

**Response to Catholic-Atheist Dialogue: The Unfinished Business of Vatican II  
by Peter Huff**

By

Barry A. Kosmin  
Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

Catholic dialogue with other Christian churches is primarily a theologically and religiously driven policy of ecumenism. However, the timing and nature of the Roman Catholic Church's dialogues with other faiths and ideologies is of a different nature and is not solely guided by theological or moral considerations. These dialogues also must be explained in the context of *raison d'état* and the Vatican's assessment of the international geo-political situation and the needs and threats to the institutional and pastoral interests of the Church. This results in changes over time in priorities and focus. Today dialogue with a resurgent Islam seems to take precedence. This reflects concerns about the physical threat of Islamism to Christian communities in Africa and Arab states as well as the need to find a *modus vivendi* with the new Muslim immigrant communities in Europe.

Dialogue and reconciliation with Judaism and the Jews, which was prominent at Vatican II reflected a response to several pressures. One was the recognition of the Church's moral failure to act as more than a bystander during the Holocaust. The Vatican, which at this juncture was financially dependent on American funding, was also responding to pressure from American Catholic politicians who considered an improvement in Catholic-Jewish community relations in the U.S. desirable for domestic and international reasons. After the 1967 Middle East War and during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, the Vatican had its own need to engage with Judaism because of the theological and political challenge presented by the unpredicted emergence of a Jewish sovereign state with control over *Terra Sancta*. This reconciliation also facilitated allied and successful political campaigns on behalf of persecuted Catholics and Jews in the Soviet bloc which were helpful in eventually winning the Cold War.

The political and moral climate of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the years of Vatican II seems very distant today. At that historical juncture Atheism, in its Marxist version, posed a serious and particular threat to the Church because as Stalin boasted it could deploy "more divisions than the Pope" and so held political power over tens of millions of Catholics in Europe and elsewhere. It appeared that it posed

a permanent challenge because it was establishing non-believing societies capable of inculcating a theoretical atheism in childhood. In addition Marxism's anti-colonial and economic agenda combined with its moral and social critique of free market capitalism was making significant political inroads among the younger generation in traditional Catholic spheres of influence in Latin America and Africa. That situation was dramatically transformed to the benefit of the Catholic Church after 1979 so that now Marxism is largely a spent force internationally outside of East Asia.

The Non-Marxist varieties of atheism extant today are not centrally controlled and organized movements. This is a major contrast to the disciplined Marxist movements with their political cadres. Contemporary Atheism is intellectually rather than politically driven and has no realistic aspirations to control states and therefore to directly impact Church-State relations. This explains a good deal of why, as Huff shows, Catholic-Atheist dialogue is both unfinished and its nature is much altered since Vatican II.

On the intellectual level atheism is a negation of belief. Hence as Pope Paul VI correctly asserted in his notion of four concentric dialogues in *Ecclesiam Suam*, a dialogue with people of no faith is *sui generis* and essentially different to that with competing faiths. Atheism today, when it is largely divorced from state power, is a "tribe without chiefs" with no hierarchy or structure with whom to negotiate. This creates a paradox for those who wish to confront it because atheism is easier to find and engage than are large bodies of atheists. Contemporary atheism is amorphous, lacking recognized authoritative texts, as well as institutions and official representatives. Atheism in the mind of its detractors and sympathizers has long straddled the boundaries of non-belief, skepticism and deism. Even its intellectual content and boundaries are disputed and as Huff argues there is a "plurality of atheisms." This view is endorsed by the contributors to *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (2013).<sup>1</sup>

The "New Atheism" is a publishing phenomenon. Naturalism has philosophical appeal and social influence in Western intellectual circles but it is not a coherent and mobilized movement. Organized atheism affiliates only a tiny fraction of its potential constituency in any country. The sociological and psychological reality of atheism in the West today makes any dialogue difficult to address or implement. In fact it is much more oriented to out-reach than traditional dialogue because one contemporary challenge for the Church in Europe and North America is alienation and apostasy among baptized Catholics as a result of its own conduct in dealing with the clergy abuse scandals. Of course, anti-clericalism and calls for reform are not

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<sup>1</sup> S. Bullivant and M. Ruse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Oxford University Press, 2013

motivated by Non-belief. Yet survey research reveals that male Catholics are much more anti-clericalist and more likely to embrace non-belief than Catholic women (Kosmin et al, 2009).<sup>2</sup> This highlights one sociological and psychological peculiarity relating to atheism. It is a male dominated tradition and has a preponderantly male constituency. This fact must influence the style and content of any effective dialogue of both “experts” and of “life.”

After Vatican II Catholic-atheist dialogue, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, was entrusted to the Jesuits and they are sophisticated enough to recognize that secularism and atheism are not synonyms. I would suggest that Liberation Theology, particularly in its Latin American form, was in fact one outcome of this initiative at and could be defined as an attempt to dialogue with non-believers over moral and ethical issues relating to the social and economic order. Thus I would not be surprised if it returned to some favor under the Pope Francis I. This might suggest, to Huff’s obvious satisfaction, that Catholic-Atheist dialogue, long in abeyance, may become a more prominent activity in the coming years.

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<sup>2</sup> Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 2009.