

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

A Farewell to Faith

"The Decline of Religious Beliefs in Western Europe" by Mattei Dogan, in *International Social Science Journal* (Sept. 1995), UNESCO, 1 rue Miollis, 75732 Paris, Cedex 15, France.

Do you believe in God? To that simple question, most Western Europeans still answer yes. But over the past three decades, observes Dogan, director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, Europeans have become much less religious.

It is well known, he notes, that Catholics' attendance at Mass, along with the number of baptisms, marriages, and religious burials, has generally declined in recent decades. Among West German Catholics under 30, for example, 52 percent in 1963 were churchgoers, but only 18 percent of their counterparts in 1982 were. With the general decline in religious practice, Dogan maintains, has come an erosion in fundamental religious beliefs, although international survey researchers have only recently sought to measure it.

One such survey in 1990–91 found that outside of Ireland (50 percent) and Poland (73 percent), only a minority of believers rates God as very important in their lives. In

France, for example, of the 62 percent professing belief, only 13 percent consider God very important in their lives; in Britain, the corresponding figures are 78 percent and 19 percent. In the United States, 89 percent say they believe, and of them, 58 percent rate God's role in their lives as very significant.

When people say they believe in God, moreover, they may or may not have the personal God of the Jewish and Christian Bible in mind. Given some other choices, the biblical God won an absolute majority in only five countries: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and the United States. "Some sort of spirit or life force" was preferred by 34 percent in France, 41 percent in Britain, 45 percent in western Germany, and 46 percent in Sweden.

Few Europeans declare themselves atheists, Dogan says. Most who lose their faith are not hostile toward religion, but indifferent. Dogan does not seem worried about the fate of morality. "The philosophy of the Ten Commandments, the prophets, and the apos-

God and the Sexes

Evelyn Birge Vitz, a professor of French and comparative literature at New York University and a contributing editor to the Catholic magazine *Crisis* (Sept. 1995), ponders the fact that Christ chose no women as Apostles.

Can it be that Jesus couldn't choose women because of the low status of women at his time? This argument has always struck me as ridiculous. Or rather, and quite simply, only those who do not believe that Jesus is God can hold such a view. . . . Are we really to believe that Jesus—God—did not, could not do something he wanted to do—pick women to be Apostles—because he was worried about what people would think?

If he did all these things, it must be because that was precisely what he, as the Son of God—as God himself—intended to do. No other view is even seriously worth consideration. Since women as priestesses were common in other religions of the time, it can hardly have failed to dawn on God that this was a possibility.

It has been charged that, at some point, Christianity got onto the wrong foot about the way in which power is assigned differentially to the sexes. But, in fact, this is the foot on which Christ started his religion. Certain fundamental roles of active leadership, of power in this world, were assigned to men, and not to women. . . .

Should we women be offended? . . . It seems safe to assume that, since [God] foresaw how he was going to assign power relations on earth, he designed his creatures to find satisfaction in this arrangement.

ties is embodied in the civil legislation of the whole of Europe. . . . Decline in religious values by no means implies moral decadence if

those values are replaced by a non-metaphysical ethic. But no doubt the fear of divine punishment tends to make us better people.”

A New View of Peter Abelard

“The Debate on Universals before Peter Abelard” by Augustine Thompson, O.P., in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (July 1995), P.O. Box 24580, Los Angeles, Calif. 90024.

In the late 11th and early 12th centuries, early medieval philosophers engaged in a sometimes bitter debate about “universals.” Historians have portrayed this as a two-sided argument. “Nominalists” considered universals such as “goodness” and “justice” mere words. One could use a word such as *humanity*, but that did not mean that such an entity existed. “Realists” regarded universals as real things. Their arguments went on fruitlessly, according to the traditional historical view, until the genius Peter Abelard (1079–1142) hammered out a synthesis.

Recent scholarship has cast doubt on this account. It now appears that Abelard was “a far less pivotal thinker” than most historians once believed, writes Thompson, a professor of religious studies at the University of Oregon.

Between 1080 and 1120, the most influential writers and teachers of Western Christendom were “realists.” In his proofs for the existence of God, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) seems to have assumed that universals such as goodness exist independent of good men or any other particular good objects. He defended universals “as pure and absolute,” Thompson says, because he wanted “to identify them with the highest pure absolute, that is, with God.” Although Anselm was chiefly a theologian, later thinkers focused on philosophical questions: how universals relate to particulars, and how particulars became different from one another.

In the traditional version of what happened before Abelard, historians identified four or five competing “schools” or “theories” and divided these between nominalists and realists. This scheme, Thompson says, rests mostly on Abelard’s own writings and those of his pupil, John of Salisbury (d.

1180)—and their testimony, it now seems, is not trustworthy.

The most celebrated nominalist was Roscelin of Compiègne, who, according to a contemporary, taught “the theory that a universal was a verbal utterance [*sententiam vocum*].” Anselm branded Roscelin a “heretic of dialectic.” Abelard, who was Roscelin’s student, also portrayed him “as an incompetent logician.” The theories advanced by such earlier thinkers appeared, in the standard account, to be



A French cleric instructs his pupil. In Abelard’s day, the Catholic Church sustained the Western intellectual tradition.

fragmentary and incoherent, until Abelard made his great contribution in *Logica Ingredientibus*, proposing that a word could be both a verbal utterance (*vox*) and a significant term (*sermo*). But the discovery of new texts and more careful readings of long-known ones, Thompson says, have changed this picture. Even the famed nominalist Roscelin, it now seems, wanted to identify the realities to which the *voces* referred and “believed that every *vox* tagged some thing in the world.”

That and other evidence suggest, Thompson says, that before Abelard there was “a movement toward a coherent rethinking of universals along antirealist lines.” To dispel the confusion that persisted required “a clever technician,” not a greatly original thinker. Abelard filled the bill.