

Atheism and Free Thought: Some Modern Italian Philosophical Contributions

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Introduction

This article takes a sceptical position, discussing the origin of the different philosophical arguments concerning the existence of God or god. Atheism and scepticism are separate phenomena, but are closely aligned, in that scepticism applied to philosophical arguments about religion often supports atheist conclusions. The Australian scholar Raphael Lataster states that, “It is not my job, intention, or desire to prove atheism is true... to disprove Christianity or other form of religion. My job is to examine the evidence/arguments” (for the existence of God or gods in religious scholarly literature).¹ In the first part of this work, I will analyse the development of ancient sceptical thought and how it has been crucial in western philosophy. In particular, important figures like the Italian philosopher Giuseppe Rensi (1871-1941), who introduced a new scepticism in the humanist, atheist and agnostic space, will be examined.

The second part will focus on freethinking women who have produced important arguments on theism and religion. Each of these female thinkers has a personal story and I discuss their provocative contributions to the study of religion. It is arguable that in the contemporary world, and especially in the last decade, the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated have rapidly increased, especially in Europe, the United States and Australia. It is important to investigate the growth of sceptical views, and why people who

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¹ Raphael Lataster, *There was no Jesus, there is no God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments for Monotheism* (CreateSpace, 2013), p. 7.

affirm that they are atheistic, agnostic, secular and non-religious are growing in Western society. If atheism springs from scepticism, from a sceptical frame of mind, the development of these two closely related phenomena can be usefully mapped throughout history. This article is a modest contribution that aims to include voices of scholars who are often excluded from Anglophone scholarship.

Being a Sceptic/Being Sceptical

The Greek *skeptikos* means thoughtful or enquiring, from *skeptesthai*, to look at or consider, and suggests the investigation of topics or problems.² In Latin, the noun *scepticus* indicates a person with a critical view of the world in general. By self-identifying as a sceptic, a person commits him/herself to the search for truth, clarity and honesty. A sceptical mind is concerned with knowledge and belief, and it tends to be detached from any form of absolute truth or doctrine concerning human affairs. When investigating philosophical and religious matters, the sceptic is a critic who has doubts about knowledge or belief in its various forms. A sceptic is critical of the canon itself; s/he investigates the adequacy of some universal statements by asking what principles they are based on. S/he questions what it is true or false, good or bad, beautiful or unpleasant, physical or supernatural. Furthermore, the sceptical and critical voice interrogates authority and freedom.³ An investigative mind is able to dismantle dubious hypotheses and theories. In everyday life, every individual can be sceptical about knowledge beyond their personal experience.

From the ancient world to the present day, the sceptic has argued about the validity of dogmas and absolute principles. For the sceptic, nothing is known definitively; this remains at the centre of sceptical thought. The sceptic does not impose theories but is interested in understanding what reality looks like and how human relationships work. Sceptics address questions about knowledge, truth and even belief; in doing so, *epochè* (suspension of judgment, a tool from the phenomenological method) is applied, in order to avoid prejudiced and inaccurate ideas.⁴ The main

² ‘Skeptic, Noun’, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skeptic>, accessed 20/11/2020.

³ Frank Furedi, *Authority: A Sociological History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 174-175.

sceptical task is questioning principles claimed to be undeniably true, thus eradicating the various forms of dogmatism, which have negatively impacted human knowledge and thought. Philosophy and science have identified doubts about common beliefs concerning the physical world and the supernatural realm, including God/ the gods. In the ancient world, the sceptics interrogated Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy.⁵

During the Protestant Reformation sceptical thinkers also disputed the claims of Calvinism, Lutheranism, Catholicism, and other Christian sectarian beliefs. From the Enlightenment, scepticism became an established part of secular movements and ideas, and therefore became linked to atheism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776), and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) played a crucial role in the secularisation of modern society. Indeed, they were considered sceptics. Within the development of modern epistemology, thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Albert Camus (1911-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) were important for the development of sceptical thought and existentialism.⁶

There is also a branch of feminist thought which is opposed to oppression and religious dogmatism, such as that of the American social reformer Frances Wright (1795-1852) and the Polish feminist and abolitionist Ernestine Louise Potowski Rose (1810-1892). Both these revolutionary women were activists and atheists and played an important role in the development of modern anti-religious views. Rose considered herself a rebel from early childhood and in 1835 was a founder (with Utopian Socialist Robert Owen [1771-1858]) of the British atheist labour organization Association of All Classes of All Nations. In the same year she moved to the United States and became socially and academically involved in human rights, religious freedom, anti-slavery causes and equality for women.⁷ She attended many international conferences about women and

⁴ James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), pp. 20-21.

⁵ Katja Vogt, 'Ancient Skepticism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>, accessed 20/11/2020.

