

Effacing the Divine: Kai Nielsen's Philosophical Achievements¹

Maurice Boutin, *McGill University*

Excellence and insight in any field are rare.
Kai Nielsen²

Kai Nielsen's program is a pure philosophical one: to free thinking from all false ideas and representations. 'Wide reflective equilibrium'—a notion Nielsen is proud of—celebrates the dying out of the metaphysical mottos, all in more or less close relationship to God and theistic religion as means par excellence to cultivate naïvety. In line with the saying in Daniel 5:25: "*Mené, Mené, Teqél uPharsîn,*" Nielsen sets for himself the task of measuring, sizing up, judging, and rejecting all metaphysical statements. He lays claim to a "thoroughgoing form of perspectivism", which he regards as uniquely coherent (NR 58.60). He opposes what he calls a "cultureless view of the world," i.e. a "God's-eye perspective," which can only be a "perspectiveless perspective" (NR 59), and thus a glaring contradiction.

I

Nielsen's perspectivism is "incompatible with metaphysical or scientific realism" (NR 58). It has everything to do with "commonsense realism," a view, he claims, which is "perfectly nonmetaphysical" (NR 58.117). Commonsense realism is "a purely terrestrial" view (NR 127–28), it has an "utterly nonmetaphysical conception of objectivity compatible with reflective common sense" (ADT 243; e.g. NR 49; EwG 19–23.47). Nielsen maintains that it is wholly possible, even at times necessary, to "repair and rebuild the ship at sea" (NR 58–59; NR 63; ADT 207.219), a metaphor he declares no longer in use, although he acknowledges that it is a "still illuminating phrase."³ It is something we do regardless.

Nielsen is not against realism, although he is against any exclusive and unique description of the world as the only true one (e.g. NR

60–61). This has nothing to do with relativism. He is also against what he calls “a *lexical* order,” whatever that may be (NR 65); he is against ‘la pensée unique’, not just in the religious sense, but any kind of ‘pensée unique’. He is against “truisms,” moral or otherwise (NR 72); too often so-called ‘natural laws’ are “mere truisms” or even “moral platitudes” (NR 64.65.72).

Nielsen is wary of the basic structure, both emotional and conceptual, of longing for ‘la pensée unique’, which at best mocks “rational activity” (e.g. NR 61). The major impulse here is certainty both as quest and as claim. Nielsen would have us quash “the drive to affirm certainty” (NR 73): “We must be on guard against the irrational heart of rationalism and not set out on the quest for certainty. Philosophers and theologians find it very difficult to absorb that lesson” (EwG 47). Nielsen is also against truth in the singular, e.g. from a “God’s-eye perspective,” as a way to put certainty up front. For him seeking and claiming certainty are the same operations (e.g. NR 66): for whoever seeks it will claim it for oneself sooner or later. The best possible way to avoid this and to accept that one should or at least “can live with uncertainty” (NR 85; EwG 21)—i.e. “without a nostalgia for the absolute” (EwG 84–85)—is to start “with the common sense and scientific beliefs of our time and place” (OTP 176; NR 67–68) and to prevent ourselves from seeking anything else than the one and only thing: how to live the good life and “give meaning to our own lives” (e.g. EwG 85). “It is a cultural accomplishment to be able to abandon the quest for certainty, to live comfortably with fallibilism and, all the same, not to be at all caught up by skepticism, nihilism, or cynicism. And in some of the more fortunate parts of the world we are stumbling along in that direction” (NR 66).

II

A self-proclaimed secularist, does Nielsen really “let philosophy range over” (NR 77) religious considerations? He insists that his is a path that is “reasonably robust” (NR 78). But he recoils from being equally robust when declaring problematical issues simply as incoherent, indeed as really false. The non-existence of God is taken to be a matter of fact. To believe in God’s existence is “surely a genuine scandal” (EwG 100), “a considerable scandal to the intellect” (NR 78), “something very baffling indeed” (NR 49.52). It is to be

“rampant and massively [...] Neanderthal” (NR 14) and “nearly drowned out by the honking of fundamentalist geese” (NR 18); it is “a disgrace that should be a scandal” (NR 14).

