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FRENCH ATHEIST SPIRITUALITY¹

Abstract. The phrase “atheist spirituality” may seem rather paradoxical at first. In practice, both atheists and theists object to it. Atheists would prefer to be called naturalists – in order to emphasize their connection with a specific tradition and interpretation of the world, and avoid being equated only with the denial of theism. They will be willing to deny the existence of any spiritual element, and thus deny the meaningfulness of religious language. It is worth stressing that this does not apply to all atheists. A new form of spirituality suggested by Francophone philosophers concerns first of all the resignation from a faith about a transcendent God, which is substituted with an undefined sacrum (what is holy, is highest) in immanence. New forms of spirituality are becoming a popular alternative to religious spirituality today. However, traditional and new spiritualities should not be treated as separate sets, as they do not necessarily compete with each other. Systems of spiritual development related to specific denominations will always provide inspiration even for atheist spirituality. The latter can indicate that apart from religion, there is also a spirituality that can develop in a person. Nihilism is not the only alternative to religion, as sometimes the defenders of the old religious order try to show. Atheist spirituality can sometimes refer to realities that are rich and enhancing.

Keywords: spirituality; atheist spirituality; French atheist spirituality; transcendence in immanence; André Comte-Sponville; Luc Ferry; Alain de Botton

1. Introduction. 2. Atheist spirituality – André Comte-Sponville. 3. Luc Ferry’s concept of new spirituality. 4. Alain de Botton’s project to create a religion for atheists. 5. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Henri de Lubac in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* writes that “it is not true that a person, as some seem to say, cannot arrange the

1 The article was prepared within the research project: *Francuska duchowość ateistyczna* [French atheist spirituality], Preludium – No. 2017/25/N/HS1/00353, financed by Narodowe Centrum Nauki (NCN) [National Science Centre, Poland].

earth without God. The truth is that without God they can only, in the end, arrange it against themselves. Humanism is excluded from inhumane humanism.”² Similar thoughts can be found in the papal encyclicals of Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* and Benedict XVI *Caritas in veritate*. Paul VI writes: “A person can of course arrange earthly things without God, but by rejecting God, they can only direct them against people. Therefore, humanism, disconnected from all other things, certainly becomes inhumane.”³ Benedict XVI states in the same spirit: “Humanism which excludes God is inhumane humanism. Only humanism open to the Absolute can lead us in promoting and implementing forms of social and civic life.”⁴

However, even a superficial understanding of society shows that these claims are false. Of all the people who do not believe in God, the greater part does not become inhumane. Since the Second Vatican Council’s approach on religious freedom also undermines the above thesis, that the attitude “without God” leads to inhumanism, then the Church should never accept the possibility of not believing in God. Talking about religious freedom would become a useless formality.

It is true that atheism is becoming increasingly common in modern Western culture, due to, among other things, the fact that it is now rare to question the existence of God himself. The question itself has been pushed into the private sphere and is no longer a social issue. On the other hand, the fundamental disconnection between religion and contemporary culture is not due to the triumph and strength of 19th and 20th century atheism, but to the changes that have taken place in human culture and understanding, which are no longer founded on religion.

2 H. de Lubac, *Dramat humanizmu ateistycznego*, trans. from French. A. Ziernicki, WAM, Kraków 2005, 28.

3 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, Vatican City State 1967, no 42.

4 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, Vatican City State 2009, no 157.

One of the more interesting and popular solutions to the decline of traditional religiosity concerns the replacement of (institutional) religion, with its rites and moral principles, with a form of spirituality completely detached from the religious dimension, e.g. atheist spirituality. Along with modernity comes a new approach to religious faith, which is spirituality torn from religiosity. Religion is increasingly understood and analyzed from the point of view of institutions, that is principles of operation belonging to particular social groups. Faith becomes an existential possibility that is only for the inner self and does not refer to Transcendence. The above thesis is well illustrated in the works of the French thinker Luc Ferry. He speaks of the Christian incarnation only as the humanization of divinity, which does not refer to transcendence. The more and more frequent use of spirituality from the Far East also strengthens the process of moving from religiosity towards a broader understanding of spirituality.

