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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# The Final Sentence of Section #151 in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*

Nick Overduin

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Adorno's post-World War II statement that 'No spirit exists', posited at the conclusion of an essay, provides a crucial window into considerations of modern atheism as well as contemporary anatheism. His utterance occurs historically about half-way between Nietzsche's infamous declaration of the death of God and these two modern phenomena. His short sentence draws some of its meaning from its immediate context (his essay against occultism), but also from its broader context, the Hegelian notion of the World Spirit. Most significantly, though, it is a highly prescient insight, baldly formulated, and arguably more far-reaching than the madman's 'God is dead.' References are made to various thinkers in the past two hundred years to elucidate some of the possible nuances of Adorno's statement. Both modern atheism and contemporary anatheism can be illuminated as pivoting around Adorno's shrewd observation.

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In the concluding sentence of Section #151 of *Minima Moralia*, in an essay approximately six pages long and consisting of nine different *Theses against Occultism*, the philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) says crisply 'No spirit exists.'

This, compared to Adorno's more usual style, is a surprisingly straightforward final sentence. Coming from a thinker who is normally nuanced, frequently using dialectical manoeuvres, the truncated elegance makes the utterance unforgettable. His previous six pages had analyzed the cultural phenomena of fortune-tellers, soothsayers, astrologists, horoscopes, spells, superstitions, palm-reading, messages from the dead, prophecies, and other variations of occultism, but had not yet ossified into such a blunt condemnation. Hints of the essay's final conclusion do appear, as when Adorno grumbles that the supposed spirits might simply be 'ill-mannered hobgoblins with whom it is better to break off all dealings' (2005: 241). He also refers to 'the inanity of what is fobbed off as "spirit"' (2005: 240). But the last sentence, a declarative 'No spirit exists', remains impactful for the reader. The statement is arguably even more impactful than Nietzsche's infamous 'God is dead' (1974: 181) since the disappearance of a Supreme Sentient Being is perhaps not as pertinent as the possible erosion of the spirit world in general.

## A) Introduction: The immediate context

It is important, first of all, to place this statement and these nine *Theses Against Occultism* within the larger context of this book as well as Adorno's thought in general. Although *Minima Moralia* from 1951 is not Adorno's

largest book, its subtitle – *Reflections from Damaged Life* – already indicates its important place in the development of his overall philosophy. He began *Minima Moralia* during the latter part of World War II, and the main themes of his *magnum opus* in 1966, *Negative Dialectics*, are clearly visible. He was a neo-Marxist – if crude labels are ever advisable – in that he continued to value Karl Marx's appreciation of the visceral realities of daily life while being profoundly scarred by the many political experiments conducted so disastrously in the name of Marxism. The small essay on *Theses Against Occultism* consistently advances this neo-Marxist valorization of social reality. Adorno critiques occultism mostly because it indirectly increases humanity's oppression and devastation. 'Facts which differ from what is the case only by not being facts are trumped up as a fourth dimension... It thus reinforces conformism.' (2005: 242). If one wishes to undermine that fourth dimension decisively, it becomes helpful to finally pronounce: No spirit exists.

The declaration by Friedrich Nietzsche's madman in 1882 that 'God is dead' is more well-known than Adorno's 'No spirit exists', but is arguably less sweeping. The notion of God can refer too much to a particular deity within some cultural tradition, or can refer to a broader conception of gods in general inherited from religions in general. Nevertheless, God could be dead while various sorts of spirits could still be said to exist. People might, in other words, give up on the god concept without giving up on the spirit concept. Adorno takes this further step, a pneumanatology rather than a mere theothanatology, some seventy years after Nietzsche. He is not simply rebuffing the notion of a God or gods, nor even a plurality of spirits, as if each alleged Apparition was worth debunking one by one. Instead, Adorno's sabotage seems directed at the entire realm of spirituality itself: No *spirit* exists.

