

*Gaudium et Spes* identified atheism as one of “the most serious problem of our time”<sup>1</sup> and hence, while the preparatory drafts did not include a section on unbelief, the Conciliar Fathers became gradually aware of the need to address this question in the context of the dialogue of the Church with the modern world.<sup>2</sup> The result of the conciliar debates was 1) an interesting analysis of the different forms of unbelief, 2) a diagnosis of its origins and consequences, and 3) finally a proposal of different solutions that the Church is to adopt. Considering the breadth of this topic and time limitations, we will only be able to briefly review what the Council teaches before considering the culpability of atheism in depth.

To begin, let us consider the general nature of *Gaudium et Spes*. Recall that *Gaudium et Spes* is a Pastoral Constitution [as opposed to dogmatic one like LG] addressed not just to Catholics and Christians, but “to all men” (GS 2). Its intention is to enter into dialogue with them regarding the current global situation. That being the case, the Council Fathers thought it necessary to address to the atheistic systems of militant communism as well as the secularization in the West which were prevalent when the council was being held (1962-5). Therefore, the final three texts afforded it a considerable amount of attention; so much so, it can actually be considered one of the major themes of the Constitution.<sup>3</sup>

The actual paragraphs concerning atheism form some of the final ones of GS’s first chapter entitled, “The Dignity of the Human Person”, which situate the Council’s treatment of atheism in an **anthropological context**. This reflects a conscience decision on part of the Council Fathers to respond to the beliefs of the prevailing ideology of Atheistic Humanism, which claimed that the affirmation of God

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<sup>1</sup> Bl. Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 37, 100.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Juan Alonso, *Scripta Theologica*, Vol. 45, (2013) “Ateísmo e increencia según el Concilio Vaticano II”, 396.

<sup>3</sup> “In fact, the proportion of the total volume of GS devoted to the question of atheism (3 articles, nos. 19-21, **containing almost 1,000 words, c. 4% of the Constitution**) is itself sufficient to establish it as one of its major themes.” James MacNeil, *A Study of Gaudium et Spes 19-22: The Second Vatican Council, Response to Contemporary Atheism* (The Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, NY, 1997) 3, citing P. Matheson, *The Notion of Truth in “Gaudium et Spes”*, *Dissertatio ad doctoratum in Facultate Theologiae Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae* (Roma 1982) 99.

limits man's dignity (cf. GS, 20).<sup>4</sup> In general, GS will present an anthropological view which does not require one to choose between exalting God and exalting man (either/or). On the contrary, man's dignity requires God's existence. The council will affirm in different ways that without God, man is a mystery to himself, will be easily led to despair, and can never satisfy the longings of his heart.

After expressing man's dependence on God and lamenting how "many of our contemporaries have never recognized this intimate and vital link with God..." the Council declares "atheism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age". However, before discussing it, atheism needs to be **described**. In its very first paragraph regarding atheism, GS clarifies that the word "atheism" is applied to "phenomena which are quite distinct from one another" (GS, 19). An initial distinction was made earlier (GS, 7) which spoke of either denying God (theoretical atheism) or abandoning religious practice (practical atheism) but here it is much more detailed. There are no philosophical definitions but rather descriptions of its different manifestations.<sup>5</sup>

Before considering these types of atheism identified by the Council, we can recall some basic notions as present by Cornelio Fabro. He reiterates the classic **definition of atheism** which was vogue during the Renaissance: "Atheism is the theory that denies the existence of a personal God,"<sup>6</sup> This, however, is a narrow definition. More widely we can say that "atheism also includes all those philosophies and religions which propose a concept of God which is inconsistent with the requirements

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<sup>4</sup> «El elemento más decisivo de la argumentación desarrollada por el Vaticano II consiste en la preparación de una antropología cristiana teológica como respuesta alternativa a los humanismos ateos. (...). La antropología es, pues, el marco adecuado para tratar la temática del ateísmo». DEL CURA ELENA, S., «Ateísmo e increencia como tema de la teología: el desarrollo en España de 1965 a 1987», en GONZÁLEZ MONTES, A. (coord.), *Iglesia, teología y sociedad veinte años después del segundo concilio del Vaticano*, Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1988, 218; cfr. también, LAGO ALBA, L., «Fe e increencia en el Vaticano II», cit., 471-473.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Juan Alonso, *Ateísmo*, 414.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelio Fabro, *God: Introduction to the Theological Question*, 17. [citations from this work are from the PDF and not the print edition] But this notion can be found as long ago as Clement of Alexandria who wrote, "the atheist is one who maintains that God does not exist". (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, VII, 1, 4, 3., as cited by Cornelio Fabro, *God: Introduction to the Theological Question*, 17.)

of his Nature”<sup>7</sup> So one is not an atheist exclusively by denying God’s existence but also by rejecting some of the characteristics which are proper to Him.