Nielsen’s position—however much he would deny it—is itself a matter of belief, of “reasonably sophisticated and independent” (EwG 79) and “logically prior understanding” (EwG 77), and of prejudice. Even if Nielsen is up front about his convictions, he hides beneath allegedly pure “empirical grounds” (e.g. NR 79). Concerning immortality for instance, he states that “What is agreed on all sides, and what is an inconvertible [or better: incontrovertible] fact, is that after a time for all of us our bodies cease to be energized, and left alone they will simply rot, and no matter how they are manipulated, when they are thoroughly in that state—there is no evidence of their ever being reenergized” (NR 78) “as a dead battery gets recharged” (NR 80). Although “we are not like batteries” (NR 78), there is indeed “no more a gap in identity between the human being first energized and then in turn deenergized and then reenergized again, than there is between the live battery, the dead battery, and the battery charged up again. In both cases we maintain bodily continuity” (NR 84). That story of the “dead battery” is meant to ridicule those who do not think the way Nielsen does. What he winds up doing, however, is ridiculing himself. Another example with a similar result is the ‘God-good’ pun. In order to illustrate that “the word God does not have the same meaning as the word good,” Nielsen refers to the following case: “Jane says to Betsy, after Betsy helps an old lady across the street, ‘That was good of you.’” Nielsen comments: “‘That was good of you’ most certainly does not mean ‘that was God of you’” (EwG 57). In the 1990 edition of the same book, Nielsen offers a revised version of this argument: “‘God’ is not equivalent to ‘good’. ‘God spoke to Moses’ makes sense. ‘Good spoke to Moses’ is not even English. ‘The steak is good’ and ‘Knowles’s speech in Parliament was good’ are both standard English sentences, but if ‘God’ replaced ‘good’ as the last word in these sentences we have gibberish” (EwG 76).

The “empirical grounds” on which an “empirical meaning” (e.g. NR 91) can be based is “what we know about the world”—an often repeated phrase—in a “reasonably robust way” (NR 78), allowing for “remaining stubbornly literal” (NR 81.92) despite the *prima facie* implausible that can permit only “those judgments that are not

dependent on factual claims" (EwG 22). In such cases, "all we can finally do, [...] is to say that we have reflected carefully on them, taken the matter to heart, and when we do these are the judgments to which we feel committed. The rationalist hopes to get behind these judgments to something more objective, but his attempts have always failed" (EwG 22). Anyway, Nielsen is convinced that he has the right "understanding of what our situation is" (NR 82; EwG 103). To object to this is to be perhaps logical, but for sure it is not causally coherent (e.g. NR 82); it might be eventually irrational, or even false.

Nielsen's enlightened attitude does promote (e.g. NR 82–83) a sense of generosity aimed at benevolence (e.g. EwG 83). He wants to avoid "a spiritual malaise [...] engendered by a conceptual confusion" (EwG 105), which "arises from muddled thinking" (EwG 106). He carefully distinguishes between persons and their beliefs. He wants to take up the part—one suspects: the place—of "the plain man," as he says (EwG 101), or of the average believer without 'good' philosophical training. All this is with a view to counter the unlikely coherence of belief (NR 86). He complains about the actual situation in which he feels forced to expose himself to "arcane" and "quaint" discussions (NR 93–94). But he is willing to do such a non-philosophical job out of compassion for his fellow human beings devoid of any "good philosophical and scientific training," as he calls it (NR 82; NR 18). This applies as well to those who, presumably wrongly, identify themselves as philosophers, i.e., individuals who are really "touched by modernity" (NR 92). His own impulse as a secularist is—quite understandably—common-sensical, because it renders one capable of making the distinction between causal and mere logical possibilities (NR 80). For causal possibilities are weightier than logical possibilities, as he often reminds us (e.g. NR 80–81). Nielsen assures us that longing for causal explanation is not at all "cosmological-metaphysical" (OTP 14; NR 51.129; EwG 83). The reason offered is that causal explanation is not interpretation; it is 'pure' description. And yet, for Nielsen also—although he is not ready to acknowledge it—"argument cannot stop where [he] wants it to" (NR 88).

According to Nielsen, "What in fact happens is the basis of all our concepts" (NR 93); "in the light of what the facts are" (EwG 98), "Existence is one thing; value is another" (EwG 82). In NR 89–93 he painstakingly offers descriptions of what he means by 'empirical ground'. He does this to show that things do have to "fit with what

we know or at least reasonably believe about the world" (NR 92; EwG 21; ADT 205.207). What is required is to "look at them soberly and nonmetaphorically," and to avoid "ontological puzzlement" (NR 92) that might bring into question Nielsen's emphasis on "plain fact" or "relevant facts" (EwG 98); it might also bring into question a unique, exclusive, coherent, real, "factual" (e.g. EwG 93; NR 68) interpretation, which Nielsen hides behind the claim of 'pure' description. By description is meant an interpretation devoid of any "evaluative force" (EwG 64–65), but also of pretensions of neutrality.