2. ATHEIST SPIRITUALITY – ANDRÉ COMTE-SPONVILLE

The expression “atheist spirituality” may seem rather paradoxical at first. In practice, both atheists and theists object to it. Atheists would prefer to be called naturalists⁵ – in order to emphasize their connection with a specific tradition and interpretation of the world, and avoid being equated only with the denial of theism. They will be willing to deny the existence of any spiritual element, and thus deny the meaningfulness of religious language. It is worth stressing that this does not apply to all atheists.⁶ In his essay *Is post-modern*

5 T. Siczkowski, *Nowy ateizm. Rekonstrukcja światopoglądu*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2018, (e-book version).

6 Paradoxically, this seems true even of the most radical modern atheists, such as the representatives of the “new atheism”, and especially of the so-called four horsemen of atheism. Sam Harris defends spirituality without religion in his book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2014.

spirituality possible?, A. Bielik-Robson gives an interesting description of the problem of spirituality, tracing a connection with post-modernity (the same description also explains why some people have a problem with the term “atheist spirituality”): “one of the characteristic tendencies of the so-called ‘postmodern ethics’ is to avoid confrontation with spiritual problems; the strategy is to usually wait for the silent, conceptually doomed problems to cease to exist. For many, the concept of postmodern spirituality sounds like a ‘wooden iron’. For what else is postmodernism if not just a radical departure from what was nourished by the spiritual traditions of all previous cultures; separating the idea of ‘spirit’ grasping its need for existential depth and meaning?... The post-modern world, despite all its inner diversity, has one common characteristic: it is a world of consciousness and accepted contingency (or is it precisely this awareness and acceptance which influences its diversity). Meanwhile, in the spirit world, quite simply, is the world of what is necessary.”⁷ Theists, however, will often reject the connection of spirituality with post-modernity and atheism. They will be willing to deny atheists the right to have higher spiritual feelings, and those who admit the importance of non-religious spirituality speak of “cryptotheism”. Such a reluctance rests on the incompatibility of religion and modernity – metaphysics was relegated to the margins of modern culture and finds no place in the post-modern debate. This seems to entail that there is no place for spirituality either, because of the close connection between metaphysics and spiritual issues.⁸

Post-modernity is completely cut off from metaphysics, which theists are largely still leaning on, wishing to return to the old metaphysical order of the world. This is why they do not give any rights to atheists, as well as to all of post-modernity, to any form

7 A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, 265-266.

8 Cf. *Ibid.*, 266-267.

of spirituality. To address this claim, it is necessary to ask what spirituality is and whether it actually conflicts with atheism and post-modernity. This is not an easy task, however, given that it is not possible to reach an agreement on the definition of the term. Following D. Motak, it can be said that “attempts to define spirituality are constantly undertaken, and it is probably without exaggeration to say that there are almost as many definitions of spirituality as there are authors of works on it. Presenting an arbitrary selection of a few of them would bring nothing significant to our considerations.”⁹

Due to the fact that attempting to define the very concept of spirituality causes enormous problems, and extensive literature on this subject, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology and popular science, usually narrowed down the issues to an attempt to answer the following question: With changes in Western civilization that took place under the influence of modernity (broadly understood), can we observe the emergence of a completely new type of spirituality, which can be reconciled with atheism, modernity or postmodernity? Is atheist spirituality, most notably its account developed in France by André Comte-Sponville among others, an example of this?

In literature, we can find four basic accounts concerning the relationship between religiosity and spirituality: recognizing spirituality as a component of religiosity, recognizing religiosity as a component of spirituality, recognizing religiosity and spirituality as separate phenomena, or even in some respects contradictory, and recognizing religiosity and spirituality as phenomena, where their semantic definitions overlap.¹⁰ The third type of relationship between spirituality and religiosity, according to which spirituality completely separates itself from the religious tradition, is becoming more and

9 D. Motak, *Religia – duchowość – religijność. Przemiany zjawiska i ewolucja pojęcia*, *Studia Religiologiczne* 43(2010), 212.

