past few decades. Now, it is not difficult at all to detect a non-theist or post-theist worldview animating many ventures in Christian theological research. Nor is non- or anti-supernaturalism an unusual aspect of academic theology. More broadly, a passive sort of practical atheism accompanies to one degree or another virtually every citizen of the secular city—including, of course, scholars in church-related institutions, laypeople, and even clergy. Arguably, in the near future, the Christian investigation of atheism will not constitute simply analysis of or encounter with an alien “other” but will be in effect a species of autobiography. The desperate father’s cry in the Gospel narrative—“I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24)—could rightly serve as the epigraph for much of the contemporary Christian story.

Conclusion

Near the end of his historic pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed a Year of Faith to observe the “golden” anniversary of Vatican II’s opening session. The celebration commenced on October 11, 2012, fifty years to the day after the council was officially convened and now the feast day of John XXIII (beatified in 2000), and it concluded on November 24, 2013, the feast of Christ the King. In his apostolic letter *Porta Fidei* (2011), Benedict described the purpose of the special commemoration and tied the event directly to renewed study of the council documents:

It seemed to me that timing the launch of the Year of Faith to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council would provide a good opportunity to help people understand that the texts bequeathed by the Council Fathers, in the words of Blessed John Paul II, ‘*have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church’s Tradition . . . I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.’⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 87.

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 5.

Since this anniversary Year of Faith, many inside and outside the church have committed themselves to a fresh examination of Vatican II's documents, especially those that contribute to the theory and practice of interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Many have called for a renewal of the council's inspiring vision of a Catholic Church in dialogue. Some have marveled at our progress in the field of interreligious dialogue. Others wonder if ecumenical dialogue among the many branches of Christianity has run its course. Who, though, remembers the council's bold appeal for "sincere and prudent" Catholic dialogue with atheists? Full Catholic engagement with the doubt and disbelief of the modern world is part of Vatican II's unfinished business.