This article concentrates on this short sentence for two main reasons. First, the recent rise of the more strident versions of modern atheism may have an important precursor in this pithy Adornoesque observation. Popular books like Sam Harris' 2004 *The End of Faith*, Richard Dawkin's 2006 *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchen's 2007 *God is not Great* represent a change in tone from the earlier emergence of post-Darwinian atheism in figures like Thomas Huxley, Bruno Bauer, A.J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, and others who may have wished to create safe space for atheistic thinking more than radical denunciation of all believing trajectories. Adorno's line erupts historically betwixt these two manifestations of atheism. Secondly, the simultaneous rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of contemporary anatheism, along with all its versions of mysticism and appreciation for spirit more than doctrine, presents an interesting counter-point to these modern versions of atheism, and thus also finds its broader matrix within this earlier perfunctory type of dismissal. A classic text in anatheism is Richard Kearney's 2011 *Returning to God after God*. Another example is John Caputo's 2013 *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, and Peter Rollins 2011 *Insurrection*. A foundational philosophical reflection within the orbit of anatheism is Charles Taylor's 2007 *A Secular Age*. Readers who wish to understand this intriguing simultaneity, the intertwined development of both modern atheism and the concurrent anatheism, can benefit from analyzing Adorno's three simple words and reflecting on the prescient timing of his publication in 1951.

### B) Exploring some immediate implications

What, after all, could Adorno's sentence mean? The reader might recall that Adorno is definitely not a positivist or empiricist. His confidence that there is no spirit is not interwoven with a corresponding glorification of materialism or scientism. People dealing with Adorno's broader corpus recognize that he, as a consummate neo-Marxist, routinely refuses to sanction the status quo, as if the present material world is the only reality that exists. The manner in which Adorno bristles against these flat types of epistemology is especially evident in his most mature 1966 work, *Negative Dialectics*, as well as his 1956 *Against Epistemology*. To the contrary, Adorno regards scientific and materialistic angles as a bourgeois capitulation to the prevalence of oppression and exploitation. Positivism, in his view, embraces facticity only because it does not wish to face the dismal way in which the factoids have been systemically arrayed against the powerless and the peniless, drawing into its vortex not only the managers of corporations and the rulers of both democracies and dictatorships, but also the compromising philosophers and epistemologists.

Adorno's statement is also not intrinsically connected to merely societal forms of despair. He does not introduce his three-word utterance with an emotional adjective such as *Alas*. Instead, as a philosopher, he is investigating a curious feature of mass culture known as occultism and he ends that particular essay by simply making a broad claim: No spirit exists. If he had sounded distraught by

this conclusion, as if it were a bleak prospect, it would be a different kind of statement. Instead, it now seems to be something readers are simply encouraged to confront in some sort of an honest manner: The realm of the spirit world is not substantial; there is no such thing as a spirit.

Though not as theatrical as the madman's theothanatology, this restrained declaration of pneumathanatology is potentially more comprehensive.

### C) The broader Hegelian context

The most important background context for Adorno's statement is likely the Hegelian philosophy of the World-Spirit, or *Weltgeist* (Hegel and Friedrich 1977). Adorno eventually accuses the occultists of an empty form of mysticism functioning as 'the *enfant terrible* of the mystical moment in Hegel' (2005: 244). Nevertheless, Hegel himself, according to Adorno, is logically at fault for such perversions in popular culture. 'The [Hegelian] doctrine of the existence of the Spirit, the ultimate exaltation of bourgeois consciousness, [...] bore teleologically within it the belief in spirits, its ultimate degradation' (2005: 244). In his later book *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno frequently follows Marx in critiquing Hegel for betraying his own clarion call that philosophy needs to be immersed in detail. In Hegel's case, argues Adorno, the execution of this call became 'caught in a tautology: as by prearrangement, [Hegel's] kind of immersion in detail brings forth that spirit which from the outset was posited as total and absolute' (1973: 303). It becomes easy to imagine how elements of popular culture, e.g. occultists throughout history, could then invoke various 'spirits' that are ultimately as conformist as that overarching and continuous *Weltgeist*. Even Hegel's own lofty conception, after all, could sometimes masquerade temporarily as a mere *Volksgeist* or a *Zeitgeist* or perhaps even more ominously, as a 'great man'. Adorno is wary about this *Weltgeist*:

In the concept of the world spirit, the principle of divine omnipotence was secularized into the principle that posits unity, and the world plan was secularized into the relentlessness of what happens. The world spirit is worshipped like the deity, a deity divested of its personality and of all its attributes of providence and grace (1973: 305).