⁶ Renata Ziemińska, *The History of Skepticism: In Search of Consistency* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 207-266.

defended women's rights. For example, on 29 January 1848 she was the speaker at the Thomas Paine annual dinner in New York, where she told the attendees:

superstition keeps women ignorant, dependent, and enslaved beings. Knowledge will make them free. The churches have been built upon their necks; and it is only by throwing them off, that they will be able to stand up in the full majesty of their being.⁸

Rose abandoned the Jewish faith of her parents, but reacted strongly when Judaism or Jews were attacked in the media. She became involved in a ten-week exchange with a journalist from the *Boston Investigator* after that newspaper (for which she often wrote) published a piece attacking Jews. Janet Freedman says that "Rose presented a strenuous critique of antisemitism and a defense of Jews based on their historical contributions to secular as well as religious culture."⁹ Suffering from ill-health, Rose and her husband returned to England, where she continued to agitate for women's suffrage. Ernestine Rose, who began life in a small Jewish community in Pietkrow, Russian Poland, was a woman who disputed the validity of religion, affirming that religion was a system built by and for men. She noted that religions claim that women are not rational as, by their nature, they are more emotional and religious than men, in order to keep women subjugated and to deny them citizenship, voting rights, and full and equal participation in civil and political life.

Italian Humanism and Scepticism

The Italian philosopher, political activist and anti-fascist Giuseppe Renzi, was born in Villafranca di Verona in 1871 and died in Genoa in 1941. Renzi and his daughter Emilia Renzi (1901-1990) are considered philosophers of human existence and freethinkers, and have been categorised as liberal and sceptical humanists, since a weighty enquiry about truth and justice pervades all their works. They both criticised religion as being chiefly concerned with power and domination, an institution which subjugated people, creating

⁷ 'Ernestine Rose: American Social Reformer', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernestine-Rose>, accessed 20/11/2020.

⁸ 'Suffragist and anti-slavery activity Ernestine Rose addresses annual Thomas Paine dinner', *Jewish Women's Archive*, at <https://jwa.org/thisweek/jan/29/1848/ernestine-rose>, accessed 20/11/2020.

⁹ Janet Freedman, 'Ernestine Rose, 1810-1892', *Jewish Women's Archive*, at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rose-ernestine>, accessed 20/11/2020.

subalterns. Giuseppe Rensi in *La religione nella scuola* ('Religion in School') and Emilia Rensi in *Scuola e libero pensiero* ('School and Free Thought'), discuss the position of religion in schools; both argue that school curricula should not have bear a religious stamp. For these philosophers, ethical issues do not need to be approached via religious views; in fact, religion produces misinformation about human relationships. In the introduction to their books, the commentator Renato Chiarenza refers to the Italian referendum against the Lateran Treaty (1929), which was an accord between Benito Mussolini and the Catholic Church that recognised Vatican City as an independent state and compensated the Church for the loss of the Papal States. In 1948 this Treaty was recognised in the Italian Constitution.¹⁰ The free schools still have no voice; the 'faith' schools have a strong influence on curriculum and staffing, and admit children from religious families, over those who are non-believers. For Emilia and Giuseppe Rensi, religion leads to socio-economic exclusion, discrimination and the marginalisation of people who are not religious. Giuseppe Rensi criticised the privilege of the faith and supported secularism. He is the only contemporary Italian philosopher and lawyer to be an outspoken voice calling for the separation of church and state. His philosophical perspective on religion is based on what he believes should be a distant relationship between religious organisations and the state.¹¹

Moreover, Giuseppe Rensi takes a clear stand against religious oppression. In discussing the teaching of religion in schools, Rensi presents it as clearly immoral. Rensi argues that religion considers humanity as inferior to God. The religious ideology that God is superior to human beings, for the philosopher, is completely illogical and unjust. In a way, this reflects the colonial relationships between possessor and owner, domination and subjugation, and therefore, between master and slave. From a postcolonial view, it is arguable that this dynamic between power and oppression still exists. Rensi states:

A moral value founded on a mystical and otherworldly impulse is not true, and the thousand people who are moralised through these spiritual teachings are not virtuous. Contrarily, a "humanistic" approach to life is one that says: be honest, be loyal, do good things

¹⁰ 'Lateran Treaty: Italy [1929]', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/event/Lateran-Treaty>, accessed 20/11/2020.

¹¹ See Marzia A. Coltri, 'On Authority and Freedom in the Thought of Giuseppe Rensi', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2018), p. 94.

to those around you, so you will be able to have a happy life. This is a moral value which can make thousands of people honest and good. It is not just based on a book (the Holy Book) in which morality is essentially based on spirituality, where the constant exaltation of the mind no longer sees the empirical relationships, but keeps an eye on the supernatural ones, and in which our moral principles are not based on the events of the world as it is, but on supernatural events...¹²

This statement paints a clear picture of the impact of religion on people's lives. For Giuseppe Rensi, most ethical principles stem from religious traditions and people's conduct is based on religious precepts. Thus, accepted morality is questioned by the philosopher, who observes that people have been prevented from thinking critically by religion. He believed that people could be free and live happily without religion.

