



a diplomatic veneer that is supposed to hide true motivation – virtue as an instrument of conspiracy. For many Christians it even seems absurd that an Atheist should pursue an inner search for virtuous life, as she or he is not bound by the admonitions of the Decalogue, by the concept of sin and does not risk eternal fire in hell. But in fact this is what astonishes Madame DE WOLMAR the most in connection with her husband – he is not virtuous because of fear and he does not avoid evil because of an award. He simply recognises the intrinsic value of virtue as such and goes for it.

### ROUSSEAU VERSUS THE CONCEPT OF THE EVIL OR STUPID PRIEST

The idea that institutional clergy is the most dangerous element in the whole religious system of lies is as old as religion itself. Resolute critics of religion often regarded clerics and the religious as the epicentre of religious corruption. The priest and monk as the symbol of vice, cruelty or stupidity, rather than virtue, is the main protagonist in many literary works dealing with religion. Even if the figure of the cruel and complacent Great Inquisitor in DOSTOEVSKY'S *Brothers Karamazov*, the pervert (and in fact Atheist) bishop in DE SADE'S *120 Days of Sodom* or the lascivious priests and monks in BALZAC'S *Contes droletiques* are presented in very different contexts, they all carry the notion of a consecrated person being an example of vice. In other words – they embody the abyss of lies between the *Schein* (pretension) and the *Sein* (reality).

Even if the history of the Church presented the critics of religion with enough inspiration for their vicious-cleric-characters, according to ROUSSEAU the criticism of these should go hand in hand with the recognition of the fact that this is just one side of the coin. ROUSSEAU, to whom the criticism of church corruption appealed, acknowledged that a fierce attack on the whole of religion and on the whole of clergy will not bring us much farther than a blind rejection of Atheism on the part of fundamentalist Christians.

### VIRTUOUS ATHEIST AND VIRTUOUS PRIEST DINING TOGETHER

In his *Confessions* ROUSSEAU observes that “the fanaticism of the Atheists and the fanaticism of the zealots are connected by their inherent intolerance.” When he recalls in *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* some of his former Encyclopaedist friends and their pathological hate against religion he denotes them as “haughty dogmatists that could not bear without anger that someone had an opinion different from theirs.” And in *Emil or on Education* he maintains that a “virtuous priest” is a reality that should be taken seriously by non-believers.



ZIGO demands that in return the reality of a “virtuous Atheist” should also be taken seriously in religious circles. If one imagines with Kierkegaardian fantasy that a dinner was organised at the house of the *Savoyard Vicar* (ROUSSEAU'S character) in which Jean DE WOLMAR and *William of BASKERVILLE* (the Franciscan from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*) would take part, it is difficult to imagine that the dinner would end with a hateful conflict. The dynamics of such a dinner would most probably prove to be diametrically different from a feast where the Great Inquisitor would host Atheist fanatics.

### VIRTUOUS ATHEISM AND ECUMENISM

Even if historical Atheism might seem to have no reason to attempt to participate in the ecumenical movement striving for the unity of the Church, still there are areas where individual Atheist thinkers can contribute with their treasures to the discussion on values essential for the dialogue between churches. A virtuous Atheist might be one who observes the ecumenical dialogue from outside but some of her or his findings – resulting from a sincere quest for harmonious development of humankind – can prove vital in the examination of the deepest roots of human needs and cravings. Michael NOVAK observes that the sincerity of Jean-Paul SARTRE'S search for authenticity and responsibility contributed largely to the awareness of his own Christian vocation.

Thus remaining deaf to the *voice of the virtuous Atheist* might be an impoverishment for Christians who in their quest for Christian unity try to discern between the essentials of their traditions and secondary priorities and rules produced along the way. In this way the painful abyss between Christianity and Atheism could be transformed into a platform of dialogue where former archenemies look for mutual enrichment. Who knows what fruits such a dialogue could produce?

- Suggested Reading**  
 ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, *Confessions*. Oxford, 2000.  
 ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, *Emile or on Education*. New York, 1979.  
 ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. New York, 1979.  
 ROUSSEAU Jean-Jacques, *Júlia alebo nová Heleša*. Bratislava, 1982.  
 ZIGO Milan, *Myšlienkový rodokmeň Jána de Wolmar; Rousseauovo "Cestného ateistu"*. Bratislava, 2005. (unpublished lecture)

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