In his concept of *Weltgeist*, Hegel was trying to provide a unity between the abstract and the real, the universal and the particular. But any such grand synthesis, for Adorno, is potentially demeaning in the face of humanity's constant acute suffering. For Adorno, instead, what one should critically notice when following the Hegelian call to immerse oneself in detail is that 'The primacy of totality over phenomenality is to be grasped in phenomenality, which is ruled by what tradition takes for the world spirit; it is not [contrary to Hegel] to be taken over as divine from this tradition which is Platonic in the broadest sense' (1973: 304). Hegel, in other words, capitulates to devastation when concocting a *Weltgeist*.

Adorno's later book, then, eventually critiques Hegel with yet another succinct version of his earlier line that

no spirit exists: 'The world spirit is', concedes Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, 'but it is not a spirit. It is the very negativity, rather, which Hegel shifted from the spirit's shoulders upon the shoulders of the ones who must obey it, the ones whose defeat doubles the verdict that the difference between them and objectivity is what is untrue and evil' (1973: 304). Given this binary impasse between atheism and anatheism, Adorno would veer over to the camp of atheism (though Christopher Brittain makes intriguing counter-arguments in his 2010 *Adorno and Theology*).<sup>1</sup> But for Adorno, both camps can easily participate in a false consciousness. Adorno is not impressed when one occultist says 'I believe in astrology because I do not believe in God' (2005: 239). Rather, this kind of atheism is merely an example of monotheism 'decomposing into a second mythology' (2005: 238, 239). Atheism thriving within occultism can become merely another version of the oppression that has 'congealed into a cultural, institutional and societal norm that may tend to support curiously retrograde formulations' (Anonymous Reviewer: 2020).

#### D) And yet: Why the necessity of this blunt statement?

It is clear, then, that Adorno's antipathy towards the various spirits of the occultists has an anti-Hegelian texture in its origin. And yet, why would it be necessary, in an essay attacking occultism, to end with this type of blunt declaration that no spirit exists? Have not enough other people said something like it, though more verbose, both in earlier and later years? Reflecting on a faith in the realm of spirit which he lost near the end of his long clergy career, Archbishop Richard Holloway says 'We fed the hungry and visited those in prison and clothed the naked and tried to share our goods with the poor. But the dead did not rise, the lame did not walk, the blind did not see' (2013: 223).

There are probably many ways to say that no spirit exists. When he reflected on the celebration of the Catholic Mass, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas noted the absence of any alleged spirit by saying, for example, that 'The host was simply dough' (1987: 17). Centuries of debate about the spirit of transubstantiation are thereby annulled; the spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit, was not present in the elements at all. As Pastor Reinhold Niebuhr noted one hundred years ago while ministering in his troubled American parish after the British Parliament had revised the Prayer Book: 'How can anyone in the year of our Lord 1927 be seriously exercised over the problem of the "real presence" in the Eucharist?' (1980: 124).

In his autobiography, Malcolm Muggeridge says 'I was born into a dying, if not already dead, civilisation, whose literature was part of the general decomposition... from Pascal's *Pensées* to Robinson's *Honest to God*... a Gadarene descent *down which we all must slide*...' (1972: 15. My emphasis). Is this global and community-wide descent not simply the slide towards Adorno's mid-century conclusion that no spirit exists? Adorno's statement lands, chronologically, 'within a genealogy of secularism that links the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first' (Anonymous Reviewer: 2020). His sentiment exists midway between Nietzsche/Schopenhauer on the one hand and

Dawkins/Kearney on the other hand. Readers may recall that Adorno was often frustrated by Walter Benjamin's abiding fascination with theological and mystical thematics, replete with their attendant spirits. 'As Adorno has remarked, mysticism and enlightenment have been found together under the conditions of the twentieth century for "one last time" in Benjamin...' (1987: 184). Benjamin's interest in the realm of spirit, as is well known, irritated Adorno. But for Benjamin, according to Leon Wieseltier, 'his decidedly unmystical friend [Adorno] was his only peer' (Benjamin, *Illuminations*. 1968: x). So perhaps they were still both concerned about spirits, but in different ways, one more keen and one more leery.

