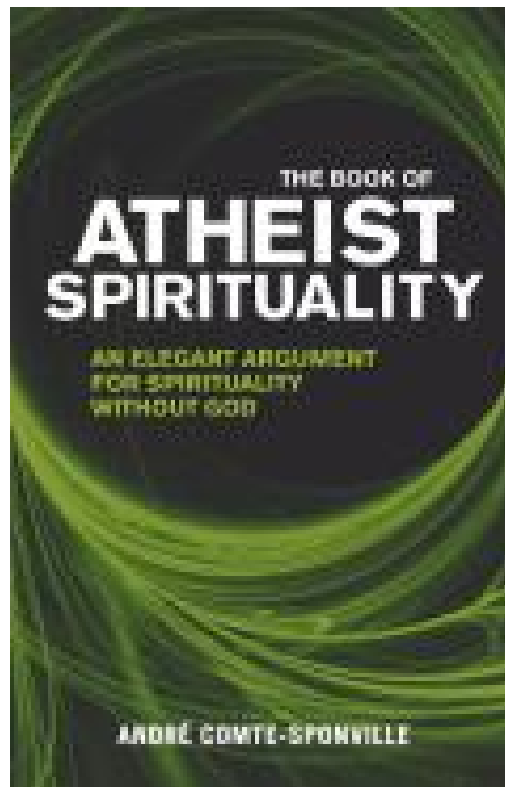


A BOOK OF ATHEIST SPIRITUALITY: SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT GOD



André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*, translated by Nancy Huston, London, Bantam Books, 2009. 212 pp. originally published in French as *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, Paris, Editions Albin Michel.

André Comte-Sponville is a lecturer at the Sorbonne. He has written the widely published and much translated *Petit Traité des Grandes Vertus*. He acknowledges how much *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* owes to the media debates, with Bernard Feillet, Alain Houziaux and Alain Rémond now published as *A-t-on encore besoin d'une religion?* (Editions de l'Atelier, 2003), and with Philippe Capelle published as *Dieu existe-t-il encore ?* (Le Cerf, 2005). This fact helps explain why the book is at once very readable but also somewhat lacking

in self-criticism. The book is particularly valuable in that it requires theists, and Christians in particular, to re-examine their position.

In the preface to the work, he admits the exponential growth of interest in spirituality in recent times and acknowledges that he wishes to take part in this movement by developing a spirituality of atheism. This is his particular originality. In this way he hopes to counter any *rapprochement* of Church and State. Indeed, he refers more than once to the Enlightenment, expressing a fear that that great period of human history might be swamped by more recent developments in the revival of religious interest..

In this first chapter 'Can we do without religion?' he defines religion in Durkheim's terms. He examines the meaning of 'community', 'faith', 'hope', 'morality', 'nihilism', 'truth', 'love' the place of ritual and the connection between religion and art, but his examination always seems to miss the mark, as though he is not describing 'community' or 'faith' etc. in the way that Christians would. His examination is not ample. He does not try to dissuade theists but in giving them permission to think their foolish thoughts he ends up sounding patronising. He admits that atheism does not provide hope, and speaks of the 'wisdom of despair'. He links his points of view with the Stoics, Epicureanism, and particularly with Spinoza whom he admires greatly, finding corroboration in their views.

His style is elegant and full of phrases and sentences which encapsulate whole volumes of thought, and yet one gets the impression that they are sleight of hand and that if they were examined one by one, they would disappear in a puff of smoke. For example, in speaking of love he refers to *I Corinthians* 13. He then quotes St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to support his contention that faith and hope are passing things and therefore are negligible. He refers to *Summa Theologica* 2.1.65.5 and 2.2.18.2 to prove his point. However a closer reading shows that in the first text Aquinas is referring to 'hope in' God and states quite clearly that 'love cannot exist without faith and hope' (*caritas sine fide et spe nullo modo esse potest*). Thomas connects 'hope in' with friendship (*amicitia*), saying that hope is an essential constituent of a relationship. In the second text Thomas is considering the question of 'hope for' something and so concludes that 'faith and hope [for heaven] cease in the heavenly homeland and so neither

can be found among the blessed' (*spes et fides evacuator in patria, et neutrum eorum in beatis esse potest*). Similarly Comte-Sponville does not distinguish between 'hope in' and 'hope for' when citing St Augustine *Soliloquies* 1.14, "Nothing is left to hope for when everything is securely possessed [i.e. in heaven]" or *Sermon* 158 "There won't go on being hope, when the thing hoped for is there", both of which Comte-Sponville uses for his argument. He does not seem to have looked closely at the text of *I Corinthians* 13.13 which says quite clearly that 'three things last: faith, hope and love'.

