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Book review essay:

“The Drama of Atheist Humanism” by Henri de Lubac

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Abstract

In “The Drama of Atheist Humanism”, Henri de Lubac meticulously explores 19th-century efforts to overcome the limits of the divine and create a humanism. The book looks at the roots of modern atheism, focusing particularly on the influential contributions of figures such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Comte. These figures were instrumental in shaping the path of contemporary humanism. De Lubac masterfully weaves together historical and philosophical currents with modern perspectives to expose the prevailing ideology that views Christianity as antiquated, a perspective that resonates throughout Eastern and Western societies. A unique aspect of the book lies in its harmonious interplay with literary and philosophical works, providing the reader with a deep insight into the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary atheism. This analysis is enriched by an examination of the theological foundations of humanism that incorporates perspectives from Islamic and Christian traditions.

Keywords: Henri de Lubac; Atheist Humanism; 19th-century Efforts; Contemporary Atheism; Philosophical Foundations.

Henri de Lubac’s thought-provoking work, “The Drama of Atheist Humanism,” intricately reveals the origins of 19th-century efforts to create a humanism that transcends the boundaries of conventional divinity.¹ Through careful reading, de Lubac examines the foundations of contemporary atheism, a movement that boldly claims to break away from the realm of the divine. This essay is enriched by an examination of three influential figures: Feuerbach, whose influence on Marx was profound; Nietzsche, a champion of nihilism; and Comte, considered the progenitor of positivism. By skillfully interweaving historical philosophical currents with the context of the present, de Lubac reveals the pervasive ideology that considers the Christian faith antiquated, a view that pervades both Eastern and Western societies. This profound exploration in “The Drama of Atheist Humanism” gains significance through its resonance with literary and philosophical companions such as Dostoevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov” and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s “Islam and Secularism”. De Lubac skillfully traces the evolution of godless humanism,

¹ Henri de Lubac, a Jesuit scholar, was a prominent theologian in the 20th century. His writings, along with those of other influential modern theologians and close associates like Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and Hans Urs von Balthasar, were instrumental in shaping Catholicism during this time.



illuminating the central role played by Marxism, nihilism, and positivism. While not solely responsible, these ideologies catalyzed the rise of humanism. As one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century, de Lubac's analysis empowers the reader to grapple with the dominant philosophies shaping our age.

The rising tide of atheism seems inexorably linked to a waning understanding of metaphysical and religious concepts. The erosion of traditional metaphysics based on divine revelation has provided fertile ground for the germination of atheistic thought. In this context, "The Drama of Atheist Humanism" proves to be an invaluable compass that enables today's readers to understand the appeal and intricacies of the philosophical foundation of modern atheism. In addition, the book provides an in-depth examination of Dostoevsky's perceptive critique of atheism and its far-reaching implications. Although the book's arguments are formulated from a Christian perspective, they also resonate with followers of Islam and Judaism and provide a toolkit for addressing the challenges posed by the growing wave of atheism, especially for those whose religious knowledge is low.

Although the book assumes some familiarity with philosophical paradigms, it is worthwhile even for readers without extensive knowledge of the philosophies addressed. Engaging with the author's discourse promises a variety of valuable insights that illuminate our contemporary conundrums. Although logical positivism is losing popularity in contemporary philosophical circles, its earlier Comtean iteration reverberates and influences various facets of modern epistemology, including analytic philosophy and the empirical sciences. Henri de Lubac wrote this book before the advent of postmodernism, a time when he was primarily concerned with the heresies of modernity. Despite this time gap, the book deftly bridges the gap by offering fundamental insights into the emergence of postmodern heresies and a comprehensive understanding of our current intellectual landscape. To deepen one's understanding of the philosophies outlined in this book, it is advisable to supplement one's reading with related works such as Roger Scruton's "Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey," a summary of the ideas of the major modern philosophers, and William Kelly Wright's "A History of Modern Philosophy," which offers concise summaries of individual philosophers.

Further enriching this discourse is "Basic Writings of Nietzsche" by Walter Kaufmann, which addresses Nietzsche's robust critique of religion and morality and underscores his indelible influence on contemporary thought. Of note is Nietzsche's benevolent attitude toward Islam, which he views as a life-affirming faith, in stark contrast to his disdain for Christianity expressed in "The Antichrist". Roy Jackson's "Nietzsche and Islam" addresses this facet of Nietzsche's worldview in more detail. In addition, John Hick's "The Existence of God" provides a comprehensive overview of the perennial question, "Does God exist?" Hick meticulously examines both sides of the debate, emphasizing the enduring nature of these philosophical dialogs. In contrast to Dostoevsky's literary account, Hick's work offers a rigorous philosophical inquiry that illuminates the reasons for believing in God. In "The Drama of Atheist Humanism" by Henri de Lubac, the focus is on the intricate interplay between faith and humanism, inviting a theological exploration of the complicated dynamics between the two. De Lubac, a luminary of 20th-century theology, embarks on a journey that explores the nature of humanism and its interaction with religious thought, particularly through the prisms of Islamic and Christian perspectives. Fundamental to de Lubac's analysis is the pursuit of a humanism that transcends the divine, a pursuit that both resonates with and contradicts elements of both Islamic and Christian theological traditions.



In Islam, humanism is inseparable from the notion that man is God's vicegerent (Caliph) on Earth. This depiction in the Quran emphasizes mankind's inherent dignity and responsibility, but at the same time admits the possibility of deviating from the divine path. This delicate balance reflects de Lubac's observations on the development of humanism, where the tension between honoring human potential and renouncing divine essence comes to the fore. Christian theology further enriches the study of the drama of atheistic humanism. Underlying Christian doctrine is the concept of the Imago Dei, which holds that man is created in the image and likeness of God. De Lubac's analysis examines the consequences of humanism moving away from these divine moorings and coincides with Christian concerns about the erosion of ethical foundations and moral orientation as humanism moves away from its theological foundations.

Both Islamic and Christian theology converge in their concerns about the ethical implications of atheistic humanism. Islam emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between faith and righteous deeds, while Christianity emphasizes the intertwining of faith and virtuous action. De Lubac's observations reflect these traditions and highlight the potential dilution of ethical values in a humanism detached from divine influence. Moreover, de Lubac's exploration of figures such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Comte invites us to explore the theological roots of their ideologies. From an Islamic perspective, these philosophical currents question the relationship between God and humanity and reflect a concern for ethical secularization and a rejection of divine revelation. In the Christian context, these ideologies reflect the timeless struggle between faith and skepticism, a tension reflected in the Christian narrative of doubt and faith.

To conclude, "The Drama of Atheist Humanism" traverses the intricate web of faith and humanism, opening perspectives for profound theological contemplation. Both Islamic and Christian perspectives resonate in de Lubac's analysis, highlighting the complexity of humanism's evolution as it breaks away from its theological roots. De Lubac's magnum opus invites followers of both traditions to reflect on the interplay between faith, humanism, and the broader philosophical currents that shape the modern world. Henri de Lubac's "Drama of Atheist Humanism" is a scholarly culmination that reveals the origins and implications of modern atheism. By tracing its historical foundations to present-day realities, de Lubac enriches readers' understanding of the prevailing ideologies that shape our era. At a time when atheism is gaining prominence in society, this work is a beacon for navigating the complicated intellectual landscape of our contemporary reality.

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