Similarly, in her research Emilia Rensi examined the relationship between schools and free thought, and concluded that education is grounded in religious conformism, which is the cause of many forms of discrimination. Before Christianity, she argues, schools were free from any religious basis. With the advent of Christianity, conservative ideas became predominant in education. She says:

The school passed into the hands of the clergymen, being the cultural transmitter of religion, which proposed all the values in life. The powerful Church transmitted mainly the "truth" of faith through the education system; instilling Christian values into people ... Thus, freedom in teaching ended.¹³

Emilia Rensi supported the idea that young people could be raised without religious instruction, arguing that education free from dogma can still provide a moral compass for how to behave in society. Giuseppe and Emilia Rensi are certainly philosophers of doubt; secularists and thus humanists,

¹² Giuseppe Rensi, *La religione nella scuola* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, 2000), pp. 15-16. Rensi says: "No con una morale fondata su di uno slancio mistico e ultraterreno, si moralizzano i mille, ma con una morale che dica: sii onesto, sii leale, fa del bene a quelli ti stanno attorno ... e solo così, riuscirai ad essere abbastanza contento nella vita. Non è con un libro che non scorge più i rapporti empirici, ma solo tien l'occhio su quelli soprasensibili; in cui la morale, pel nostro sguardo, si muove non tra gli eventi del mondo com'è, ma solo tra accadimenti singolari, stupefacenti, miracolosi."

¹³ Emilia Rensi, *Scuola e libero pensiero* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, 2000), p. 33. She states: "La scuola, perciò, passo nelle mani degli ecclesiastici, essendo tutta la cultura in funzione della religione, la quale proponeva di tutti i valori nell'al di là. La chiesa vittoriosa. Così la libertà dell'insegnamento ebbe fine."

and also atheists. They are both critical of politics, philosophy and religion. Their writings reveal their philosophical scepticism.

One of Giuseppe Renzi's remarkable works on scepticism is *Apologia dello scetticismo* 1 (*Apology for Scepticism* [1926]), originally featured in an earlier publication entitled *I Lineamenti di filosofia scettica* (*The Features of a Sceptical Philosophy* [1919]). He was uncompromising in his scepticism, asserting "in truth there is not any truth."¹⁴ The basic strategy of Renzi's doubt is to defeat absolutism or certainty on its own ground. One must begin by doubting the truth of everything—not only the evidence of the senses and the more extravagant cultural presuppositions, but even the fundamental process of reasoning itself. If any particular truth about the world survives this extreme sceptical challenge, then it must be indubitable, and therefore a certain foundation for knowledge. Giuseppe and Emilia Renzi argue that idealistic assertions about what is rational, deductive and absolute are uncertain. We are only secure if the ideas are from the self which *a priori* is perfect and true. These ideas or forms are in the subconscious, from which logic comes (the combination of fundamental concepts in the mind), and where reason develops its ontology.

The scepticism of both Rensis denies the concept of absolute truth, and it accepts the mutability of reality and of facts. These facts exist but they are just evident, and they do not need any rational explanation. The real has no reason; it has no other reason than being what it is, and it has its being without reason. On the other hand, people have their own reason; yet this reason it is not absolute and perfect, and it serves as a tool for thinking which helps humans to understand the self as a certain thing. Giuseppe Renzi argued: "the corporeal world which we perceive cannot be fake."¹⁵ Therefore we only conceive what the natural world is, that it is existent. For Giuseppe Renzi, scepticism recognises that there is no rational explanation concerning reality; the facts exist in themselves without any demonstration. Yet, since human beings possess the faculty to ask why, thus they seek the reason for facts through explanation. The whys and wherefores are the *sine qua non* of being, as a result of which, reality becomes anthropomorphised. Renzi views this process as "the main point of scepticism."¹⁶ What prevails in Giuseppe

¹⁴ Giuseppe Renzi, *Apologia dello scetticismo* (Milano: La Coda di Paglia, 2011 [1926]). Giuseppe Renzi states: "*della verita' non c'e' verita,*" p. 10.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Renzi, *Apologia dello scetticismo*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Giuseppe Renzi, *Apologia dello scetticismo*, p. 39.

and Emilia Rensi's sceptical thought is the incessant search for truth and for significance in human existence. Their scepticism consists mainly in anti-rationalism and anti-idealism. Indeed, the Rensis' philosophy criticises religious knowledge which asserts that it is a necessary part of understanding the world and making it better (perfection through divine design). They also apply their criticism to areas such as 'truth', 'freedom', 'justice', and 'human rights'.

On the Existence of God and Metaphysics

In ancient Greece philosophers such as Socrates, Protagoras, Anaxagoras and others argued about the existence of gods and goddesses. A fragment of a play, possibly by Critias (455-403 BCE), *Sisyphus*, was preserved in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. This fragment claimed that the gods had been fabricated by the government, to keep people in subjugation and obedience.¹⁷ Cicero (106-43 BCE) seemingly did not believe in miracles.¹⁸ Epicurus (341-270 BCE) denied an afterlife. He said that the only way to enjoy life is living with nature and like-minded people. Two centuries later, the Roman poet Lucretius (99-55 BCE) praised Epicurus' ideas about immortality. Epicurus stated: "Nature is to see all things spontaneously, without the meddling of gods." Finally, the Roman philosopher Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) added: "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and the rulers as useful."¹⁹

The question of the existence or non-existence of God was discussed by Europeans (in particular German thinkers such as Nietzsche and Hegel) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Hegel, history comes from human consciousness itself and freedom is an attribute of humankind.²⁰ The negation of God was given more attention in the philosophical thought of Giuseppe Rensi. His argument starts from one or more theses and leads to a conclusion which can be true or false. For example:

(Premise 1) Being is temporal, spatial and visible.