The theologians who had talked the most about spirits arguably lost their credibility long before Adorno came on the scene to utter his three-word dismissal, even if they did not become as vociferous in their apologetics as the countering atheist movement of today. In his 1877 essay promoting Darwin, 'The Pre-Darwinite and Post-Darwinite World', Daniel Conway Moncure says about the Christians that 'a tribe so mistaken about *visible* nature, must naturally have been mistaken about *invisible* nature. The people find that they have been deceived by their religious teachers – deceived about the sky, about the earth, and their own origin – and they imbibe a suspicion of those teachers. An atmosphere of suspicion settles around every church and priest.'<sup>2</sup> Adorno's three-word judgment simply extends that suspicion, right after World War II, to its final destination and implies that his denunciation could gradually have a universal impact affecting every kind of religiosity, even the type that has no priests: No spirit exists.

There are, to be sure, still thinkers who go to great lengths to articulate positions that circumvent this Adornoesque blockade. For this reason, the conversation about anatheism is relevant in this essay. Peter Rollins, as an example of the anatheistic style of thinking, says in his 2011 *Insurrection* that 'in Christianity, God is an immanent transcendence' (2011: 124). But what could such a statement, apparently drawing spirits into everyday life, actually mean? It is hard to imagine an explication of that sentence; instead, the substance of the sentence evaporates into the aether, quite beyond the realm of elucidation.<sup>3</sup> A similar manoeuvre is found in the Catholic theologian Hans Küng when he attempts to signal a distinction between two types of Heaven: "*Resurrection* means a life that bursts through the dimensions of space and time in God's invisible, imperishable, incomprehensible domain. *This is what is meant by "heaven" – not the heaven of the astronauts, but God's heaven. It means going into reality, not going out*' (1980: 678. Küng's emphases). Again, what could actually be the meaning of such a sentence? What is the actual referent of going into reality instead of out of it? And how can there be two different types of heaven, one belonging to God and another one accessible to astronauts? Immanent transcendence, and a heaven beyond astronauts, for many readers, will sound like mere word games. Such phrases evoke the concept of a spirit without actually revealing the spirit. Adorno clears the deck for all his readers by simply declaring, apparently without hesitation, that there are no spirits.



### E) Comparing Adorno's sentence to Schopenhauer's insights

What Adorno provides here, and what readers might need in the face of various types of obfuscation, is the clarity of the much earlier Arthur Schopenhauer: 'To call the world God,' said Schopenhauer in the early 1800s, 'is not to explain it but merely to enrich the language with a superfluous synonym for the word world. It comes to the same thing whether you say "the world is God" or "the world is the world"...' (1970: 217). Adorno, in this comparable Schopenhauerian trajectory, is emphasizing that the concept of a spirit is as empty of meaning as a superfluous synonym; the term does not actually add anything to human conversation. Schopenhauer, as is well known, disliked Hegel's philosophy of a progressive *Weltgeist* even more intently than Adorno. Schopenhauer favored, instead, an omnipresent and impervious *Weltwille*, a pessimistic version of fateful reality that would have more in common with the eventual prominence of Darwinism. As Schopenhauer once said, 'the world itself is its own universal Last Judgement' (1970: 140).

Schopenhauer's impatience with tautological spirit-language can also be directed, perhaps, against the more modern movement of anatheism, since it is ultimately a deeply-rooted revival of mysticism. Anatheism could be criticized for putting new wine into old wineskins. But as Jesus might then respond: Why would people engage in such activity? The wine, according to Jesus, will burst the bag (Mark 2: 22). Why do theologians try to rejuvenate god concepts? Why not use completely other concepts? *No spirit exists*. As Bataille says, 'No one [can] pose the problem of religion if he starts out from arbitrary solutions not allowed by the present *climate of exactitude*' (Habermas, 1987: 101).<sup>4</sup> Adorno wishes to say, precisely and without equivocation, that there are no spirits. The skepticism might backfire on him, as this article will also reflect momentarily. But the Adornoesque desire to honor the exactitude is there, because anything less would endorse continued oppression by those who monopolize power within the realm of the alleged spirits. Even the occultists quietly pay tribute to the sway of the rulers in the dominion.