10 Cf. J. Piotrowski, *Transcendencja duchowa. Perspektywa psychologiczna*, Liberi Libri, Warszawa 2018, 19

more common. Of course, religious systems still hold onto the idea that both realities are related, since religion is an element of spirituality that provides a safe and open structure. However, spirituality is being practiced more and more often outside explicit religious contexts.¹¹ Spirituality is no longer associated with any “religious or ecclesiastical institutions, and it is even defined as an alternative to religion and it is quite often not even regarded as an integral part of religion. Religiosity is associated with attachment to doctrines and beliefs enforced by the structures of ecclesiastical authorities, expressed in rituals and practices carried out in community contexts. Spirituality is associated with one’s own sense of Self, with the personal search for the *sacred* without the mediation of the Church, with a personal inner experience.”¹² Today, this kind of spirituality is referred to as the “new spirituality” in sociology, psychology, theology, and especially philosophy. The expression refers to various phenomena, most commonly associated with the New Age movement.

For the purposes of this paper it will be assumed that, unless otherwise stated, “new spirituality” identifies the form of spirituality that has been shaped in the contemporary world as a result of the changes introduced by modernity into European culture. Its most distinctive feature seems to be individualism, which traces its origins back to the Reformation. André Comte-Sponville defines spirituality as life of the spirit, whereas Descartes defined it as a “thinking thing.”¹³ The Spirit is something that doubts, understands, claims, denies, wants, does not want, and also imagines and feels. To this, Comte-Sponville adds “something that loves but also doesn’t love,

11 Cf. J. Mariański, *Nowa duchowość jako fenomen ponowoczesności: alternatywa czy dopełnienie religijności?*, in: *Religijność i duchowość – dawne i nowe formy*, eds. M. Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, S. Grotowska, Nomos, Kraków 2010, 24.

12 J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2010, 207-208.

13 Cf. A. Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme. Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu*, Albin Michel, Paris 2006, 146.

contemplates, recalls, laughs or jokes.”¹⁴ Such a thing is identified with the brain (Comte-Sponville) or an intangible substance (Descartes). “When it comes to spirituality, the problem is the rather too broad understanding of the word ‘spirit’. Spirituality in a broad sense would cover all or the majority of human life: the term ‘spiritual’ would almost be a synonym of the term ‘psychological’ or ‘mental’. The perspective that interests us, we do not think about spirituality in this way. When we talk about spirituality today, it is mostly to point out a part of our lives – generally quite limited, though perhaps open to the limitless – part of our personal inner life, one that has to do with the absolute, infinity, and eternity. It is like the highest peak of the spirit, determining its greatest amplitude. [...] A person is a finite being, open to infinity. I can add: an ephemeral being, open to eternity, open to the absolute. This openness, is the spirit. Metaphysics is about thinking, but spirituality is about experiencing, practicing and experiencing. This is what distinguishes spirituality from religion, which is only one of its forms.”¹⁵ In practice, it is possible to practice both religiosity without spirituality and spirituality without religiosity.

It seems that the emergence of a spirituality without reference to religiosity is due to modernity and the change in the way we understand people and the attitude to transcendence. Dominika Motak, in her article *The Religion – Religiosity – Spirituality. The Transformation, Phenomena and the Concept of Evolution*, writes: “An extremely important role was played here by the sixteenth-century reformers who, as Hans-Georg Soeffner writes, ‘lifted the barriers of morality, legend, tradition, ecclesiastical dogmatics and the scientific faith supported by ritual lying between the single faithful and their God’. Luther argued with conviction that religious merit can be transferred from person to person; therefore, as Steve Bruce puts it, ‘he demanded that every person become their own monk’

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 143-144.

and emphasized a coherent religious and ethical life (instead of the traditional focus on the periodic purification rituals between which the essentially secular 'weekday' prevailed). In this way, the transition from a 'ritualised part-time activity' to a belief seen as a character-trait took place. This gave a basis oriented towards self-observation, self-interpretation and self-reflection, which resulted in the privatisation and individualisation of religions."¹⁶ The rise of atheism was one of the consequence of modernity, and what followed was the detachment of spirituality from religiosity. On this issue, George Simmel argued that: "one of the deepest pains of the modern-era person is that they are no longer able to continue with the religions conveyed by ecclesiastical tradition, while their religious drive does not weaken."¹⁷ An example of such a "religious drive" is the French atheist Comte-Sponville, who emphasizes that atheism does not deny that there can be something that is absolute. Such a distinction was also stressed by Ludwig Feuerbach, who distinguished between two ways of denying God, one who rejects the existence of a personal transcendent God or any other absolute principles, and the other which just rejects transcendent existence, but accepts the existence of something absolute. What is absolute here means something that exists independently of any conditions, relations or points of view.¹⁸ It is not a personal, transcendent being, existing independently of person and this world. The absolute is not God as all personal supernaturality is rejected by this account, which is the basis of the new spirituality.

