

# **Archbishop Lori's Talk - "Your Face, Lord, Do I Seek (Ps. 27:8): Reflections on Contemporary Atheism and Belief"**

*"Your Face, Lord, Do I Seek (Ps. 27:8): Reflections on Contemporary Atheism and Belief"*

*Thomistic Days, Institute of the Incarnate Word*

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Not long ago, the Vocations Director and I met with a group of potential seminarians at the home of a parishioner in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. After several of us spoke about our callings to become priests, we opened the floor for questions from the participants. Some of the young men had questions about the daily life of a priest and others wondered what seminary formation would be like. But one young man had a more searching question: "How do you respond to people who say they don't believe in God?" The Vocations Director said, "That's a question for the Archbishop!"

I did my best to respond to the young man's earnest question but I must admit I did not have my "elevator speech" ready, that short summary designed to inform and convince others of a value proposition in under a minute. Instead, my answer rambled and I even ended up amending it. Hearing this, you're probably sorry you invited me today.

This afternoon I don't have to craft a thirty second elevator speech but I have been asked to deal with the vast topic of atheism in forty-five minutes. I can do that adequately but I can at least offer you some reflections so that you can write your own "elevator speech" - your own succinct and convincing summary designed to help unbelievers to seek and find the face of God. Consider this talk, then, "a pastor's introduction" to the contemporary problem of atheism and unbelief, beginning with my own introduction to the topic many years ago.

I was a freshman in high school, when on April 8, 1966, the cover of *Time Magazine* was emblazoned with the words, "Is God Dead?" At the time, a fair number of people thought that this was the case. In the 60's more than a few people seemed to be concluding either that God did not exist or that nothing could be known of God's existence or that belief in God and knowledge of God really no longer mattered.

Almost everyone in our neighborhood thought this state of affairs was scandalous and the sermon delivered by the pastor on the following Sunday strongly condemned all forms of atheism. Little did I know, however, that this storm had been brewing for quite a while. At the time I knew nothing of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). He wrote of a madman who lit a lamp one sunny morning and ran into the market place crying out, 'I seek God! I seek God!' . . . and as Nietzsche's story continues, the madman screams, 'We have killed him, you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how could we do this? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?' And as the story concludes the madman makes his way into empty churches – the empty churches of Europe – and sings his *requiem aeternam deo*.<sup>[1]</sup> Nietzsche's philosophy was to find tragic resonance in Nazi Germany but also continues to exert influence upon our culture to this day.

So too, as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, I knew nothing of John Paul Sartre whose version of existentialism saw the human person "as absolute and unlimited *freedom*..." as the one who "must seek his own way by himself alone, without God and without any norms" ...Ultimately, his philosophy dissolves into absurdity<sup>[2]</sup> even as much of contemporary philosophy (though not all of it) sees no open path to the Absolute.

More familiar to me was the name of Karl Marx (1818-1883) because of his connection to Communism and the Soviet Empire. His was a materialistic philosophy that saw history as a long protracted struggle between the ruling class and the people, between those who have power and the means of production and those who do not have access to these things. God was accorded no place in this materialist understanding of history; he famously described religion as "the opium of the people" and said that its influence should be removed from society, as indeed happened in many Communist countries. As a result, the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced many martyrs.

Equally familiar to me was the name of Sigmund Freud the putative father of modern psychology and no friend of theistic belief. As the Supreme Knight, Carl Anderson, succinctly observed, “Freud called religion an illusion, even a ‘universal obsessional neurosis’ – attributing to religion something akin to addictive and hallucinogenic properties.”[3] Thus, the foundations of modern atheism go back a long way. Already in his lifetime John Henry Newman could see atheism taking hold of culture[4] and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it found a firm foothold in American culture. No wonder that the drama of humanistic atheism was a central concern during the II Vatican Council in its landmark 1965 document, *Gaudium et Spes* where it describes personal and systematic atheism and maps out the Church’s response to this phenomenon.[5]

Unfortunately that hold has intensified in recent years. While in 2014 only 3.1% of the U.S. population self-identified as atheists and only 4% self-identified as agnostics, nearly 22.4% of the population is religiously unaffiliated[6]. A goodly number of the unaffiliated say they are “spiritual but not religious” while others tend more to be skeptical not only about religion but also about the importance of God in everyday life. This trend is particularly acute among millennials and presents the Church in the United States with a tremendous challenge.

