

What is an Atheist?

Sylvain Maréchal

1799

There was not always a God. There was a time when a man, living with his family, knew no other authority than that of his father. He had few needs because he had few desires. He wasn't a brute, a barbarian, or an eater of men, as we have been led to believe. Nor was he a polished and false city-dweller, vain and servile: he was a man in all his plenitude, ignorant of the art of writing, perhaps even that of speaking, but knowing how to live; that is, he loved his father, his wife and his children. He worked for them, with them and died in their embrace. In his eyes his fields were the entire universe. Regulating his occupations by the sun's movements and the earth's fecundity, his arms and his heart comprised his entire fortune and pleasure. Suspecting nothing beneath the vegetal layer of the soil he cultivated, man of that time was a stranger to sciences and vices, to social virtues and crimes, but was entirely given over to nature, to innocence.

Travelers have found a few faint traces of the golden age: it is not a chimera. Poets have rendered its existence doubtful by loading it with factitious ornaments, but that happy age once shone.

Why should we feel any repugnance about believing such things? Are they in the realm of the possible? Is it so difficult to live in this way? And isn't the current existence of humankind even more astonishing?

At that time man, limited to the surface of heaven and earth, neither had nor could he have had any idea of any power other than that which put him on earth and raised him. Do we think about something we have no need of? And what need do we have of a God when we have a father, a wife, children, a friend, arms, eyes and a heart?

But a true atheist is the man of the golden age. The atheist is he who, retreating into himself and freeing himself from the ties he has been forced to contract, or that were made unbeknownst to him, retreats from civilization to that former state of humanity and, in the forum of his conscience, laying low all prejudices of every color, approaches as nearly as possible that fortunate time when there was no suspicion of the divine existence, where all was well, where we contented ourselves strictly with family obligations. The atheist is the man of nature.

Nevertheless, placed today in a more complicated and narrow sphere he fulfills his obligations as a citizen and resigns himself to the decrees of necessity. While groaning about the vicious bases of political institutions, while striking with contempt those who so poorly organize them, he submits to the public order of the place he lives. But we don't find him becoming chief of a party or of opinion. We never meet him on the banal road that leads to useful or brilliant posts.

Consistent with his principles, he lives among his corrupted or corrupting contemporaries like the voyager who, having to traverse muddy beaches, protects himself from the venom of reptiles. He gets off with only being deafened by their insults. He goes his way among these evil beings without taking on their tortuous and servile allure.

The true atheist is thus not the sybarite who, taking himself for an epicurean when he is nothing but a debauchee, doesn't fear to say deep in his worn-out heart: "There is no God, thus there is nor morality, so I can permit myself everything."

The true atheist is not the statesman who, knowing that the divine chimera was imagined to frighten the men of the people, commands them in the name of a God he has no use of.

The true atheist cannot be found among those hypocritical and bloody heroes who, in order to open a path to conquest, announce themselves as the protectors of the cult they profess to the nations they propose to tame, and who when among their families amuse themselves on the subject of human credulity.

The true atheist is not that vile man who, condemned for many years for his indelible character as a sacerdotal imposter, changes his habit and opinions when this infamous *métier* ceases to be lucrative and impudently ranges himself among the sages he persecuted.

The true atheist is not that hot-head who goes around the crossroads smashing all the religious signs he meets and preaches the cult of reason to a plebe graced only with instinct.

The true atheist is not one of those men of the world, or men *comme il faut* who, through snobbery, disdain the use of thought and more or less live like the horse they mount, or the women they keep.

Nor is the true atheist seated in the chairs of those scientific societies whose members ceaselessly lie to their consciences and agree to hide their thoughts and to inhibit the solemn march of philosophy in order to advance their miserable personal interests or for pitiful political considerations.

The true atheist is not the proud semi-savant who wants there to be no other atheist than himself in the world, and who would cease to be one if most people became so. For him the mania for standing out in the crowd takes the place of a philosophy. Self-love is his God. If he could he'd see to it that enlightenment belonged only to him; to hear him speak, the rest of humanity is not worthy of it.