The ontological dependence of the spirit on matter does not exclude the fact that the existence of a spiritual dimension must still be accepted. Moreover, the relationship between matter and spirit must be clarified in a way that is exactly the opposite of theism. It is not matter that has been created by the Spirit. Rather, it is the

16 D. Motak, *Religia – duchowość – religijność*, op. cit., 205-206.

17 *Ibid.*, 201.

18 A. Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, op. cit., 150.

spirit that results from the transformation and evolution of matter. In order to characterize a new spirituality, A. Comte-Sponville paradoxically refers to traditional Christian virtues, more precisely to theological virtues, and replaces them with his own proposals: instead of the spirituality of faith, he proposes the spirituality of fidelity. The spirituality of hope replaces action, and the spirituality of love is supposed to be an alternative to the spirituality of fear and subordination. These experiences, in his opinion, lead to mysticism of a non-religious nature.¹⁹

When a person experiences complete peace, he contemplates the vastness of the world and their self-centeredness becomes less prominent. When a person permeates the conviction of unity with the surrounding vastness, he becomes a symbol of this new mystical spirituality. However, this experience has an emotional-aesthetic nature more than a religious or spiritual one. We are simply dealing here with an “oceanic feeling”, that is, the experience of ourselves in unity with everyone. It is a type of instatic mysticism (from gr. *in-statis*, “to be in yourself”). The path to true reality does not lead through the outside world. Rather, it is found in the person, it is our “me” or “self”. This “me” does not equate with the self on a purely mental level. The path to unity with something absolute is found through the inner human being. It is necessary to learn to detach from externality, which is only an illusion, and to know that spiritually is the deepest truth of one’s identity with divinity. R. Otto suggests that we can find such a mysticism in yoga, for example.²⁰ It is the “pure” mysticism of the soul. The soul is not a place to encounter a God that is separate from the soul. Rather, the soul becomes God itself. This is not so much ecstasy but “enstase” (as referred to by

19 Cf. *Ibid.*, 148.

20 Cf. R. Otto, *Mistyka Wschodu i Zachodu. Analogie i różnice wyjaśniające jej istotę*, trans. from English T. Duliński, KR, Warszawa 2000, 165-166.

Elijah), which is the experience of the self within immanence. It is also a purely natural experience.

According to Comte-Sponville, in this experience we find such elements as silence, mystery and obviousness along with fullness, simplicity, unity, acceptance, death and eternity. The first element is silence, which is not a lack of conversation but the suspension of reason. This stance is not irrational, as Comte-Sponville argues. Silence is about the contemplation of reality, which does not have to turn into a rational discourse. It is the contemplation of the truth itself – that is, reality. In this way silence is the original contact of a person with the world around them. However, Comte-Sponville fails to acknowledge that one intuitive or pre-reflective aspect of reality is the ability to create concepts. Contemplation is also rational and a manifestation of the cognitive abilities of a person. In this case, atheist spirituality equates with the functioning of human cognitive abilities. Mystery and obviousness are further elements of this account of spirituality, which is the delight of the mystery of existence. There is only being, and the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” makes no sense as the very fact of existence is obvious. The mystery of being is reduced to the obviousness of being. Why not face the question of existence, the origin of existence, the cause or reason of existence?