III

Wide reflective equilibrium (= WRE) is for Nielsen the best way to come to terms with the demise of tradition considered as a matter of fact. It entails enough truth to fill gaps caused by problems of being and becoming—for instance, questions regarding the 'meaning of life'. It helps to articulate the realm of obligation as opposed to a realm of being deemed desperately metaphysical and hence won over, as it were, to 'sound' philosophical reflection (e.g. NR 40–41). The motto is: rebuff statements *about* things, which is a metaphysical preoccupation, and foster obligations and self-regulating requirements. There must, Nielsen argues, be "a commitment to the thoroughgoing coherentism of WRE" (ADT 247; ADT 205.218–19) because "We do not want our views and convictions to be just an incoherent jumble" (ADT 238; NR 72).

WRE is a method—better: the method—against 'la pensée unique'. Method, as Nielsen understands it, is a way of "fixing" convictions "without any of the obscurities and *inescapably* ethnocentricizing factors that are unavoidable" for those in need of the religious "skyhook" (NR 69–70). WRE is both a "holistic" and "coherentist" method (NR 41.68–69) to be used fallibilistically and in line with historicism; therefore one has to be fully aware of the relevance of contextuality (e.g. NR 52.60.69.135–98 & NwF). Whereas for WRE coherence remains a 'telos', religion is divested of any coherent 'telos' (e.g. EwG 104–6). This, however, does not mean that WRE should be "a secular source of salvation" (NR 72), a way of "reenchanting the world" (NR 13). For Nielsen, if there is a "purpose *in* life," which WRE readily supports, there is no "over-arching purpose *to* life," as religion would have it (EwG 84–85).

"A legitimate conception of a normatively acceptable order [...] set against the reality of what is now disorder and illegitimacy" (ADT 198), WRE operates and guarantees the promotion of concepts through their transformation into ideas and ideals (e.g. NR 12). It also provides orientation for action and for knowledge, and sets goals and criteria for evaluation. 'Should' and 'ought' are words of hope (e.g. EwG 24) that offer us the possibility "to live a genuinely human life" (NR 18), to attain the appropriate understanding, to "approximate it and recognize that it is ideally the standpoint from which we should make" our judgments (NR 24; NR 115). Here as well—and not only in tradition(s) whose demise is heralded—reality is to be complemented by a self-created world. Nielsen is the man of a desire whose proper goal is hope (e.g. NR 12.17.53) above and beyond any "disenchantment of the world" fueled by the bankruptcy of the idea of progress (NR 47). WRE casts a wider net than that (e.g. ADT 199.235.243). It provides models (ADT 214) erected at times with such high standards that they themselves can never be met and have therefore to be declared as incoherent, illusory, and finally, false.

All this is particularly relevant to religion. Nielsen also is ready to use "strict criteria" for 'being religious' (e.g. NR 72; EwG 23–24.60), placing the 'burden of proof' on the believer. For him, to be religious is to abide by principles, ahistorically and without context; of course, this is not the case with so-called secularists. Nielsen has a 'pure' and indeed very high view of religion. Whereas the task for Kant was to get closer to an unattainable ideal, Nielsen articulates a pure vision of religion to rid society of it. After all, religion is responsible for a good amount of the world's evils, past and present (e.g. NR 18). Such idealization (e.g. NR 40–43) is not merely a way for Nielsen to free religion of its shortcomings; it goes to the heart of his rejection of religion. In his program, such words as 'atheism' and 'metaphysics' function like pistons: the piston of 'atheism' constantly pushes the piston of 'metaphysics', all the way down to the 'categorical imperative' of the secularist (NR 18.56–76). To be "thoroughly naturalistic" (NR 35), to "keep an anthropological perspective in mind" (EwG 100), remains throughout the ideal.

Discussions on WRE remind one of a word by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In *Hyperion*, a character called "the young Greek" writes to his friend: "A god when s/he dreams, human being is a beggar when s/he thinks."⁴ Nielsen would certainly agree to say that this

Hölderlin statement does apply to all of us. Thomas Aquinas, too, knew this very well, provided we do not understand him as onesidedly emphasizing the 'absolute' will of God. Actually it would be better to take a second (or first?) look at Aquinas' epistemology, for instance at the following statement: "We cannot grasp what God is, but what God is not, and how every other being and thing relates to God."⁵ Is Nielsen's "reflective equilibrium" really "wide" enough to include this? Nielsen might react by saying that here also, "we have gibberish," as he said in his revamped example of the 'God-good' pun (EwG 76). Yet this would be a 'cheap' answer. It simply won't do.