During my high school years and in minor seminary, my professors taught the classical proofs for the existence of God. In my early exposure to Thomistic thought, these proofs seemed so rational, logical, and irrefutable that I could not imagine how anyone would conclude that God does not exist. After all, they were drawn not from the Bible or Church teaching but rather from the writings of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. For example, why couldn’t everyone see that God is the Unmoved Mover? Loving such a God, I admitted, might be a little more difficult, but in my view, the proofs were unassailable, beyond criticism, and sufficient unto themselves. Or so I thought.

In my naïveté the proofs for the existence of God were a matter of logic. But of course, it’s much more complicated than that. Is it a metaphysical question? Is it an epistemological question? A moral question? Yes, it is all of those and more but for so many of our contemporaries, it’s not about the fundamental nature of being or the theory of knowing or the moral good. No, it’s simply this: God has been replaced by

other things. Many don't seem to care about God and the things of God. For one thing, religion and science are deemed incompatible. This is taken for granted not only by the scientific community itself but also by many young people, including many Catholic young people. A recent report by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate concludes that "...an increasingly popular narrative claims that science and religion are largely incompatible and perhaps mutually exclusive." [7] (The survey results for Catholics was better than those for the non-affiliated but the numbers nonetheless seem to be headed in the wrong direction).

Many intellectuals and media elites are openly dismissive of religion, for example, ABC's talk show host, Joy Behar, recently offered a popularized version of Freud's view when she said that those who think they converse with God are mentally ill. Sometimes doctors, scientists, professors, and people in the media tell me how hard it is today to be a believer in their chosen professions. Many other people, immersed as they are in the world of technology, are excited, even consumed by its seemingly endless capacity to collect untold data, to master the world, and to push back boundaries, but in the process to exclude religious faith and God. For still others, atheism is a system of belief [8] and like a religion to be spread. For example, Ron Reagan, the son of the late President, is an avowed atheist and a spokesperson for the Freedom from Religion Foundation. He brashly proclaims that he is not at all concerned about burning in hell. Yet, is not "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10)?

Others are not as surefooted as Ron Reagan and the Foundation he represents. Even for some avowed atheists, the inability to believe is a source of pain. Those who claim to be agnostic must coexist with their own decision to bracket questions of ultimate meaning and destiny. Such an abdication gives rise to what one author called "working despair" [9] found in the hearts of many people who raise families, work hard, and pay taxes and it manifests itself in anger, broken relationships, and existential loneliness.

In addition to the cultural currents in which so many are swept up, there are perennial reasons why people find it difficult to believe or fall into unbelief.

One is suffering – personal suffering, the suffering of family, friends, and loved ones,

suffering on a more massive scale due to natural disasters or human atrocities. Add to that, “the enigma of death”[10], especially when life is cut short in acts of meaningless violence such as the shootings in schools. Many interpret human suffering to mean that life is meaningless, even absurd, and if God exists (they say), he surely doesn’t care very much about us. In *Salvifici Doloris* St. John Paul II writes that “the daily experience of suffering – in one’s own life and in the lives of others – and the array of facts which seem inexplicable to reason are enough to ensure that a question as dramatic as the question of meaning cannot be avoided.”[11] A few avowed atheists do not exclude the possibility of finding meaning in suffering. Nietzsche said, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in suffering” whereas Christopher Hitchens said he wished he could find some meaning in it.[12]