¹⁷ See Malcolm Davies, 'Sisyphus and the Invention of Religion: ('Critias' TrGF 1 (43) F 19 = B 25 DK)', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, vol. 36 (1989), pp. 16-32.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Dawson, 'Cicero the Historian and Cicero the Antiquarian', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 62 (1972), p. 42.

¹⁹ James A. Haught, *2000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People with Courage of Doubt* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp. 17-22.

²⁰ Bill Cooke, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought since the Enlightenment* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), p. 214.

(Premise 2) Facts, phenomena and things are continuously developing, changing and dying.

Conclusion: These do not last forever. Therefore, in metaphysical terms, there is no Being.²¹

From the point of view of sceptical discourse, the negation of Being (God/gods) is merely true. There is no absolute Being as there is no absolute truth. According to the sophist Gorgias of Leontini (483-375 BCE) in *On the Non-existent or On Nature* we can argue that nothing exists, and even if something exists, nothing can be understood about it. If things exist, the existence of the facts cannot be communicated and explained clearly. Phenomena are not infinite and eternal, therefore Being does not exist per se. In conclusion; if the non-existent exists, it will both exist and not exist at the same time (B3.67).²²

Giuseppe Renzi's argument adds to the principles of Gorgias, explaining further why there is nothing absolute and the existence of Being is necessarily false. Renzi supports evolutionary theory and rejects the existence of the absolute or supernatural. For Renzi, only the natural world produces living beings, and that is found throughout the universe. There is no ultimate reality; therefore, there is no perfection or Kingdom of God, or Heaven. According to the Italian philosopher, we cannot accept an intimate connection between human beings and the supernatural world. The world is just a phenomenon; the natural objects and phenomena cannot be understood through religious or metaphysical explanations. Furthermore, he holds that as human beings we must just face our morality and problems with our intellect and intelligence, without calling on prayer for supernatural help. This implies that there is no reason to believe in a supernatural Being (God) or in an afterlife.

Renzi was against the mainstream, the major religious traditions, and the majority of people who believe mystical claims, worship an unseen god or gods, and say that life is eternal, and we will be saved by an invisible heaven or universe. In one of his most provocative books, *Apologia dell'ateismo (Apology for Atheism)*, which denies the existence of God,

²¹ Giuseppe Renzi, *Apologia dello scetticismo*, p. 54.

²² C. Francis Higgins, 'Gorgias', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/gorgias/>, accessed 20/11/2020. See also Bruce Comiskey, 'Gorgias, "On Non-Existence": Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Logicians" 1.65-87, translated from the Greek Text in Hermann Diels's "Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,"' *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1997), pp. 45-49.

Rensi explains the intimate connection between people and the supernatural, which he sees as regression to an infant's brain development, linked to the schizophrenic mind and behaviour.²³ He says that only immature or malfunctioning minds are intimately connected to the spiritual world. These people "see and feel" the invisible world as they look at the visible and tangible one. He doubted the existence of the supernatural, and for this reason was regarded as a non-conformist and free-thinker because he felt that it is impossible to know the spirit realm. For the philosopher, there is no God or multiple deities who are in control. Rensi held that a god or God cannot be the cause of all things, and everything is best understood as a system of mathematics and physics. Things are not part of a transcendental world. Everything which happens in the universe can be explained in terms of scientific law and is scientifically determined; therefore, there is no need of a supernatural explanation. The universe and reality operate by themselves according to natural laws.

Rensi was impressed by scientific theories which came from Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and he accepted their view that the way to build up our human knowledge, "to question and doubt," is to start from critical premises, and accordingly deduce consequences. As Rensi says:

One of the great aspects of human knowledge, critical philosophy and the intellect is to remove irrelevant beliefs from the ordinary or conventional ... Reality is what we can see, touch and perceive ... Our mind already has its basic principles from which it can think of reality.²⁴

Therefore, human *certain* knowledge cannot be contradicted, but preserves basic empirical principles that are derived only from experience. In other words, Rensi pointed out that we seek to understand things within their totality, and these things are linked to other things but we cannot know anything outside our direct knowledge. With regard to the supernatural, this is sited outside the material world, and we ourselves are finite creatures with physical bodies. This must be the case, unexplained by anything else, for

²³ Giuseppe Rensi, *Apologia dell'ateismo*, (Milano: La Vita Felice, 2009 [1925]), p. 8. He says: "Negare l'ateismo e' cadere nell'allucinazione, nella pazzia schizofrenica, nella mentalita' crepuscolare dei bambini e selvaggi, incapaci di distinguere l'e' dal non e'."