IV

There's considerable repetition in Nielsen's arguments and use of examples. One has the same old thing all over again, even though he allows himself "to be paradoxical, for a moment" (NR 124; NR 34; EwG 108). Deemed a highly effective tool, albeit eventually at once "excessively obscure" and "yet strangely challenging" (EwG 67), paradox is part of the attempt "to 'get behind' what are in this life-world our most firmly fixed considered judgments or convictions given to us in our traditions" (ADT 233). As such paradox is used against those allegedly fond of "closed questions;" so-called "Christian absolutists" (EwG 150–52.157) receive honored mention for being "on a Quixotic and morally irresponsible quest for moral certainty and purity" (EwG 152; e.g. EwG 61.95; NR 67). Nielsen, who proclaims himself a consequentialist (EwG 148–54), is, of course, exempt from this since the "consequentialist argument appears at least to be very strong" (EwG 152; EwG 149; NR 19) and seems to enjoy "strong moral ground" (EwG 154).

Nielsen secures for himself the right to be "iffy," as he calls it, whenever he pleases (e.g. EwG 148–49.153–54; NR 48.88). If one cannot shoulder the "burden of proof" (e.g. EwG 39.80–82.101.152; NR 52), then one ought to invite others to do so. On that basis one can appeal to others for the right to argue the way one does (e.g. EwG 157–58). A consequentialist has that right, because for the consequentialist the consequences are the principles, and no genuine principle can be opposed to consequences (EwG 152–53.162). The kind of consequentialism, for which Nielsen is prone to argue, "provides," in his estimation, "so persuasive 'a theoretical basis for common

morality that when it contradicts some moral intuition, it is natural to suspect that intuition, not theory, is corrupt" (EwG 154; EwG 152). When a theory strives to make sure that it is immune against negation, it paradoxically predisposes itself to conformism, the infamous tactic of 'political correctness'.

Nielsen wants to secure for himself the possibility that the question before him is "a genuine question" (NR 115), particularly when he thinks he doesn't have one (e.g. NR 126.51–52). He does not want to be misled by questions he doesn't have control over (e.g. NR 34.106.116; EwG 61–62). A question, he surmises, must be "intelligibly" asked, i.e., based on "some criterion" (NR 115); a question has to be tailored by the philosopher (e.g. NR 127; EwG 80–81), if he—as a consequentialist—wants to bring his non-consequentialist partner to his "home court" (EwG 157). Contrary to what he asserts, Nielsen does not always take language "as it comes" (NR 52; but e.g. EwG 61). Not only does he set the conditions for the validity of his own argumentation (e.g. EwG 57), he also disallows the same right to others (e.g. NR 128). For him, this is not in the least an expression of "arrogance" (EwG 86), even though he is reluctant to recognize that others' reasons really are their reasons, and not just distorted forms of what would count as reasons for him. If "We need not be forced to religion, against our reason" (NR 13), presumably this should apply to atheism as well. Nielsen's atheism presents itself as a hymn to freedom: the freedom to choose the moment when one is forced to abdicate freedom under an obligation deemed unavoidable and absolute. Thus atheism consists in affirming that theoretically and ideally an obligation exists that jeopardizes freedom. It also consists in affirming that the time and the modality of such surrender is a free act of the person who complies with that obligation.

Nielsen's reference to an error-theory of religion (e.g. NR 40–43.48) demands an error-theory of atheism as well, which would turn Nielsen's familiar argument around. If—as Nielsen states—"There is no *essence* of religion, *essence* of theism" (NR 46), then surely there is no essence of atheism either. Yet, the fact that "naturalistic explanations are, of course, incompatible with religious belief" (NR 49)—"much of which, in some way or other, is theistic belief" (NR 34)—does not make them suddenly compatible with human life; otherwise, "word-magic" (NR 49; EwG 61), a game Nielsen reserves for the theist, would be the favorite game of the atheist as well. Like

the theism he desperately tries to oppose, Nielsen's atheism cannot live up to the tall order to which he sets it.

V

Nielsen is against "free-spinning wheels that turn no machinery and have little significance, except sometimes as encumbrances, to moral and political life" (NR 70; EwG 18). He boasts of being terribly far-reaching when necessary. He wants to be at bottom "genuinely anthropological" (NR 67). He is convinced that religious people do not think properly, that they are fond of "nonstarters" (NR 67), and he says he is ready to respect that. This seems to be a highly laudable attitude, but it is a convenient way to secure his negative stance toward religion while remaining faithful to his own understanding of it.