In a sense, atheist spirituality arises from neglecting the most important question: why is there something rather than nothing? It turns out that the new spirituality has nothing to propose on this matter, apart from the claim that there is no secret of being, there is only being. Mystery and the world become one. From the experience of the obviousness of being or existence, comes the deepest joy due to completeness. There is existence and only existence, is it possible to desire more? This is certainly a very optimistic assumption by A. Comte-Sponville: such experiences of completely losing attachment to life and contingency, as well as the absence of suffering, are not

frequent. These are very rare events, and it is probably difficult to build one's spiritual development on them.²¹

The experience of mystical existence also brings about the experience of simplicity and unity. Simplicity is about focusing on what is essential and important. This, as Comte-Sponville writes, amounts to "being with oneself to the point that we no longer have ourselves, because there is only one thing left, only action, only consciousness."²² From this follows unity, that is lived on two essential levels: the unity of the world and the unity of a person.

The next stage in this spiritual journey is the experience of eternity, which is not understood in a theistic sense. It is rather an experience of the present, because neither the future nor the past actually exist. There is only lasting time. Even past events are present as memories, and the future as present expectations or hopes. Everything that exists inside and outside of us is present. Hence, the present is everything, it is even eternity, but an eternity here and now. Even the idea of death ceases to cause fear since there is only the present and there is no point in expecting any other eternity. Comte-Sponville's proposal to identify the present with eternity is not new or original: this idea was already introduced by the Stoics. As for Comte-Sponville's account, it seems too optimistic to be entirely true or attainable in everyday life.²³

This project of atheist spirituality culminates in the concept of unconditional acceptance, which is the attitude of saying "yes" to everything that happens. It is not the approval of everything, but the adoption of a peculiar attitude of non-religious faith according to which everything that is, is true. Faith is the foundation of our life, not some additional (or unnecessary) aspect of it. Each person builds their life on numerous elements of faith, understood as a form

21 Cf. A. Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, op. cit., 170-171.

22 *Ibid.*, 173.

23 *Ibid.*, 180-181.

of entrustment: that is, faith is not related directly with religion. It is often an act of trusting another person. More precisely, it is about an even more fundamental attitude that permeates everything: it anticipates every act, decision, thought, and above all, it marks the first, most basic contact with the surrounding world.²⁴

However, an important question arises as to whether this new spirituality can meet the most important “challenge” to any spirituality, namely the mystery of death. As already mentioned, immersion in the present is intended to put aside its inevitability. Comte-Sponville states that it will only take away the future and the past, but not the present. The present does not take the whole person, only a part. However, this does not explain the problem of the death of other people. In the context of the lives of the people we love and our family, death also takes away the future that you want to naturally share with your loved ones. Therefore, the theistic account of death will always be much more optimistic and easier to accept. In his book *Live until Death*, the late Paul Ricoeur formulates the concepts of a horizontal and vertical resurrection. Horizontal resurrection concerns our existence in the works that we have left behind, in the memories of other people, and in the life we have passed down to our children. It simply means the continuance of the good we have done in the course of our earthly existence. Vertical resurrection, which is the essence of the Christian message, indicates the necessity of existing in such a reality that will collect all the good done and ensure its durability, not only partly, as perpetuated in other people, but all the good that was shared by people. The end of good cannot be the mortality inherent in our nature. Although this is not a purely philosophical argument, it is certainly an interesting assumption that enables us to complement natural spirituality with supernatural spirituality.²⁵

24 *Ibid.*, 184-185.

25 See P. Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort. Suivi de Fragments*, Seuil, Paris 2007.

The atheist spirituality outlined above is based mainly on the experience of a unity with the existing world, the acceptance of its existence and diversity. As Comte-Sponville states, it is something special. It is not your regular everyday experience. Hence the reference to mysticism, which also belongs to experiences of a unique nature in theism. However, the “new mystic” leaves no room for an appeal to a personal God. God becomes redundant, because the experience of uniting the concept of existence with peace and acceptance, fills man completely and leaves no room for anything else. From this, Comte-Sponville’s concludes that God, who is no longer missing, ceases to be God. “There is no God, there is only a dream without a dreamer, a dream that contains all dreams: it is a world into which we can only enter under the condition that we wake up.”²⁶ The question that arises here concerns the originality of Comte-Sponville’s proposal and whether this kind of spirituality is in fact atheistic, leaving no room for God.