His occasional person reminiscences are valuable in assessing his work. He refers to the moment, when as an adolescent he begins to toy with the idea of atheism and seems to take this experience of adolescence as the supreme moment of knowledge. His major, as a young man, reminiscence occurs in chapter 3.

He quotes the occasional comments of priests, whether at the school he attended or after one of his lectures, and gives their 'one-liners' the full force of dogma. Those priests may be surprised at hearing that their words have been given such importance.

The second chapter of the book, 'Does God exist?', is like a colander: it has so many holes it cannot hold water. He summarises the content in six steps. This list is useful. He refers, firstly to the 'ontological argument' of St Anselm which many philosophers, Christian among them, have not found convincing. He then refers to the 'five proofs' for the existence of God given by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* I.2.3. Aquinas' text does not say, however, that they are proofs of the existence of God. He only attempts to prove the existence of a Prime Mover, or of an Efficient Cause, etc. using some elements of Aristotle's teachings on causes. At the end of each proof, Thomas Aquinas adds the comment such as 'which we call God' (*et hoc dicimus Deum*).

Few people are religious on the basis of philosophical argument. This leads him, therefore, to his second point which is: 'if God existed, he should be easier to see or sense'. He concludes that all religious experience is to be discarded. I fail to see the logic of this argument. It is all the more surprising in that he frequently quotes Pascal in defence of his position - as is almost *de rigueur* for a

French philosopher - but chooses to ignore the account of an experience Pascal had undergone and which was so important to him that he carried it always, sown into his clothing:

"The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, day of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr. From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past twelve, FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers nor of the Wise. Assurance, joy, assurance, feeling, joy, peace...Just Father, the world has not known thee but I have known thee. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy."

His third point is to refuse 'to explain something [namely, elements in nature] I cannot understand by something I understand even less [namely, God]'. Comte-Sponville desires above all to understand rather than to experience, yet religion is not concerned just with explanations. When he recounts his mystical experience, in chapter three, he does not try to explain anything.

His fourth point concerns the problem of evil. This is a much tried subject. He says it is not solved by theism; it is certainly not solved by atheism.

He then speaks of the mediocrity of mankind. He refers to the teaching of *Genesis* 1 about the human being made in the image of God. Without investigating what is meant by this phrase, he rejects it in light of the banality of human experience and horror of human cruelty. He does not seem to remember the teaching in *Genesis* 3 on 'the fall' which holds that human beings, though essentially good, have experienced a profound 'disfigurement' which vitiates their actions and emotions but does not render them completely evil. The human being is at present 'fallen', and human actions are evidence of that fall. Despite his admission of human mediocrity he wishes to base the future on humanity only.

Lastly he holds that God 'was invented to fulfil our wishes'. This too is a much tried subject.

The third chapter presents the spirituality of atheism and is the most valuable part of the book. Indeed, the clue to the work and perhaps its most moving paragraph is when André describes his solitary walk one evening through the forest. On that occasion he experienced a profound sense of the unity of all

things and of himself as part of it. The rest of the book is basically a defence of this insight. He quotes Romain Rolland at some length and his teaching on 'oceanic feeling' to which André attaches great importance. The solitary nature of that experience may help to explain why 'Zen' appeals to him, though I am not sure whether Zen practitioners would agree with his presentation of their position. He seems to attribute no ultimate value to friendship. There is no reference to love, and his love for his wife is passed over as though it was not significant in the discussion.

It would be interesting to see how he reconciles his 'oceanic feeling' with the six major points against the existence of God, especially the problem of evil. Is there no experience of evil in the 'oceanic feeling'?

Despite all its weaknesses, the values of the book are many. Principally it takes the reader beyond a crass materialism into something bordering on the mystical. The book has made me look at things without reference to thought systems, and so discover more clearly the unique wonder of each person and of each moment. Perceiving the individual free of the cloud of mental constructs, one begins to see more deeply and find that this person, this situation, is indeed not only profoundly beautiful but profoundly revelatory, leading to the depths from which this person has sprung, namely a Person from whom all persons spring. St Paul speaks about the glory of God being visible in creation (*Romans 1*). Has André perceived something of the glory of God without perceiving the God whose glory it is?

This book, for all its shortcomings, is an invitation to dialogue and discussion. Comte-Sponville raises many questions which those who disagree with him must take the time to answer. He has provided a challenge. Shall we take it up?

Reviewer: John Dupuche is priest, academic and interreligious specialist. He chairs the Catholic Interfaith Committee for the Melbourne Archdiocese and is an Honorary Research Associate at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology at Monash University.
