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Young Apatheists: Is Religion Becoming a Relic, and How to Counteract It?

Abstract: Apatheism, a unique attitude of indifference to religion and the question of God's existence, is becoming increasingly prominent in the context of contemporary socio-cultural changes, particularly among younger generations. This article comprehensively analyzes apatheism, exploring its origins, distinct characteristics, and evolution in the face of escalating secularization. Drawing on research and theory, including the concepts of Robert J. Nash and Jonathan Rauch, the authors present various perspectives on apatheism, highlighting its unique aspects and contrasting them with other non-theistic attitudes such as atheism, agnosticism, and secularism. The article delves into the social and cultural contexts of apatheism and its potential implications for the future of religion in society, as well as the challenges and needs it raises. The study aims to demonstrate how apatheism aligns with the broader landscape of contemporary social change and its potential influence on future forms of religiosity and spirituality. The concluding remarks offer insight into how to think practically and theologically about apatheism so that pastoral offerings have a chance to meet the challenge.

Keywords: apatheism, religious indifference, secularism, nontheism, religiosity, contemporary society

Introduction

The subject of this article is the unique and intriguing phenomenon of apatheism, an attitude characterized by indifference to religious questions and the existence of God, not to be confused with religious indifference in the classical sense. In an era of increasingly diverse attitudes toward religion, apatheism stands out as

a significant trend that is not based on an explicit rejection of religion (as atheism is) or the search for answers to metaphysical questions (as agnosticism is) but on the lack of practical and cognitive-theoretical engagement with it. Apatheism is gaining importance in contemporary social changes, characterized by a noticeable decline in religious commitment, especially in younger generations.

This article aims to delve into the origins and evolution of apatheism, a phenomenon rapidly gaining ground in contemporary social change. Is apatheism merely a facet of the ongoing secularization in Western societies, or does it possess its own unique and intriguing socio-cultural characteristics? The article aims to define apatheism and understand the reasons behind its burgeoning prevalence and its potential implications for the future of religion in society.

The methodology used in this article is based on an analysis of the literature on the subject and an interpretation of available research and theory. A comparison of various definitions and concepts of apatheism was conducted, particularly in the context of the works of authors such as Robert J. Nash and Jonathan Rauch, who approach the phenomenon of apatheism in different ways. The article uses the method of comparative analysis to examine how apatheism differs from other non-theistic attitudes, such as atheism, agnosticism, and secularism. This method allowed for identifying the peculiar characteristics of apatheism as a phenomenon that, although related to the process of secularization, may have unique characteristics and causes.

However, the article is not limited to a purely theoretical analysis. To better understand apatheism, a study of social trends, such as the decline of religiosity in Western societies and changes in the attitudes of younger generations toward religion, was also conducted. This multifaceted method facilitates a deeper understanding of how apatheism fits into the broader context of contemporary social and cultural changes. The conclusions drawn from this analysis not only help understand the future directions of religiosity but also provide practical insights for scholars and practitioners, guiding them in addressing the challenges and needs raised by apatheism.

The article analyzes various perspectives to show a complete picture of the phenomenon of apatheism, with its complexity and

the diverse factors influencing it. The conclusions that arise from this analysis are relevant not only to scholars of religion but also to those interested in the sociology of religion in the broadest sense and the future of spirituality in a society where apathy toward spiritual issues is becoming increasingly prevalent.

1. Apatheism

To properly understand apatheism, it's necessary to consider the diversity of possible strategies for rejecting the question of God's existence. The collective term encompassing all such strategies is nontheism, not atheism or agnosticism, as the habit of thought suggests. The latter two are based on the same assumption, according to which the problem of God's existence is a meaningful cognitive issue.¹ This assumption is overly narrow. A group of non-theistic positions deny the issue of God's existence as a cognitive one. These positions collectively represent the so-called theological non-cognitivism, a view that the question of the existence of God is meaningless, not because it lacks an answer, but because it lacks a question. Understanding this distinction can make us more knowledgeable about the subject (Drange 2005, 137–50).

Theological noncognitivism assumes that the question of God's existence is a practical issue. Its resolution is not the consideration of arguments but the adoption of an attitude or stance in life. Apatheism is a variation of theological noncognitivism within the spectrum of non-theistic positions.

¹ Let us add that according to this assumption, the problem of God's existence should be resolved as a cognitive issue – atheism poses a strong thesis of God's non-existence. Conversely, it is possible to distinguish between the theistic and non-theistic agnostic positions in the case of agnosticism. In the first case, it is claimed that human cognitive powers are incapable of resolving the question of God's existence, and at the same time, it is accepted belief, such as in the fideistic form, that God exists. In contrast, nontheistic agnosticism also asserts that the question of God's existence is cognitively inconclusive while making a point of atheism as a belief that God does not exist, albeit one that is not grounded in cognitive resolution.

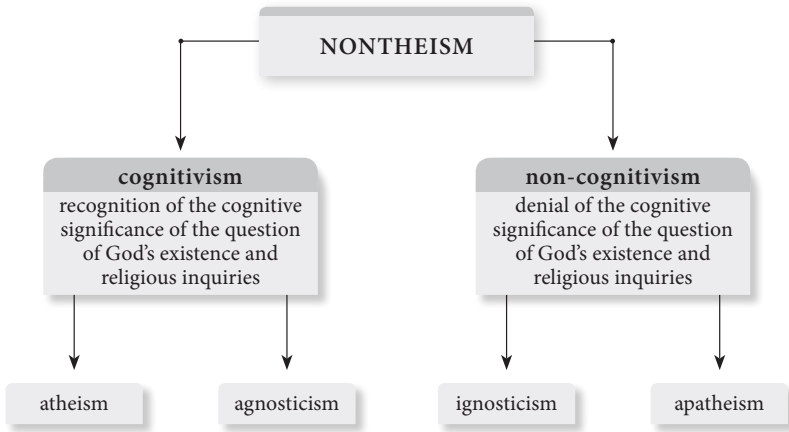


Fig. 1. Typology of Nontheism

1.1. Apatheism According to R.J. Nash and J. Rauch: Exposition and Comparison

The term “apatheism” was coined and first used by Robert J. Nash in his book, in which the author argues that universities should be places for a lively debate about religious differences among students since these differences are a key element of cultural pluralism and, as such, are given too little space in the educational programs and practices of universities (Nash 2001, 4). Introducing, in turn, the definitions of the terms to which he will refer in justifying his essential thesis and postulate, Nash proposes:

