

## HUMANISM AND NEW ATHEISM: EXPERIENCES AND PROPOSALS OF AN EDUCATIONAL MINORITY

Humanismo y nuevo ateísmo:  
*experiencias y propuestas de una minoría educativa*

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Reception date: 18/01/2020 • Acceptation date: 22/01/2020

**Abstract.** The research intends to trace a profile of two twentieth-century movements — *Humanism* and *New Atheism* — which, from an educational point of view, constitute an interesting and original minority. Although both studies and activities of undeniable educational interest have been produced, they have not yet been put at the centre of specific research. They currently represent one of the most innovative aspects of the current debate on the purpose of education both at school and in the family. These are movements that are not only academic or theoretical research, but they represent a varied social sample which in some countries, moreover, is no longer a small minority, but clearly affects public opinion and even parts of the political agenda.

The analysis of the recent history of movements that we can define of an “atheist world” indicates a clear trend line: their positions seem destined to be an integral part of the debates on current educational issues, particularly because the positions they expressed — with their constant anchoring to scientific culture and rational dialogue — seem suitable to face the difficult challenges of globalisation and the tensions that cross pluralistic societies.

**Keywords:** Atheism; rationalism; agnosticism; education; school.

**Resumen.** *La investigación pretende trazar un perfil de dos movimientos del siglo XX: el humanismo y el nuevo ateísmo, que desde un punto de vista educativo, constituyen una minoría interesante y original. Aunque han producido estudios y actividades de indudable interés educativo, aún no han ocupado*

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*el lugar central de una investigación concreta. Actualmente, representan uno de los aspectos más innovadores del debate actual sobre el propósito de la educación, tanto en la escuela como en la familia. Se trata de movimientos que no son solo investigaciones académicas o teóricas, sino que representan una muestra social variada que, en algunos países, además, ya no es una pequeña minoría, sino que afecta claramente a la opinión pública, e incluso a algunas partes de la agenda política.*

*El análisis de la historia reciente de los movimientos que podemos definir como la “galaxia atea” indica una clara línea de tendencia: sus posiciones parecen estar destinadas a formar una parte integral de los debates sobre los temas educativos actuales; en particular, debido a las posiciones que expresan, con su anclaje constante en la cultura científica y el diálogo racional, parecen aptas para enfrentar los difíciles desafíos de la globalización y las tensiones que atraviesan las sociedades pluralistas.*

**Palabras clave:** *Atéismo; racionalismo; agnosticismo; educación; escuela.*

## LISTENING TO EDUCATIONAL MINORITIES

One of the most interesting fields of contemporary research is that of educational minorities, that is, of the positions expressed by parts of the population (and sometimes also by the academic sphere) which are in contrast with the thinking and practices of the majority. These sometimes regard difficult studies because, even in democratic systems, there are many obstacles to free expression of thoughts that can push minorities to make themselves almost invisible just in order to continue to express their positions freely. This reduces the sources available to us and makes it more difficult to reconstruct the characteristics of their thinking.

In the specific case of this article, the study intends to trace a short profile of the cultural positions of non-believers, starting from the two twentieth-century movements, *Humanism* and *New Atheism*, and then focusing on their educational proposals: from a pedagogical point of view, in fact, they constitute an interesting and an original minority that is making a significant contribution to rethinking training activities, from the first years of school, in a social and economic context that is undergoing momentous changes. It is precisely in this crisis situation that listening to minorities is very important and must be taken into due consideration even by those who do not share their theoretical positions.

From the historiographic point of view, this study is positioned at the crossroads of two crucial cruxes of the making of history today. The first is given by the subject matters that combine a few aspects of the history of education with the philosophy of education: however different their argumentative modalities may be, there are historical arguments that need the philosophical contribution or at least a careful consideration of the philosophical implications of the educational experiences that people and communities have put in place.<sup>1</sup> Another important issue is the relationship between contemporary history and current history. In fact, the twentieth century has accustomed us to extremely rapid change processes, which have deeply modified – and continue to modify – the lives of populations. To neglect the more recent aspects, in order to respect the standard of temporal distance, would mean losing the possibility of interpreting some changes that are currently underway, but have solid and branched historical roots. It is therefore worth taking the risk of the greater weight of subjectivity, so that we can appreciate what is happening again right before our eyes.<sup>2</sup> If the object of study is non-belief, among other things, it is twice as important to connect the aspects of long and very long duration with the most recent ones, since there is a clearly visible red thread that allows us to appreciate the link between a few ancient positions and those closest to us.

It is necessary to start from a general consideration. It is known that in the early part of the twentieth century, atheism was an integral part of some European state systems, in Russia and in the satellite countries of the east. The Soviet regime fought religious practices vigorously, absolutely loyal to the affirmations of Marx and Engels who, within the *Communist Manifesto*, affirmed: “There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Marc Depaepe, “Philosophy and History of Education: Time to bridge the gap?”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2007): 28-43; Gary McCullogh, *The struggle for the history of education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. François Bédarida, “Le temps présent et l’Historiographie contemporaine”, *Vingtième siècle, Revue d’histoire* 69 (2001): 153-160; Marina Franco y Florencia Levín, *Historia reciente. Perspectivas y desafíos para un campo en construcción* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2007); Diego H. Arias Gómez, “La enseñanza de la historia reciente y la formación moral. Dilemas de un vínculo imprescindible”, *Folios* 42, no. 2 (2015): 29-41.

contradiction to all past historical experience”.<sup>3</sup> According to the Marxist perspective, laws, morals, religion “are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests”.<sup>4</sup> Faced with these positions, both theoretical and political, the Catholic Church fully sensed the materialistic and atheist danger and fought it vigorously, up to the excommunication of the communists in 1949 (Decree of the Congregation of the Holy Office of 1 July).

Although it is natural that the term “atheist” is generally connected to all of this today, it is necessary to clarify a few basic questions that allow us not to unduly simplify the position of non-believers. The first is to bear in mind that the atheists’ cultural and existential affirmations cover a wide spectrum of positions that include both atheism in the strict sense, and agnostic, rationalist, skeptical, free-thinking positions, etc. This variability is particularly emphasised if we take many centuries into account and do not stop at the contemporary era. Moreover, from this point of view, the positions of believers and non-believers are perfectly symmetrical because they are rich in variations, often extremely significant.