3. LUC FERRY’S CONCEPT OF NEW SPIRITUALITY

A similar concept was suggested by Luc Ferry.²⁷ His main thesis describes two processes which take place in a religious and a secular space, respectively. On the one hand, we are dealing with the humanization of divinity, whereas on the other, the process of “divinization” (deification) of a person. The humanization of divinity is nothing more than the denial of the existence of Transcendence. This is in line with the contemporary critique of metaphysics and reduces the understanding of religion to a purely human endeavor. Religion is not a personal relationship with God, but merely a possible

26 A. Comte-Sponville, *L’esprit de l’athéisme*, op. cit., 205.

27 L. Ferry, *L’homme-dieu ou le sens de la vie*, Autres Temps Année, Paris 1996. For his views on religion, see also L. Ferry, L. Jerphagnon, *La Tentation du chistianisme*, Grasset, Paris 2009; L. Ferry, *Apprendre à vivre*, Plon, Paris 1996; L. Ferry, M. Gauchet, *Le Religieux après la religion*, Grasset, Paris 2004.

area for personal development. There are still people who accept the existence of a reality that goes beyond the finite order, but they increasingly begin to “abandon traditional dogmas and turn to the ideology of human rights.”²⁸ For example, when it comes to moral issues we can’t help but notice how selectively practicing religious people treat what the Church allows, orders or does not allow. Ferry claims that the suggestion of the primacy of moral truths over freedom found in the encyclical of John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor* is unacceptable to a modern person. Moral dilemmas are no longer dealt with from a theological perspective, but only from a universal human perspective. The humanization of divinity, that is, keeping the religious dimension only in a horizontal perspective, is a complete renunciation of the very basis of religion. Ferry proposes replacing religious spirituality, which in his opinion no longer refers to the personal God, with the “new spirituality”, closely connected with the notions of sacrifice and person. Despite what the representatives of traditional religions, most notably Christians, sometimes claim, today we are not facing an increase in nihilism or ungodliness. Rather, we face an authentic return to ethics and traditional values.²⁹ According to Ferry, the basic feature of the “new spirituality” is the concept of holiness, defined in a completely different way than in religious narratives. Holiness comes down to emphasizing the almost sacred character of human dignity. It is the only value for which people are willing to give up their lives. Nowadays, a person is not at all willing to sacrifice their life for the state, God or any ideology. Only another person whom we love can influence us into a sacrificial action, including giving up our life for them. It is the “sacralization (deification) of humanity”, which presupposes “the transition from what might be called ‘vertical transcendence’ (these are external being more important than the individual so to speak), to ,horizontal

28 L. Ferry, *L’homme-dieu ou le sens de la vie*, op. cit., 46.

29 Ibid., 78.

transcendence' (the transcendence of others towards myself)."³⁰ The "Other", whom often is our "Closest" becomes the basic determinant for ethical relations. Modern thought, according to Ferry, rejects any attempts to explain the character traits of human dignity through the category of the "sacred". From what do they derive their ultimate justification, then? Does human dignity have no ontical-transcendent justification? Ferry does not address these questions.

Ferry, however, does not completely dissociate himself from religious systems. His spirituality also draws from Christianity. In his *La Tentation du christianisme*,³¹ he tries to describe the process that takes place between Christianity and Western civilization. On the one hand, the Christian faith has ceased to function in public spaces and it is often reduced to the private sphere. On the other hand, Christianity is still a strong tradition that stands at the roots of our culture. Christianity cannot therefore be ignored or omitted in modern discourse, for doing so would eventually lead to the "deculturalization" of Europe. Ferry agrees with the historian Jerphagnon, in tracing the influence of Christianity back to the Greek tradition to find a new way of introducing Christianity in modern society. According to Jerphagnon, the "success" of Christianity in ancient times is explained by Roman pragmatism (it was a new religion capable of uniting the empire) and a completely different concept of religiosity, which refers to individual testimony, leaning toward martyrdom. However, according to Ferry, the confrontation between Greek philosophy and Christianity concerned a broader intellectual spectrum. The "Christian Revolution" stood in opposition to two main theses of Greek philosophy. Firstly, the world is impersonal, even if it contains harmony; secondly, the purpose of life is a good life on earth, not only the search for eternal life. Living in harmony with the universe allows one to overcome the fear of death. Christianity