A new term to describe some students and colleagues, *apatheism* (from the Greek *apathes*, meaning unfeeling, and *theos*, meaning God), to suggest a different perspective: one that implies a complete lack of interest or concern toward *the* question of God’s existence or non-existence. In my language, an apatheist is someone who expresses no passion, emotion, or excitement about religious matters. In this sense, apatheism is an attitude toward religion that sees it as nothing more than an individual idiosyncrasy, a matter of personal temperament or taste, only

vaguely interesting in an intellectual sense but with nothing exciting about it. (Nash 2001, 27)

“Another perspective,” Nash says, is that the term apatheism enabled him to differentiate the observed phenomenon from typical cognitive positions, such as agnosticism or atheism. However, it is worth noting that for Nash, apathy includes at least a weak cognitive (intellectual) component in the question of God – for it is a question that is “vaguely interesting in the cognitive sense.” Moreover, he considers the phenomenon to be negative. He claims that every year, he observes an increasing percentage of people at the university who can be classified as apatheists, and at the same time that – despite their “declared lack of interest in religious phenomena” – it is with people in this group that he has “the most tense religious disputes” (Nash 2001, 27).

However, it was not Nash’s academic publication that decided to popularize the notion of apatheism and undertake reflection on the phenomenon captured by it. The concept became more widely known and discussed thanks to Jonathan Rauch’s article “Let It Be,” which appeared in the May 2003 issue of “The Atlantic Monthly” (Rauch 2003, 34). The author, who is a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program and the author of eight books and numerous articles on public policy, culture, and administration, pointed out in his text that apatheism (Rauch 2003, 34):

1. is “an unwillingness to be concerned about one’s religion and an even stronger unwillingness to be concerned about other people’s religions;”
2. it is distinguished from both atheism and religious belief because it “concerns not what one believes, but how,” i.e., the degree of commitment to religiosity or areligiosity, which he explains as follows: “the hot-blooded atheist cares about religion just as much as the evangelical Christian, only that in the opposite direction,” which is precisely what the apatheist does not do;
3. it also distinguishes itself from secularism: it does not disapprove of the presence of religion in public life, nor does it advocate religious tolerance in the sense of John Lock

since it does not share the assumption leading to the idea of tolerance “that everyone is full of religious passions which everyone else must bear hard;”

4. regarding agnosticism, on the other hand: most agnostics “are apatheists, but most apatheists are not agnostics. Because – and this is the essential point – many apatheists are believers.”

Against this background, it can be noted that Nash’s definition differs significantly from Rauch’s concept. The former sought to indicate that a new phenomenon, beyond the drawn distinctions between theism, atheism, and agnosticism, is being marked among college-aged people. However, he did not consider the case in which someone declares religiosity but – by the way he experiences religiosity – is an apatheist, someone in whom apathy towards religious matters prevails over religious fervor. On the other hand, the rise of apatheists among believers is crucial for Rauch. In his view, “there are many reasons for attending religious services: to connect with a culture or community, to socialize, to introduce children to religion, to find the warming comfort of a familiar ritual” (Rauch 2003, 34). For him, people pursuing these reasons qualify as believers. In Rauch’s view, a typology of positions that takes into account apatheism within theism would take the following form (Figure 2):

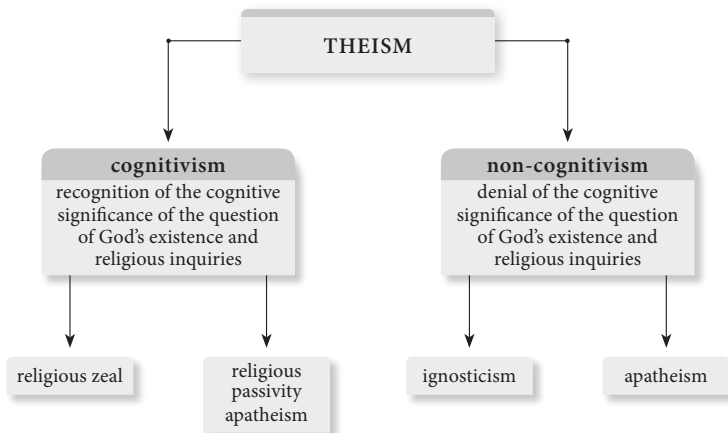


Fig. 2. Typology of Theism According to Jonathan Rauch

After all, there is no doubt that from an internal religious perspective – not only dogmatic but also spiritual – atheism associated with such focused religious practices represents a purely external religious affiliation. Perhaps it is the realization of a natural religious need or the fulfillment of a culturally inherited tradition. However, it diverges from the normative understanding of the faith of (most likely) any religion. Perhaps atheism can only be considered equivalent to fideistic faith on the grounds of noncognitivist theism. However, this would be a dubious presumption since fideism is usually associated with a high zeal in professed faith and religious affiliation.