Although atheism was a recent feature of some state systems, it actually has a very long history behind it, well rooted and theoretically already clearly explained in ancient times. What marked the medieval and modern era was above all the risk associated with the public declaration of positions, even slightly discordant from orthodoxy. The history of heresies clearly shows us how dangerous it was to express one’s positions on religion. The life of the Friulian miller, Menocchio (masterfully rebuilt by Carlo Ginzburg in 1976<sup>5</sup>) exemplifies the tragic relationship between the dominant Catholic culture and popular culture in the era of the Inquisition, as well as the danger of positions certainly not atheistic, but if anything the result of a personal theology, which syncretically brought together religious aspects of different origins.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx y Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with an Introduction and Notes by G. S. Jones (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 242.

<sup>4</sup> *The Communist Manifesto*, 232.

<sup>5</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980; 1976 1st edition).

Remembering these elements of European history is absolutely crucial to understanding the difficulty of the surfacing of a non-believer thought, as well as the frequent concealment of one's own ideas to avoid recriminations. A particularly interesting example is that of the abbot Meslier who was a prelate for all his life but left a will that in 1729 caused a huge concern because he clearly and deeply expressed his convinced materialistic ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Only in liberal democracies, it gradually became possible to express atheistic positions that in fact became ever more present and with increasing strength during the twentieth century, also spreading among the population. Above all, it should be noted that they are characterised in a distinctly different way from Marxist-style materialistic atheism, both for the underlying reasons and for the close link with the ancient positions.

Liberal thought, moreover, had warned of the dangers of Marxism, defined by Raymon Aron as the opium of intellectuals.<sup>7</sup> And it is precisely in the tradition of Enlightenment and liberal studies that non-believing thought can be found in modern and contemporary times, starting above all from the works of Hume. It is a composite and heterogeneous current that originally presents deist positions, strongly opposed by the churches because they are considered atheistic positions in all respects (especially since they denied the impossibility of miraculous interventions and the creator's interest in human affairs). While Marxist materialism imposes its vision of life on all citizens, liberal-inspired non-believer thought, while strongly opposing religion, does not aspire to a controlled society, but aims at convincing with rational arguments. It is therefore no coincidence that anti-clericalism has waned over time and the ability and willingness to dialogue with theist positions has increased enormously.

These considerations are particularly useful if we deal with educational issues at the heart of this study. In fact, during the twentieth century, within democratic states, we witnessed the birth of a philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Meslier, *Mémoire contre la religion*. Établissement du texte par JeanPierre Jackson et Alain Toupin (Paris: Éditions Coda, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Aron, *L'opium des intellectuels* (Paris: éditions Calmann-Lévy. 1995).

movement that has since its inception a strong ethical, universal, pacifist and educational influence. In the first founding document, *A Humanist Manifesto* in 1933, the following assertion begins with these words: “Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created”.<sup>8</sup> If, on the one hand, the existence of a creator god is denied, at the same time the perspective of the non-believer is presented as if it were a religious perspective, that is, a believer in the values of humanity. In this first edition of the *Manifesto*, in fact, the right to profess a secular vision of religion is claimed, which in the sixth principle is defined as follows: “religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labour, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation – all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained”. Among the signatories, the presence of John Dewey stands out, who the following year published a collection of university lectures entitled *A common faith: a written work with a programmatic character*, where the dogmatism of historical religions is rejected, but at the same time the religiosity of man understood as a deep aspiration to improve the life of the community.<sup>9</sup>

The first manifesto was followed by two other documents – in 1973, among which the signatories were also B.F. Skinner and H.J. Eysenck, and in 2003 – which improved the theoretical exposure and expanded the range of action. The humanistic approach appears increasingly distant from the model of a secular religion and the most cogent criticism of historical religions: “Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualisation, and from rectifying social injustices”.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, in the awareness of the drama of the world war, it was emphasised that religions were not the only problem to be addressed: “Traditional religions are surely not the only obstacles to human progress. Other ideologies also impede human advance. Some forms of political doctrine, for instance, function religiously, reflecting

<sup>8</sup> *A Humanist Manifesto I*, 1933, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1>.

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1934).

<sup>10</sup> *Humanist Manifesto II*, 1973, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2>.

the worst features of orthodoxy and authoritarianism, especially when they sacrifice individuals on the altar of Utopian promises”.

It is interesting to note that the consolidation of the social presence of humanistic ideas owed a lot to the establishment of associations such as the *American Humanist Association* (AHA, 1941) in the United States or the oldest, *Humanists UK* (formerly British Humanist Association) and *Humanist Society Scotland*. In 1952 also *Humanists International* was founded, a federation that brings together all national associations and developed two short but punchy bills, called *Amsterdam Declaration*, in 1952 and 2002.<sup>11</sup> As is evident, not all national associations have carried out an activity of effective promotion of humanistic ideas which are still dangerous today in various states. Even in democratic states, however, the condition of atheists should not be underestimated (from here onwards, with the term atheism, the meaning is to be understood in a broader sense, the various positions of non-believers, including indifferent ones). Children and adolescents in particular suffer greatly from the social stigma that identifies them – together with their families – as immoral and unreliable individuals.<sup>12</sup> Scientific writings on the subject, although not very numerous, have begun to deal with what we can define as a real social discrimination within democratic societies.<sup>13</sup> The results are clear enough: the students feel the full weight of the collective culture that is accustomed to despising non-believers, especially in reference to the religiously founded value orientations, with very deep

<sup>11</sup> *Amsterdam Declaration*, 1952, Humanists International, World Humanist Congress, <https://humanists.international/policy/amsterdam-declaration-1952>; *Amsterdam Declaration*, 2002, Humanists International, 50th anniversary World Humanist Congress, <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration>.

<sup>12</sup> Refer to, taking as an example the Italian case, what Maria Luisa Lo Giacco writes: “At the end of the 1940s, the Italian judges expressly favoured the Catholic parent over the atheist one, on the basis of the presumed incapacity of the latter to educate children, and were of the opinion that the interest of the minor was to be educated according to the principles of the traditional religious faith of the Italian people” (Maria Luisa Lo Giacco, “Educazione religiosa e tutela del minore nella famiglia”, *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, rivista telematica, febbraio 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Dena M. Abbott and Debra Mollen, “Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity: Outness, anticipated stigma, and well-being”, *The Counseling Psychologist* 46 no. 6 (2018): 685-707; Kathleen M. Goodman and John A. Mueller, “Invisible, marginalized, and stigmatized: Understanding and addressing the needs of atheist students”, *New Directions for Student Services* 125 (2009): 55-63; Elizabeth RA. Liddell, Christopher D. Stedman, “Nontheistic students on campus: Understanding and accommodating atheists, agnostics, humanists and others”, *Journal of College and Character* 12, no. 3 (2011): 1-8; Jesse M. Smith, “Creating a godless community: The collective identity work of contemporary American atheists”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 1 (2013): 80-99.

historical roots.<sup>14</sup> This translates into a loss of self-esteem and social difficulties of various kinds for young people, thus creating discomfort and alienation.<sup>15</sup> At this point, it is easy to understand the interest of *humanists'* associations in promoting a change in education systems, through a series of opinion campaigns and pressure on political decision-makers.