Nor is the true atheist that timorous philosopher lacking in energy who blushes about his opinion as if it were an evil thought. A cowardly friend of truth he would sooner compromise it than compromise himself. We see him haunting temples in order to cast aside any suspicion of impiety. An egoist who carries circumspection to the point of pusillanimity, he always finds the time to be premature for the extirpation of the most ancient prejudices. He doesn't fear God, but men frighten him. It makes no difference to him that they destroy each other in civil and religious wars, as long as he lives sheltered from harm and in peace.

Nor is the true atheist that systematic physician who only rejects God in order to have the glory of fabricating the world at his leisure, with no other assistance than that of his imagination.

The true atheist is not he who says: "No, I don't want a God." Rather it is he who says: "I can be wise without a God."

The true atheist doesn't reason with great argumentative skill against divine existence. On the contrary, the weakest theologians could embarrass him if he crossed swords with them. But he could say to them with *bonhomie* and to close the discussion:

“Doctors, is there a God in heaven? For me that question is no more important than this one: Are there animals on the moon? Here is my motto, in one line, doctors:

‘I have no more need of a God than he of me.’

– Sylvain, the French Lucretius

“What difference does a God make to me? My thoughts go no further than that which strikes my senses and I don’t push my curiosity so far as to want to find in the heavens yet another master: I already meet enough of them on earth. Believing that there is something beyond the all of which I am a part is repugnant to my reason. But if this object were to exist he would be perfectly foreign to me. What is the relationship between us? Enclosed within the limits of the universe in which I live, that which happens among my neighbors is no concern of mine. It is not my affair. The doorway to my house is for me the columns of Hercules. There is quite a distance between man and what we call a God. I am too near-sighted to see that far. It is difficult to get along at such a great distance. In any event, I have everything I need right at hand: rights to exercise, duties to fulfill, and pleasures, the results of my duties and rights. The heart’s most tender affections and the sweetest illusions of the spirit find around me, in me, and at every instant of my life, nourishment taken from the nature of things. I don’t have a moment to waste. Every season of my existence offers me varied subjects for contentment. Newborn I have my mother’s breast; a young man I throw myself into the arms of another me. In my old age my children render me the care they received from me.

“Surrounded, embraced by my parents, my wife, my children, my friend, where is there room for God? He has no place in a united family. We don’t at all feel the necessity. A good son, a good husband, a good father lacks for nothing.

“If I meet with no reward I go down into the depths of my heart, close myself in and find there ample recompense for the pains I suffer outside, for the losses I feel at my side, for injustices, for the persecutions of the wicked, who are more to be pitied than I.

“I know how to find all I need within myself, without any effort. All my means are at my disposal. I envelop myself in the memory of my good works and rely on my conscience without begging for help above my head, in the clouds.

“Doctors, if your God exists or not you can see that man, if he knows to question himself and knows how to appreciate his personal and internal resources, has no need to go outside of himself to taste happiness, the fruit of his virtue. The happiness of honest men is always their own work. They owe nothing to anyone.

“Doctors, keep your God. I can do without him.”

Some good souls take pity on atheists: “The unfortunates (they say). They cannot be well either in this world or the next. Hope, this balm of life, has been taken from them. They have a narrow spirit, a dry soul. They don’t know how to love, the unfortunates!”

The heart that didn’t love was the first Atheist.

– L. Mercier

Good people! Don’t fret about the lot of atheists. They don’t in the least envy your enjoyments. They have their own that are more real and purer. Not worrying about the past that is no longer, or the future, which is not yet, limited to the present, which alone belongs to them, their interest

is in the best possible use of their time. They take their rule of conduct from nature, which knows no lacunae and is never wrong.

Good people, don't fret on their account. Good, true atheists are more dependable lovers, spouses, and friends than other men. They feel and they enjoy with more energy. Present life being all for them they work at getting the most advantage from it. And experience has taught them that that they can't abuse it without first harming themselves.

“Certainly, but leave us our God!”

Good people, what do you want with him? What good is he to you? From what evils does he preserve you? After having left you under royal despotism for twelve centuries was your almighty God able to defend you from anarchy? If your God mixes in your affairs why do they go so poorly? Why do you have altars and no morals? Why so many priests and so few honest men? If your almighty God contents himself on high in a perfect neutrality, then tell me, good people here below, is it not then as if you have no God? Are atheists so wrong, are they so criminal when they see to their own salvation? Keep your God, but don't find it evil if atheists don't needlessly multiply beings. And above all, rid yourselves of all unjust prejudices in their regard.