One may ask why Rauch identifies a phenomenon concerning religion without considering religion's internal perspective, i.e., whether atheism can be reconciled with properly (normatively) understood religious faith. It can't be said that – following the example of the atheists – he “didn't care” about this question since he included the explanation within the enthusiastic assessment of atheism that he summarized in his argument. In his opinion:

The rise of atheism should be celebrated as a significant advance for civilization. Religion, as the events of 9/11 and beyond brutally demonstrated, remains the most divisive and volatile social force. Being in the clutches of religious zealotry is the natural state of human beings, or at least of very many human beings; so many species seem to be entangled. Therefore, one should not assume that atheism represents lazy lying, like my sinking into a soft chair after a long day. On the contrary: it is the product of a determined cultural effort to discipline religious thinking, and often an equally determined personal effort to control spiritual passions. This is not a downfall. It is an achievement. (Rauch 2003, 34)

Given that Rauch's position was formulated in 2003, shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, it becomes understandable that he shared the typical perspective of the time, according to which it is religiosity and religion that is now the most dangerous source of terrorism. This historical context is crucial to understanding Rauch's argument (Harris

2004; Hoffman 2008). He could understand the presence of non-standard religious expressions among declarative believers as a harbinger of the de-escalation of the threat from religiously motivated violence. Such a view of religion has been subjected to in-depth critical analysis, leading Anthony Giddens to propose forward a more balanced hypothesis (Giddens 2006, 573; Sztompka 2021, 779). In his view, the source of religious fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism is not a religion but a defensive movement against the processes of globalization. According to this hypothesis, religious fundamentalism enables a strong identity identification that can be captured in individual consciousness. Fundamentalism thus functions as a reversal of globalization rather than an expression of the internal dynamics of religion or religiosity itself.

Was Rauch unable to see this perspective at the beginning of the century? Isn't it surprising that he could point out the differences between a devout believer and an apatheist while he failed to see the difference between a devout believer and a terrorist? The reason probably lies in how Rauch interprets the primal aggressive impulses inherited by humans through evolution, which can lead to cruelty. Writing about the "clutches of religious zealotry," he points out unequivocally that he equates the core of religion with aggression and cruelty and that religious zealotry leads to their eruption. Hence, apatheism, which he interprets as the extinguishment of religious zeal, is equivalent to "the extinguishment of spiritual passions."

However, this is a one-sided view. It is not difficult to see that the form of expression of aggression and cruelty can be anything human: religion and lack of religion, art, corporate culture, and others. After all, it is not the form itself responsible for violence and cruelty, but the evolutionary inherited, primal inclinations and the limited ability to control them due to evolutionarily younger and much more costly mental processes responsible for controlling primal reflexes. So much can be seen if one introduces the appropriate differentiation of phenomena. Religion, on the other hand, and strictly Christianity, indicates that man is marked by a propensity to evil, which he will not remove by his efforts. Nor will religion remove this propensity. If Rauch admits that man is religious (even that religious fervor is

“the natural state of human beings”), wouldn’t it be more fitting to be interested in ways to prevent the misuse of religion against its normative orientation toward the good, instead of showing a not at all apatheistic attitude toward non-normative phenomena in the bosom of religion, such as apatheism? In light of current discussions on the “new return of religion,” far beyond the analysis of the negative context of terrorism, this question is already positively resolved. This balanced view of religion is essential to understanding its role in society.²

Given the differences between Nash’s definition and Rauch’s position on apatheism, it is fair to ask to what extent this is a unified concept. This doubt is worth articulating, especially if one intends to use such a concept to describe an ongoing phenomenon concerning faith and religion. After all, it cannot be ruled out that apatheism in Rauch’s (but not Nash’s) terms is – at this stage – a performative concept, i.e., its introduction is calculated to produce or reinforce the effect supposedly only described by it. It is mainly concerned with the impact of lowering commitment to religion and faith among those people who are not yet capable (e.g., for psychological or family reasons) of calling themselves atheists or agnostics.

1.2. Apatheism in Context: Religious Indifference and Precedents

Despite the definitional differences and possible interpretations of the concept of apatheism, both Nash and Rauch, as well as Tomáš Halík, who invokes the term in his discussion of transformations of faith,³ agree on the thesis that the core of apatheism is indifference to matters of God and religion, beginning with the question of God’s existence. In the face of this, however, does

² The so-called “new return of religion,” a concept that is being explored and differentiates from the classical secularization thesis, is a significant development in the field. For further insights, see, among others, Mandes 2016; Ammerman 2007.

³ According to Halík, “apatheists have an apathetic and indifferent attitude toward religion – and not about answering questions, but about the religious questions posed by faith itself. The apatheist does not bother with faith and considerations of religion and wastes no time in polemics with faith” (Grün and Halík 2017, 84).

the phenomenon one seeks to subsume under the term apatheism not correspond to the well-known concept of ‘religious indifference’? If this position were recognized, “apatheism” would be redundant.

However, equating apatheism with religious indifference fails to take into account that indifference to religion does not necessarily mean indifference to the question of God’s existence and spiritual life. This distinction is important to understand the nuances of belief and non-belief (Mercadante 2020, 1–16). Even if they do not engage in spirituality understood as theism proposes and, for example, enjoy some form of “non-religious spirituality” or syncretic spirituality (Joosr 2015), it cannot be claimed that they are apathetic toward all those issues in which apatheists lack interest. On another note, Milenko Budimir, who has studied the problem of apatheism in comparison to, for example, practical atheism or religious indifferentism, points out that “the sense of apathy advocated by Rauch is inherently positive, in contrast to the negative connotations traditionally associated with the state of apathy” (Budimir 2018, 31–36). Facing this, the distinction between religious indifference and apatheism should be considered.

On the other hand – even if we agree that apatheism and religious indifference are not quite the same phenomena – there is also not enough reason to claim that apatheism is an entirely new and previously unknown phenomenon. All authors seem to realize this by advocating using the new term. Nash writes that he is introducing “a new term,” not identifying a new phenomenon. Rauch marvels at the increase in the percentage of apatheists, and in his view, the mark of novelty is held not by the phenomenon itself but by that increase. Budimir sees precedents for apatheism in the broader context of the philosophy of religion, as well as connections between apatheism and the ideas now proposed by Slavoj Žižek and Harry Frankfurt’s earlier work on communication calculated to persuade without really paying attention (Budimir 2008, 87–93).

1.3. Apatheism vs. Secularism

In analyzing the distinctions between apatheism and other phenomena, it is worth paying attention to Rauch’s secularism–apatheism

distinction. According to it, atheism merely does not disapprove of the place of religion in society but also does not recommend tolerance because it supports the extinguishing of “religious passions” in society. That is, atheism does not contain any positive conception of religion, religiosity, or its social place.