Before examining this aspect in detail, we must point out an absolutely new and perhaps unexpected element for many: the appearance, for the first time in history, of entire states where the majority of citizens are not religious. The most impressive case is that of Sweden: “a society – a markedly irreligious society – that was, above all, moral, stable, humane and deeply good”.<sup>16</sup>

Although the calculation of non-believers is particularly complicated and methodologically insidious, there are a large number of written works that help us to define the phenomenon with adequate accuracy. The main difference between the data concerns the number of those who do not believe in God (or a personal God) and the number of those who call themselves atheists. Phil Zuckerman states, at the end of a broad review of studies:

Between 500,000,000 and 750,000,000 humans currently do not believe in God. Such figures render any suggestion that theism is innate or neurologically based manifestly untenable. The nations with the highest degrees of organic atheism includes most of the nations of Europe, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Israel. However, atheism is virtually non-existent in most of Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Asia. Most nations characterised by high degrees of individual and societal security have the highest rates of organic atheism, and conversely, nations characterised by low degrees of

<sup>14</sup> Refer to, for example: in the Bible, Galatians 5:19-21; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Revelation 21:8; in the Qur'an, Sura IV An-Nisá' (The Women), 101; Sura VIII Al-'Anfâl (The Spoils of War), 12.

<sup>15</sup> In the United States: Amy I. McClure, “Becoming a Parent Changes Everything: How Nonbeliever and Pagan Parents Manage Stigma in the US Bible Belt”, *Qualitative Sociology* 40, no. 3 (2017): 331-352.

<sup>16</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the least religious nations can tell us about contentment* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).



individual and societal security have the lowest rates of organic atheism and the highest degrees of belief. High levels of organic atheism are strongly correlated with high levels of societal health, such as low poverty rates and strong gender equality. In many societies atheism is growing, however, throughout much of the rest of the world – particularly among the poorest nations with highest birth rates – atheism is barely discernible.<sup>17</sup>

The general picture that emerges from the studies is extremely interesting and requires analysis, also of an educational nature. The presence of the “atheist world” is not only confirmed by numerical data, but above all it has given good proof of itself, supporting the development of societies more attentive to human rights and more just.

However, the world of culture does not seem to have taken these aspects into serious consideration: if we go to a bookstore, we can hardly find specific locations and written works suitable for exploring this topic, which still appears to be completely specialised today. It is therefore significant to report the delay with which the communication methods typical of publishing production are being updated, which are evidently affected by belonging to the consolidated and traditional Christian episteme. For example, if we look for the place occupied by atheistic positions (once again understood in a broader sense) in the *Dewey Decimal Classification*, we notice the considerable under-representation of these issues. It should be noted that the DDC, which reached its 23rd edition in June 2011,<sup>18</sup> is the most widely used bibliographic classification in the world; it is used in more than 138 countries and by over 60 national bibliographies, translated into more than thirty languages. Bibliographic classification is organised by topics (called classes) which are listed hierarchically. The class dedicated to religion is 200 (Religion) and in particular sub-classes 210 (Natural Religion) and 211 (Conceptions of God): “the latter class includes: agnosticism, anthropomorphism, atheism, dualism, secularism, monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, rationalism (free

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<sup>17</sup> Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary rates and pattern”, in *The Cambridge companion to atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47-67.

<sup>18</sup> Melvil Dewey, *Dewey decimal classification and relative index*, Ed. 23, edited by Joan S. Mitchell (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online, 2011).

thought), skepticism, theism, humanism”. The note also indicates to “classify the overall works on God, on the sacred here”.<sup>19</sup>

The thinking of non-believers is thus effectively misrepresented and without any autonomy, because it is placed within the religious dimension and not outside it as it should logically be. Even in the classification of books, the ideas of non-believers essentially occupy the position historically occupied by heretics towards orthodoxy.

This specific location is not accidental and has a clear (albeit not obvious) explanation of a theological nature, that is, within Christianity. The life settings of non-believers are, in fact, considered as simple reactions to a misunderstood Christianity or to the deficient and contradictory testimony of the faithful, according to what the scripture says: “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for others”.<sup>20</sup> This second type of analysis of non-belief, developed after the Second Vatican Council, however, does not lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon because, once again, it makes it an internal event in the development of Christianity. In this regard, a renowned theologian wrote:

Why this outcome of a culture of Christian origin? We do not want to say, it is clear, that atheism and nihilism (let alone the return of the Sacred) are the result of Christian culture or are themselves Christian culture in crisis. A Christian culture remains authentic, not confused in any way with the theoretical foundations of atheism and nihilism. We want to say, however, that what happens to the West cannot fail to touch it, it is a negative aspect (often a vehicle of positivity) that it alone can heal, bringing it back to clarity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In so far as, starting from the 22nd edition (of 2003), the plan to downsize Christianity within the 200 class has been completed compared to other religions, this partial departure from nineteenth-century Eurocentrism of the work, as regards non-theistic positions, has not even been started. Certainly, this is not the only problem of DDC, which is also afflicted by geographical imbalances, but it is certainly a problem that is very indicative of the non-neutrality of the classification and communication of knowledge tools.

<sup>20</sup> Gospel of John 13:35.

<sup>21</sup> Giuseppe Maria Zanghi, “Una chiave di lettura dell’ateismo occidentale”, in *Il problema ateismo. Per una comprensione del fenomeno*, ed. V. Araújo et al (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1986), 214.

The conclusion is the logical corollary of these premises:

Atheism and nihilism, today, seem like insane derivations, pathologies of Christian culture, like growths on its trunk. If we want to heal these growths, the roots of the trunk must sink even more deeply into the Christian mystery.<sup>22</sup>

By treating the thought of non-believers this way, in fact defined as a pathology of Christianity (or a heresy), the constant presence of the materialistic/spiritualist dualism that runs through all human history, which has been attested with incredible theoretical clarity since ancient times and throughout the world, is completely obscured. Think, for example, of the Greek philosophers Protagoras of Kos, Protagoras of Abdera, Diagoras of Melos, Theodorus of Cyrene, and Euhemerus of Crete; or in ancient China of the third century BC of the work of Xun Zi; in ancient India of the sacred text, *The Bārhaspatya-sūtras*; or finally, during the affirmation of Islam, of the texts of Ibn al-Rawāndī in Persia (ca. 815-ca. 860).<sup>23</sup>

#### **HUMANISM AND NEW ATHEISM: CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF NON-BELIEF**

Humanists, as we have seen, have a fundamentally philosophical root and over time, starting from the first *Manifesto*, have developed initiatives aimed at both citizens and political power to promote their ideas. In particular, we can observe that in some states there has been greater activism (for example in the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Holland), but the issues are substantially the same: the associations of *humanists* promote cultural actions in the field of education and training, support human rights (and work for equal rights for the LGBTI population), demand a clear separation between state and churches, support ethical reflection and, in particular, bioethics to ensure everyone's freedom of choice.