For Nielsen, it probably does not make much sense to say that we are "beyond theism" (NR 70). He pays this at best lip service, otherwise he would have to acknowledge that we might be beyond atheism as well. And by no means will he admit to this either, since he chose the opposition between theism and atheism as constitutive of his own philosophical grammar and personal agenda. His atheism is a fusion of secularism, science and social discontent. Nielsen stresses the argument of irreligion at the expense of the argument of religion. By doing so he attempts to unify the mind by externalizing the anti-creative element in religion, as he sees it. The preacher does similarly by demolishing imaginary atheists with the argument of design. Hers is the quest for a verbal 'coup de grâce', an irrefutable refutation based on 'furor teleologicus'. The question that "forces itself on us" is "whether it is *desirable* to hope that religion will gradually whither away" (NR 47; NR 17). Nielsen seeks to implement such a desire by using philosophy in order to denounce and reject what he calls "an incoherent something we know not what" (NR 34.40). He reserves for himself the right—more: the duty—to do so. For sure, atheism is no more detrimental to thinking than theism, since theism also uses philosophy for its own purposes and defense.

To judge religion or irreligion according to what in it has a so-called rationalized element is to engage in generalizations that aim to escape possible refutation by being vast enough to contain the refutation, or vaporous enough to elude it. The grandeur of generality—even if expressed in terms of wide reflective equilibrium—is not any

better than chatting about infinity. Conducting oneself less rhetorically would introduce the notion of self-conflict as a theme. It's a more perilous theme but ultimately more rewarding. To take a stance of self-conflict involves the following dilemma: is it possible to be critical without being at once apologetical? Can one reject the attempt to use philosophy for theistic purposes and not be at once a self-proclaimed missionary of atheism? Should the task of philosophy be to seek sanctuary in some impossible neutrality? If neutrality is possible only as illusion, doesn't involvement in the theism-atheism debate spawn its own set of illusions fueled by the prejudices they both generate and cultivate against one another in reciprocal suspicion and denunciation? Can one continue to set the Gospel against the Gulag, or set Marx and all 'sound' naturalisms against the Inquisition, and really hope to achieve something 'sound' philosophically?

That kind of hope was abandoned in the 1960's as an outcome of intense Christian-Marxist dialogues. Be that as it may, Nielsen continues to think that the "only game in town"—an expression he is fond of (e.g. NR 20.21; EwG 24.149)—capable of debunking what he calls the "metaphysical horse" (NR 20) is the theism-atheism game—a game he plays faithfully and whose repetition amounts to some kind of obsession under a philosophical guise. He does not see that this also might well be an "absurd game" (EwG 18); he does not see that that game is over and that one can only dream of getting a 'freebie', that we really "have better things to do than to dwell on such idle wishes" (NR 101) and that it is the theism-atheism horse tandem that is to be put "out to pasture" (NR 21).

Theism and atheism are rival worldviews, mutually inconsistent, with neither one capable of refuting the other or seriously undermining it. Nielsen seems to concede this when he says that "Scientific naturalism and theistic metaphysics take in each other's dirty linen" (NR 60). Such scientific naturalism Nielsen equates with "scientific realism" that makes "something like a religion, or at least an ideology, out of the natural sciences," and he suggests therefore that we call it "scientistic naturalism" and "ersatz religion." Nielsen's naturalism, on the other hand, purports to be social-contextual-historicist, and not only nonmetaphysical, but moreover atheistic: "In fine *Naturalism and Religion* seeks clearly to articulate and render plausible naturalism and, what ineluctably goes with it, atheism" (NR 13; NR 14.30). This is why Nielsen articulates it with an eye on theism "whose claims are so

problematical as to be arguably incoherent or at least best set aside as yielding very little, if anything, in the way of understanding" (NR 60). Nielsen's atheistic naturalism too is ineluctably caught up in the theism-atheism game.