Imagine, then, that the social majority are apatheists, but there are also fervently religious people in it. If the principle of religious tolerance does not apply, then the issues most important to some will be indifferent to others. This could mean that apatheists will agree to all religiously motivated claims, embracing the “principle of apathy,” replacing the “principle of tolerance,” both religion and all its derivatives. However, it seems more likely that the majority’s atheism will be motivated by a desire to subordinate to the “apathy principle” all social issues that intersect with religious matters. In turn, this is something that religious zealots will not agree to. Thus, the cohesion of this type of society will become even more urgent and complex to resolve than the principle of cohesion of secular societies that recognize the principle of religious tolerance.⁴

These questions may never arise because Rauch’s perception of the principle of religious tolerance – in the context of seeking to define what atheism is – may be subject to modification. Indeed, Kyle Beshears also starts from Rauch’s definition, noting both the identification and dynamics of the phenomenon and addressing the question of how to evangelize in an environment affected by atheism (Beshears 2021, 13–50). Thus, it can be said that Beshears analyzes atheism in the broadest context. However, unlike Rauch, he recognizes that atheism can only be adequately grasped when the secularization process is considered. Therefore, Beshears considers atheism in the context of Charles Taylor’s theory of secularization, which we will return to when we analyze the reasons for atheism. It is worth noting that the juxtaposition of Rauch’s and Beshears’ perspectives offers a stronger or weaker definition of atheism, depending on how

⁴ For a broader analysis of the theoretical and practical rationale behind accepting or rejecting so-called practical atheism – distinguished by the authors from intellectual atheism (Hedberg and Huzarevich 2017, 257–76).

the atheism–secularization relationship is understood. A more robust delineation of atheism (Rauch) will explicitly question, while a weaker one (Beshears) will consider that religious tolerance has been a constant reference point in religious discussions since at least the 17th century.

2. Causes of the Phenomenon

Since we have obtained a conceptual recognition of atheism through analysis, it is worth directing attention to the factors leading to this phenomenon's emergence. In the case of social reality, conceptual analysis alone is insufficient. Considering information and data that can significantly modify the original theoretical hypotheses is necessary.

There are two groups of determinants of atheism: socio-psychological and religious. The co-occurrence and interrelationships between them are responsible for the prevalence of atheism in the young generation. They are a consequence of the kind of society Western society has become. It is, on the one hand, based on consumerism and comfort. The spread of comfort in Western civilization has caused people to “feel they don't need God” (Zielińska 2009). This is accompanied by the distraction that defines people living in the West and the accelerated pace of life forced by technological advances and job growth. According to Beshears, this complex set of conditions results not only in a loss of rationale for recognizing the existence of God but, above all, in a lack of motivation to believe. So, let's look closely at selected phenomena that make up the atheistic loss of motivation to believe.

2.1. Socio-psychological Factors

2.1.1. Digital Migration – Distance and Lack of Rooting

Among the socio-psychological factors, the so-called migration and digital transformation are indicated (Siebel 2019). The modern world, as is well known, is highly digitized. Digitization has penetrated almost every sphere of human life, making it more accessible. Still, from a sociological point of view, it has increased the distance in

interpersonal relations, including even with the immediate family. Although it has made contact through social media possible, it is a mediated communication, devoid of direct interaction, meeting on a purely human level. It cannot fully satisfy the need for proximity, touch, observing the other, feeling, or participating in body language. Thus, the entire sphere of non-verbal communication necessary in the relationship with another human being is subject to the same complex and not at all positive transformations (Yu 2023, 90–97). Digital migration has also led to a distance from cultural and religious values. By their very nature, these values require active participation, preparation, and predisposition. Thus, the process does not amount to mere listening or cursory viewing. It requires a disposition to experience the encounter with art or religious mystery. Social media has led to the erosion, if not elimination, of preorientation to symbolic culture (Kreft 2009).

In highlighting this process, it is worth referring to the audience's attitude to art – musical works. In this regard, we will refer to our observation in Hanover, Germany. This city has a high culture, especially in terms of music. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one could observe music lovers preparing for concerts or opera. It was a solemn and complex ritual: reading the opera's libretto, commenting on it, discussing, getting to know the performers, festive attire, leaving, socializing during the event, and exchanging ideas. All this took place outside the concert hall, outside the concert proper. These accompanying experiences, no less than the musical event itself, shaped the culture of everyone involved in the culture. The pandemic period meant that even the most significant musical events could be watched from home, listened to, for example, while lying in bed, decked out in a bathrobe. This led directly to a shallowing of the culture of participation – the solemn ritual ended, the sense of communing “live” with something great, and the event was reduced to ordinariness, to appearances. A complete analogy can be seen in religious life, in the liturgy “experienced” online, at home. Enabling “viewing” does not mean participation and inevitably leads to a shallowing of essential aspects of both cultural and religious life. This is noted by the Pontifical Council for

Social Communications in its document “The Church and Internet,” pointing out:

Virtual reality is not a substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and participation in worship celebrated in a living community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; even religious experiences, made possible there by the grace of God, are not sufficient in isolation from interaction with other faithful in the real world. (CI 9)

While the digital transformation – social media, instant messaging, webmail – has made it possible for people to communicate quickly and conveniently with each other, to create and join circles based on shared interests, to build bonds and a sense of community, it has, according to research, simultaneously distanced people, leading to shallow and less meaningful interactions (Primack et al. 2017, 1–8; Czarna 2011, 129–45). Emoticons, likes, and shortcuts crowd out deeper conversations and genuine emotional engagement. Paradoxically, the digital universe leads to loneliness and a sense of isolation.