²⁴ Giuseppe Rensi, *Apologia dell'ateismo*, p. 10. See also Richard Westfall, *Newton: The Life of Isaac Newton* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Francis Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (NY: Dover Publications, 1958).

there is nothing else. However, Rensi was also a philosopher of unmitigated doubt, a thinker who denied that we could be sure of anything, whether it can be the existence of God or the external world, or ourselves. We do not know anything. But we do not really have the option, he argues, to do anything but live in conformity with a perception of things.

Who was Emilia Rensi?

Emilia Rensi is less well known than her father, and was an Italian teacher, writer, and philosopher. She was born in Belinzona, Switzerland, daughter of a feminist Swiss journalist and teacher Loretta Perucchi (1873-1966) and Giuseppe Rensi. Her parents were both of aristocratic origin. Giuseppe Rensi moved to Switzerland in 1893 where he met his wife and with whom he had two daughters: Adalgisa (1899-1994), who became a nun known as Sister Maria Grazia in a convent of the Sisters of Saint Francis of Salis, and Emilia. Emilia attended the gymnasium in Verona and Bologna, and she moved to Genoa in 1918 when her father moved the family to that city. She was initially disappointed by conservative Genoese society, which she viewed as mediocre. In Genoa, she received her degree in humanities and Italian studies and worked as a teacher of Italian at the Colombo High School. As a woman, Emilia was quite reserved and reluctant to talk about her personal life. Her education and experience came from the life and vicissitudes of her father, who travelled for work across Italy and was stripped in 1927 of his university professorship, due to his anti-fascist ideals and activism.²⁵ After the war, Emilia Rensi worked almost until her death in the library of the University of Genoa, achieving sixty years of intense literary activity and the publication of moral reflections in various libertarian magazines such as *Sicilia Libertaria*.²⁶

Emilia Rensi was a prolific author. She wrote extensively on religion, politics and ethical issues. Thanks to the influence of her mother, who was president of the Ligurian section of the National Council of Italian Women, Emilia collaborated in the socialist women's magazine *La chiosa* with the writer Flavia Steno (1877–1946). In 1969, Emilia was actively involved with other publications, *La Fiaccola* and the progressive and anticlerical movement *Sicilia Libertaria*. In 1967, she met the anarchist Franco Leggio,

²⁵ Coltri, 'On Authority and Freedom in the Thought of Giuseppe Rensi', p. 89.

²⁶ 'Emilia Rensi', *Wikipedia*, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emilia_Rensi, accessed 20/11/2020.

who was producing the second edition of Giuseppe Renzi's *Apologia dell'ateismo*. Emilia Renzi published works on the themes of education, democracy, justice and equality.

Atheists of the Dawn

In 1973, Emilia Renzi wrote her first book on atheism, entitled *Atei dell'alba* (*Atheists of the Dawn*). This work consisted of seventeen chapters, focusing on ancient atheist thought. She examined Taoist, Atomist, Sophist, Cynic and Sceptic modes of thought. She addressed the issue of the purpose of life, not in terms of the divine but in terms of a liberal and secular society. Being a nation under God/gods, it has been demonstrated, denies freedom and equality to certain people. Emilia Renzi argued that God's task was limited to that of a police inspector, whose responsibility is to maintain control, a mission which all the religious institutions have assumed in history.²⁷ *Atei dell'alba* can be divided into two parts: in the first, Renzi writes about ancient Eastern societies, focusing on China and Asia in general; and in the second, she analyses the ancient Western societies of Greece and Rome. She examines the word "atheism" in the light of classical civilisations. Inspired by ancient thought, she developed the idea of modern atheism, humanism and therefore, secularism. She sees atheism as a part of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. As she notes, the separation of religious ceremonies, institutions and practices from the political sphere was already a feature of ancient China, India and Greece. Teachers like Confucius, Buddha and early Greek philosophers were interested rather more in morality than in religion itself. They were considered teachers of ethics and social responsibilities rather than founders of religion. She links an ancient Chinese tradition to modern humanist thought: "the problem of death, the belief in the afterlife and in God are indifferent to Confucius."²⁸

Furthermore, in her discussion of the classical Greek philosophers, Renzi singles out the Atomists and Sophists as the most important atheists in the fifth century BCE. Leucippus and his pupil Democritus were the key figures of this new type of atheist thought, involved in the discussion of the nature of reality regardless of the proliferation of metaphysics. They believed

²⁷ Emilia Renzi, *Atei dell'Alba* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, 1973), p. 122.

