Postface

From Atheists to Nones: An Updated Perspective

On the 8th of June 1794 (the 20th of Prairial according to the calendar of the French Revolution, Pentecost Sunday by the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar), at Les Tuileries, in Paris, Maximilien de Robespierre celebrated the “Festival of the Supreme Being” (symbolized by a tree) condemning atheism, embodied in a straw effigy and burnt along with others representing Ambition, Selfishness and False Modesty. At the same time, homage was paid to an incombustible statue indicating Wisdom. The Hymn to the Supreme Being, composed by the poet Thédore Desorgues and set to music by François-Joseph Gossec, was sung. The first article of the new revolutionary catechism, approved on the 7th of May (18th of Floréal) 1794, recognised “the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul”. Robespierre, on that occasion, said that “the idea of a Supreme Being and of the immortality of the soul acts as a constant reminder of justice” (Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre, Société des études robespierristes, Paris, 1961–1967, x, pp. 443–462). The republican celebrations replaced Catholic feast days, the cult of the Supreme Being the atheist one of Reason.
It was precisely upon the topic of the immortality of the soul, elicited by Robespierre, that a few decades later Ludwig Feuerbach dwelt, in a juvenile text of his dated 1830 *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* (Thoughts on Death and Immortality), denying immortality (and, as a result, losing his university teaching post). Like Auguste Comte, his contemporary, he envisaged a cult of humanity, that is, a “Religion of Humanity” whereby, due precisely to atheism, humanity itself became the object of a meta-individual kind of veneration, leading to the disappearance of Christianity (*On Philosophy and Christianity*, 1839), the essence of which (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841) was believed to consist in a simple projection of man upon God. In short, humanism became a form of atheism.

The topic was resumed quite some time later and involved a series of theological debates, worthy of considerable attention and which, especially in Germany, led to fecund exchanges between some theologians/philosophers (Bultmann, Barth, Moltmann, Ratzinger) and a limited number of sociologists (Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas). These discussions are reported, in part, in an invaluable little volume called *Atheismus in der Christenheit* (Atheism in Christianity), Ausaat Verlag, Wuppertal, vol. 1, 1960, 1970, by theologian-philosopher-sociologist Klaus Bockmüll. For a more thorough discussion of this issue, M.J. Buckley’s *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1987, is very helpful.

The Catholic Church too, among others, made an effort to address its inadequate knowledge of atheism. It did so, above all, by setting up a Secretariat for Non-Believers (later abolished) which, in 1969, organized, in collaboration with the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation, an international symposium on belief (in actual fact, on non-belief, as the proceedings testify), which remains a one-off episode in the history of the sociology of religion seeing that it managed to bring together scholars of the calibre of Bellah, Cox, Daniélou, Glock, Luckmann, Marty, O’ Dea, Parsons, Wilson; the proceedings by R. Caporale and A. Grumelli (eds.) were published as *The Culture of Unbelief*, by the University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971. A certain degree of continuity consisted in a symposium held at the Pontificia Università Urbaniana (Poticfical Urbanian University) on the 13th and 14th October 1978, the papers of which were published in *Diagnosi dell’ateismo contemporaneo* (Diagnoses of Contemporary Atheism), Urbaniana University Press-Roma, Paideia Editrice-Brescia, 1980. It was precisely in 1980 that the Istituto Superiore per lo Studio dell’Ateismo (Higher Institute for Studies of Atheism), a section of the Urbanian University, organized another international congress; in this case, too, the participants were illustrious: Cottier, Frossard, Ferrarotti, Kuhlmann, Miccoli, Moltmann, Rahner, among others: the volume containing the proceedings consists in 786