Another effect of digital migration is a lack of a sense of rootedness. As is known, if only from research on the mind (4E),⁵ building rootedness requires multisensory activation and, more broadly, activation of oneself as a person, including diverse psychological resources. This is done by meeting other people, learning the whole repertoire of attitudes and behaviors in social relations, being moved by a person or an event, and touching the places of memory associated with the individual, his family, nation, and culture, which makes up participation, if only in a substitute, in what shapes a person, a citizen, a believer.

⁵ The 4E (*embedded, embodied, extended, enactive*) concept of the mind has provided an alternative to traditional approaches in the cognitive sciences, which often treat the mind as a system that processes information in a way that is disconnected from the body and environment (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991).

2.1.2. Information Chaos and Recklessness

The growing use of information and communication technologies and increased data availability create a climate conducive to apatheism in information management. Network users are constantly inundated with information and, as a result, experience information overload.⁶ It is enough to mention that today, the amount of information created every two days is roughly equal to the amount made between the beginning of human civilization and 2003 (Jackson and Farzaneh 2012, 523–32). The recipient of information overload loses the ability to select and process information. He assimilates information unreflectively without evaluating the reliability of the sources. However, the lack of selection does not generally result in the rejection of information; on the contrary, it leads to a hasty belief in the information that arrives (Przybysz 2018, 140–66). Thus, the information society faces fundamental difficulties in managing information. Recklessness in receiving information can lead to problems in religious life since superficiality and spiritual life are mutually exclusive.

2.1.3. Wellness and Carefree

Often criticized for their role in information overload, new media also significantly promote wellness. Wellness, a philosophy of life that focuses on conscious decisions and daily practices to achieve complete health and happiness, is being popularized through these platforms. It encompasses various aspects of life, including physical, emotional, intellectual, social, occupational, and spiritual health. Often associated with religion, the latter refers to an existential sense of meaning, purpose, and hope for life. The role of new media in promoting this holistic approach to wellness is an enlightening aspect of technological advancement (Mansager 2000, 237–41).

Apatheism tacitly accepts that life is there to be enjoyed non-alternatively. Since it is confined to the temporal, gains should be maximized, focusing on physical and mental well-being. This emphasis

⁶ Information overload is one of the most frequently cited (22.5%) stressors, according to a survey of a representative German sample (Meyer, Zill, and Dilba 2021).

on physical and psychological well-being underscores the importance of holistic health, making the audience feel the need to balance these aspects in their pursuit of wellness. This leads to an increased search for a state of life in which comfort, relaxation, and lack of tension prevail. The Christian idea of sacrifice has no place in this paradigm. Christianity accepts that life does not exhaust itself in its earthly course, and because of this, sacrifice and offering for the benefit of another, participation in the fate of another, sacrifice, and hardship make sense. This perspective does not consider the situation in which human existence consists of use, which ends in the ultimate forfeiture of everything, including the user (Melosik 2013).

2.1.4. Digital Narcissism

Within the framework of a conception of life dominated by a user-oriented attitude, it is important to see it also in terms of self-fulfillment or self-realization. A measure of such a state in digital culture is the solicitation of *likes*, *follows* (watching profiles and accounts) on social media, and *subscribing* to channels (e.g., on YouTube). This often leads to an obsession with likes, emotional dependence on external, subjective evaluation, and loss of objective values and self-esteem (Francis 2020).

2.1.5. Health, Age, Communications

Apathy will primarily affect young people, as the typical developmental age drives people to make their mark in the world, achieve significance, and be noticed, which provides fertile ground for their development. To a lesser extent, this phenomenon will involve representatives of the older generation since they benefit on a smaller scale from the goods and prospects available at the developmental age (Mariani 2017, 231–57).

2.2. Religious Factors

Among the factors determining the emergence of an atheistic attitude, one can also identify elements inherent in the religious

world. Thus, these are internal variables occurring directly on the grounds of religion.

2.2.1. The Problem of the Lack of Need

The first religious correlates of apatheism are “lack of need.” As mentioned, apatheism is characterized by indifference or lack of interest in the existence or non-existence of God or gods, lack of need to seek answers to metaphysical questions and about the meaning of life, lack of need for religious affiliation, lack of need for spiritual or religious support. Apatheists do not know how to find a “use” for religious content in their lives, do not feel attached to it, are not interested in it, and feel bored. To arouse these needs requires a commitment to communicating Christian content directly rather than mediating it in language that young people, in particular, do not assimilate. The same applies to high Christian phraseology, including the call to “bear witness” (if a young person cannot embed this witness in his own experience, it will accomplish nothing). The first of the challenges of apatheism, then, boils down to establishing a thread of understanding with apatheists – often young people – so that they can locate the communicated content in their own lives (Grün and Halík 2017, 84).

2.2.2. Contradicting Faith and Religion

For some time now, it has been possible to observe the phenomenon of the juxtaposition of faith and religion, encapsulated in the belief that it is not necessarily necessary to be a religious person; it is vital to have faith. This misunderstanding was discussed to the ground by, among others, Paul Tillich. He perceived that faith is a state of “concerned heart” – a deep, personal commitment. It is not so much the acceptance of doctrinal truths as an act of trust in God that permeates man’s whole being and shapes his existence (Tillich 1957). On the other hand, religion is a structural and organizational “expression of faith,” a way of expressing it. A distortion of religion, on the other hand, is its idolatry – when symbols and doctrines lead to dogmatism, become self-sufficient, and distract from the personal, more profound experience of faith.

To consider faith that finds no means of expression is nonsense, as is to speak of any other human involvement that would not manifest itself in anything. Hence, it should be noted that getting entangled in discussions separating faith from religion (faith: yes, religion: no; Christ: yes, Church: no) – although it may be present as an essential process at a particular stage of faith development – does not in itself lead to an answer to the question of what expression – possibly extra-religious – faith finds.

Separating faith and religiosity correlates with promoting the individualization of faith and negating its communal dimension. In this regard, the Church should develop a position to avoid the mistakes of far-reaching ecclesiastical interventions in people's religious needs and desires. One dimension of this interference was the imposition of untenable community life on young people who were ashamed to express some of their perceptions or experiences because they felt misunderstood by the community. It is, therefore, necessary to separate the dimensions of faith reserved for individual development and guidance (e.g., spiritual direction or accompaniment) from the dimensions of faith that the community lives by. We believe this is a significant challenge, requiring a refocusing of pastoral programs (Jacyno 2007).

