



## Religious Indifference and Lived Atheism: The ‘Religious Pulse’ of the World at Present

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**Abstract:** Atheism is marked by its nearness to religion. As a trend, it was considered a potential enemy of religion. The rejection of God or any absolute or divine realities and the dismissal of religions as artificial and superfluous to mankind were regarded as the core contents of the atheistic tendencies. Nowadays these contents are replaced by religious indifference and practical non-belief in God and religion. The militant atheism has come to an end and the traditional atheistic tendencies have paved the way for practical ‘lived atheism’ in the form of religious indifference. Thus, the decline of faith and the loss of religiosity has become *Weltanschauung*. Sensing the ‘religious pulse’ of the current world shows that, it is secularism that is predominating while faith and religion seem to be losing their ground. This calls for immediate remedial measures of reinstating the natural religiosity of mankind which is expressed by *Homo religiosus*.

**Keywords:** Militant Atheism; Religious Indifference; *Weltanschauung*; ‘Talked Atheism’; ‘Lived Atheism’; Enlightenment; *Homo religiosus*

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## Introduction

A few decades ago, atheism as a trend was considered a potential enemy of all religions. However, the trend has changed now and the use of the word atheism is very rare. It is placed as a course unit in the academic curricula and as a theory, it is studied and often discussed only in the academic arena. The core contents of the atheistic tendencies which were topics that induced heated intellectual and theoretical discussions among the learned and the elite are now in the praxis of the ordinary people.

The decline of faith and the loss of religiosity is a *Weltanschauung*. Sensing the ‘religious pulse’ of the current world signals that faith and religion seem to be losing their ground. This universal phenomenon evokes many questions about faith and religion: What is religion? Is faith reasonable? If the faith in God is deemed real and fundamental, why then there is unbelief? If both believers and unbelievers are found in society, who is correct? Who is mistaken, the believer or the unbeliever? This study deals with the transition of the human civilization from theoretical atheistic tendencies to practical ‘lived atheism’ in the form of religious indifference and proposes some remedial measures to face this crisis situation.

## Atheistic Tendencies

Atheism is viewed from many perspectives. Atheistic tendencies are there from the very beginning of the concept of God and the formation of religions. Atheism is as old as theism. It is a historical phenomenon. It is seen by many historians, on the basis of dialectic processes, as a natural reaction to theistic tendencies.

The rejection of God or any absolute or divine realities and the dismissal of religions as artificial and redundant to mankind are regarded as the core contents of atheistic tendencies. Atheism properly so-called does not deny merely a plurality of gods or

merely a particular way of worshipping God or even simply a personal 'theistic' God. It denies any belief in God and any divine reality whether understood in the mythological, theological or philosophical realm. Atheism can be either speculative or practical. Speculative atheists make recourse to science and reason to say that there cannot be any rational proof for the existence of any God or divine reality. Such people will theoretically present sound arguments that God cannot exist. However, in practice, they may behave as if there is God. Practical atheists are those who on a practical level are not convinced about the existence of God. They may in theory accept God and religion, but do not put into practice their beliefs. There may be many baptized atheists in Christianity. Practical atheism is regarded as grave because it involves wilfully negating God and divine realities.

At the theoretical level, many trends of atheistic tendencies were prevalent in a different era of history. Naturalistic, materialistic, socio-political, anthropological, psychoanalytic and pragmatic are some of those trends through which atheism was viewed by different thinkers during the diverse epochs of history.

Atheistic tendencies were there from the very beginning among various civilizations. However, at a certain point of the moment in history, particularly after the advent of modernity and the upheaval of enlightenment, atheism intruded on a big scale into Western society. Gradually it became a prominent trend of thought and a popular movement all over the world. As a thought pattern and a way of life of the ordinary people, it started posing a real menace to all the religions, above all to Christianity, because the trends of modernity and enlightenment had their outbreak in Europe. Among the diverse philosophies and practices of atheism, it was communist atheism, as an

organized system both intellectually and practically that lasted longer than other atheistic tendencies. Through the well-organized communist political parties and all the way through the popular movements like trade unions, the communist atheistic tendencies were able to influence and impose a strong impact on ordinary people.

### **The Fall of Militant Atheism**

Militant atheism was considered as the most infringing and propelling dynamism to forcibly remove God and religion from the memory of the human race. The communist revolutions which were successful in different parts of the world were promoting militant atheism to the point of killing the leaders and practitioners of religions.

After ‘Perestroika’ and ‘Glasnost’<sup>1</sup> which brought reforms and caused the collapse of the then Soviet Union during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people around the world thought that these were remarkable moments in the contemporary era to create a new global order in the socio-political, economic and religious arenas. People who feared the elimination of religious beliefs from the world due to the immense growth of the ‘atheistic’ Soviet Union as a world power celebrated these events with a new hope. This shows how atheism, especially the well-organized political atheism, was regarded as a great danger for religious beliefs.

Currently many speak of atheism not as a philosophy or a system or a trend of thought but as a lived reality. After the reforms of ‘Perestroika’ and ‘Glasnost’ and the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, which resulted in the collapse of the communist

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<sup>1</sup> Perestroika is a Russian word that means ‘restructuring’ in English. It is a political reformation within the Communist Party of the USSR during the latter part of 1980s and is commonly associated with the then leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his glasnost policy reform.

Soviet Union, atheism has left out its intellectual and theoretical pedestals. In other words, atheism is seen as a way of life, except being placed as a course unit in the academic curricula. It is no more a theory. It is a lived reality for many people in the world. The core contents of the atheistic tendencies are nowadays replaced by religious indifference and lived atheism, that is, to live a life as if there is no God or any divine realities.

