

that comfort. The National Assembly of the French Church in 1770 engaged that universal genius, l'abbé Nicolas-Sylvain Bergier, to deal intellectually with the deluge of atheistic literature pouring into the capital. In 1771, to fulfill his mandate from the Assembly, he wrote as his refutation of d'Holbach's *System of Nature* his own *Examen du matérialisme*, "one of the best pieces of critical writing of the century."<sup>48</sup> Felicité de Lamennais in the subsequent century would evaluate l'abbé Bergier as "le plus grand apologistes des siècles passés, et peut-être de tous les siècles."<sup>49</sup> And how did Bergier intend to deal with the atheism of the Baron?

As soon as it is evidently proven that movement is not essential to matter, that the latter is purely passive by its nature and without any activity, we are forced to believe that there is in the universe a substance of a different nature, an active being to which movement must be attributed as it is to the first cause, a Mover that is not itself matter."<sup>50</sup>

Bergier represents the relationship between science and religion that continued the *Newtonian Settlement* and that still found obvious favor in the Church and among its major apologists. The Benedictine scholar, Louis-Mayeul Chaudon, carried out the same high hopes that the conflict could be waged and won through a reading of nature. He concludes with two axioms that can bring our own précis of the *Newtonian Settlement* to its conclusion:

The study of Physics is quite properly the cure of two extremes: Atheism and Superstition.... It proves that there is an intelligent first cause, and it makes us know the particular mechanical causes of this and that mechanical effect. Physics augments admiration and diminishes astonishment."<sup>51</sup>

Over the centuries the theologians had become philosophers in order to counter a putative atheism. What is more, philosophy had become Newtonian physics, and its apologetic value lay in the ability to do physics better than one's opponents. If physics declared that it wanted and needed only commensurate principles to explain the mechanical phenomena it was investigating, then the existence of God was left without the foundations upon which the theologians had been counting and to which they had made appeal.

The book, *At The Origins of Modern Atheism*, contextualized and explored in considerably greater dimensions the argument and the history touched upon in this paper. Thomas V. Morris maintained as the thesis of this book that "religion turned to philosophy for its defense and philosophy betrayed it."<sup>52</sup> It would more accurate to express that thesis as religion betraying itself. In turning to philosophy for its foundations, for its "first foundations" as Samuel Clarke's revealing phrase had it, religion was implicitly confessing its own intrinsic lack of warrant, confessing that it did not possess the proper resources to deal with the existence of the God upon whom it reflected, that it must look elsewhere

for the substantiation of its most profound claim. It was only a question of time until that confession would become public. The last sentence of that book expresses again its basic position: "The origin of atheism in the intellectual culture of the West lies thus with the self-alienation of religion itself."<sup>53</sup> Obviously there is nothing intrinsically inimical between the philosophic enterprise and Christian faith. Centuries of Christian wisdom have proven just the opposite to be the case. Etienne Gilson remarked on more than one occasion that, in contrast with Islam, philosophy flourished in Western Europe among the theologians of greatest orthodoxy. From the earliest stages of philosophy in the West, philosophers have asserted the existence of God as essential to their study of the nature of things. To assert that philosophy can neither substitute nor provide the foundations for religion is not to assert that it is the enemy of religion or has no properly theological role. Philosophy does not betray religion. Religion can only betray itself. The problem with the *Newtonian Settlement* is not that philosophy was present, but that religion was absent.

Perhaps what was basically wrong with the *Newtonian Settlement* only emerged when it generated its own denial. In turning to some other discipline to give basic substance to its claims that God exists, religion — or that reflection upon religion for its evidence that we have been calling theology — is admitting an inner cognitive emptiness. If religion does not possess the principles and experiences within itself to disclose the existence of God, if there is nothing of cogency in the phenomenology of religious experience, the witness of the personal histories of holiness and religious commitment, the sense of claim by the absolute already present in the demands of truth or goodness or beauty, the intuitive sense of the givenness of God, an awareness of an infinite horizon opening up before inquiry and longing, an awakening jolted into a more perceptive consciousness by limit-experiences, the long history of religious institutions and practice, or the life and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth, then it is ultimately counterproductive to look outside of the religious to another discipline or science or art to establish that there is a "friend behind the phenomena." Inference cannot substitute for experience, and the most compelling witness to a personal God must itself be personal. To attempt something else either as foundation or as substitute, as did the *Newtonian Settlement*, is to move into a progress of internal contradiction of which the ultimate resolution is atheism.