Nielsen knows very well how to engage the zeal of theism; he does it with equal, if not greater, zeal. If the religion *qua* theism (NR 34) he is against is only "little better than superstition" (NR 15), can one say the same about his atheism without falling into "intellectual and moral disgrace" (NR 14)? Nielsen has to awake from his atheistic dream. He should do so not to fall into the theistic dream, but rather to concentrate on how to keep cognitive competition alive, a task difficult to achieve also for the one who is comfortable in the two-dimensional theism-atheism game. French philosopher Henri Duméry warned against such a game in 1978 by saying:

In our culture theism and atheism are hostile siblings. Their polemics are constant, feeding off one another. What one asserts, the other contradicts. Focused on their quarrel, as they are, they hardly consider renewing the issue. The quarrel continues based on old ideas and dated methods. It would last much longer if the issue didn't change. And yet the issue does change and the problem is posed differently. This change is among the most significant in our age, the consequences incalculable. [...] Self-assured theism is waning. Let's wager that atheism, too, will become less euphoric. In this second half of the twentieth century, it is not religion that mutters, and irreligion that speaks out clearly. It is Western man, either believer or unbeliever, who behaves and speaks differently, who despairs of correcting one ideology with a better one, and who would rather do away with all ideology. Is this possible? That's the question, the only question. Perhaps it will soon be added to the already long list of *insoluble* questions."⁶

Notes

1. This paper, given at the Montreal Conference in Honor of Kai Nielsen (Concordia University, October 3-4, 2003), was turned down by the editor of the proceedings after consultation with Nielsen and the publisher, Prometheus Books. The paper was probably deemed inappropriate because it oversteps the boundary of political correctness that usually accompanies such events. Such a decision speaks to Nielsen's unwillingness to engage seriously a critique of his "philosophical achievements". Missionaries of atheism—at least the sort

epitomized by Nielsen—are strangely becoming apathetic when challenged; they do not hesitate, then, to take refuge in hideouts provided by some ‘Holy Office’ of modern atheism embodied by Prometheus Books. Nielsen’s action demonstrates a truism of his own making, recounted in the epigraph: “Excellence and insight in any field are rare.”—I wish to thank Dr. Jim Kanaris for his insightful suggestions.

2. NR 105.—The abbreviations used refer to the following writings by Kai Nielsen:

ADT = *After the Demise of the Tradition: Rorty, Critical Theory, and the Fate of Philosophy*. Boulder/San Francisco/Oxford: Westview, 1991, x + 278 p.

EwG = *Ethics without God*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990, 207 p.; revised edition of the first publication in 1973, 103 p.

NR = *Naturalism and Religion*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001, 506 p.

NwF = *Naturalism without Foundations*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996, 607 p.

OTP = *On Transforming Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry*. Boulder & Oxford: Westview Press, 1995, xiv + 289 p.

3. Ciarán Benson uses it in *The Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001, xv + 263 p.), p. 56. – The metaphor was coined by Viennese philosopher and economist Otto Neurath (1882-1945): “We are like sailors obliged to repair our ship at sea without being able to rebuild it at a dockyard with better parts.”

4. “O ein Gott ist der Mensch, wenn er träumt, ein Bettler, wenn er nachdenkt” (F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, part II, 92).

5. “Non enim de Deo capere possumus quid est, sed quid non est, et qualiter alia se habeant ad ipsum” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.30).

6. “Dans notre culture, théisme et athéisme sont des frères ennemis. La polémique ne cesse pas entre eux, parce qu’ils se nourrissent l’un de l’autre. Ce que l’un affirme, l’autre le nie. Mais tout à leur dispute, ils ne songent guère à renouveler le problème. La querelle continue sur de vieilles idées, avec de vieilles méthodes. Elle durerait longtemps si la question ne changeait pas comme question. Or voici qu’elle change et que le problème se pose autrement. Cette modification est l’une des plus significatives de notre époque. Les conséquences en sont incalculables. [...] Le théisme d’auto-complaisance régresse. Parions qu’à son tour l’athéisme sera moins euphorique. En cette seconde moitié du vingtième siècle, ce n’est pas la religion qui bredouille et l’irréligion qui parle haut et clair. C’est l’homme occidental, qu’il soit croyant ou incrédule, qui change d’attitude et de langage. Il renonce à corriger une

idéologie par une idéologie meilleure. Il voudrait sortir de toute idéologie. Le peut-on? La question est là, elle n'est que là. Mais peut-être va-t-elle rejoindre aussitôt la liste déjà longue des *insolubilia*" (H. Duméry, Art. "Dieu – 5: Par-delà théisme et athéisme": *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol. 5. Paris: 1978, 13th ed., 586–87). – See also Bruno Latour, « La comédie des erreurs » : journal *La Recherche Hors Série* 14 (Jan.–March 2004): 82–85. No 14 (98 pages) is a special issue on « Dieu, la science et la religion ».