MOZRIK 2003/1 CLOAKS OF SOPHIA

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The Historical Message of Virtuous Atheism

Or the Christian-Atheist Alliance against Fundamentalism

It happens from time to time that a Christian and an Atheist develop a friendship in which they realise, with mutual surprise, significant spiritual affinity. It can even seem to them as if their spiritual growth has been driven by mutually related motives and sources. On the other hand both of them realise that within their own traditions there are people with whom they never felt the same kind of relatedness and closeness.

MONSIEUR DE WOLMAR

- ROUSSEAU'S VIRTUOUS ATHEIST

When Julie, the wife of Jean DE WOLMAR, finds out after eight years of marriage that her husband is a non-believer, an Atheist, she is consternated. Julie – who is one of the main protagonists in ROUSSEAU'S novel *Julie or the New Heloise* – admits, however, at the same time that her husband is a man of sound and exemplary morality.

He is deeply aware of the equality of all humans, cultivates an intensive passion towards his wife and is known for astonishing impartiality and fairness in decision-making. He is a conscious administrator of his property, a faithful husband and in many other ways he is a moral example to his wife who considers him a visionary of how to incorporate virtue into everyday life. Julie remarks even that he lives a virtuous life not because of fear of punishment for his sins or a reward for his merits (as many believers do), but simply because he recognises virtue as correct and vital.

ZIGO: THE PHILOSOPHICAL GENEALOGY OF MONSIEUR DE WOLMAR

The Slovak philosopher *Milan Zigo* draws our attention to the ideological roots of the novel character of Jean de Wolmar. It is to be noted that the world of thought of Rousseau and de Wolmar are not completely identical. Rousseau was rather a Deist, whereas de Wolmar is an Atheist (or a confessing sceptic, at least). Rousseau's determined quest for tolerance, freedom of growth and expression gave rise to several serious conflicts with his former philosophical friends, which at last contributed to the deterioration of his mental health.

Even if he recognised and accepted some of the serious points of critique of religion presented by the Encyclopaedists he realised that some of the critics of religion were equally intolerant towards religious people as fanatic religious leaders were intolerant towards non-believers. Thus Rousseau was aware not only of the existence of a "virtuous non-believer", but also of the existence of a "virtuous Christian."

The violent attacks on religion on the part of the Holbach Clique were to Rousseau just another form of genuine intolerance – this time with anti-religious overtones. For this reason when shaping the character of Monsieur DE Wolmar he did not present him as a posthumous child of the anti-religious libertines or iconoclasts, but rather as one of the seekers of individual virtue and wisdom. In this sense DE Wolmar is a spiritual son of Michel DE Montaigne rather than of Baron D'Holbach. As Zigo observes, DE Wolmar does

not mock religion, does not offer or force his attitudes on his wife, but with the light of reason examines what is authentic, virtuous and good.

RELIGIOUS AND ANTI-RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

The fact that intolerance is not linked with one specific type of *Weltanschauung* has been proved, too many times, by history. Speaking about a tolerant and virtuous Atheist could have seemed utterly sardonic during the atheist totality of Enver Hoxha in Albania or during the antichurch purges in the Leninist and Stalinist Soviet Union. But it might have seemed equally tragicomic to speak of religious tolerance during the religious wars of the post-Reformation period or during the spree of witch trials.

Fanaticism, whether religious or anti-religious, presents the observer with an interesting issue. It has been mentioned that both an understanding Christian and an understanding Atheist are able to find common ground – but equally a fanatic Christian and a fanatic Atheist cannot complain about a lack of mutually shared elements (as to methodology at least).

Through the deeply respectful relationship between Julie and Jean DE WOLMAR, ROUSSEAU tries to pinpoint that an open, tolerant and virtuous Christian can learn substantial things from her or his Atheist counterpart and vice versa. Jean and Julie explore together new ways of approaching the education of children, just treatment of employees, love for the neighbour and last but not least they construct together the virtuous relationship between Julie and the lover of her youth, whom her husband generously incorporates into the family, knowing about the depth of the still extant emotional bond between the two.

EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA VIRTUS

Jean DE WOLMAR is from a certain perspective a classenemy to his wife. It is, however, her love for him, her common sense and her deeper religious intuition that keep her eyes open to see his essential search for virtuous life. Julie herself sees virtue as a religious value (especially after the love-affair of her youth) and thus faces a paradox regarding how to understand her husband from the religious point of view. At first, her heart is filled with great pain and grief (upon learning that he is an Atheist) as she has to detach herself from the image of her husband she has produced.