Atheists, who they once used to frighten, and still today frighten women and big and small children with, are the best people in the world. They don't form a corporation, like priests; they don't make propaganda. In fact, they don't offend anyone.

The repertoire of ancient and modern atheists will at last prove that most of them are, of all men, the most tolerant, the most peaceful, the most enlightened, and the most loving. They are also the happiest.

Compare the character and the habits of the man without God to the habits and character of the man of God. Is there a more perfect contrast?

Observe the latter: he continuously lives in fear and humiliation, like a slave kissing the whip that strikes him.

If he carries out a good act, instead of giving himself over to a legitimate pride he is foolish enough to attribute all the merit, all the honor to a master who dictated it to him. If he proposes a generous resolution he demands the grace and the permission to accomplish it. A weak child, he doesn't dare put a foot in front of the other without looking over at papa God (forgive us the familiarity of the expression, but it is perfectly accurate). Look at how the deist, the theist, the religious man of any sect lowers his head, closes his eyes, joins his hands, extends his arms, bends the knee when he pronounces the word “God.” Are there any terms more abject or more foolish than those he uses in his invocations? If he loses his wife or children he thanks his divine creator, for nothing happens without his orders, and it's always for the best. On his deathbed, like a criminal, he trembles at the approach of the supreme judge. The idea of a generous or vengeful God prevents him from giving himself over to nature's final effusions. He coldly casts his family and friends aside in order to prepare himself to appear before the celestial tribunal. Of course such an existence is a perpetual torture and realizes in this life the hell of the other world.

The man without God has and maintains a completely different attitude.

Let us follow him on one of the days of his life. He leaves his wife's arms or wakes up to order to view the rise of the great star, and then he sets in order his household affairs and his labors. After having given his children their first lessons he takes the morning meal with his

family. Afterwards, each works at his own occupations and commitments. They get together again at midday in order to recuperate the strength worn out by their labors and to gaily prepare themselves for new fatigues. Exercising his natural and acquired faculties the man without God doesn't know boredom. Every hour procures for him an observation to be made, a service to be rendered. An indispensable part of nature, and as active as it, he coordinates himself with it so as to fulfill the duties imposed on him by his relations with others. The evening comes, he passes peaceful moments in the midst of his family, with a friend, and allows himself to relax, the well-earned salary of a productive and useful day. Gentle rest awaits him during the night. He falls asleep, satisfied that he left no void in his day, modeled on the sun's path.

And when he reaches the term of his existence? He gathers all his strength in order to enjoy the pleasures that remain to him and then closes his eyes forever, but with the certainty of leaving an honorable and cherished memory in the hearts of his kin, from whom he receives the final testimonies of esteem and attachment. His role finished, he peacefully retires from the scene in order to make room for other actors who will take him as their model. He doubtless feels lively regret for the separation from all he loved, but reason tells him that such is the immutable order of things. In any event, he knows that he doesn't entirely die. A father is eternal. He is reborn, he lives again in each of his children, and even in pieces of his body: nothing of him is obliterated. An indestructible link in the great chain of beings, the man without God embraces everything in thought and finds consolation in this, knowing that passing away is nothing but a displacement of matter and a change in form. At the moment he leaves life remembers, if he has the time, the good he did, as well as his faults. Proud of his existence, he has only bended his knee before the author of his days. He has walked on the earth, his head high and with a firm step, the equal of every other being and only owing accounts to his conscience. His life is as full as nature: *Ecce Vir*.

If the narrow framework in which we are circumscribed allowed us to profit from all the advantages of our subject, we would teach certain people that atheists are trustworthy in commerce, gentle and calm in society, that they alone know how to enjoy with delicacy and in keeping with nature's wishes, which they consult before anything else. Among them it is rare to meet fanatics or hypochondriacs. Happy and content, they are easy to get along with because, knowing how short life is, they prefer to pass it loving each other rather than in disputes or hatred. This is why they don't see anything wrong in thinking differently from them. Philosophers without any pretensions, they aren't angered by insults, even those habitually cast at them by men of God. They look upon them as ill-bred children.