And let us not conclude this section without assuming some of the blame ourselves; we need to admit the role of scandal in the drama of unbelief. Michael Buckley writes that “the forgiveness of sins engages the recognition of evil, of some conscious and chosen absence of the goodness of God.”[13] Because sin is the conscious decision to exclude God in some way from our intentions, decisions, and actions, bad example, especially the notoriously bad example of scandal contributes to people’s loss of faith in the Church and in God. So too, we need to admit the frailty of our own faith, especially those of us who are ordained, consecrated, and in ministry. We like to think that we live, pray, and serve only for the glory of God but if we discern what is in our hearts, we find a host of ulterior motives, especially the winning of Pharisaical praise or other ungodly props such as ambition. Pope Francis calls this “spiritual worldliness” and it is not only a danger to us but it also contributes to the climate of unbelief that is all around us. For, as Bousset famously observes: “There is an atheism concealed in all hearts, which is diffused in all our actions; God counts for nothing.”[14] The missionary conversion to which Pope Francis calls us is first and foremost the purification of our hearts from this latent atheism.

...All of which brings me back to our need for an “elevator speech”, a penetrating but succinct response to avowed, practical, or systematic atheism which seems to be making headway in the hearts of many people and in our culture. I will not write your “elevator speech”; you have to write your own and it must flow from your own prayer and reflection. What I will attempt to suggest are the elements of that

speech, its foundations and its building blocks. I offer this as perhaps a device for organizing and putting to good use the wisdom and learning of the speakers who have preceded me to this podium.

## **#1. The One Necessary Thing: Discipleship**

Let me begin with what is most foundational, the one necessary thing, if you will, namely, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, our closeness to God in prayer, a faith that is alive, joyful, grateful—full of praise and adoration, a prayerful receptivity of that grace by which we are continually consecrated to God such that our lives become a gift to God and to others, a readiness to pick up our cross daily, to cheerfully accept hardship and suffering, a hope that shapes our hearts according to the designs of Christ's loving heart, a hope that prompts us to live differently.[15]

We must demonstrate by our lives that belief in God, far from diminishing our humanity opens it out and reveals its true dignity; far from making us unconcerned about human need and the state of our world makes us more attentive to it and more generous in serving; and far from diminishing our reason, gives it its proper horizon.[16] Indeed, human dignity is most fully revealed in Christ, the Son of God made man, for, as the II Vatican Council has so memorably taught, in assuming (not absorbing) our humanity, the Incarnate Son of God revealed the Father's love and in doing so revealed thereby our dignity in the eyes of God.[17] With our hearts, souls, minds, and energy focused in one direction, namely, on the mystery of Christ, the Word made flesh.[18]

What's more, as St. John Paul II taught, "The true key-point, which challenges every philosophy, is Jesus Christ's death on the Cross . . . ." He goes on to say: "The wisdom of the Cross, therefore, breaks free of all cultural limitations which seek to contain it and insists upon an openness to the universality of the truth which it bears." [19] The Cross corresponds to the most urgent questions of humanity about the enigma of death and the apparent senselessness of suffering, questions that we do not necessarily answer in the abstract but rather by our own embrace of the Cross however it asserts itself in our lives.

As baptized Christians living consecrated life and priesthood, as disciples of the Lord called to spread the Gospel, let us never forget this one necessary thing. The witness

of our lives, entirely freed from the grip of the Evil One, entirely possessed by the One who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) is the most important factor in breaking down unbelief; for, in our culture, especially among the young, there remains a thirst for authenticity couched sometimes in suspicion that people like you and me are not authentic. Thus we must always be formed intellectually by the Truth; we must choose the Good; be possessed by the Beauty; seek the coherence and unity of a well-integrated life.

## **#2. The Role of Friendship in Seeking Truth**

One of the great marks of contemporary life is isolation. We are knitted ever more closely together through technology and we like to talk a lot about the global village, yet that same technology can also substitute for interpersonal relationships. People are wed to their mobile devices and their interaction is on the social media meanwhile true, lasting, and virtuous friendships are often in short supply. As a result, one palpable hunger among millennials, or so I’m told, is for community and among some there is a renewed desire to engage in some form of service.