The first form of atheism identified in GS is what we can call **theoretical atheists** who “expressly deny [God]”. Fabro says these “indirectly or directly arrive at the judgment that the divinity does not exist.”<sup>8</sup> They believe they have some facts or metaphysical principles from which they deduce that God either does not exist or cannot exist.

The next three forms of atheism enumerated by the Council are all types of **agnosticism**. The first consists in “believing that man can assert nothing about [God]”. Ultimately, the question of God is unsolvable. This general sort of agnosticism, consists in suspending any positive or negative judgment regarding God.<sup>9</sup> It is a position of neutrality “between affirmation and denial regarding all that concerns problems of the absolute.”<sup>10</sup> Next, there is a kind of semantic agnosticism: “others use such a method to scrutinize the question of God as to make it seem devoid of meaning” (GS, 19). This group struggles with the very idea of affirming anything about God at all. St. Thomas Aquinas answered this difficulty when he discusses “The Names of God” in question 13 of the Prima Pars; it will be the subject of Dr. Hochschild’s talk, but here we can just say that all we predicate about God is done so analogously.<sup>11</sup> The final form of agnostic atheism is a form of empiricism mixed with an exaltation of the positive sciences

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<sup>7</sup> Fabro, *God*, 17. Fabro later identifies the characteristics which are proper of God’s nature: “*pure Spirit, first creative cause, free, personal, provident and transcendent.*”(Fabro, *God*, p. 27)

<sup>8</sup> Fabro, *God*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> “In general, [agnosticism] indicates the spiritual attitude of one who suspends judgment on the existence and nature of the Absolute and of the Divinity.”Fabro, *God*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Fabro, *God*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> “Attribution of these perfections to the divine essence is thus intrinsically dialectical, since it involves two contrary moments that generate a movement of the intellect which always remains open in this life. The first is the moment of affirmation or **attribution of pure perfections to God**, as to their first and proper possessor; then, the moment of circumspection, i.e. that of guarding against anthropomorphism and immediate transpositions, as one becomes aware that **such perfections cannot exist in God in the same way in which they are found in creatures**, but rather in another way, in a way “proportioned” to the divine essence. To use the technical terminology, **predication is not done according to univocity but according to analogy**; it is in this moment of analogical predication that Thomistic realism satisfies the kernel of the legitimate demand implicit in agnosticism’s reservations.” (Fabro, *God*, 38)

which “contend that everything can be explained by this kind of scientific reasoning alone” (GS, 19). That is, they affirm that only the knowledge acquired through the positive sciences has any worth and all problems can be solved by science. Called “scientific agnosticism” by Fabro, it is when “certainty of truth is attributed to the results of experimental inquiry.”<sup>12</sup> However, there are some who recognize the limits of the scientific method as being unable to reach the definitive truth, and therefore deny that it can be known; if they can’t know absolute truths via science, much less so through any non-scientific method.

The fifth one is a more **anthropological form of atheism** where the exaltation of man requires the denial of God. That is, adherents of this humanistic atheism claim that man’s dignity is lowered by existence of a greater being. GS already addressed this in passing when it posited that man’s dignity consists fundamentally in his vocation to the divine (GS, 19).

Another group “form for themselves such a **fallacious idea of God** that when they repudiate this figment they are by no means rejecting the God of the Gospel” (GS, 19). That is, they are rejecting a God of their imagination who in fact does not exist but who they imagine to be the God worshiped by believers. Later on, both the poor example of believers and the inadequate proclamation of the faith will both be seen to have contributed to atheism, particularly atheism of this sort.