### F) The contribution of Emile Durkheim to the viability of 'spirit'

Might there be an alternative approach that can honor spirits by contemplating something like *the spirit of society*, ala Émile Durkheim? In his rigorous pursuit of the essence of religion, or at least its ultimate origin, Durkheim eventually concludes in his 1912 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* that it is facile to dismiss religion without grasping the source of its strength. That source, he argues, is the spirit of society. Adorno rightly notices a thematic continuity between Hegel and Durkheim, but with the Durkheimian twist. 'Durkheim (who was charged with metaphysics for that reason) recognized that what society worships in the [*Weltgeist*] is itself, the omnipotence of its own coercion' (Adorno, 1973: 316). A society, according to Durkheim, 'is the most powerful bundle of physical and moral forces observable in nature' (2001:

342). It is debatable whether Hegel directly influenced Durkheim and whether Durkheim is implicitly responding to Hegel's *Weltgeist* (Knapp: 1985). But Durkheim's overall approach does not necessarily contradict Hegel's idealism, and there may well have been Hegelians within his sphere of contacts.

More importantly, for Durkheim the sociologist, unlike Adorno the philosopher, it would probably not be helpful to focus on an abstract insistence that no spirit exists. Instead, as Durkheim puts it, 'The appearance of the notion of spirit marks an important advance in the individuation of religious forces' (2001: 209).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, just like Adorno, Durkheim would undoubtedly be uncomfortable with the notion that *actual* spirits *actually* abound in place and time, as any separate sort of entity. Conceivably, then, Durkheim could ultimately echo Adorno's statement that spirits do not exist and would appreciate essays written against occultists. But why would worship and superstition persist then? 'Our entire study' states Durkheim near the conclusion of his book, 'rests on this postulate: that this unanimous feeling of believers across time cannot be purely illusory...given the fact that, if you will, 'religious experience' is grounded in some way – and what experience is not? – it does not in the least follow that the reality that grounds it must objectively conform to the idea that believers have of it' (2001: 312). Granted, then, that no spirit exists; scholars can surely avoid the specificity of the claims inherent in the doctrines of various believers. But that would be a vacuous refutation, according to Durkheim. The reality that lies behind the spirit or gives birth to the spirit is what requests articulation by the theoretician. This reality, declares Durkheim, 'is society... If religion generated everything that is essential in society, this is because the idea of society is the soul of religion... Only by viewing religions from this perspective is it possible to perceive their real significance' (2001: 313, 314). This could be called, then, the 'spirit' of society. For Durkheim, that would differ from, and likely have more traction than, any Hegelian *Weltgeist*.

### G) Some other options for a viable 'spirit'

But there are even more options, for those who might resist Adorno's claim. If not, for example, Durkheim's spirit of society, what about the spirit of hope, or the impulse to revolution, or the free and unhinged thought that dares to critique the monopolies of universal oppression? Adorno's overall philosophy, viewed critically, constantly searches for what could be called the spirit of non-identitarian critiques of identitarianism, the sparks that can fuel appropriate revolt against monolithic oppressive reality. As mentioned above, then, Adorno's skepticism about the spirit world potentially comes back to haunt his own philosophizing, for his yearning for betterment cannot find any location in which to pin that emerging confidence. *Negative Dialectics* thus ultimately becomes a massively insightful book but one that is also full of contorted despair, unhelpful cynicism, desperate self-immolation, the self-destruction of Reason. Some critics therefore accuse him of 'an Adornoesque strategy of hibernation' (Jay, 1985: 139). – the sort of tactic that made

disciples like Habermas break rank with this incisive philosopher and accuse him, despite his brilliance, of things like intellectual impotence and agonized self-absorption. The overall effect of *Negative Dialectics* on the careful reader is even more paralyzing than the 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which Adorno co-authored with Max Horkheimer. According to books like *Negative Dialectics* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there are very few solutions, but numerous catastrophes. Marxism becomes shy in this neo-Marxist silhouette, having seen how calamitous utopian solutions became when distorted by the leaders of the proletariat and the traitorous philosophies of the bourgeoisie, but it still insists, like Marx, on seeing religion as the opium of the masses. In any case, the 'spirit' of hope, or the 'impulse' to revolution, is inadequate; it partakes of the paradox that victims become tyrants, the cruel irony of Kant's moral imperative that there *must* be freedom. 'This is the spark that kindles the pathos of Kant. He construes even freedom as a special case of causality' (Adorno, 1973: 250).