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<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Maria Zanghi, "Una chiave di lettura dell'ateismo occidentale", 214-215.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Dale McGowan (ed.), *Voices of unbelief: documents from atheists and agnostics* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2012).

This vast area of cultural and social activities has been joined by other initiatives which are decidedly interesting and completely new compared to the history of non-belief, which has always been made up of individual personalities, of great intellectual depth, with few links between them if not of a cultural character. As we have already seen, towards the end of the *nineteenth* century, humanists, in the transformed social and political context, were able to discover the beauty and usefulness of being together. The establishment of the *British Humanist Association* in 1896 is an important example. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, there was a real leap in quality with regard to these forms of association, a kind of mutation of the experiences of the population of non-believers. In fact, initiatives were launched that offered support and assistance to people in difficulty, both in schools and in hospitals. The *Humanist* Chaplains thus covered a large gap in education and care services, providing specific and adequate help to non-believers.<sup>24</sup>

But that wasn't all. Secular ceremonies for a newborn, for weddings and funerals spread widely. The celebrants, together with the applicants, organised rituals that allowed non-believers to establish new relationships and to live a community life. This was an extremely important step, a trend that we can only see in recent years which will presumably have further developments. What non-believers are starting to do is to recognise themselves as such and not to hide or disguise their positions in life. In democratic systems this type of activity has developed greatly thanks to the Internet. The ability to connect online has facilitated exchanges, relationships and the establishment of online communities. Digital resources have made up for the shortage of paper and have distributed (especially in English) a large amount of materials, brochures, articles and even books relating to non-belief issues.<sup>25</sup> This type of presence in social life has rightly been called *atheism 2.0*, emphasising on the one hand the importance of the digital connection, and on the other

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<sup>24</sup> Refer to, for example Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network, <http://nrpsn.org.uk>; Humanist Chaplaincy Network, <http://www.humanistchaplains.org>.

<sup>25</sup> A few educational resources are of particular interest: cfr. the online test *How humanist are you?:* "Many people are humanists without even knowing it. If you are non-religious and look to science, reason, empathy, and compassion in order to live an ethical and meaningful life, please consider joining us". (<https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/how-humanist-are-you>).

the need to regain community dynamics which are currently the exclusive prerogative of religions.<sup>26</sup> According to this vision, community practices (including some aspects of rituality) are a human need that religions have satisfied, but of which they are not an essential ingredient.

A pragmatic and historical confirmation of this assumption can be found in the community experiences of Sherwin Wine, an American rabbi who founded *humanistic Judaism*, whose communities are still numerous and active.<sup>27</sup> In essence, he developed the cultural and community experience of the Jewish tradition, not excluding ethical and life provisions, as a cultural and non-religious system; that is, apart from faith and the affirmation of the existence of divinity.

Towards the end of the twentieth century another movement made its appearance, generally referred to as *New Atheism*, the last heir of the tradition of the rationalist and materialist cultural world (or rather, naturalist). Although it has been hastily considered a re-emergence of old anti-religious and anti-clerical themes, a closer look makes us understand that, in addition to the continuity with the Enlightenment and liberal tradition, there are decidedly original elements.

The positions of *New Atheism* are in fact clearly connected to scientific research and in particular to evolutionary biology, indeed to the resumption of evolutionist studies after the Second World War, to their strong theoretical consolidation and clarification (in particular with research on the DNA of fossil finds). In terms of public communication, compared to humanist experiences, the *new atheists* have had a huge media impact and have generated heated debates, real *cultural wars*, especially in the United States.

A very indicative example of this new course is the *Brights Movement*<sup>28</sup> which has placed itself vis-a-vis public opinion as a real flag of atheist pride. The issue of pride, that is, the desire for public recognition

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Alain de Botton, *Atheism 2.0*, at *TED Global 2011*, [https://www.ted.com/talks/alain\\_de\\_botton\\_atheism\\_2\\_0](https://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0); Alain De Botton, *Religion for atheists: a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Sherwin Wine, *Judaism beyond God: A radical new way to be Jewish* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> The Brights Movement, <http://www.the-brights.net>.

of one's existence and identity is of particular importance: it resumes what were, in North America, the development phases of African American minorities or gay movements, starting from the sixties. It is no coincidence that digital resources allocate a large space to individual biographies that allow you to get to know people and not just the inspiring principles of the movement.

It is precisely the biographies that provide the opportunity of exploring the movement of non-believers from a point of view that is not only theoretical but is filled with the feelings and passions of the individuals. An internal perspective that not only restores humanity to an often-fossilised debate on defining issues but allows us to understand the profound and existential reasons behind individual choices. Accustomed as we are to knowing the stories of conversion (that of Saint Paul comes to mind above all) we do not know the other side of the coin, nor do we make it known to students during their studies: the stories of deconversion, that is, the autonomous paths and personal research of the meaning of one's life. Using autobiographies as privileged historical sources, we can come into contact with the reasons for detachment from religion in a direct way, not mediated by the journalistic accounts or by the argumentative opinions of religious leaders. I propose a short list which is very significant both for the quality of the people and for appreciating the variety of positions in the field.

Dan Barker (born in 1949) was an American evangelical pastor; in the volume, *Losing Faith In Faith*,<sup>29</sup> he tells of his tormented path with great sincerity, a path that led him to abandon faith and engage in promoting the atheist ideal. This choice also upset his private life and his loved ones to the point that they could no longer accept his presence. In his "second life" Barker was deeply involved in public communication activities, especially as co-president (together with Annie Laurie Gaylor) of the *Free From Religion Foundation*,<sup>30</sup> an association that developed a wide range of digital resources, in particular of video clips that deal with a large number of topics weekly.