### From ‘Atheism’ to ‘Religious Indifference’

Chris Sidoti, a lawyer and an international human rights consultant from Australia, has shared his reflection about virtually going back for worship to the churches after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. He manifests a dilemma and feels that his presence or absence in the church for worship in the past did not make anything positive or negative to God or to himself. He also feels that the effect made on him in the past by going for worship in the churches physically was nothing (Sidoti, 2020). Such an attitude of a believer shows clearly the difference between atheism and religious indifference. Chris Sidoti is not an atheist. He is a Catholic believer. However, he manifests a type of religious indifference which might have been the result of various reasons.

Religious indifference is not a professed doctrine. Rather, it is a lived and unspoken personal attitude about God and religion. It is characterized by disinterestedness and a type of alienation. According to Edmund Goblot, “Indifference in the religious or philosophical field is the state of mind which does not pass judgment, which does not affirm and does not deny, either out of heedlessness or out of scepticism” (Goblot, 1945). Indifference is a celebrated psychological state of mind. Religious indifference closes all possibilities for God or religion. Modernity and enlightenment have taught human

beings self-reliance and self-sufficiency and therefore the human growth is reckoned without any reference to God or religion.

Religious indifference allows many interpretations and may manifest itself in different forms. There are those who are indifferent to religious beliefs and values but are not indifferent to religion as such. They may take part in religious practices and celebrations without any conviction. For them, religion is one of the choices of consumption and it is good if it is useful. For this reason, some scholars tend to speak of ‘secular religion’ to suit such tendencies. Such a pragmatic approach to religion makes religion a commodity and satisfying the material and social needs of human beings rather than satisfying their spiritual needs. Some are indifferent to all the aspects of religion. For them, religion is merely a human product as some sociologists and psychologists assert. Such an expression of indifference reflects a pessimistic attitude to life.

### **From ‘Talked Atheism’ to ‘Lived Atheism’**

Many would agree that unbelief in God and religion has become very common among the people in the world at present. It is not exaggerating to say that many no longer bother about God and religion. Contemporary human civilization seems not to be wasting its time and energy trying to negate and reject God and religion as in the past.

The ‘talked atheism’ of the past lived in the intellectual discussions and political agendas. Only a few learned elites of the society upheld such atheistic tendencies. However, the ‘talked atheism’ which survived in the discussions of the intellectuals has permeated the ordinary people and has transformed itself into a ‘lived atheism’. The majority of the people are very comfortable in not referring to such realities like God, religion, divine, morality and values. When references are made to such realities, many people manifest a

surprise and ignorance as if they never existed. Humanity, having lost its ‘ultimate goal’ is very busy only with the temporal world in searching for every comfort. This leads humanity to choose a ‘world’ without God. Such negligence is referred to as ‘lived atheism’ which is prevalent among the majority of the people in the world today. The seriousness of this phenomenon may differ from place to place and from culture to culture; however, it has become a universal phenomenon and a weltanschauung. This ‘lived atheism’ is seen by some thinkers as secularism and it is triumphing over the religiosity of the people. Rapid developments in communication and technology have paved the way for the loss of values and growth of consumerism, secularism and materialism. The ‘talked atheism’ as a system and trend of thought do not endanger religions any longer. But the ‘lived atheism’ on a mass scale challenges the world of its values and religiosity.

### Secularism as the ‘Religious Pulse’ of Today’s World

Secularism is a doctrine that denies any validity to the religious dimension, especially in the public sphere and refers to the decline of religious values in society (Gallagher, 1995: 12). The ‘secularisation’ process of modernity has already stripped off all the powers of medieval Christianity. Secularism and secularisation do not refer to the same reality. However, both of them, in practice, have distanced humanity from faith and religious institutions.

Secularism does not admit any validity for religious matters (Pannenberg, 1989: 43). If one can

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sense the ‘religious pulse’ of the current world, it is secularism that is predominating while faith and religion seem to be losing their ground. This shows that the natural tendency of man to be religious

and to be 'sick of God' (Scheler, 1961: 27) has been artificially replaced by secularism and its escorts religious indifference and lived atheism.

### **Conclusion: Reinstating the *Homo religiosus***

*Homo religiosus* is one of the many perspectives to study the human mystery. Naturally, human beings are religious. This means religion is something essentially connected to human nature. Atheistic tendencies made religion something alien to human nature. Such notions prevail in the current world in the forms of religious indifference and lived atheism.

In the contemporary background of globalization, extreme materialistic tendencies together with pragmatic doctrines have taken the upper hand; *Homo religiosus* is substituted by *Homo economicus*. Here capitalism becomes a new religion; money or the capital is the god; business or transaction is the liturgy; the material profit is the satisfaction or religious experience. All these negate the natural tendency of the *Homo religiosus*. Therefore, there is a necessity that *Homo religiosus* has to be reinstated. "The desire for God is written in the human heart because man is created by God and for God, and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness that he never stops searching for..." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #27). Faith and religious practices enable humans to find the meaning of life here on earth and the means to reach their ultimate destiny.

Both believers and non-believers in their own ways seek the meaning of the mystery of life. The human mystery remains puzzled and life's riddle unsolved. But for a believer, it is clear that in the light of Jesus Christ one can find the meaning of the mystery of life and the means to achieve it. The ultimate meaning of being human is hidden in God. This mystery can be understood only through man's submission to God in faith. A believer lives life with a clear set of goals but a non-believer, lacking such goals lives life as it comes. Therefore, a life based on faith can give meaning to human life and give the answer to the fundamental questions regarding the purpose and destiny of mankind.



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