2.2.3. Stereotypes and Negativisms in the Perception of the Church and the Clergy

Among the causes of apatheism, which has to do with the internal structure of religion, is the disseminated image of the Church and the clergy. Social media plays a significant role in this regard, prone to highlighting a negative image built from unverified stereotypes. The Church's formation activities towards candidates currently applying to seminaries or monasteries may cause the encounter with a clergy member to negate the image spread by the media; it will not be confirmed by the personal experience of meeting a clergy member.

It should not be thought that grassroots activities, oriented to personal encounters, cannot change the trends the media sets (Obarska, Gawrysiak-Knez, and Drejer 2022). To substantiate this, we will cite the circumstance of the farewell in recent months of the vicar of the parish of Wiśniowa in the Lesser Poland voivodeship based

on participant observation. The young curate came to bid farewell to some 3.000 young people who came to Mass to thank him for his ministry. When asked in depth whether they were guided by the publicly available image of the priest, the young people responded that what was important to them was not the media image but the contribution the young vicar had to their personal faith life. This indicates how profound and wide-ranging the impact can be for a single priest who properly lives out his priestly vocation. While the Church does not influence what trend the media will take in building a clergyman's image, it is within the clergyman's power of decision and activity that his image will be made among the parishioners entrusted to him. This image may be more lasting and influential than changing macro-social trends.

2.2.4. Misunderstanding of the Church's Core Activities

Factors that can reinforce apatheistic tendencies also include widespread deficiencies or errors in communicating what the Church, especially the clergy, does. Improving the quality of information in this area is also a task that clergy and church personnel face. After all, this is not limited to the form but also to the content of the message, especially catechetical. It is necessary to consider how teaching about the sacraments is carried out, including how the dictionary of religious terms is used. It turns out that many of the faithful do not understand basic religious concepts, symbols, and signs, including sacramental ones. One can encounter, for example, a situation in which a person asking for the anointing of the sick, receiving this sacrament in faith, then asks where he can buy such oil (with which the priest administers the sacrament). These situations indicate a deep-seated misunderstanding of the content of faith. They prove the need to constantly clarify basic church activities, signs, symbols, language, and concepts until truly understood (Przybysz 2018, 150–66).

2.2.5. Aversion to Communities and Closed Environments

One such content that demands proper understanding in a society marked by individualism is the question of the community dimension of faith. It does not imply a compulsion to tie oneself

to some closed religious community. Forming and shaping oneself in the faith does not have to be about entering some specific circle of people. The communal dimension of faith implies the diversity and multiplicity of paths that people travel in faith; it means acceptance for a person who wants to believe in the Church and accepts the teaching of the Church but can implement and embody it in different ways. Crucial to the community dimension of the Church is the discovery of precisely this diversity. Forcing someone, especially a young person, to belong to a specific group or enter a particular path can only intensify counter-suggestive attitudes and motivate them to get busy pursuing less intrusive life scenarios.

2.2.6. Confusing Spirituality with Psychological Needs and Vice Versa

The atheistic attitude may be fostered by the vague self-awareness of Christians and a lack of a sense of separateness from their surroundings. This amounts to attempts to combine spiritual and psychological or sociological content in today's culture. This implies that religious or spiritual content is a commentary on sociological or psychological theories. Conversely, the correct proportions are the opposite: spiritual content is in the foreground, while psychology or sociology can helpfully serve as a background. In this order, it is clear that religious activities – especially confession or direction or spiritual accompaniment – are not psychotherapy or sociotherapy. This means, among other things, that in complex human biographies and experiences, clergy and laity can and should show closeness and accompany each other in life. In contrast, situations that require specialized competence cannot be undertaken amateurishly in church circles, as this causes harm. By sticking to these simple distinctions, it is possible to avoid a situation of vagueness in which young people do not receive a clear message about what defines the meaning and tasks of the Church. Vagueness, in turn, fosters distrust and a sense of unconcreteness, in which nothing is worth being interested in. (Stark 2017; Stern 2004; Suwiński 2021).

3. Apatheists, but Only Partial

Given the possible reasons identified and discussed so far for the persistence and even growth of apatheism, we would like to point out that there are indications that allow us to see apatheism as an open phenomenon and susceptible to deliberate modifying interventions. In doing so, we do not intend to discuss the trend but rather to suggest an interpretation of the available research on youth religiosity that reorganizes the horizon of thinking about phenomena affecting the young generation concerning religiosity.

We will first refer to research on the religiosity of young Germans, taking into account the most representative sets of studies: the Shell, Sinus, and independent studies conducted by individual researchers (Calmbach, Borgstedt et al. 2016, 336–51). These studies have shown that young people are religiously interested but not connected to the Church. However, it should be emphasized that “being religiously interested” does not equal “being religious” – young Germans are, therefore, not non-religious and religiously interested at the same time. The key result of the cited research is that young Germans do not find a place where they can satisfy their curiosity about religiosity. This means that the church is no longer a place that provides answers to young people’s questions about religion. Young Germans are not connected to the Church, so they try to satisfy their curiosity online or at casual or occasional meetings with people they confront in some way. During these encounters, varied answers are given, which can intensify the difficulties to the extent that they are sometimes highly unreliable.

The German study also showed – regardless of the institute that conducted it – another intriguing phenomenon: young Germans live spirituality but in isolation from the Church/churches. It should be stressed that the research does not support the possible claim that young Germans deny spirituality. They realize they are spiritual beings and try to learn this dimension of their lives in various ways: meditation techniques, trips to closed monasteries for several days, contemplation of nature, or ecological involvement. An important observation is that communing with nature allows them to penetrate themselves.