²⁸ Emilia Renzi, *Atei dell'Alba*, p. 12. See also Giuseppe Tucci, *Saggezza Cinese (Chinese Wisdom)* (Torino: Astrolabio Ubaldini, 1926), p. 16. Emilia Renzi, quoting Tucci, says: "*Il problema della morte, ogni indagine sull'al di là' e su Dio sono indifferenti per Confucio.*"

that reality is generated and governed by atoms. For them, there was no deity as the prime cause of the cosmos. The soul, like the body, was made up of the smallest invisible atoms which constitute the elements of everything. In the atomist system, gods were excluded *a priori* and they were just seen as a human fabrication. For the Greek atomists, everything was derived according to strict causality.²⁹ In addition, the Sophists, who believed in a naturalistic and rationalistic approach to nature, were more interested in moral matters and less in religion. She mentions Critias and Prodicus of Ceos, known to be political activists and teachers or rhetoricians, who both discussed ethical matters such as virtue and vice. Prodicus travelled as a freelance educator teaching mainly philosophy and politics, while Critias was a prolific writer and poet. Both Sophists wrote against religion, and they saw a pantheon of gods as personifications of nature in order to give comfort to human beings. She returns to religious matters with the atheist views of Critias:

A smart and intellectual person invented gods to threaten the evil, even if they were doing (and concealing), talking of or thinking about malicious things. Thus, religion began; there is a god of an eternal and flourishing life, who with his mind listens, sees, meditates and looks after us with his divine counsel.³⁰

In this passage, reiterating the atheist theme found in Critias, Emilia Rensi affirms that this statement expresses the elaborate religious hoax perpetrated by people who created God/gods “as a political invention having as its object the policing of society.”³¹

In the last section of the book, Rensi focuses on the philosophical thought of the ancient Roman patricians, which was influenced by Greek philosophy and spirituality. Romans were particularly devoted to sacred pagan subjects. Yet, some Romans were sceptical about gods. The satirist Gaius Lucilius, Publius Cornelius Scipio (called Africanus) and the statesman Gaius

²⁹ A. G. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (London: Kessinger Publishing Co, 2005), p. 24. See also Emilia Rensi's quote of Drachmann, in *Atei dell'Alba*, p. 76.

³⁰ Emilia Rensi, *Atei dell'alba*, p. 84. She quotes Critias' critical view on gods, which is taken from the *Sisyphus* fragment, translated into Italian by G. Fraccaroli: “*Un uom acuto d'intelletto e savio si penso' d'inventare gli Dei, che fossero spauricchio dei malvagi, anche se facciano nascostamente, over parlino o pensino. Così' religione ebbe principio: c'e' un Dio di vita eterna e florida, che con la mente ascolta, vede e medita e bada a noi nel suo divin consiglio.*” For a further analysis, see Charles H. Kahn, ‘Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment’, *Phronesis*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1997), pp. 247-262.

³¹ Emilia Rensi, *Atei dell'alba*, pp. 84-85. See also Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, p. 47.

Laelius (called Sapiens), members of the Circle of Scipio, a group of thinkers, discussed Greek culture and humanism. These freethinkers shared their opinions about freedom of thought and religion and expressed their views to others. During their meetings in the Circle, they also attacked the belief in gods. Lucilius, in particular, in Book 3 of his *Satires*, said that gods were created to impose and reinforce the procedures and policies of the Senate.³²

As in much ancient Greek and Roman thinking, the world of the gods was crucial for the moral code of Rome. Renzi reminds us the emperor Augustus was superstitious and imposed his religious beliefs on the people. He established a state religion (veneration of the emperor) with a political purpose, to serve the interests of the Roman empire. He re-established ceremonies and religious festivals from ancient times. The historians Titus Livius and Quintus Curtius Rufus in the first century CE were good friends of the Roman emperor and advised him that the best means to control the crowd was religion. The *religio civilis* was strictly observed by the Romans, while the religion of poets and philosophers was criticised, marginalised and rejected. But for Emilia Renzi, the gods were just a fiction devised to control people who, like children, believed that bronze statues were alive and had souls. Emilia Renzi reminds us of the words of Denis Diderot (1713-1784): “I am very comfortable with atheists.”³³ She reveals her nonconformist and sceptical thought, a free woman who is detached from any cultural and “religious” biases. Her atheism can be defined as an ethical atheism insofar as it examines the ethical themes of death, pain, grief and happiness.

Conscious Contestation Through Ideological Contestation

Like the majority of male sceptics, in her book *Di contestazione in contestazione (On Contestation through Contestation)* Emilia Renzi addresses the problem of contestation, or disputes concerning ethics. She argues that each ideological contestation is the result of philosophy; and this speculative role belongs to sceptics or dissidents who can bring the people to concrete action, to bring about the transformation of reality and society, through their disbelief in social and religious conventions. In the past,

³² A. S. Gratwick, ‘The Satires of Ennius and Lucilius’, *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature. Vol 2. Latin Literature, Part 1. The Early Republic*, eds. E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), p. 165. See also Emilia Renzi, *Atei all'alba*, p. 122.

³³ Denis Diderot, “I believe in God, although I live very happily with atheists,” quoted by Jim Herrick, *Against the Faith* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 75.

dissidents were thinkers who preached against ideological hegemony in society; the laws, customs and conventions which people accept as in their own interest. Dissidents believed in philosophy as means of coming into contact with all aspects of humanity. The aim of philosophy was to become more practical in the humanitarian task of helping the poor and the oppressed.