For a number of Christians people like Monsieur DE Wolmar fall into the class of *faithless* and are to be regarded with pity. For them a virtuous Atheist is a *contradictio* in adiecto and if they knew the secret thoughts of Madame DE Wolmar – that her husband in fact could be a moral example to many of them – they would be scandalised. For them not only the maxim *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation), but also the concept of *extra Ecclesiam nulla virtus* (outside the Church there is no virtue) seems utterly plausible.

A virtuous Atheist appears to many Christians as someone who is virtuous for profit or for another non-ethical reason. The virtue in an Atheist context is thus viewed as CLOAKS OF SOPHIA MOZAIK 2003/1

a diplomatic veneer that is supposed to hide true motivation – virtue as an instrument of conspiracy. For many Christians it even seems absurd that an Atheist should pursue an inner search for virtuous life, as she or he is not bound by the admonitions of the Decalogue, by the concept of sin and does not risk eternal fire in hell. But in fact this is what astonishes Madame DE Wolmar the most in connection with her husband – he is not virtuous because of fear and he does not avoid evil because of an award. He simply recognises the intrinsic value of virtue as such and goes for it.

ROUSSEAU VERSUS THE CONCEPT OF THE EVIL OR STUPID PRIEST

The idea that institutional clergy is the most dangerous element in the whole religious system of lies is as old as religion itself. Resolute critics of religion often regarded clerics and the religious as the epicentre of religious corruption. The priest and monk as the symbol of vice, cruelty or stupidity, rather than virtue, is the main protagonist in many literary works dealing with religion. Even if the figure of the cruel and complacent Great Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the pervert (and in fact Atheist) bishop in De Sade's 120 Days of Sodom or the lascivious priests and monks in Balzac's Contes droletiques are presented in very different contexts, they all carry the notion of a consecrated person being an example of vice. In other words – they embody the abyss of lies between the Schein (pretension) and the Sein (reality).

Even if the history of the Church presented the critics of religion with enough inspiration for their vicious-cleric-characters, according to ROUSSEAU the criticism of these should go hand in hand with the recognition of the fact that this is just one side of the coin. ROUSSEAU, to whom the criticism of church corruption appealed, acknowledged that a fierce attack on the whole of religion and on the whole of clergy will not bring us much farther than a blind rejection of Atheism on the part of fundamentalist Christians.

VIRTUOUS ATHEIST AND VIRTUOUS PRIEST DINING TOGETHER

his Confessions Rousseau observes that "the fanaticism of the Atheists and the fanaticism of the zealots are connected by their inherent intolerance." When he recalls in *The* Reveries of the Solitary Walker some of his former Encyclopaedist friends and their pathological hate against religion he denotes them as "haughty dogmatists that could not bear without anger that someone had an opinion different from theirs." And in Emil or on Education he maintains that a "virtuous priest" is a reality that should be taken seriously by non-believers.



ZIGO demands that in return the reality of a "virtuous Atheist" should also be taken seriously in religious circles. If one imagines with Kierkegaardian fantasy that a dinner was organised at the house of the *Savoyard Vicar* (Rousseau's character) in which Jean de Wolmar and William of Baskerville (the Franciscan from Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose) would take part, it is difficult to imagine that the dinner would end with a hateful conflict. The dynamics of such a dinner would most probably prove to be diametrically different from a feast where the Great Inquisitor would host Atheist fanatics.

VIRTUOUS ATHEISM AND ECUMENISM

Even if historical Atheism might seem to have no reason to attempt to participate in the ecumenical movement striving for the unity of the Church, still there are areas where individual Atheist thinkers can contribute with their treasures to the discussion on values essential for the dialogue between churches. A virtuous Atheist might be one who observes the ecumenical dialogue from outside but some of her or his findings – resulting from a sincere quest for harmonious development of humankind – can prove vital in the examination of the deepest roots of human needs and cravings. Michael Novak observes that the sincerity of Jean-Paul Sartre's search for authenticity and responsibility contributed largely to the awareness of his own Christian vocation.

Thus remaining deaf to the *voice of the virtuous Atheist* might be an impoverishment for Christians who in their quest for Christian unity try to discern between the essentials of their traditions and secondary priorities and rules produced along the way. In this way the painful abyss between Christianity and Atheism could be transformed into a platform of dialogue where former archenemies look for mutual enrichment. Who knows what fruits such a dialogue could produce?

Suggested Reading

ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, Confessions. Oxford, 2000. ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, Emile or on Education. New York, 1979. ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, The Reveries of the Solitary Walker. New York, 1979. ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, Júlia alebo nová Heloisa. Bratislava, 1982.

Zigo Milan, Myslienkovy rodokmeñ Jána de Wolmar, Rousseauovho "Cestného ateistu". Bratislava, 2003. (unpublished lecture)

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