A relatively holistic picture of young Germans' attitudes toward religion can thus be put as follows: although young Germans do not want to talk about God, they do not want to talk about religion – in this, they follow the atheistic trend, but at the same time they admit to a certain kind of inner stirring or spiritual restlessness. From a religious point of view, this is an excellent prognosis. There is no need for young people to become overwhelmed by matters of religion and God, which gives rise to a sense of excess, an aversive reflex. Anxiety is present in their inner world, and even so, they are susceptible to atheism – and what is crucial – in the face of this circumstance, baptized people who proclaim the Good News cannot pass by indifferently. This is far more important than possibly remaining at the level of purely reactive actions, such as attempts to combat atheism.

The challenge is that among young Germans, faith and religiosity are disconnected. As many as 60% of those surveyed declare themselves believers, but they cannot define the content of that faith. Since they do not find a means of expression for faith, it remains a fuzzy, uncomfortable, complex topic suspended in a vacuum.

Complementing the picture of the religiosity of young Germans is the fact that they talk about God personally. Thus, they are not targeting an abstract idea or an indefinite transcendence. Therefore, if the message about a personal God were adequately presented to young Germans – as the research indicates – it would remain attractive to them. On the other hand, it is challenging to communicate this message to the church because they accept the church only as a social institution. This means that the church community has ceased to be clear and distinct on spiritual grounds – it does not generate any such apparent associations. It seems all the more urgent to restore the proportion: spiritual content should be of primary importance, and anything else – including social sciences, disciplines that bring people closer in many ways – auxiliary. It should not be allowed for a person seeking the expression of his faith to be provided with sociological or psychological theories because such a person does not experience a deficit in this area. These remarks should be weighed insofar as, according to the survey analyzed, 18% of young Germans surveyed indicate that faith gives them a sense of meaning.

Contrary to popular perceptions, they do not view the Church negatively – in the context of social activities, they view it positively. This fact paves the way for reaching out to young people. In the next step, it turns out that by 18% of those experiencing meaning through faith, it is possible to reach the rest. The condition is the proper communication of the content of faith.

Also, research on Polish youth provides positive indications, differentiating the view on the extent of the dominance of atheistic tendencies. According to a recent survey, 78% of young people still consider themselves believers (CBOS 2024, 2). At the same time, one should be critical of commentaries describing sociological research on the religiosity of young Poles. It is pointed out that a testimony to the decline in the religiosity of young Poles is that in the 1990s, 90% declared faith, and 78% did. (CBOS 2021, 12). In the era of “Eurosecularism” (Marianński 2006), this decline should be considered as remaining within the limits of the norm – it is difficult to speak of a profound erosion of religiosity and faith of Poles with such high rates. It is worth pointing out that Poland has an excellent basis for evangelization and pastoral activity. The only question that arises is how this basis is used (Bullivant 2018).

It is also worth noting that 82% of young Poles identify with the Catholic faith. This does not mean, of course, that the same percentage of young people practice the faith. After all, if they were to return to practicing the faith for some reason, they would do so based on the Catholic religion. Comparatively, in the same context, young Germans answer: “I don’t know because I don’t have any experience.” Polish religious capital is, therefore, still very high. However, it is necessary to be able to recognize this and implement actions based on these social facts. The most important crisis in this context is probably a communications crisis.

Also of note is that 26% of young Poles admit to religious practices. This percentage should be considered in the context of the social and cultural factors affecting today’s young people. In Poland, on the other hand – despite the processes leading to, among other things, atheism – still 1/4 of the surveyed population of young people practice the faith, which, in our opinion, should inspire respect towards those responsible for the transmission of faith and religious

upbringing (Pew Research Center 2018). Also not to be overlooked is the fact that the administration of the sacraments of Christian initiation – baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist – still takes place on a mass level. Instead, a critical question is expressed in how pastors overcome this massification and take care of the personal dimension of the faith of those receiving the sacraments.

4. Apatheism in the Logic of Faith

Taking into account the conceptual findings on apatheism, and then those on the factors conducive to the emergence of apatheism as a social phenomenon, and at the same time taking into account the data on religiosity that allow us to differentiate the view of the phenomenon in question – we propose to move to theological interpretation. Thus, we consider how to look at apatheism from the perspective of religious faith. In this context, it is worth noting the observation of Pope Francis, according to whom:

The worst thing we can do is follow the prescription proposed by the spirit of this world, which is to anesthetize young people with other news, entertainment, and triviality. (*ChV* 75)

In the case of apatheism, the worst thing that can be done is to try to adapt to the cultural changes that have occurred. The accuracy of the Pope's perspective is confirmed by the voice of those who were part of the youth of the 1960s in Germany. At the time, these young people made the following appeal to the German bishops:

If the Church is nothing more than a Red Cross institution or a bowling club, it does not pay to belong to it. Therefore, we ask: do not try to make the Church more attractive to us, do not give the youth a stone instead of bread ... preach to us the Gospel about the Son of God, who, being born in Bethlehem, became a man for us, rose from the dead and will come at the appointed time. (Graber 1979, 35)

At the time, no one heeded this appeal. Instead, the process of orienting the Church toward social action began precisely as it is perceived by young Germans today. It is hard to avoid the puzzle that has led to a situation where young people have nothing to look for in the Church. This is all the more so because the relevant social organizations, which specialize in social activities, offer much more than the Church on the social level. Therefore, Pope Francis is right: one should not follow the prescriptions of “this world.” One should believe that something in the Christian message will move hearts. In the message itself, not in its – of one kind or another, social, “scientific,” and any other still – disguise or dummy. And to boldly, fundamentally, and with conviction stand behind it.

The key question to be addressed in the context of new media is how to defend rationality against the usurpations of the currently dominant centers of meaning creation and distribution. This is especially true of the information chaos generated by the media multiplying information that cannot be verified, processed, or considered. The Church should counterbalance this trend by placing importance on truth and rationality. It should strive to become a “new forum,” to be associated with dialogue, exchanging ideas and spiritual perspectives – not with inept comments, another one given to young people on Facebook or Twitter.