30 Cf. *Ibid.*, 89.

31 L. Ferry, J. Jerphagnon, *La Tentation du christianisme*, op. cit.

rejects this idea on three fundamental levels: theory, morality and salvation. On a theoretical level, it is the personalization of the universe that is the result of the new religion. The universe is no longer ruled by impersonal principles, but is permeated with love, which also expresses the idea of the Incarnation. Moreover, such a world can no longer be known through reason. It requires not only theoretical knowledge, but faith. That is, an action of trust in the Creator. Christianity also replaced philosophy in representing a “way of life” and “spiritual exercise”. The domain of philosophy was limited to the analysis of concepts. Philosophy stopped to be the search for wisdom. In turn, the Christian revolution, by introducing the idea of the equality of all people before God changed the hierarchical structure of Greek society. Every person is created in the image and likeness of God. It does not matter what social class they belong to. This was the most substantial revolution proposed by a Christian doctrine. The last change brought about by Christianity concerned the soteriological spectrum. Salvation is the purpose of human life and it became an individual and conscious endeavor carried out both through actions and destiny – because it is Christ, a divine person, who saves and offers salvation to every human being. A radical novelty of Christianity is also the idea of the resurrection of the body, based on selfless love practiced in life.³² It is a pity that Ferry does not see that even today an essential element of the Christian religion is the proposal of personal salvation, the source of which is God himself. No “new spirituality”, even if it is capable of self-sacrifice, offers life after death. Such a personal salvation, understood as the continuance of existence in the new reality after death, is a specifically religious proposal.³³ Non-religious spirituality cannot solve the essential

32 Cf. *Ibid.*, 94.

33 An interesting analysis of the various concepts of salvation, both religious and non-religious, can be found in the work of I. Ziemiński, *Życie wieczne. Przyczynek do eschatologii filozoficznej*, W drodze, Poznań 2013.

challenge of the human death which every spirituality faces, whether religious or atheist.

Ferry's concept of spirituality refers to a specific notion of transcendence, understood as "transcendence within immanence". Ferry's transcendence was strongly criticized by Marcel Gauchet. In their co-authored book *Le Religieux après la religion*,³⁴ they clarify their respective positions in the new dimension of religiosity. Ferry reiterates his thesis that traditional religion, speaking of a personal God wants to create a moral law and build a society. According to him, it is precisely this idea that is in decline. Criticism of the Transcendence of a personal nature does not mean that there are no longer people who believe and practice traditional religions. According to Ferry, however, this is ultimately a matter of individual choice. Gauchet agrees with this, but he derives different conclusions from his analysis of today's religiosity than Ferry's. Ferry tries to argue that the "humanization of divinity" and the "sanctification of a person" lead to a slow discovery of transcendence in immanence. This process leads to the need to transcend secular ethics, which in certain situations becomes helpless, e.g. when it comes to issues of death, suffering and the meaning of life. Such a need does not arise with respect to specific religions; rather, it is about something that transcends a purely temporal dimension. Transcendence is becoming an ethical horizon, but of a very unspecified nature. It is a concept so vague that it is hard to understand what it is supposed to mean. Gauchet is even more inconsistent than Ferry because he does not accept such an undefined transcendence. In his opinion, it still has the characteristics of religious transcendence. He proposes to replace it with an "earthly absolute". How should this expression be understood? First of all, it is the negation of metaphysical transcendence. Only certain dimensions transcend experiential categories: e.g. selfless love, which is the pursuit of profit. Certain values transcend others.

34 L. Ferry, M. Gauchet, *Le Religieux après la religion*, op. cit.

As Ferry states: “the transcendence of freedom, so to speak, not only exists in us but also outside of us: it is not we who invent values that guide and move us, it is not we, for example, who invent the beauty of nature or the power of love.”³⁵ They exist independently of us.

4. ALAIN DE BOTTON’S PROJECT TO CREATE A RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS

The Swiss thinker Alain de Botton, in his *Religion for Atheists*,³⁶ claims that he is not interested in the question of the truth of religion. In his opinion “religion is not true in any sense given by God.”³⁷ This question does not make sense. Moreover, he does not intend to address issues relating to the existence of the Absolute and, consequently, the veracity or falsity of religious claims. His purpose is to show that religion can be useful, interesting and even comforting. The atheist can also apply religious ideas and practices to the secular world.³⁸ De Botton lists religious elements that can inspire a non-believer: community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture, institutions.