Finally, there are those people who “never get to the point of raising questions about God, since they seem to experience no religious stirrings nor do they see why they should trouble” (GS, 19). This is **religious indifferentism** or practical atheism: “living without acknowledging God, ‘as if’ God did not exist or without concerning oneself about his existence, and organizing one’s private and public life without reference to the existence of any absolute Principle which transcends the values of the individual and of humankind”<sup>13</sup> However, as GS points out later, it is a fact of experience that one cannot go on forever

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<sup>12</sup> Fabro, *God*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Fabro, *God*, 17.

with this indifference.<sup>14</sup> Sooner or later, man's innate yearning to know the answers to life's great mysteries (meaning of life, his own activities, and death) will call these issues to mind. While admitting that practical atheism could exist for a time on account of "the pressure of life's concrete problems, the ardor of the passions, an indifferent family environment, and a secular education," Fabro too declares that "it cannot be so forever.... The posing of the problem [of God] seems inevitable."<sup>15</sup> So long as a person is engaged in society, it will come up "due to the very demands of competition and of religious and political debate."<sup>16</sup>

With some of the various manifestations of atheism identified, the Council then turned its attention to consider where they might have come from; that is to say, their **causes**.<sup>17</sup> Without attempting to produce an exhaustive list, three different causes are enumerated. 1) First of all, atheism could arise as a violent protest against the evil in the world. It is the classical argument of, if God is all-good (doesn't want evil) and all-powerful (could remove it), why does He allow it? 2) The second cause isn't so much one of denial of God as much as the idolatrous affirmation of other gods. These atheists form pseudo-religions which have exchanged God for either personal goods (money, pleasure, power, health) or social realities (science, race, nation, party, etc.). 3) Finally, atheism could come from the very

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<sup>14</sup> "She [the Church] also knows that man is constantly worked upon by God's spirit, and hence **can never be altogether indifferent to the problems of religion**. The experience of past ages proves this, as do numerous indications in our own times. For man will always yearn to know, at least in an obscure way, what is the meaning of his life, of his activity, of his death. The very presence of the Church recalls these problems to his mind." (GS, 41)

<sup>15</sup> Fabro, *God*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Fabro, *God*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Fabro saw one of the major causes of modern atheism as being the "spiritual tiredness" and superficial (dilettantism, dabbling tendencies) nature of society. These in turn are founded in a "more fatalistic conception of human events." Which in turn comes from the dissolute nature of philosophy and the precarious situation of the people, nations which takes away the traditional sort of security. (cf. Fabro, *God*, 29)

He also says "the subjectivism of modern philosophy" is one of the factors most responsible for contemporary atheism (Fabro, *God*, 28).

But an even deeper examination reveals that the roots of modern atheism stretch back to the subjectivism of the Protestant Reformation and its religious individualism (Pius X, *Pascendi*, "Equidem protestantium error primus hac via gradum iecit"; cf. Fabro, *God*, 28-9)

Pope John Paul II meanwhile, saw it as stretchly connected with the Rationalism of the Enlightenment, "El ateísmo del que aquí se habla tiene estrecha relación con el racionalismo iluminista, que concibe la realidad humana y social del hombre de manera mecanicista." (Pope St. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 13).

nature of modern society where man is so heavily engrossed in earthly affairs that God and the supernatural gets left by the wayside.<sup>18</sup>

Following this, the next paragraph, together with LG 16, is perhaps the most interesting and controversial of all Vatican II's texts addressing atheism since it relates to the culpability of atheists.<sup>19</sup> Later we will consider in depth this matter, but here we can just point out that for the first time in Conciliar history, blame was partially attributed to believers on account of their defective intellectual formation and bad example in their religious, moral, or social life. This however, does not extenuate atheism as a system which is "repudiated" nor atheists as individuals who are "not free of blame." Some wanted to remove any reference to the culpability of atheists but they were unable to convince the other Council Fathers.<sup>20</sup>

**Number 20** is the shortest of the three sections which directly speak of atheism and discusses two issues: the general cause of systematic atheism and Materialistic or Communist atheism. Here we will not discuss either in depth since the former will be treated by Fr. Alberto Barratero in the following talk of "God vs. Freedom" and the latter was addressed by Fr. Mariano Ruiz last night ("The Historical & Culture Impact of 100 Years of Marxist Atheism"). The Council identifies an unrealistic desire for personal **independence** as the reason for which God needs to be denied. For man to be free, God can't exist. Hence, a common root for all systems of atheism is the desire for complete autonomy. The paragraph concludes by mentioning how advances in modern technology have favored man's belief that he is self-sufficient.