Another ex-religious who told his personal story was Anthony Kenny (born in 1931), a highly respected English philosopher, who in a small

<sup>29</sup> Dan Barker, *Losing faith in faith. From preacher to atheist* (Madison. Wis.: FFRF, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Free From Religion Foundation. <https://ffrf.org>.

but dense volume described the events that led him to shed the cassock of the Catholic church.<sup>31</sup> Kenny's agnosticism, as profound as it is well argued, does not lead to a tight anticlericalism (typical of some atheist positions) but rather to a careful consideration of how much religion can still be used, exploiting some (rationally selected) parts of its cultural tradition. A similar position has recently been expressed by a French philosopher, François Jullien who, in this regard, uses the term "resources of Christianity" to underline precisely the possibility (and usefulness) of extracting a few sections of the religious cultural heritage without necessarily making a declaration of faith.<sup>32</sup> Resources and not values, affirms Jullien, because the former are an expression of free choice while the latter are always fixed and dogmatic.

Equally interesting and decidedly engaging is the deconversion story of Richard Holloway (born in 1933), former bishop of Edinburgh of the Scottish Episcopal Church (within the Anglican communion). In his autobiography, we can discover all the humanity and passion of a man committed to improving society who cannot help but act and think in an increasingly autonomous way.<sup>33</sup> His choices led him to leave the religious life, dedicating himself to writing and lecturing, for which he is internationally known.

These three life stories are in a sense parallel stories, which start from a religious education experienced with conviction and constant search for truth. There are also three stories of apostasy, one of the most serious sins, both in Christianity and in the Islamic world.<sup>34</sup> It should not be forgotten that even today apostasy, and also simple blasphemy, is punished with the death penalty in some countries.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Kenny, *A Path from Rome: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Anthony Kenny, *Un affettuoso addio alla Chiesa* (Rome: Carocci, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> François Jullien, *Ressources du christianisme: mais sans y entrer par la foi* (Paris: L'Herne, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria: a memoir of faith and doubt* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Refer to, for example: in the Bible, Deuteronomy 13:7-11; in the Qur'an, Sura IV An-Nisâ' (The Women), 89.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed and updated analysis, cfr. The Freedom of Thought Report, <https://fot.humanists.international>, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 editions. Valuable proof of the difficulty and risk associated with the profession of atheism can be read in the autobiography of Waleed Al-Husseini, *Blasphémateur! Les prisons d'Allah* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2015).

Alongside the life stories of former religious individuals, there are others – no less interesting and involving – that concern ordinary people, who deal with a faith taught, transmitted, practiced but never explained and discussed. And even in these cases we note how difficult it is to get out of the educational and family context. The American actress, Julia Sweeney, describes it in an original and at times even hilarious way, especially in her theatrical work as rich in autobiographical notes as it has profound theoretical implications.<sup>36</sup>

Obviously we could continue on this biographical path with other interesting authors (such as Ken Follett, Bart Ehrman, Margherita Hack, etc.), but the fundamental point I think is already clear: the contemporary age, at least in some areas of the world, has allowed the emergence of a marginalised community, forced into silence, condemned even before listening to its reasons. From a more general point of view, this change can be interpreted as a re-emergence of paganism, or rather of some characteristics that were its own:<sup>37</sup> think of religious tolerance understood as a plurality of manifestations of the sacred, the separation between religion and political sphere, the supremacy of reason, the idea that the only reality is that which humanity finds itself living in this world.<sup>38</sup>

The authors mentioned so far can certainly be included in the “atheist world”, as well as other scholars of great interest (think of Hector Avalos<sup>39</sup>, Paul Cliteur<sup>40</sup> or Michel Onfray<sup>41</sup>). But the term *New Atheism*

<sup>36</sup> Julia Sweeney, *God said, “Ha!”* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997); Julia Sweeney, *Letting Go of God* (DVD, 130 minutes, Los Angeles, California: Five Sisters Productions, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. Maurizio Bettini, *Elogio del politeismo: quello che possiamo imparare oggi dalle religioni antiche* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2014); Riccardo Campa, *La rivincita del paganesimo: Una teoria della modernità* (Roma: Deleyva Editore, 2015); Luciano Pellicani, *Le radici pagane dell'Europa* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Pellicani, *Le radici pagane dell'Europa*, 163-164.

<sup>39</sup> Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Paul Cliteur, “A secular critique of religious ethics and politics”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, ed. John R. Shook and Phil Zuckerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 389-400; Paul Cliteur, “Biblical stories and religion as the root cause of terrorism”, in *The Root Causes of Terrorism: A Religious Studies Perspective*, ed. Mahmoud Masaeli and Rico Sneller (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 1-26.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Onfray, *Traité d'athéologie: physique de la métaphysique* (Paris: Grasset, 2005); Michel Onfray, *La puissance d'exister: manifeste hédoniste* (Paris: Grasset, 2006); Michel Onfray, *Le souci des*



actually connects to a particular and specific event: to the publication, in a few years, of some *bestsellers* that have relaunched the atheist idea in the context of global communication. The philosopher, Sam Harris,<sup>42</sup> the biologist,<sup>43</sup> Richard Dawkins, the philosopher of science, Daniel<sup>44</sup> Dennett and the journalist,<sup>45</sup> Christopher Hitchens, published a series of volumes between 2004 and 2007 which were quickly translated into many languages. Both individually, and considered in their mutual relationships, they relaunched the atheist proposal to the point of deserving a specially-made media label, that of the “Four Horsemen of Atheism”.<sup>46</sup> It was a very important media event, but above all the theoretical restructuring of a field of cultural and political action that seemed destined to end after the results of the experience of atheist and communist totalitarianisms and the fall of the Berlin wall. In different ways (and also with some debates), these four authors have reused the centuries-old cultural tradition of non-belief: think, for example, of the refutation of the rational proofs of the existence of God. The most original aspect, however, is the connection with new scientific acquisitions and, in particular, with evolutionism. Richard Dawkins is the main creator both as a biologist and as a populariser or better as a philosopher. It is good to point out the issue because it is of great importance and has a general meaning. From the *hard sciences* point of view, the issue of divinity per se does not exist and cannot be included in research programmes. For

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*plaisirs: construction d'une érotique solaire* (Paris: le Grand livre du mois, 2008); Michel Onfray, *L'ordre libertaire: la vie philosophique d'Albert Camus* (Paris: le Grand livre du mois, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: WW Norton, 2004); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Richard Dawkins, *A devil's chaplain: reflections on hope, lies, science, and love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the spell: religion as a natural phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Daniel C. Dennett, Alvin Plantinga, *Science and religion: are they compatible?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not great: how religion poisons everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Christopher Hitchens (ed.), *The portable atheist: essential readings for the nonbeliever* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2007); Christopher Hitchens, Douglas Wilson, *Is Christianity good for the world?* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> The same authors reprised this journalistic title when they published their 2007 conversation that had been broadcast online: Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation that Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2019).