If some of the atheists whose names are gathered in the "Dictionary" were to return to the world what would we not do to be admitted to their company, to share their easy and remorse-free happiness? Who among us would regret his day if he had passed the first hours of it in the school of Pythagoras or Aristotle, then accepted Anacreon's, Luctreius' or Chaulieu's hospitality. And then, after having strolled in Epicurus' or Helvetius' garden allows himself to be surprised by the night between Aspasian and Ninon.

Without any consideration for these illustrious names, they say to us:

"Nothing less than a God, or the idea of a God, is needed to fill the void in man's heart, to occupy his thoughts. He who doesn't believe is necessarily more ambitious, more boisterous. It's only by achieving honors or material pleasures that he can get by and exist on earth without disgust."

Let us answer this.

He who is an atheist through reason feels more than others the worthlessness of these social distinctions, these vulgar pleasures that most men are so vain and jealous of. A careful observer, an enlightened friend of nature, he needs great objects to feed his imagination. He looks with pity and affliction on those political or religious crises that torment the mass of men for the profit of a handful of wretches whose entire talent lies in the audacity of crime. These are nothing but atrocious and shameful spectacles in which the atheist refuses to play a role.

Sometimes vengeance is taken for his disdain by covering him in insults. It is here that we can admire the influence of liberal opinion on the character and existence of man. The atheist who has come to think in this way by studying the nature of things has necessarily placed himself above them. Filled with his own dignity he submits his reason to no other authority than that of evidence. Atheism inspires sentiments of elevation and independence to a degree unattainable in any other system.

"A God is necessary for the people. The people need one to learn to be docile before their leaders. And these leaders can't do without one in order to ease their tasks of administration."

We answer: God is useful to neither those who are governed nor those who govern. For many years he has made no impression on the spirit of the former. The people aren't so stupid as not to see that God is nothing but a brake used by those who tyrannize them. Daily experience has rudely awakened them to the truth of this.

In any event, in a population of 100,000, there are perhaps not fifty who have taken the trouble to reason out their beliefs. The people accept them without question. They are Catholic, just as they'd be atheist, if their ancestors had been so. God resembles those old articles of furniture which, far from being useful, are only in the way but which are passed on in families and are religiously kept, because the son received it from the father, and the father from his ancestor.

We insist and we say: a God and his priests are as necessary as a police magistrate and his spies.

Whatever the perversity of men in civilization a good correctional tribunal suffices for all causes. Dual employments harm each other, paralyze each other reciprocally. The counter-police of priests is never as good as the active surveillance of spies.

It is at long last time to smash these old politico-religious gears that everyone agrees are insufficient and so little favorable to human perfectibility.

But here is the most atrocious and most gratuitous of imputations against men without God: Atheism (they dare to say) demoralizes civil society.

"Holy choler of virtue, guide my pen a moment..."

Priests of a God fruit of adultery you dare say to us that atheism demoralizes!...

And you, theist adorers of an all-powerful providence that has permitted the bloody immoralities of a ten-year long revolution, you too say that atheism demoralizes!

And you too, statesmen, you permit yourselves to become the complacent echoes of priests and you say along with them: "Atheism demoralizes the people." You who every day allow conjugal faith to be ridiculed on all the stages of the land; you who lay a trap for the unfortunate with your lotteries ... This is what truly demoralizes the people. A people loses its morality with priests who sanctify adultery in their liturgy, with semi-philosophers who preach a providence complicit in the crimes he permits ...

Thinkers who are either inconsistent or in bad faith: was it atheism that reigned at the court of our last three monarchical masters, Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI?

Was it atheism that dominated the Convention, with Robespierre the persecutor of atheists?

Was it atheism that founded the Inquisition; that covered America with corpses, that ordered the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and which, in the Vendee, commits all kinds of crimes?

Is it a coalition of atheists, that of the crowned powers that carries the plague of a war of extermination all over Europe?