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<sup>18</sup> As cited early, Fabro does speak about this as being a possible cause for temporary practical atheism: "the pressure of life's concrete problems"

<sup>19</sup> "[this paragraph] recognizes the possibility of an atheist denying God in good faith" (MacNeil, *A Study*, 247)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Alonso, *Ateismo*, 404-5.

Without referring to it explicitly, the second part of number 20 is directed against **communist atheism** which seeks a social and economic emancipation. Adherents of this system claim that hope in the future life distracts man from concerns of this world: why build up the earthly city if there's a heavenly one to come? Despite the request of many Council Fathers to explicitly condemn atheistic communism, this did not come to pass since many believed it would hinder future efforts at dialogue.<sup>21</sup> However, the Church's position with regard to this form of atheism was manifested both in a subsequent number where we read that the Church "has already repudiated and cannot cease repudiating, sorrowfully but as firmly as possible, those poisonous doctrines" (GS, 21) and also in a footnote citation (#16) which included the numerous papal encyclicals which deal with atheism including Pope Pius XI's *Divini Redemptoris* "On Atheistic Communism" where the Holy Father does repeatedly and explicitly condemn it.

The final number on atheism (GS, 21) treats the Church's attitude regarding atheism. Once again, both doctrines and lifestyles that deny God are "repudiated". That is, both theoretical and practical atheism are identified as being "poisonous."<sup>22</sup> Three reasons are given for this repudiation of atheism: 1) atheism "contradicts reason"; 2) it is contrary to the "common experience of humanity"<sup>23</sup>; and 3) it is detrimental to man's dignity.<sup>24</sup> This demonstrates that atheism is not evil on account of a positive decree from the Magisterium, but rather, as Cornelio Fabro wrote, it is condemned by the natural law itself.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, a positive condemnation was already issued infallibly by the first Vatican Council in its "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith" (*Dei Filius*).<sup>26</sup> It is significant to note that with

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Juan Alonso, *Scripta Theologica*, Vol. 45, (2013) "Ateísmo e increencia según el Concilio Vaticano II", 407.

<sup>22</sup> Some did not want to use the term "poisonous," but after deliberating, it was seen to be a true quality of atheism (cf. Alonso, *Ateismo*, 408).

<sup>23</sup> As G. van der Leeuw affirmed, "Peoples without religion do not exist. At the beginning of history there is no form of atheism. Religion has existed always and everywhere." (*Phaenomenologie der Religion*, Leipzig 1935, p. 570, as cited by Fabro, *God*, 18)

<sup>24</sup> "dethrone man from his native excellence" (GS, 21).

<sup>25</sup> Fabro, *God*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Denzinger, *Ench. Symb.*, ed. 18-20, nn. 1801-1805.

this condemnation, Vatican II is keeping in line with the Church's tradition and not introducing anything revolutionary.<sup>27</sup>

At this point the Council **responds to two common objects of atheism**. To those who affirm that the existence of God is detrimental to man's dignity, GS counters that God's existence does the exact opposite: "Far from diminishing man, [the Church's] message brings to his development light, life, and freedom" (GS, 21). We can also recall what was stated at the beginning, namely that the foundation of man's dignity is that he is called to union with God (GS, 19). To those who claim that an eschatological hope for a future life diminishes man's concern for temporal progress, GS answers that "a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives." Without revelation of man's vocation to the communion with God, life's great mysteries remain unanswered and "every man [would] remain to himself an unsolved puzzle" (GS, 21) which would lead to a sort of despair.

Finally, GS concludes its examinations on atheism by proposes **two basic remedies** to atheism. The proper witness of Christian life and dialogue with non-believers. 1) Regarding the first, it is the mission of the Church to make God present in the world and this is accomplished principally through its members who live out their mature faith with fraternal charity. In this way, atheism can serve a purifying function in the Church by challenging the faithful to present the true face of God through an adequate presentation of doctrine and the testimony of their lives.<sup>28</sup> Regarding the latter, the document first reiterates its disgust for atheism saying the Church rejects it "root and branch" before going on to

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<sup>27</sup> As opposed to Rahner who believed the Church was, in GS 19-21, putting forward a theory opposite of what was traditionally asserted regarding the culpability of atheists. However, the consistency of this text with previous magisterium is further confirmed by the above-mentioned footnote which clarifies that "repudiate" can be understood as "condemn". William Whitaker's Words Latin-English program translates the Latin "reprobet" as "condemn" or "reject".