This is a characteristic to build upon, for seeking the truth is not a solitary occupation, as the life of St. John Paul II illustrates. Reflecting his own journey to truth and love, he would later write: “Human beings are not made to live alone . . .” – and again – “In believing we entrust ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people . . .” “...the truths sought in this interpersonal relationship are not primarily empirical or philosophical. Rather, what is sought is the truth of the person— what the person is and what the person reveals from deep within . . . .”[20]

## **#3. The Church’s Defense of Reason**

Second, while it may be true that many of our contemporaries simply don’t seem to care about the question of whether or not God exists or about the question of whether or not they can know God in a meaningful way – we who are believers, disciples, and evangelizers cannot afford to ignore the questions at the root of contemporary atheism and agnosticism. For the “atheism or disbelief [that] runs like a river through much of ordinary consciousness”[21] is deep and if we are to evangelize not only individuals but indeed our culture, then we must understand not only what is driving contemporary atheism but we must also be ready to give

everyone a reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15).

This requires that we give some thought to the Church's defense of reason and the capacity of reason, albeit limited and wounded by sin, to arrive at truth. There is a universal desire to know, to learn, to discover, to understand. Further, of all creatures, the human person is the only one who has self-knowledge, and who can know in a self-reflective way. Apprehending reality all around us, taking it in, analyzing and judging it, making it the basis for decisions – this universal human experience is critical to the discovery of the spiritual dimension, indeed the core of the human person.[22] Further, the truth that people instinctively search for is not only empirical truth gained through science and technology but also an adequate basis for their lives – not doubt, uncertainty or deceit but a deeper truth about themselves and the purpose of their lives.[23] Real people are interested not only in empirical data and its applications nor ultimately are they completely absorbed by technology, nor is the human mind and heart ultimately satisfied by philosophical knowledge. At some level they want to know if love is real and when they doubt the reality of love, they are saddened in their depths. This working despair, the gaping inward hole, unfillable by human achievement, indicates that we are made for more, that we are oriented toward transcendence. Even if we evade or deny the demands which the truth places upon us, there is an inward longing for a truth that is both universal and absolute.

#### **#4. The Image of God and Nostalgia for God**

For life to have meaning, for persons to have communion with one another, for human societies of any sort – from families to nations – to have cohesion, there must be universal truths that embody fundamental human values and virtues. But beyond that, “. . . people seek an absolute which might give meaning to all their searching – a meaning and an answer – something ultimate – which might serve as the ground of all things.”[24] “In other words, [the Pope adds] they seek a final explanation, a supreme value, which refers to nothing beyond itself and which puts an end to all questioning.”[25]

This search for truth and meaning is indicative of something even deeper. It speaks to the desire of God implanted deeply in the human heart. Again, to quote St. John



Paul II: “. . . in the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God.”[26] This is because we bear in us the image and likeness of God, which creates in us a longing that is ultimately sated only by divine truth and love. Thus St. Anselm said, “Forget, then, your greatness and confess your dependence. Reflect upon the splendor you bear within you.” So also, St. John Chrysostom: “Do not neglect the light that is given to you, but do not attribute the source to yourself.” And finally, St. Augustine: “Try to discover your reality as a mirror and as an image. Know yourself by knowing God. Begin, as far as possible for a mortal, to contemplate his Face in recollection.”[27]

Whether or not the atheist or agnostic is prepared to admit any of this is, of course, another question but for us it is a motive to love the unbeliever, to acknowledge his or her dignity, & to recognize that he or she is called to friendship with God just as surely as we are. It is also to recognize that natural virtue and goodness are possible for unbelievers, eventually to be weighed on the scales of God’s mercy and love.[28]

## **#5. Proofs for God’s Existence**

All of which lays the foundations for the classic demonstrations of God’s existence, proofs with which I know you are already familiar. When it comes to proving the existence of God, however, the Church teaches us to have confidence in human reason but not to take pride in it. For reason can indeed establish the existence of God but nonetheless can only see him “as in a mirror darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). St. Thomas says, “To know God exists in a certain and common and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is the happiness of man.”[29]