A most influential philosopher in the ancient world was Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404-323 B.C.E.), who acted against convention and put the centrality of reason unto practice.³⁴ Diogenes not only subverted political and religious power, but also sought virtue and reason (“I am searching for the human being”). All social institutions such as family, nation and religion, were repudiated by Diogenes and other Cynics.³⁵ They also rejected patriarchy and began a provocative criticism of the weak, passive and subjugated position of women in society. These philosophers advocated gender equality and women’s rights and believed that a woman’s virtue was the same as that of a man. Hipparchia (300 BCE) was one of the few women philosophers of Ancient Greece who represented the masses of the poor and the oppressed. Her goal in the pursuit of freedom for the oppressed was to follow a non-conformist life and therefore advocate a non-traditional and non-patriarchal, religious gendered society.³⁶ In focusing on the ancient Greek philosophers, Emilia Rensi claims:

Religion was contested by these philosophers, the cynics. In particular, they rejected folk religion, the ceremonies, and the rituals. The sacrifices were useless because they were not relevant to the gods. The prayers invoked to the gods in order to gain success or to get goods were merely dreams, far from reality ... The cynics denied the belief in God as a prime cause of the universe.³⁷

She asks: Who contests today? Clearly, she believes that religious belief and tradition are the product of a system which has evolved in society to support the power of a few people who are motivated and act in their own interests, selfishly, and at the expense of others. Thus, she realises that religion does not recognise women, with their abilities and potentialities, or

³⁴ Julie Piering, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/diogsino/>, accessed 20/11/2020.

³⁵ Robert Dobbin (ed. and trans.), *The Cynic Philosophers: From Diogenes to Julian* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012).

³⁶ Laura Grams, ‘Hipparchia of Maroneia, Cynic Cynosure’, *Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2007), pp. 335-350.

³⁷ Emilia Rensi, *Di contestazione in contestazione* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, 1971), pp. 18-21.

treat them equally and as beings as virtuous as men. The feminist philosopher demonstrates to women and oppressed people her socio-political struggle against religious-cultural-misogynistic deprivation in society. Her literary contribution has significantly challenged that patriarchy which involves oppression, poverty and religious enslavement.

Rensi analyses the theme of obedience and brainwashing or indoctrination in religion. A person who is vulnerable and fearful tends to be controlled and manipulated by another's authority. In contesting the myth of religion, Emilia Rensi holds that:

In our obedience we cannot know freedom, which comes from the understanding of life, and not from the acceptance of authority or from the imitation of someone ... Authority serves to annihilate the person's strength and skills ... This authority blocks people's potential.³⁸

Emilia Rensi also anticipates creative and dissident writing. Her philosophy is the product of a historical journey, especially into the sceptical thought of Ancient Greece. Contextualizing cynicism in antiquity, she reconstructs the image of a new philosophy which reveals a new sense of consciousness, emancipation and freedom from socio-religious conventions. In fighting for religious liberation, she took the cause of oppressed people in a new direction. She was the most significant voice of twentieth century Italian feminist humanism, alongside the poet, writer and partisan Joyce Lussu Salvatori (1912-1998) and the astrophysicist and science writer Margherita Hack (1922-2013). Emilia Rensi's socialist, dissident and humanistic thinking was interested in what is good or bad, fair or unfair for people, whatever is to the benefit of people. Her writing is a commitment to a realistic and objective representation of reality.

A Heretic Woman in the Twentieth Century

Joyce Lussu Salvatori was an Italian political activist, poet and translator with a British background. Her father and mother were both British but had emigrated to Italy in the nineteenth century; both were politically involved in socialist movements and anti-fascist parties. Joyce Lussu's writing was influenced by the socialist ideas of her parents and later by her husband, the activist and politician Emilio Lussu (1890-1975). She wrote essays and poetry about history and politics, particularly against the fascist regime of Mussolini. Her writing style and freedom of thought were intended for a

³⁸ Emilia Rensi, *Di contestazione in contestazione*, pp. 115-116.

broader audience; she aimed to create accessible texts and a simplification of the language.

Another important aspect of Joyce Lussu's life and work is her involvement with women, the politics of subalterns, and in religion. In her writings, Lussu discusses women from different backgrounds who migrated abroad and lived in poverty for their political and secular ideals, and her works were designed for women to have a voice in a patriarchal society. She was active in the feminist movement and she published books on women and literature, as well as theoretical and ethical discussions on religion. In 1991, in an anticlerical meeting, she stated "any organization which is based on authority and absolute obedience seems to me to be in contradiction with any social development."³⁹

Joyce Lussu's participation in anticlerical meetings is important. In these meetings between 1991 and 1995, she introduced not only her sceptical perspective against religion, which is set up to control people and monopolise power and profit, but she also discussed women's role in religion and in politics, which remains marginal. She believes there is no difference between the Dalai Lama, the Pope, an imam and a Hindu priest; all religions have denigrated women and devalued their dignity. The fact of enforcing the metaphysical idea of an eternal and divine Father in our civilisation implies absolute authority (patriarchy) and total submission. God is unreasonable as a concept, and religion is the cause of all forms of dictatorship where democracy cannot take place.