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Alonso, Ateismo, 415. En su comentario a GS 19-22, J. Ratzinger señala también la función purificadora del ateísmo para la fe: Ratzinger, J., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, Teil III, 2 ed. Fribourg-Bâle-Vienne: Herder, 1968, 345, 347.

say that all need to work together “for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live” (GS, 21). This subject of dialogue was treated exhaustively by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* and so the Council does not elaborate any more.

The section concludes on an **anthropological note**, stressing man’s dependence on God in order to reach fulfillment. It states that the Church’s message, far from diminishing man, will alone “avail to fill up the heart of man” since it “is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart” (GS, 21). “Thou hast made us for Thyself,” O Lord, “and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”<sup>29</sup> Man depends on God to the point that “without the Creator, the creature would disappear... when God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible” (GS, 36). Years later, Pope St. John Paul II would succinctly express this mutual dependence when he wrote, “the ideology of the ‘death of God’ is more a threat to man... The ideology of the ‘death of God’ easily demonstrates in its effects that, on the ‘theoretical and practical’ levels, it is the ideology of the ‘death of man.’”<sup>30</sup> To ‘kill’ God is to kill man.

Reading through these few paragraphs, one might assume that there is nothing controversial contained therein. In fact, there is no issue. However, it has become a point of contention especially regarding the culpability of atheists. There are those who, founded in a “hermeneutic of rupture”<sup>31</sup> have attempted to interpret GS 19-21 as a re-evaluation of the culpability of atheists in such a way that there now exists the possibility of a professed atheist might not be guilty of any moral guilt<sup>32</sup> for such a

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<sup>29</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1: PL 32, 661.

<sup>30</sup> San Juan Pablo II, *Dominum et Vivificante* [Sobre El Espíritu Santo en la Vida de la Iglesia y del Mundo], 38.

<sup>31</sup> In his first Christmas Address to the Roman Curia as Pope, Benedict XVI attributed most of the misinterpretations of the Second Vatican Council to this Hermeneutics of rupture (discontinuity) as opposed to the hermeneutic of reform (continuity/renewal) which ought to have been used. As proof he cites St. Pope John XXIII’s address at the opening of the Council where he stated that Vatican II wanted to “to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion”. ([https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html)) “It does seem clear, though, that there are significant elements of both continuity and discontinuity in the documents of Vatican II. The discontinuity cannot be held to involve discontinuity concerning doctrine, although a discontinuity of methodology, pastoral strategy, attitude, and formulation can certainly be demonstrated.” (Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, note 17, p. 221

<sup>32</sup> Cf. This was the traditional assesment (Meinvielle, *De la Cábala*, 335.)

profession. Note that the controversy does not revolve around whether it is possible for a non-believer to be saved; rather, it is focused on whether the very act of non-belief is culpable or could actually be salvific, a “salvific atheism”.

One of the most widespread, and hence consequential, interpretations has been put forward by Karl Rahner, Jesuit theologian and *peritus* (expert) of the first session of Vatican II. In his work *Atheism and ‘implicit Christians’*, Rahner notes that the traditional thesis regarding the culpability of atheists<sup>33</sup> is not repeated by the Council. For him, this absence is “a conclusive argument” despite the fact that “the contrary thesis<sup>34</sup> ... is not proclaimed in an explicit way.”<sup>35</sup> Based on this “conclusive argument” of absence, Rahner goes on to explicitly affirm the possibility of atheists justified by grace so long as they live “according to the dictates of their conscience”<sup>36</sup> and never “deliberately exclude God and avoid religious questions.”<sup>37</sup> In following their conscience they are following God, because the knowledge of God is implicitly contained in the content of their consciences.<sup>38</sup> That’s why the atheist that follows his

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Hence, Luis Lago Alba calls the Council documents a “giro historico en el juicio sobre la culpa moral del ateo...” and highlights that the council “ignora la tesis tradicional de la teología escolástica.” (Luis Lago Alba, *Ciencia Tomista* Vol. 113 (1986), “Fe e increencia en el Vaticano II”, p. 474.