It is also relevant, if one looks for ways to challenge Adorno's line, to query whether a statement like 'No spirit exists' is overly-European. After all, a commentator such as Kwame Appiah can say 'Most Africans, now, whether converted to Islam or Christianity or not, still share the beliefs of their ancestors in an ontology of invisible beings...' (1992: 134). European history discounts such ontologies, and this has certainly influenced the way Westerners frame these dialogues about spirit. Adorno, too, is thus clearly a European. And yet people are *Homo sapiens* more primordially than they are ever Westerners or Africans, for there is only one human species. As Adorno says in another place 'Between "there came to me in a dream" ...and "I dreamt" lies the ages of the world. But which is the more true? No more than it is spirits who send the dream, is it the ego that dreams' (2005: 190). The African scholar might still be more willing to say 'there came to me in a dream' while the European scholar, under the influence of Freud and many others, might rather say 'I dreamt'. But this later development, in which Western people have eventually spotted the disintegration of the ego itself – the disappearance of man, according to Michel Foucault's worrisome premonition (1994: 342) – might be more a matter of cultural presupposition rather than of philosophical rigor. Adorno's comment that 'no spirit exists' might suffer somewhat, then, from that broad aura of Eurocentricity.

There used to be a hope – and this is the hope that still lives on in that intriguing movement of anatheism – that after individuals have suffered a dark night of the soul or gone through the medievalist's Cloud of Unknowing, they would emerge on the other side with a more refined sensibility about God. In liberal churches, catechumens are even encouraged to raise radically provocative questions. Collectively, it might be thought that the species as a whole could, by such means, also arrive at a deeper level of intimacy with some sort of spirit or Divinity, perhaps in the vein of Paul Tillich's 'ground of all being'. Some version or another of mysticism might then be the only locale in which conceptualizations of 'spirit' can still thrive.

Richard Rohr in 2019 writes best-sellers about 'the universal Christ'.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps disciples of a credible spirit-realm can come up with some new version of the Name. 'Ricoeur... used to speak of faith in terms of a 'second innocence' to which one returns after one's first and naïve innocence has been disturbed by critique and suspicion' (Caputo in Kearney, Ed., 2016: 194).

Unfortunately (or fortunately?) when Adorno's gavel comes down at the end of his essay, his three-word dismissal – No spirit exists – causes any lingering hope for that second innocence to disappear. His pneumathanatological critique not only empties religion of its false promises but even attacks the loftier pretensions of pietism, mysticism, and anatheism. Nietzsche's theothanatology arguably does not have as large an impact. If history used to include periods of time in which people floundered temporarily until they found a second innocence, those times may now be irretrievable. Secular people in general, even if the process is unconscious, may increasingly be aware within the quietness of their souls about something that is difficult to say, although it does not need many words to say it: No spirit exists.