Were St. Dominic, Charles IX, and Maria de Medicis atheists? Were Ferdinand, George III, Francois II, and Paul I atheists? Was the mother of the latter an atheist? Are Pitt and Maury? Are the French émigrés who turn their swords against their mothers' breasts?

Studious Bayle! Virtuous Spinoza! Wise Freret! Modest Dumarsais! Honest Helvetius! Sensible Holbach! Etc. All of you philosophers who only rejected God so as to bring forth an unalloyed morality! You demoralized the world?

Is the atheist to be looked upon like the scapegoat who the Hebrews charged with all their iniquities?

It is for the amusement of idlers and the education of fools that the coryphées of *bas empire* of French literature enjoy themselves in both prose and verse at the expense of the atheism of those who profess it.

We will only reply to them by burying them in the imposing names and the authority of those in the "Dictionary." These praise-worthy names should at least make them more circumspect. A moral opinion professed by so many great and good men deserves to be spoken of in more measured tones. This mass of suffrages should carry some weight in the scale of the undecided.

We have gathered not only the principal sentiments of known atheists, but also an infinite number of testimonies in their favor. Testimonies worthy of even more credence because they come from the mouths or pens of their adversaries.

We have surprised several theologians stating maxims much more philosophical than they had thought, rendering homage to the purity of conduct and intention of men without God.

It should also be said that many honest citizens and learned men are atheists without believing that they are so. This is because they haven't yet learned to draw the consequences of and apply certain principles that they profess.

Let us add that if there had never been rogues or unfortunates on earth we would never have thought to look for a God in the heavens.

Our descendants will not be able to read certain pages of our annals without asking: were men differently organized than us in those times? What did they do with their reason? What a pity that they placed so much importance on pronouncing the word God!

Regeneration is spoken of, a new order. Great principles are announced, vast plans, and profound insights. Ideologues treat their predecessors as idiots, as shortsighted. And yet these men with their daring concepts don't dare officially publish anything against the most absurd and decrepit of prejudices. They propose the raising of an edifice of the most sublime proportions, yet they seem to respect the Gothic ruins that they fear to deliver a decisive blow to. They allow humanity to remain prostrated at the feet of its ancient fetish instead of saying to it, with all the authority of reason: "Rise up and march with giant steps towards happiness." Following the timid counsels of a false policy they accord public asylum to both sacerdotal imposture and philosophy. Statesmen would be mortified if we thought them religious, but it doesn't bother them that everyone except them be so.

They say: "It is not yet time to take God from the people."

What are you waiting for? Fear the results of semi-enlightenment. Everything must be told the people, or nothing. A people only half enlightened is the most detestable of peoples. You will never make anything of them. But this is perhaps your intention. If all nations have unanimously recognized a God distinct from matter, and dedicated a cult to him, the wise men of all centuries and all countries have only recognized matter working on its own.

Going over our nomenclature we can see these two extremes touch. We see the theologian and the philosopher walk in opposite directions in order to arrive at the same goal. The spiritualist and the materialist draw similar results from their opposing arguments. God is nature to the eyes of the body; nature is God to the eyes of understanding. Matter or abstraction, the divinity is all or it is nothing. And those who speak of it are either Spinozists or Don Quixotes.

It is to be hoped that the reading of the "Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Atheists" will lead its readers to say:

"Why spill so much ink, bile and blood? God can have his moment of utility during the childhood of political bodies. Now that humanity has reached maturity we no longer need that old leash. Freed, we will know how to reduce to their just value those brilliant, vehement speeches. The useful, the good, the true will obtain preference in our spirits over the superb flights of imagination and vanity. Agitated men who meditate *coups d'état*, deep thinkers who want to carry out revolutions in the empire of ideas, or apply their sublime theories to statistics, will meet sensible men along the way, walking with nature and reason, imperturbable enemies of both political and religious abstractions. With religion, simplified and reduced to filial piety, we will also want to simplify our civil institutions. The entire diplomatic apparatus will appear to us as a gigantic piece of childishness. All of those numerous gears of social government, which resemble ancient hydraulic machines will be reduced to less complicated movements. We will act in a fashion contrary to our superstitious ancestors, who made little of much. Rid as we will then be of all the petty considerations that were necessary up till now in order not to bump up against venerable and ancient errors, we will say, parodying an expression of Ninon's: 'A government must be quite poor in enlightenment and resources when it thinks it has to come to terms with religious prejudices.'"