the simple fact that the affirmation of the existence of divinity is an assumption that cannot be falsified in any way.<sup>47</sup> From this point of view, what Bertrand Russell claimed many years ago regarding the philosophical and theological affirmation of the existence of the divinity maintains its full validity: the burden of proof lies with those who affirm its existence, not with others. The famous metaphor of the teapot, also taken up by Dawkins, was also used in a creative and ironic way<sup>48</sup> to contrast the creationist positions in the school, founding the Pastafarian church, that is, of the worshipers of the *Flying Spaghetti Monster*.<sup>49</sup>

The stakes are very high, especially in the light of recent scientific discoveries that radically challenge the consolidated image of human evolution. Telmo Pievani explains:

Since the unilinear paradigm that interpreted our natural history as a succession of stages of progress has definitely fallen, the intricate diagram of the hominin species that in reverse connects the last surviving twig, that is *Homo sapiens*, with the common ancestor among us humans and the chimpanzees – who lived in Africa around 6 million years ago – is currently composed of at least twenty different species, each with its own taxonomic uniqueness and with a peculiar mosaic of adaptive characteristics. Not a march towards modern humanity, therefore, but an exuberant exploration of possibilities.<sup>50</sup>

The contribution of evolutionism does not consist in defining once and for all and “scientifically” the meanings of human experiences (some of which are definitely out of its scope) but rather in asking new questions

<sup>47</sup> Bertrand Russell, “Is There a God? [1952]”, in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 11: Last Philosophical Testament, 1943–68*, ed. John G. Slater, with the assistance of Peter Köllner (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 542–548.

<sup>48</sup> On the official website, in the Questions and Answers section, you can read: “Q: Is this a joke? A: It’s not a joke. Elements of our religion are sometimes described as satire and there are many members who do not literally believe our scripture, but this isn’t unusual in religion. A lot of Christians don’t believe the Bible is literally true – but that doesn’t mean they aren’t True Christians”. (<https://www.spaghettimonster.org/about/>).

<sup>49</sup> See Lionel Obadia, “When Virtuality Shapes Social Reality. Fake Cults and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster”, *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 8 (2015). <https://www.spaghettimonster.org/>

<sup>50</sup> Telmo Pievani, “Il non senso dell’evoluzione umana”, *MicroMega Alamanacco della Scienza* 1 (2012).

starting from its acquisitions. The first consists in the documented belief that *homo sapiens* is currently on earth due to a specific historical and geographical contingency, so that its survival is due to contextual factors that could have rewarded other species, even non-human ones.<sup>51</sup> There is no one who does not see how the idea of man's superiority and his insertion into a design that puts him at the peak (even hierarchical) of life may be shaken.

From a theoretical point of view, Stephen J. Gould proposed the idea of "Nonoverlapping Magisteria", that is, the exclusive competence of religion on the ultimate things, on the meaning of life and on morals, that of science on natural things.<sup>52</sup> The proposal, although advanced by an influential scientist, did not satisfy anyone and added itself to the other two logical options that history has presented to us: that of those who consider the search for *hard sciences* as the only possible way of knowing (position recently brilliantly expressed by Jerry Coyne<sup>53</sup>) and the alternative that considers scientific research insufficient and therefore it is necessary to impose an act of faith. Indeed, the geneticist, Francis Collins disputes the claim of science with these words:

Dawkins uses evolution as one of his strongest arguments against God's plausibility. Seeing as how Darwin came to his theory of evolution, insists the author, there was no longer any need to believe in a Designer or Creator. But for me, as for most of the wisest believers, Dawkins makes a categorical mistake trying to use scientific arguments to discuss the existence of the supernatural.<sup>54</sup>

The controversy raised by the writings of the new atheists quickly rose in tone, leading to accusations of dogmatism and fundamentalism.<sup>55</sup> However, if science cannot fully answer the questions of meaning,

<sup>51</sup> Telmo Pievani, *La vita inaspettata. Il fascino di un'evoluzione che non ci aveva previsto* (Milan: Cortina, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Stephen J. Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria", *Natural History* 106 March (1997): 16–22 and 60–62.

<sup>53</sup> Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> Francis Collins, *La genetica di Dio* (Rome: Lit, 2018), 34.

<sup>55</sup> Refer to, for example, Alister McGrath, Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

it nevertheless has the great advantage of asking questions and providing argumentative logics resulting from centuries of elaboration and improvements.<sup>56</sup> Human history clearly shows that these are “undecidable” issues on an argumentative level and that they have seen different and repeated opposite positions without having been able to arrive at a weighted decision in favour of one or the other (as, instead, happens regularly in the field of *hard sciences*, the claims of which are subject to obsolescence and replacement).

### THE EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT OF THE “ATHEIST WORLD”

A second aspect of evolutionism – which brings us to the centre of educational issues – can help us understand this controversial relationship between scientific/falsifiable statements and philosophical/interpretative statements. We all know from life experience that pain and suffering are inevitable. However, scientific research presents us with the pain of the innocent, of children, of the discovery of terrible childhood diseases with a new and disturbing awareness: that of their location within the biological development itself, therefore not exceptions or errors of nature, but even normal and essential biological elements of evolutionary mechanisms.

It is an absolutely shocking fact that challenges our conscience and that requires a standpoint. Umberto Veronesi, an internationally renowned oncologist, faces this issue head on in his autobiography:

In the same way as Auschwitz, for me cancer has become a proof of the non-existence of God. I developed this belief above all at the National Cancer Institute of Milan, where I occasionally spent time in the Pediatrics ward. How can you believe in Providence or divine love when you see a child plagued by this terrible illness, which is consuming him/her day after day before your eyes? Are there words in some holy book somewhere in the world, are there truths revealed that can alleviate the pain of parents? I don't think so, and I prefer silence, or the murmur of a “I don't know”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition pumps and other tools for thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

<sup>57</sup> Umberto Veronesi, *Il mestiere di uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), 18.