Thus in “proving” the existence of God, we are not substituting our reasoning for Revelation nor are we apprehending God as he really is, as if he could be classified in a genus. As Etienne Gilson has warned, “If God were in a genus, something would have to be anterior to him . . . .” So too Gilson warns against abstract notions of being and essence with God who is prior to even the most universal and all-embracing of concepts.[30] Similarly, when the proofs for God’s existence speak of causality, they do not mean the sort of causality that can be observed in a laboratory or the sort of causality that can be ascribed to contingent creatures, as did Kant. To try to “entrap” God in our categories and causality is to make him the projection of

our wishes, as Ludwig Feuerbach charges. Rather, our reason is a path by which our humanity reaches up towards God. Reason can indeed attain *analogical* knowledge of God's existence and attributes, (the analogy of being and the analogy of faith working in complementary ways). In this way, the proofs fulfill their main function which is to clear away obstacles to belief and to demonstrate to reason why belief is not irrational. Understood in this way, these proofs remain perennially valid and you should definitely include them in your "elevator speech"

Alas, my protracted "elevator speech" has taken us up the Empire State building and back down many times! Let me conclude by thanking you, the seminarians, brothers, and priests of the Incarnate Word and the Sisters Servants of the Lord and of the Virgin of Matera for the courage, intelligence, dedication, and love with which you evangelize. Part of evangelizing is giving people motive to believe. Part of it is removing excuses for not believing. But most of all it's manifesting the joy of the Gospel which you do with overflowing generosity.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you and thanks for listening. God bless you and keep you always in his love.

**[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, quoted in Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *What Do You Seek?* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016, 92-93.**

**[2] Walter Brugger and Kenneth Baker, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "Existential Philosophy" Spokane: Spokane University Press, 1972, 133.**

**[3] Carl A. Anderson, "Christianity on Trial," Naples, Fla.: *Ave Maria Law Review*, Vol. 9:2, 2011, 208.**

**[4] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967, 216-219.**

**[5] See Documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 19-21. See also Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, trans. by Marc Sebanc, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995, where the author sets up the conflict of thinkers such as Nietzsche with Kierkegaard and Comte with Christianity as a drama that achieves resolution through Fyodor Dostoevski, the Russian Orthodox writer, who offers the teachings of Jesus Christ as a**

response the alienation and suffering of contemporary culture.

[6] *America's Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015.

[7] *The CARA Report*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, Vol. 23, No. 3, Winter 2018. The attitudes of Catholics track those of other Christians but still vary widely in some respects with the views of the non-affiliated.

[8] See Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967 and *Deny and Disclosing God*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004 on the rise of modern atheism as a kind of philosophy of life.

[9] Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *op. cit.*, 95.

[10] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 18.

[11] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 11 February 1984, no. 11; see also *Fides et Ratio*, no. 26.

[12] See Michael Heinz, "The Purpose and Meaning of Suffering", a course of healthcare professionals published on-line. This is the source of these quotes.

[13] Michael Buckley, S.J., *op. cit.*, 42.

[14] Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, 115.

[15] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 16: "It is no accident that when the sacred author comes to

describe the wise man, he portrays him as one who loves and seeks the truth." See also Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no.

[16] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 21.

[17] *Ibid*, no. 22: "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear...."

[18] John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 7: Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will, and heart is—towards our

**Redeemer, towards Christ the Redeemer of man....”**

**[19] Fides et Ratio, no. 23.**

**[20] Fides et Ratio, nos. 31-32.**

**[21] Michael J. Buckley, op. cit., 95-96.**

**[22] See Fr. Louis Bouyer, *Christian Initiation*, New York: Macmillan, 1960, 21f.**

**[23] Fides et Ratio, no. 28.**

**[24] Fides et Ratio, no. 27.**

**[25] Ibid.**

**[26] Ibid., no. 24.**

**[27] Patristic quotes taken from De Lubac, op. cit., p. 13.**

**[28] Pope Francis, General Audience, May 23, 2015.**

**[29] St. Thomas , *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, a.1, ad 1m.**

**[30] Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940, 115.**