



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF PAUL VI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SYMPOSIUM
ON «THE CULTURE OF UNBELIEF»**

Thursday, 27 March 1969

It is with respectful regard that We greet Our visitors, participants in the Symposium on “The Culture of Unbelief”. We thank them for this visit, which takes on for Us the character of a highly significant encounter. This is not the usual meeting of friendly persons; it is rather the encounter of diverse cultures and differing thoughts. We say this with humility; We know that here before Us are men of high intellect and deep study; but We say this also with joy and with hope: for it is always Our desire to listen to those voices which express the thinking of our times, as it is ever Our desire that Our own voice should be heard – a voice which, only because of the debility and lack of skill of Our lips, may seem to be uncertain and out of tune; yet, We must add, holds within itself the sureness of the truth, and the yearning to communicate its message of hope and of life.

This moment, therefore, seems to Us to be as it were dramatic and symbolic.

The Secretariat which is called that for Non-Believers was instituted, first of all, for the purpose of promoting the study of those attitudes of negation which modern man assumes—whether in cultural expressions, in sociological and political terms, or in practical and unthinking ways—with regard to that religion which believes in a transcendental, personal God, the beginning and end of the entire universe, including man, and with regard to that religion which finds in Christ the solution of the great problem of the true and living God, the loving God of our salvation.

Thus it comes about that we must recognize many aspects and many motives of non-belief; that we must receive the many objections which non-belief proposes to us; that we must respect the scientific contributions which it makes to the study of the religious problem, with arguments drawn from unquestionable sciences such as psychology and sociology; that we must admit the difficulties raised today by the pedagogico-social context, particularly in young minds engaged in

scientific studies; and in the employment of sensitive knowledge, in preference to speculative knowledge, when dealing with the traditional religious mentality. We wish also to acknowledge that frequently that a-religious form which defines itself as secularization, and is so widely spread today, is not in itself antireligious; rather, it tends to claim for the autonomous forces of human reason the knowledge and exploitation of the world as proposed to man's direct experience. In a word, then, we are fair, and in part assenting, in regard to "Non-Believers".

At a certain time, however, we must say that we, too, are "Non-Believers". For example, we do not believe that the development of modern thought, provided it is consistent with its intrinsic exigencies, leads to necessity to the denial of God. Moreover, although we admit that the knowledge of God requires an assistance which only God can give (cf. *Ps. XXXV*, 10; *Denz.-Sch.*, n. 2732), we do not believe that the certitude of God's existence is inaccessible to the human mind (cf. *Rom. 1. 20*; *Denz.-Sch.*, n. 3004); that is to say, we do not believe that science and belief in God are antithetical terms, mutually exclusive of each other; we do not believe that the theoretical and practical forms of the modern denial of God are beneficial to the progress of culture and of human happiness; we do not believe that the economic, social and civil liberation of man requires the necessity of banishing religion as being a deviation from the struggle to establish truly human dimensions and to build up the earthly city (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 21); and finally we do not believe that the ineffable, mysterious, transcendental and unknown God is inaccessible and distant (cf. *Acts. 17, 22-28*; DE LUBAC: *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, p. 112). In this, we too are «protesters»!

We are protesters because we wish to raise up again the idea of God, from the degradation into which it has fallen with many men of our time, and from the fantastic, superstitious or idolatrous counterfeit which we often encounter, even in modern life, as well as from the despair, the anguish, the void, which its absence produces in the heart of man.

Therefore We greet with pleasure the initiative taken by the Secretariat for Non-Believers, and by its Eminent President, Cardinal König, with the valid and disinterested contribution of the "Giovanni Agnelli" Foundation of Turin, and the scientific collaboration of the Department of Sociology of the University of California, by convoking in Rome during these days a group of illustrious scholars from various parts of the world, who have, under the chairmanship of Professor Peter Berger and in the company of several theologians, analyzed the theme: "The Culture of Unbelief".

Together with Our congratulations for the good work done, We express the hope that these studies will continue, and develop, by means of collaboration with personalities and institutions of the scientific world. The Church will, to the extent of her possibilities, favour this type of undertaking which, besides the contribution which it can offer to her own specific mission, will also, We fervently hope, share in securing peaceful and orderly living together of all peoples.

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