<sup>33</sup> “Nobody, endowed with normal intelligence, can remain an atheist for a long period of time without personal guilt” (Luis Lago Alba, 4 citing *Sacrae theologiae Summae of the Patres Societatis Iesu* (Madrid 1964), n. 23-4).

<sup>34</sup> The contrary thesis would be “it is possible that a normal adult, during a relatively long period of time, including even until death, could explicitly profess atheism, without that necessarily implying, in that unbeliever, moral guilt.”

<sup>35</sup> Karl Rahner, *Ateísmo y ‘cristianismo implícito’*, 105-6 cited by Miguel Ángel Funes, *En Una Noche Oscura: La Virtud de la Fe*, (EDIVE: San Rafael, Argentina, 2013), 160-1.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner, *Ateísmo*, 109.

<sup>37</sup> MacNeil, *A Study*, 244.

While this 2<sup>nd</sup> condition might initially seem to be reasonable, it is clear that the author does not mean it as one might imagine since he goes on to say “It is striking that the text does not actually say that such atheists actually exist.... It recognizes, for example, the possibility of professing atheism in good faith, a factor which is partly learned through the developments of modern psychology and sociology.”

Here we can see why Fabro would say, “Trying to call them ‘theists that don’t know they are’, as some theologians such as Fr. Rahner seem to do, is to trust too much in psychology.” (Cornelio Fabro, *Drama del hombre y misterio de Dios*, 84, as cited by Fuentes, *En una noche*, 170).

<sup>38</sup> “When a person considers the ethical requirement of his own conscience as absolutely valid in itself, and when he accepts it as such and adjusts his life in accord with it, although it only be in a completely spontaneous manner, **he is practically affirming, whether he knows it or not, with or without conceptual reflection, the absolute being of God** understand as the foundation of from which, in general can come something like an absolute moral requirement.” (Rahner, *Ateísmo*, 109)

conscience is an implicit theist, an anonymous theist; hence, he can be saved. And since there cannot be salvation without supernatural faith and sanctifying grace, the atheist receives both of these by obeying his conscience.<sup>39</sup> In his words: “according to the doctrine of Vatican II, there exists the possibility that an atheist lives in justifying grace.”<sup>40</sup>

Against these modern interpretations, it has to be affirmed that the faith in the existence of God as a necessary mean<sup>41</sup> for salvation is an indisputable fact of scriptures: “without faith it is impossible to please him, for anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6). Hence, atheism is objectively sinful; but subjectively, what happens in the heart of the atheist and what possibility he has of saving himself, that God alone knows.<sup>42</sup> Deepening this testimony of scriptures, classical theology has always been believed and taught, that “Nobody, endowed with normal intelligence, can remain an atheist for a long period of time without personal guilt.”<sup>43</sup> The reason is expounded by St. Thomas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he writes:

“Since the ability to impede or not to impede the reception of divine grace is **within the scope of free choice**, not undeservedly is responsibility for the fault imputed to him who offers an impediment to the reception of grace. In fact, as far as He is concerned, God is ready to give grace to all, indeed ‘He wills all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ as said in 1 Timothy. But those alone are deprived of grace who **offer an obstacle** within themselves to grace...” (3.159)

Moreover, the conclusion of Rahner and his followers neglects not just what is traditionally been taught but also 1) the basic meaning of the text from GS, 2) subsequent reaffirmations about the

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Fuentes, *En una noche*, 165.

<sup>40</sup> Rahner, *Ateísmo*, 108.

<sup>41</sup> As opposed to necessity of precept. Consequently, without it, it is completely and absolutely impossible to be saved (cf. Julio Meinvielle, *De La Cábala al Progresismo* (EDIVI: Segni, Italy, 2013), 335.)

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Julio Meinvielle, *De La Cábala al Progresismo* (EDIVI: Segni, Italy, 2013), 335.