#### H) Empathy for the most recent versions of atheism

One might venture, actually – due to Adorno's mid-century oracle – that in an ironical way, 'New Atheism' (Cotter et al. 2017) deserves a priestly absolution, the gentle care of a ministerial touch. Exasperation is exhausting for anyone, no matter what the cause. If some people in the modern movement of Dawkins, Hitchen and Harris have become impatient with the stranglehold that Divinity still seems to exercise in world affairs, is that any reason to demean their occasionally 'raucous' critiques and their 'shrill' denunciations? Perhaps commentators should be more forgiving. The average vicar, just like the average psychoanalyst, has long since learned that whenever people become infuriated, they are usually dealing with more than one problem and may be expressing pent-up frustrations. Adorno had already pointed out the loss of the spirit world in 1951. Society also experienced the more gentle version of a 'God is dead' movement in the 1960s with writers like Paul Van Buren, Gabriel Vahanian, Thomas Altizer, Richard Rubenstein and others, not to mention the infamous *Time* Magazine cover of April 8, 1966 asking 'Is God Dead?'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one could modestly argue that the exasperated atheists of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are simply going through the Stages of Grief after the losses of the increasingly distant past, including the polite versions of theothanatology. Anger is only one of the Stages but anger is the crucial stage often vividly forbidden by society. Moncure Daniel Conway already articulates anger in 1904, prior to the two world wars that scorched Adorno's tripartite terminology: 'How often have I had to ponder those words of Jesus, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Men do not forsake their God; He forsakes them. It is the God of the creeds that first forsakes us. More and more the dogmas come into collision with plain truth... One after another the gods forsake us, forsake our commonsense, our reason, our justice, our humanity.'<sup>8</sup> It might simply be common sense,

then, along with some anger, which spawns the thought that spirits are not plentiful.

Adorno's sentence crystallizes that we are definitely dealing, as Georges Bataille says, with 'the mask of an inaccessible divinity' (1991: 126). That inaccessibility is a felt emotional juggernaut. Julius Schniewind criticizes Rudolf Bultmann's lifelong focus on demythologization by saying 'the real difficulty lies not in myth but in the profoundest of all problems, the ultimate problem, the problem of God' (Bartsch, 1961: 101). In other words, if no spirit exists, why should theologians try to rejuvenate the messages that supposedly need to be demythologized? Richard Holloway insists that he was personally always 'attentive only to the captivating presence of the God for whom I longed but whose presence continued to elude me' (2013: 88). The question about the bald existence of spirits in general becomes the most pivotal concern, then, in the journey of faith. And Adorno's mid-century signpost signifies that he has made a discovery. People are talking, he vouches, about a complete non-entity.

Richard Dawkins once said 'I decry supernaturalism in all its forms... I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented' (2006: 57). Some interpreters might then react by trying to assuage the hurt sensibilities of the believing communities, but ultimately the marauding atheists might also deserve some empathetic care. As John MacQuarrie explains, 'The secularist not only denies, as a consequence of a world-picture, that there can be events which interrupt the regular course of nature, he also denies, as a consequence of his self-understanding, that there can be any events at all which reveal God' (1960: 237). The exasperation nowhere becomes more palpable than when Adorno simply declares, post-Auschwitz, that no spirit exists.

When James Smith explains the monumental 2007 work of the philosopher Charles Taylor (*The Secular Age*) he clarifies that in Taylor's thought there has now been a fundamental shift 'in how people *imagine* nature, their environment, and our cosmic context' (2014: 70). As Taylor himself puts it, 'our whole background understanding and feel of the world has been transformed' (2007: 325). This book by Taylor is in many ways the foundational text for any trajectories that keel to the anatheistic motifs. Taylor speaks of a vague sense of loss or lack that can be captured with the phrase 'a felt flatness' (2007: 307). Ultimately, by the time humanity reaches the second half of the twentieth century, this flat type of sorrow has morphed into a kind of bald-faced realism. Adorno's crisp formula might fit precisely into that unique category of realism. Karl Heim summarizes as follows:

... the genuine secularism with which we are confronted today is neither a Promethean rebellion of mankind against God nor the expression of a weary resignedness in the face of the darkness which enshrouds our existence. It is rather the necessary consequence of a conception of the universe

which, precisely because of its simplicity and perspicuity and its elimination of all kinds of *obscure, metaphysical, cosmic substrata*, presents itself with the force of evidence to the people of the machine age who have lived through two world wars (1953: 24. My emphases).

'Obscure, metaphysical, cosmic substrata' may well be identical with the absent and missing spirits whom Adorno is highlighting. Charles Taylor knew about all these nuances just as well as Adorno and the modern atheists, and he was willing to engage the dialogue in exactly that realm. Taylor was concerned with the conditions of belief; he was concerned with 'a shift in the plausibility of conditions that make something believable or unbelievable.' These are ultimately philosophical debates about 'what is *believable*...the default assumptions...' (Smith, 2014: 18, 19). But no one has likely ever drawn the line in the sand more clearly than Adorno. He is suggesting that the default assumption should simply be an agreement amongst all the players that no spirit exists, an embrace of pneumathanatology even more than the othanatology.