Vito Mancuso, Christian theologian and philosopher, deals with the theme of the suffering of the innocent in a completely different way:

Creation carries within itself the need for God to suffer more: for God to be sacrificed. Inside here, inside this absurd revelation, lies the absurdity of children who are born with a handicap. God's relationship with the world makes God take the shape of the lamb, gives rise to the figure of the lamb destined for sacrifice. God who is love, choosing to set the world and to set it free, becomes a sacrificial lamb... this absurdity is the only conceptual space to think about the absurdity of children born with a disability.<sup>58</sup>

In devotional written works the subject is treated in a much more explicit way. For example, in the reflection of the first Friday of June, in the *book of novenas*, we can read:

*The heart of Jesus exalts pain.* From the sin of the first man, life became suffering and thorns. (...) *The heart of Jesus loves pain.* He did not move away from pain but waited for it and embraced it with love. (...) What better example for us as sinners as we are and therefore worthy of every pain, we shy away from all that afflicts and torments us and we are hungry only for consolations and joys. *The heart of Jesus generously endures pain.* His entire life can be defined as a continuous cross. The prophet had rightly called him "the man of sorrows". (...) His heart wanted all these sufferings, embraced them heroically, supported them with admirable calm and sublime generosity. We learn from the Heart of Jesus to appreciate and love the Christian pain that admirably serves to sanctify, embellish and transform our souls.<sup>59</sup>

I don't think it's necessary to add other citations to document the opposite interpretations summarily presented here; I believe they are sufficient to support the rational undecidability of the theodicy issue, filled with a vast and embedded literature. If anything, the significant educational repercussions are worth highlighting. Given this controversy, both in this specific case of the presence of pain of the innocent, and

<sup>58</sup> Vito Mancuso, *Il dolore innocente. L'handicap, la natura e Dio* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 157.

<sup>59</sup> Tiziana e Roberto Bagato, and Raffaella e Roberto Gava (a cura di), *Il libro delle novene* (Conegliano: Editrice Ancilla, 1995), 551-552.

more generally on questions of meaning relating to human life, no one can claim the right to impose or teach only his/her specific truth:

Atheists don't presume to know for certain that there is no such an unquantifiable "entity". They merely –merely! – deny the claim of any human to be able to "know" it and to claim authority over other human as consequence.<sup>60</sup>

This last statement is in fact the central point of the educational proposals of contemporary atheism. The question that humanists and new atheists highlight, particularly in Richard Dawkins' works, is that children cannot be classified, from early childhood, as Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists or others, so as to be treated in different ways or to receive diversified lessons:

I think we should all wince when we hear a small child being labelled as belonging to some particular religion or another. Small children are too young to decide their views on the origins of the cosmos, of life and of morals. The very sound of the phrase "Christian child" or 'Muslim child' should grate like fingernails on a blackboard.<sup>61</sup>

These labels, although used and abused by educators and teachers (and also official statistics from ministries), only concern parents, but not their children. The school, therefore, must not be conceived as a place to form or strengthen the identities (religious or other, for example nationalist) of individuals being taught, but to train scientific thought and the free choice of individuals. The school is in fact the place of science and not of the dissemination of identities. After a long excursus on the relationship between coercion, violence and religious faith, Dawkins states: "Faith can be very, very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong".<sup>62</sup>

Although Dawkins speaks of it as a real "abuse of childhood", this does not follow the proposal for an atheist or anti-clerical education (as

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<sup>60</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Foreword", in *Against Religion: The Atheist Writings of H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. Susand T. Joshi (New York, NY: Sporting Gentlemen, 2010), VIII.

<sup>61</sup> Dawkins, *The God delusion*, 338.

<sup>62</sup> Dawkins, *The God delusion*, 308.

in the Marxist tradition), but rather for a plural and multireligious education that also includes the point of view of non-believers:

an atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education. And of course, we can retain a sentimental loyalty to the cultural and literary traditions of, say, Judaism, Anglicanism or Islam, and even participate in religious rituals such as marriages and funerals, without buying into the supernatural beliefs that historically went along with those traditions. We can give up belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage.<sup>63</sup>

In a similar perspective Daniel Dennett, interpreting the history of religions from an evolutionary point of view as any other natural phenomenon,<sup>64</sup> does not hesitate to ask for the study of all religions:

Here's my proposal (...): education on world religions for all of our children — in primary school, in high school, in public schools, in private schools and home schooling. So what I'm proposing is, just as we require reading, writing, arithmetic, American history, so we should have a curriculum on facts about all the religions of the world — about their history, about their creeds, about their texts, their music, their symbolisms, their prohibitions, their requirements. And this should be presented factually, straightforwardly, with no particular spin, to all of the children in the country. (...) That, I think, is maximal tolerance for religious freedom. As long as you inform your children about other religions, then you may — and as early as you like and whatever you like — teach them whatever creed you want them to learn. But also let them know about other religions. Now, why do I say that? Because democracy depends on an informed citizenship. Informed consent is the very bedrock of our understanding of democracy. (...) This is the way we treat people as responsible adults.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Dawkins, *The God delusion*, 344.

<sup>64</sup> Cfr: Dennett, *Breaking the spell*.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Let's teach religion — all religion — in schools*, TED2006, [https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_dennett\\_let\\_s\\_teach\\_religion\\_all\\_religion\\_in\\_schools](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_dennett_let_s_teach_religion_all_religion_in_schools), dal minuto 4:08.

The long quote is useful for evaluating the proposal in its entirety and in its close connection with the democratic culture of the school. It is a proposal that, regardless of the approval or disapproval of the non-religious thought that expresses it, is particularly suitable for the times we are living in. The pluralism of contemporary society is indeed posing many challenges to society and education systems. Classes that include children whose families express different, sometimes conflicting, faiths are increasingly frequent: a first response, in some European states, has been the replacement of the traditional teaching of religion as a mono-confessional subject with separate teachings according to the faiths declared by families. However, this model does not solve the problems, because it translates into classes that are divided according to the wishes of families, strengthening separate identities, increasing the sense of otherness, rather than that of inclusiveness and dialogue.<sup>66</sup>

However, a third model is taking its first steps, gathering both the suggestions (and criticisms) of *humanists*, and of non-Christian religions (in this specific case, of Muslims): I am referring to the recent and very interesting changes in the teaching of school religion in Norway, a real case study. In summary: in 1997 the subject *Christianity, Religion and Ethics (KRL)* was introduced in primary and secondary schools, focused on the Christian religion as a cultural heritage of the country, but open to the study of other religions. Non-believing parents, but also Muslim parents, started a dispute with the ministry of education immediately after, in which they denounced their clear discrimination. The problem reached the European bodies and in 2004 led to a ruling by the UN's *Human Rights Committees* and *the European Court of Human Rights*. The incident thus became part of legal discussions regarding discrimination of minorities and led, after a heated public discussion, to a review of the curriculum that began in 2008 with the new denomination *of Religion, Philosophies of Life – livssyn – and Ethics (RLE)*.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Francisco Díez de Velasco, "La enseñanza de las religiones en la escuela en España: avatares del modelo de aula segregada", *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 4 (2016): 277-306; Francisco Díez de Velasco, *Las religiones en un mundo global: retos y perspectivas: lección inaugural del curso académico 2000-2001 de la Universidad de La Laguna pronunciada el 29 de septiembre de 2000* (Universidad de La Laguna: Servicio de Publicaciones, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Bengt-Ove Andreassen, "Religion education in Norway: Tension or harmony between human rights and Christian cultural heritage?", *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 49, no. 2 (2013): 137-164.