The religious community can motivate us to see a potential friend in the other person, rather than an enemy. Unfortunately, in today’s world everyone is a potential threat to everyone else. Thanks to religious affiliation, one can expect help and understanding just because they are a member of a religious community. According to De Botton, in the contemporary world such an attitude is hard to find, although to some extent religion continues to promote it. Why should the “new spirituality” not follow its example?³⁹

35 L. Ferry, *Apprendre à vivre*, op. cit., 293.

36 A. de Botton, *Religion for Atheists. A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*, Pantheon, London 2012, (e-book version).

37 Ibid., 10.

38 Cf. Ibid., 11.

39 Cf. Ibid., 42.

Kindness, another postulate of De Botton's atheist spirituality, consists restoring an ethical dimension to life, an assumption we can clearly find in religious systems. To be clear, this is not about introducing, for example, Christian ethics as a normative system. Rather, it is about maintaining ethical reflection, which should be an important element of both individual and community reflection.⁴⁰

Religious education can also be a model for an atheist society, given that knowledge does not coincide with scientific knowledge and aims to promote the development of the whole person, including the dimension we call spirituality and which religion calls the soul⁴¹.

Tenderness, for instance as personified in Mary in the Christian religion, is another element that can fascinate an atheist. It draws attention to the emotional side of a person, which is also important and cannot be neglected in modern spirituality.⁴²

The paradoxical elements referred to by De Botton are religious pessimism and perspective. These two elements teach us a healthy distance from reality.⁴³ Unfortunately, atheism is sometimes a naive position – for instance, by believing that progress will eliminate all the possible pains of this world.

Two more religious patterns are art and architecture. According to De Botton, modern art and architecture have ceased to delight and have become incomprehensible to people who are not expert. Art has ceased to arouse emotions that are easily shared with others.⁴⁴

The final postulate of a religion for atheists is to look at religious institutions, usually the most criticized aspect of any religion. De Botton, however, sees their positive side. It is the institutions that give us a sense of identity and implement the rituals by which spirituality

40 Cf. *Ibid.*, 94.

41 Cf. *Ibid.*, 161-162.

42 Cf. *Ibid.*, 165.

43 Cf. *Ibid.*, 187.

44 Cf. *Ibid.*, 207.

is realized. Perhaps it would be worth considering similar institutions in a secularized society, says De Botton.⁴⁵

De Botton's project to create a religion for atheists is interesting, but as Andrzej Draguła notes, it is essentially a sacred, non-religious proposal.⁴⁶ Although it is not a critique of religion (rather, it criticizes the modern world and atheism), it fails to perceive the value of religion as such. Religion has positive elements on the condition that they are independent of any reference to Transcendence.

5. CONCLUSION

Summarizing the considerations of the Francophone philosophers, it can be said that the new spirituality they suggest is first of all the resignation from a faith in a transcendent God and the search for an undefined sacrum (what is holy, is highest) in immanence. As Anna Kubiak argues, such an understanding of spirituality has a positive impact on several aspects of life, such as the experience of art and nature, the issue of life after life, the concept of healing as understood in alternative medicine, secular thought (e.g. science), activism for animal rights and the experience of a unity with the universe.⁴⁷ New spirituality is becoming a popular alternative to religious spirituality. However, both spiritualities should not be treated as separate sets, they do not have to compete with each other. Systems of spiritual development belonging to specific religions will always provide inspiration even for atheist spirituality. The latter indicates that apart from religion, there is also a spiritual dimension that can develop in a person. Beyond religion, there is not only nihilism, as sometimes the defenders of the old religious order try to show. Sometimes, one can find realities that are nevertheless rich and enriching.

45 Cf. *Ibid.*, 298.

46 Cf. A. Draguła, *Ateistyczna imitacja religii?*, *Więź* (2018)2, 168-177.

47 Cf. A. Kubiak, *Duchowość Nowej Ery*, *Studia Socjologiczne* 1(2002), p. 45.

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