Such will be the revolution carried out by atheism. Such, we repeat, will be the influence of that liberal opinion on spirits and institutions. The full and complete destruction of a long and imposing error that mixed in with everything, that denatured everything, even virtue; that was a trap for the weak, a lever for the powerful, and a barrier before men of genius. The destruction of that long and imposing error will change the face of the world.

While waiting for this great event, which is so feared by those who live on lies, and which the sterile vows of the wise call for but can't hasten, we say to our perplexed contemporaries:

"God has for him ignorance and imposture, fear and despotism, and against him reason and philosophy, the study of nature and the love of independence. God owes his birth to misunderstanding. He only exists through the charm of words: the knowledge of things kills and obliterates him. Good sense rejects the idea of a corporeal God. An abstract God has no hold on it. And yet God can only be abstraction or matter. It must again be repeated here: God is all or nothing. In order to get along and to be understood, the theologian has to express himself like the philosopher. But if everything is God, then God loses his divinity. On the other hand, ceding to his spirituality, he only exists in the thought of man. We can understand the embarrassment of the schools, constructing on imaginary spaces and with words that have no meaning, or who

destroy the ghost when they do. Alas, all the sacred wars that bloody the pages of history are then nothing but grammatical quarrels. Blush for your fathers, who lost themselves in miserable theological questions. Burn those dusty libraries that only attest to the delirium and shame of the human spirit. Life's brevity doesn't leave you enough leisure to waste your fleeting moments in gratuitous conjectures or suppositions.

"Up till the present you have only lived on fictions. Your very laws are still full of them. Man needs something more substantial. Leave aside all that doesn't rest on nature and the evidence of things.

"A modern legislator (Porcher) dared to say, in a moment of openness: 'Opium should be administered to three quarters of men.'

"May this statement dissipate your long sleep. It is only too true: up till today men have only been governed by administering them religious and other soporifics. From here on in, close your ears not only to priests, but also to any statesman who speaks and acts like a priest.

"Three talismanic words were enough to make religions and revolutions. This must no longer occur. You must no longer present – or at least suffer – such spectacles and scandals. Reject all these systems that are the cause or the result of them. Has not everything already been said on the subject of divine science and politics? Pass now to positive objects that truly touch you. Do you not have domestic morality and traditional experience.

"Two books are open to you, your hearts and nature. Think on them above all else. Think about how any other kind of study is petty and pitiful, wasteful and uncertain compared to that of the heart and nature. Only they are real and useful, good and beautiful. Give yourselves over to the results of observation and experience, and to the sweetness of the sentiments of reciprocal benevolence. Place all that has been said and done about God and diplomacy in parallel with the labors of agriculture and family duties. How pitiful and wretched is the profound metaphysician who passes his time in his dusty study in order to make books with other books, compared to the atheist exercising his intellectual and physical faculties under nature's eye and enjoying the purest pleasures, the result of a healthy organization. How thin and ridiculous is the grave publicist next to the laborer, head of a family and having the good sense to be nothing but that, and who relies on the light of his good sense! It is to this that man must sooner or later return.

"Leave God aside. God is of no use to you...God is of no use to man.

"Learn from your fathers' errors. Don't, like them, sacrifice things to words. Look after your own affairs. Keep an eye on those among you charged with taking care of your external interests. Your agents aren't bothered that the crowd keeps its gaze raised to heaven. While it is looking there, it doesn't see what is going on on earth"

The idea of a God making up in another world for the tyrannies put up with in this one, imprinted on the brain of the ruled, is a comfortable pillow for the head of the rulers.

A republic of atheists would give its supreme administrators less latitude. Atheists are clear-sighted and honest citizens and absolutely refuse to recognize any other power than that of reason. Men like these can't be led with sticks. One fears encountering them. Beautiful exteriors don't impress them; beautiful promises don't satisfy them. It's not to them that we can say: "Be patient, let the evil ones do as they please. God allows them to reach the heights for a moment in order to prepare a greater fall." Atheists don't accept these reasonings. They want to prevent evil; they want justice to be done to the first place holder who does wrong. They want the law, present everywhere at the same time and as prompt as lightning, to replace a hidden and slow-moving God, who allows Cromwell and Monk to die in their beds.