A specific area of this teaching (*philosophy, ethics and views on life/humanism - livssynshumanisme*), meets the demands of a pluralism really open to all positions of life, therefore both to the conceptions of life of believers and non-believers:

The main subject area philosophy, ethics and views on life/humanism (*livssynshumanisme*) focuses on selected philosophers from a number of epochs and from several regions of the world. The main subject area also looks into ethical concepts and argumentation models and forms the basis for making one's own opinions and choices. This main subject area focuses on humanism in a historical and contemporary perspective. Continuity and tensions within the humanism tradition are key elements.<sup>68</sup>

England has followed a similar path. It should be remembered that religious education is not part of the National Curriculum, but is entrusted to the mediation of local bodies (*Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, SACRE*): "religious education aims to strengthen students' knowledge (learning about religions), to develop their critical thinking, and to link what they learn with their own experience (learning from religions)".<sup>69</sup> Since 2004, through the adoption of a national reference document, some points have been clarified, among which the inclusion of non-religious conceptions of life appears fundamental. Also, in this case, the contribution of humanist associations was significant, starting from the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. Although their opinion campaigns have only partially affected the legislation, they have had the great merit of bringing to light a series of very important issues regarding education and respect for people's rights.<sup>70</sup>

What derives from these initiatives, as well as from the underlying theoretical proposals, is that in education it is necessary to start from "questions" and not from "ready-made answers", in particular those provided by the parents' religion. Religions, both Abrahamic and other

<sup>68</sup> Andreassen, "Religion education in Norway", 153.

<sup>69</sup> Luce Pépin, *Teaching about religions in European school systems: policy issues and trends* (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2009), 27-28.

<sup>70</sup> Stephen G. Parker, "Secularists, Humanists and religious education: religious crisis and curriculum change in England, 1963-1975", *History of Education* 42, no. 2, (2013): 222-256.

numerous forms of faith present throughout the world, cannot be the starting point of a pedagogical reflection for the simple reason that they represent some of the possible (and often conflicting) answers to the questions of meaning that humanity has posed itself throughout its history: where we come from, what is our role on earth, what is our destiny, and so on. Starting from the questions means that the school, in the humanist perspective, has the opportunity to present the answers that have historically been elaborated by religions, philosophies, and pragmatic behaviours of the populations. This way of dealing with existential issues allows us to exercise critical thinking, using all the cultural resources available in order to understand the world.

It is important to note that in the picture outlined so far, a few other voices also appear that, although belonging to the secular area, do not wish to position themselves in opposition, not even in a dialectical way, with the churches. This more conciliatory vision is offered in particular by the proposal of *Modern Stoicism*, a movement that aspires to a contemporary and updated vision of the great legacy of Stoic culture.<sup>71</sup> In groups many positions, both atheistic and spiritual, which find acceptance precisely because of the pagan ideals of respect for the different conceptions of divinity.

The non-exclusion of spiritual aspects is at the same time a characterising trait of a part of the current secular thought and also a specific trait of the ancient culture of paganism. The claim to an individual's own religiosity, understood as a vital impetus towards humanity and the earth, is a decidedly interesting aspect and constitutes going beyond the binary logic between believers and non-believers, albeit in the precise clarification of their respective differences.<sup>72</sup>

In this context, it is understandable that other issues can also be addressed by moving away from a transmissive and normative teaching, to leave room for reflection and dialogue. It is the case, above all, of the moral education that non-believing families want to be set up in a way that

<sup>71</sup> Modern Stoicism, Home of Soic Week, Stoicism Today and Stoicon, <https://modernstoicism.com>. Cfr. Massimo Pigliucci, *How to be a stoic. Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

<sup>72</sup> In this regard, refer to Duccio Demetrio's excellent theorisation, *La religiosità della terra: una fede civile per la cura del mondo* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2013).

respects their conceptions. However, the request for a “pedagogical continuity” does not derive from this, with the thought of families in mind, as usual. Rather, it is requested that in school education children can “also” find the position of their family: that they can, in essence, reflect themselves in a common educational discourse and not feel excluded and marginalised.<sup>73</sup>

The new atheist movements emphasise that a moral education based on human experiences and rationality is not only possible, but also desirable.<sup>74</sup> They also highlight that it is necessary to start from the awareness of the identical situation shared by every living being, human and animal species, united by suffering and pain, but also by feelings of justice and compassion which – as Frans de Waal taught us – are not only the prerogative of humans, as “superior beings”.<sup>75</sup> This is a point of great conflict with monotheistic religions that consider this approach absolutely harmful to the individual and to societies.<sup>76</sup>

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that, although the positions expressed by *Humanism* and *New Atheism* have not been studied very much in the historical-educational context, they represent one of the most innovative aspects of the current debate on the purpose of education both at school and in the family. These are movements that are not only academic or theoretical research, but they represent a varied social

<sup>73</sup> Dale McGowan (ed.), *Parenting beyond belief: on raising ethical, caring kids without religion* (New York: American Management Association, 2007); Dale McGowan et al, *Raising freethinkers: A practical guide for parenting beyond belief* (New York: American Management Association, 2009); Nel Noddings, *Educating for intelligent belief or unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); Nel Noddings, *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: Harper, 2009); Richard Holloway, *Godless morality: keeping religion out of ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> Frans de Waal, *The bonobo and the atheist: in search of humanism among the primates* (New York - London: W.W. Norton, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> Refer to the pope’s recent pronouncement: “At the heart of biblical faith is God’s love, his concrete concern for every person, and his plan of salvation which embraces all of humanity and all creation, culminating in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without insight into these realities, there is no criterion for discerning what makes human life precious and unique. Man loses his place in the universe, he is cast adrift in nature, either renouncing his proper moral responsibility or else presuming to be a sort of absolute judge, endowed with an unlimited power to manipulate the world around him” (Encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei* of the Supreme Pontiff Francis - Jorge Mario Bergoglio to the bishop priest and deacons consecrated persons and the lay faithful on faith, 9 June, 2013, paragraph n. 54, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html)).

sample which in some countries, moreover, is no longer a small minority, but clearly affects public opinion and even parts of the political agenda. All this seems to indicate that the movements of the “atheist world” are also destined to be an integral part of the debates on educational issues in the future. In particular, because the positions they expressed – for their constant anchoring to scientific culture and rational dialogue – seem very suitable for facing the current challenges of globalisation and the tensions that are running through contemporary societies.

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