For Lussu, religion is just power. A number of racial, social and sexual disparities have been found in religion. Religion has been created to disseminate physical or mental abuse, discrimination, and terrorism. According to Lussu, religion is not only wrong, but evil. For her, religion has served the interest of a small group of people having control of a country or a system ("the ruling military oligarchy").⁴⁰ The spreading of religious doctrines is like a moral imperative. Lussu does not merely disagree with religious traditions and superstitions. She disagrees with inculcating them, with cooperating in their colonisation of the weak-minded. She says: "people

³⁹ Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo: Interventi di Joyce Lussu al meeting anticlericali di Fano (1991-1995)* (*A Heretic of Our Times: Joyce Lussu's Speeches at the anticlerical meetings of Fano [1991-1995]*) ed. Luigi Balsamini (Camerano: Gwyplaine, 2012), p. 16. See also the videos available on the YouTube channel of the *Biblioteca Enrico Travaglini* at <https://www.youtube.com/user/BibliotecaTravaglini> accessed 20/11/2020.

⁴⁰ Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo*, p. 29.

should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on other people?"⁴¹ Religious people are fundamentalist because they believe in the supernatural. She points out that religions have been a substantial cause of war, intolerance and lack of human rights. She states:

Where have religions been throughout this period? They have been used to corroborate historical situations kept in the hands of a group of people. Religions have been gravely complicit and even promoters of all the major crimes against humanity.⁴²

It is clear that for Lussu the problem is religion in general. As long as we accept religion as a moral principle, we are submitting ourselves to patriarchy, class structures, and cultural-social oppression. The people have been governed in the most severe way, by religious and governmental value systems; for instance by criminalising offences against Christian values, and by the Islamic persecution of women for adultery, which can carry the penalty of death by stoning. According to the United Nations, these are forms of abuse, barbaric and degrading treatment and punishment which should be prohibited.⁴³

Lussu declares that religion has been instrumental in religious war: religion uses the words of democracy and freedom, but acts to kill people to re-establish order and civilisation. Additionally, she claims that religion is encapsulated in the symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus. Religion is a tool of human torture and a form of mental addiction to pain which does not redeem a person; "He died for us."⁴⁴ How could someone who dies a violent death redeem us? In psychological terms, this is an example of suicidal thought, a form of social and psychological deviance. Further, it is contradictory to a religious value system which forbids suicide. According to recent psychiatric studies, in modern atheistic and agnostic societies (that is, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, France, Wales and England) suicide is more common than in those with strong religious affiliations.⁴⁵ As these studies have reported, there are fewer suicides among believers, even those who are

⁴¹ Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo*, p. 28.

⁴² Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo*, p. 35.

⁴³ 'Group of UN experts urge governments to repeal laws that criminalise adultery', *UN News: Global Perspective, Human Stories* (18 October, 2012), at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/10/423892-group-un-experts-urge-governments-repeal-laws-criminalize-adultery>, accessed 20/11/2020.

⁴⁴ Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ Kanita Dervic, Maria A. Oquendo, et al., 'Religious Affiliation and Suicide Attempt', at <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ajp.161.12.2303>, accessed on 03/01/2017.

affected by depression. Statistical studies suggest that irreligious people are less family-oriented and have fewer social networks, and have significant lack of self-esteem and more distress. Therefore, they can be more subject to mental disorders.

But how could a secular society which has been open to social integration and has accepted diversity in its complexity be prone to suicide? Also, how is it possible to have a high rate of suicidal behaviour amongst agnostics and atheists when social scientists believe that non-belief in God or lack of religiosity are not causative factors of suicide? Indeed, the symbol of the crucifix, we can point out that the electric chair still exists in some 'Christian' societies. This can be paradoxical for a religious person. Lussu says: "the crucifix was the electric chair for Romans."⁴⁶

Conclusion

In the study of philosophy of religion there is still a limited literature about non-religion. For more than two thousand years, sceptical thinkers have been neglected, banished and misused by philosophers of religion. This article has introduced a range of influential thinkers associated with atheism, scepticism and humanism. They are freethinkers: people who rejected accepted opinions, especially those concerning religious beliefs. I have been particularly concerned to present the contribution of three modern Italian thinkers; Giuseppe Renzi; his daughter Emilia Renzi, and Joyce Lussu, as they are little-known in Anglophone scholarship. In the present, the West demonstrates a shift away from religious fundamentalism to secularisation, in which people manifest less interest in religion. We can retrieve a classic distinction made by Karl Marx. In describing religion as "the opium of the people," he expressed an implicitly atheist view: that religion is an illusory happiness (sedative) for the people.⁴⁷ So, does God exist? Thinking globally and over time, some people have used religious language to describe their deepest beliefs and their unconditional love. However, to a sceptical mind, these beliefs in the supernatural reveal the expression of people's emotions, thus providing access to the strange forces of their internal worlds.

⁴⁶ Joyce Lussu, *Un'eretica del nostro tempo*, p. 37. What Lussu meant was that commitment to the crucifix was a death warrant for Christians in the Roman Empire (well, at least before Constantine).

⁴⁷ James F. Danielli, 'Altruism and the Internal Reward System, or the Opium of the People', *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, vol. 3, issue 2 (1980), pp. 87-94.