As one way of the desired change – and one should renounce spectacular mass action, especially if it were to have exclusivity – are the international, interdisciplinary, ecumenical seminars initiated within the Polish Catholic Mission in Germany, which are designed to enable one to look at the processes taking place in the world from the point of view of the Christian message, especially the Catholic one. One is currently underway, titled “Threats to democracy (nationalism, populism, extremism) and Christianity’s response to them.” Participants – students, doctoral students – from Russia, Poland, Germany, and Georgia have been invited. This means that – intentionally – an “explosive mix” of representatives from countries that are politically, socially, and historically very “out of the way.” This was met with an unexpectedly large and enthusiastic response from young people who feel called to think responsibly and creatively. Here is one comment from a participant: “The church has

become a space where we can think and express ourselves.” Thus – if any association with the Church is to be consciously built in young people – it brings them God first and foremost – a living experience of contact with God. Further, it is a platform of values and rationality, not superficial, half-hearted information, often at the level of fake news or post-truth.⁷

Related to this perspective is how to free young people from the dictates of the digital world, based on temporariness, ad hoc, whose hierarchies depend on the criterion of “likes.” It should be assumed that this is the task of Catholic anthropology. The answer to this challenge exists but is currently uncommunicative and inaudible to young people. It is a message about the value and origin of man from God. But how do we communicate this message to young people? As of today, there is no suitable recipe. The essence of the message would be to make a person feel the value of himself, not oriented to “likes” controlling the well-being because the One who gives the biggest like is already on the young person’s side. How do we convey and communicate this to young people? We also address and elaborate on this topic in the German context on the grounds of the Polish Catholic Mission.

5. Conclusions

1. A holistic view of the processes and challenges discussed can be encapsulated in the metaphor of “an afternoon of Christianity.” This is the perspective proposed by Tomáš Halík, referring to C.G. Jung’s depth psychology. The most important thing seen through this psychotherapeutic metaphor is that afternoon does not mean decline. Instead, it signifies entering a phase of a person’s deepened psychological life. We are currently at

⁷ See, for example, Edenberg and Hannon 2021; Hannon and de Ridder 2021. In September 2024, a book with the same title as the international seminar will be published, bringing together texts by tutors and students and doctoral students, seminar participants, on not only the threats to democracy, but also the contribution of Christianity (and other religions – for the seminar also included followers of Islam and non-religious people) to responding systematically to the phenomena of populism, extremism and nationalism.

such a stage in the history of Christianity. It is a situation that calls for deepening in every area of life: spiritual, intellectual, and rational. And it must be a significant deepening (Halík 2022).

2. The deepening will occur if we return to the essence of the mission. Continuing to deal with misplaced priorities in proclaiming the message of the Gospel – for example, replacing the message with hypotheses and theories of psychology or sociology – will resemble a situation in which someone repeats the same mistakes and expects a healing effect. The fundamental issue, then, boils down to how we preach the Gospel: with what do we preach it – the Gospel itself or with substitute means? If by substitute means, then we have substitute effects. Since it was recognized in the 1960s that the message of Gospel love was centered on social action – a substitute image of the Church as an agenda for social action emerged.
3. A necessary conclusion from the analyses concerns the need to rethink the Christian message and its place worldwide. The point is determining whether the Christian duty is to “keep up with the world.” In this way, we will obtain clearly defined tasks. Indeed, one can get the impression that such a definition of tasks does not exist – the result of this deficit is a crisis of self-awareness and sense of existence.
4. The definition of tasks will not be accurate without agreeing to the loss of previous meaning and position. After all, it is necessary to perceive reality in the right proportions: it is not a priority for Christians to have significance and position in the world.
5. Consent to de-influence will occur insofar as there is an effort to perceive new forms of God’s presence in the world. He acts primarily in the sacraments but is not closed or limited by sacramental reality. He speaks in many other ways, including through apatheism. It is necessary to look at apatheism precisely as a sign of God’s presence in the world.
6. There is a need to look for more individual forms of pastoral work. However, existing forms should be preserved. It

is not a matter of opening “offices of individual service” and reducing Christianity to this dimension. Instead, it is a matter of seeking ways to reconcile personal desires and needs related to the faith with the communal dimension of the faith. It is essential to consider what distinctions should be made here. They distinguish what should not be presented to the community and leave it to individual guidance. At the same time, the community is significant in succeeding on the paths of individual faith development.

Młodzi apateiści. Czy religia staje się przeżytkiem i jak temu przeciwdziałać?

Abstrakt: Pojęcie apateizmu, charakteryzowanego jako obojętność wobec religii i istnienia Boga, które różni się od typowej obojętności religijnej – zyskuje na znaczeniu w obliczu współczesnych przemian społeczno-kulturowych, szczególnie wśród młodszych generacji. Artykuł eksplikuje w genezę, cechy definiujące i rozwój apateizmu w kontekście rosnącej sekularyzacji. Opierając się na badaniach i teoriach, w tym pracach Roberta J. Nasha i Jonathana Raucha, autorzy przedstawiają wielostronną analizę apateizmu, podkreślając jego odrębne cechy w porównaniu z innymi nieteistycznymi postawami, takimi jak ateizm, agnostycyzm i sekularyzm. Artykuł rozważa społeczne i kulturowe konteksty apateizmu i jego potencjalne konsekwencje dla przyszłości religii w społeczeństwie, a także wyzwania i wymagania, jakie stawia. Badanie to ma na celu zilustrowanie, w jaki sposób apateizm wpisuje się w szerszy krajobraz współczesnych zmian społecznych i jego potencjalny wpływ na przyszłe przejawy religijności i duchowości. W podsumowaniu artykuł dostarcza praktyczno-teologicznych spostrzeżeń na temat apateizmu, sugerując zasady tworzenia oferty pastoralnej, która uwzględniałaby specyfikę tego zjawiska.

Słowa kluczowe: apateizm, obojętność religijna, sekularyzm, nonteizm, religijność, współczesne społeczeństwo

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