**Analysis: Atheism worldwide in decline**

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There seems to be a growing consensus around the globe that godlessness is in trouble. "Atheism as a theoretical position is in decline worldwide," Munich theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg told United Press International Tuesday.

His Oxford colleague Alister McGrath agrees. Atheism's "future seems increasingly to lie in the private beliefs of individuals rather than in the great public domain it once regarded as its habitat," he wrote in the U.S. magazine, Christianity Today.

Two developments are plaguing atheism these days. One is that it appears to be losing its scientific underpinnings. The other is the historical experience of hundreds of millions of people worldwide that atheists are in no position to claim the moral high ground.

Writes Turkish philosopher Harun Yahya, "Atheism, which people have tried to for hundreds of years as 'the ways of reason and science,' is proving to be mere irrationality and ignorance."

As British philosopher Anthony Flew, once as hard-nosed a humanist as any, mused when turning his back on his former belief: It is, for example, impossible for evolution to account for the fact than one single cell can carry more data than all the volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica put together.

Flew still does not accept the God of the Bible. But he has embraced the intelligent design concept of scholars such as William Dembski who only four years ago claimed to have been mobbed by pro-evolutionist colleagues at -- of all places -- Baylor University, a highly respected Southern Baptist institution in Waco, Tex.

The stunning desertion of a former intellectual ambassador of secular humanism to the belief in some form of intelligence behind the design of the universe makes Yahya's prediction sound probable: "The time is fast approaching when many people who are living in ignorance with no knowledge of their Creator will be graced by faith in the impending post-atheist world."

A few years ago, European scientists sniggered when studies in the United States -- for example, at Harvard and Duke universities -- showed a correlation between faith, prayer and recovery from illness. Now 1,200 studies at research centers around the world have come to similar conclusions, according to "Psychologie Heute," a German journal, citing, for example, the marked improvement of multiple sclerosis patients in Germany's Ruhr District do to "spiritual resources."

Atheism's other Achilles heel are the acts on inhumanity and lunacy committed in its name. As McGrath relates in Christianity Today: "With time (atheism) turned out to have just as many frauds, psychopaths, and careerists as religion does. ... With Stalin and Madalyn Murray O'Hair, atheism seems to have ended up mimicking the vices of the Spanish Inquisition and the worst televangelists, respectively."

John Updike's observation, "Among the repulsions of atheism for me has been is drastic uninterestingness as an intellectual position," appears to become common currency throughout much of the West.

The Rev. Paul M. Zulehner, dean of Vienna University's divinity school and one of the world's most distinguished sociologists of religion, told UPI Tuesday: "True atheists in Europe have become an infinitesimally small group. There are not enough of them to be used for sociological research."

The only exceptions to this rule, Zulehner said, are the former East Germany and the Czech Republic, where, as the saying goes, de-Christianization has been the only proven success of these regions' former communist rulers.

Zulehner cautions, however, that in the rest of Europe re-Christianization is by no means occurring. "What we are observing instead is a re-paganization," he went on, and this worries Christian theologians such as Munich's Pannenberg and the Rev. Gerald McDermott, an Episcopal priest and professor of religion and philosophy at Roanoke College in Salem, Va.

For although in every major European city except Paris spirituality is booming, according to Zulehner, this only proves the emergence of a diffuse belief system, Pannenberg said, but not the revitalization of traditional Christian religious faith.

Observing a similar phenomenon in the United States, McDermott stated that the "rise of all sorts of paganism is creating a false spirituality that proves to be a more dangerous rival to the Christian faith than atheism."

After all, a Satanist is also "spiritual."

Pannenberg, a Lutheran, praised the Roman Catholic Church for handling this peril more wisely than many of his fellow Protestants. "The Catholics stick to the central message of Christianity without making any concessions in the ethical realm," he said, referring to issues such as same-sex "marriages" and abortion.

In a similar vain, Zulehner, a Catholic, sees Christianity's greatest opportunity when its message addresses two seemingly irreconcilable quests of contemporary humanity - the quest for freedom and truth.

"Christianity alone affirms that truth and God's dependability are inseparable properties to which freedom is linked."

As for the "peril of spirituality," Zulehner sounded quite sanguine. He concluded from his research that in the long run the survival of worldviews should be expected to follow this lineup:

"The great world religions are best placed," he said. As a distant second he sees the diffuse forms of spirituality. Atheism, he insisted, will come in at the tail end.