<sup>43</sup> *Sacrae theologiae Summae of the Patres Societatis Iesu* (Madrid 1964), n. 23-4

culpability of atheism from the magisterium,<sup>44</sup> 3) as well as other Conciliar texts such as *Lumen Gentium* 16 which, though admitting the *possibility* (and not *probability*)<sup>45</sup> for non-believers to be saved, taught that “very often” (*at saepius*) they do not in fact achieve salvation. Even if they are in fact invincibly ignorant, this “ignorance of the gospel is merely a condition of, not a cause of, salvation.”<sup>46</sup> That is, an invincibly ignorant atheist might not be damned because of their lack of faith, but “they may be damned because of ‘their other sins, which cannot be taken away without faith.’”<sup>47</sup>

If we are attentive to the texts, we can understand just why atheism is objectively sinful. It states, “Undeniably, those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences, and hence are not free of blame” (GS, 19). The culpability of the act springs from its voluntary nature. They “willfully” decide to disregard their conscience and separate from God. It is not ignorance which is condemned, but an evil free choice to neglect to acknowledge and worship God.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Fabro, following G. van de Leeuw, calls atheism, “the religion of flight” before God, it is “a negative moment in the development of the consciousness

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<sup>44</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 70: “With the whole tradition of the Church, we call **mortal sin** the act by which man freely and consciously rejects God, his law, the covenant of love that God offers, preferring to turn in on himself or to some created and finite reality, something contrary to the divine will (*conversio ad creaturam*). This can occur in a **direct and formal way**, in the sins of idolatry, apostasy and **atheism**” (RP, 17). Cf. also CCC 2125, 2140.

<sup>45</sup> “An important distinction must be made, it seems to me, about an ‘optimism’ that sees the possibility of people who have never heard the gospel, or who have never it ‘adequately’, having a possibility of being saved under certain very specific conditions (spelled out in LG 16 but also in previous theological and magisterial documents), and an ‘**optimism**’ that presumes that ‘**possibility**’ means in fact **probability**.’ It is a short step from an assumed ‘probability’ concerning salvation to the wide-spread assumption now common in the culture of the Church as well as in the culture at large, that virtually everyone will be saved.” (Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved: What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012), 55)/

<sup>46</sup> Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved: What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012), 53.

<sup>47</sup> Martin, *Will Many...*, 38; citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 10, 1. Also: “[unbaptized adults] would not suffer eternal damnation simply because of the guilt of original sin, but only because of their grave personal sin.” (Martin, *Will Many...*, 36)

<sup>48</sup> Cf. CCC 2125 and 2140.

which can arise and flourish only inasmuch as it presupposes a prior stage of affirmation, i.e., that of religion as worship of the divinity.”<sup>49</sup>

This is made explicit in the following phrase which reads: “taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development” (GS, 21).<sup>50</sup> Hence, the council affirms that no one is born an atheist but only becomes one through the denial of something. It takes a positive act of the will, a personal election, to be an atheist. Therefore, in accord with the Constitution, it is not possible to affirm the salvation of guilty atheists so long as they continue being so because their attitude comes from a rejection of grace that God offers to all men in some moment of their life, since God “who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.”<sup>51</sup>

In light of what has been said, the moral situation of non-believers is definitely a sobering one. But the truth ought not cause fear but should rather serve as a stimulus to work against this growing phenomenon of modern atheism. If it is true, as GS and Catechism state, that believers “frequently bear some responsibility for this situation... [and] can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism” (GS, 19; CCC 2125), then we need to do what is possible to minimize such an influence by living a life in accord with the faith we profess and knowing how to present in an adequate manner the truths of that faith. We can say further that the obligation to spread the Gospel is not simply one of positive precept (because Jesus said so), but one of charity on account of the negative eternal consequences that ignorance of the Gospel very often (*at saepius*) brings about. Let this reality serve to enkindle our zeal for the missionary vocation we have been called to.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Fabro, *God*, 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> Fabro uses almost the exact same phrase: “Theoretical atheism, therefore, cannot be an originary situation but must be explained as a reflexive phenomenon, as the “conclusion” of a specific rational process based on certain premises”

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Alonso, *Ateismo*, 405. Citing Miano, V., «Ateísmo», en Pacomio, L. (ed.), *Diccionario teológico interdisciplinar*, vol. I, Salamanca: Sígueme, 1982, 514. In LG 16 three conditions are listed which would annul the moral responsibility of the atheist: 1) sincere search for God; 2) openness to the truth; and 3) striving to lead an honest life. (cf. Alonso, *Ateismo*, 405)