## I) Conclusion

Emily Dickinson once voiced the sound of child-like faith as follows: 'Great Spirit – Give to me/A Heaven not so large as Yours./But large enough – for me – ' One might call this acknowledgement of spirits an endearingly innocent type of faith. Certainly it contains some tenderness and humility. But in a move reminiscent of the Adornoesque trajectory, the poet's next lines worry that she was being mocked by the spiritual realm. Her poem therefore goes on to say 'I left the Place, with all my might –/I threw my Prayer away – ' She then ends her poem with a deafening roar that corresponds to Adorno's dictum:

I, grown shrewder – scan the Skies  
With a suspicious Air –  
As Children –swindled for the first  
All Swindlers – be – infer – (1951: 230; Poem #476).

Using this profound Dickinsonian language, we might conclude as follows: Adorno, after two world wars and many failed communist experiments, had scanned the skies. He had become suspicious. The depth of his post-Nietzschean suspicion speaks loudly prior to the current phase of 'New Atheism', and also provides an incipient wariness towards the simultaneous anatheistic movement. His *Theses Against Occultism* points out that all observant philosophy has now been scarred, swindled by the alleged world of spirits. The time has come to say, more radically than Nietzsche's comment, that no spirit exists anywhere, ever. The disappearance of a Supreme Sentient Being is not as severe as the possible erosion of all metaphysics. Reality, according to Adorno's philosophy, cries out for redemption and humanity cannot afford to be sidetracked by spirits any longer, even if collective social health seems unable to emerge from the global quicksand unaided.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Brittain, Christopher Craig (2010). *Adorno and Theology*. London: T&T Clark.
- <sup>2</sup> Moncure, Daniel Conway (1904). *Autobiographical Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway, with two portraits*. London, Paris, New York, and Melbourne: Cassell & Co., Ltd. My emphases. (No page numbers were included).
- <sup>3</sup> Similarly, Rollins says something quite inexplicable once when he states: "There is neither high church nor low church, Catholic nor Protestant, citizen nor alien, capitalist nor communist, gay nor straight, beautiful nor ugly, East nor West, theist nor atheist, Israel nor Palestine, American nor Iraqi, married nor divorced, uptown nor downtown, terrorist nor freedom fighter, for all are made one in Christ Jesus." *ibid.*, *Resurrection*, 166, 167. There is something quite shallow about this statement. Atheism and Theism, for example, are not a simple binary, and terrorism should never be minimized. It is also doubtful whether Paul, with his strong views on marriage, would have put married and divorced on the same level as Jew/Greek and male/female.
- <sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille quoted in Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.* Italics in Habermas.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. chapter 9 of Durkheim's book, "The Notion of Spirits and Gods". – "The tribal high god is, in fact, simply an ancestral spirit who managed in the end to win a prominent place. The ancestral spirits are simply beings forged in the image of individual souls whose genesis they are meant to account for. The souls, in turn, are simply the form taken by the impersonal forces we have found at the basis of totemism when they become individualized in particular bodies. The unity of the system equals its complexity" (2001: 216, 217).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Rohr, Richard (2019). *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*. New York: Convergent Books.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Gabriel Vahanian (1966). *No Other God*. New York: Braziller. Also Gabriel Vahanian (1961). *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*. New York: Braziller. Paul Van Buren (1963). *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, Based on an Analysis of its Language*. Toronto: Macmillan. Thomas Altizer (1966). *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. Philadelphia: Westminster. Richard Rubenstein (1966). *After Auschwitz*. Toronto: Macmillan Co.
- <sup>8</sup> Moncure Daniel Conway, *op. cit.*, *Autobiographical Memories and Experiences*. No page numbers were included.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Information

I am 64, achieved my Doctor of Philosophy last year in the Cultural Studies Department at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. My thesis was entitled

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