Tolerant by taste and principle, atheists want the magistrate of a great nation, by consecrating a law on the freedom of religion, to nevertheless make felt the absurdity and the inconvenience of all religions in his wise proclamations addressed to fathers and heads of families.

“Citizens! (he could say to them) the freedom of religion is demanded, and we won’t refuse it. But is it something good for those who so loudly call for it? We don’t think so, and we think it is our obligation to share our doubts with you. We can’t forbid the sale of arsenic by pharmacists. But fathers and heads of family, we ask you in the name of good morals and holy truth, in the name of public and private interest, to join your nature to the enlightenment given by all those who were truly wise and preserve the rising generation from the religious contagion.

“Make your children and your dependents feel that they are being fooled, that they owe nothing to a being high above their understanding; that their sole duties are the love of labor and the laws, the recognition of the authors of their days and their instruction. Fathers and heads of family! Accustom your children and your servants to only see in you ministers of morality; to see as their only altars the places where they received life and education, to only confess their faults to you, to only consult you. Finally, to find in you and you alone their God and their priests.

“Heads of family! Reclaim your rights. The only brake a free people requires is laws and morals.

“Good mothers! Be your children’s providence. May your daughters virtues be your work. Don’t join strangers to your august functions. A well-born daughter should never leave her mother for an instant. It is indecent to see a young virgin kneel at the feet of a man who is not her father to confess to him her domestics errors. There is a universal religion that is previous to all the others and that will survive them: filial piety. This is the only natural religion. The paternal household is its temple...”

But such means are slow. Entering into agreement with falsehood, attacking it only with proclamations, promises a victory for truth in a few centuries. I like to think that one day, perhaps soon, a pure man will rise, joining to the sparkle of his intelligence, to the ascendant of his virtues all the strength of a great character.

For many centuries almost all countries have been dissatisfied with their condition. They call on a supernatural being who must come to earth in order to change, or at least ameliorate, the state of things.

At Delphi they prophesied the coming of a son of Apollo who would bring the reign of justice to man.

The Romans waited for a king predicted by their Sybils. The Indians wait for Vishnu, who will appear to them in the form of a centaur. The Persians wait for Ali, the Chinese for Felo. The Japanese wait for Pe’irum and Karbadoxi, and the Siamese for Sammonocodon. The Hebrews think yet about their Messiah. The Christians believe in a second visit from Jesus, in the fearful guise of a severe judge from whom there is no appeal.

The moralists, the philosophers themselves, hope for the appearance of a man daring to openly speak the whole truth.

May he be proclaimed the benefactor of humanity, the wise legislator who will find the secret of erasing from man’s brains the word “God,” sinister talisman that has caused so many crimes and so much evil!

What is an atheist?

The true atheist is a modest and peaceful philosopher who doesn’t like to make noise and who doesn’t show off his principles with a puerile ostentation, atheism being of all things in the world the most natural, the most simple.

Without arguing either for or against divine existence, the atheist goes straight to his goal and does for it what others do for their God. It isn't so as to please the divinity that he practices virtue, but in order to be right with himself.

Too proud to obey anyone, even a God, the atheist takes orders only from his conscience.

The atheist has a treasure to guard, and that's his honor. A man who respects himself knows what he must forbid or permit himself and would blush at the idea of taking advice or following a model.

The atheist is an honorable man. He would be ashamed to owe to a God a good work he can do for himself and in his own name. He doesn't like to be pushed to do good, or turned away from evil: he seeks the one and avoids the other of his own will, and we can depend upon him.

How many good acts have been attributed to God that had as their only principle the heart of the great man who produced them?

The most perfect disinterest is the basis for all the resolutions of the atheist. He knows he has rights and obligations. He exercises the first without complaint, and the others without constraint. Order and justice are his divinities, and he makes free sacrifices only to them:

“The wise man alone has the right to be an atheist.”

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Sylvain Maréchal
What is an Atheist?
1799

<https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/marechal/1799/preliminary-discourse.htm>

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