

Religion for Atheists

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Few people nowadays are embarrassed by the question whether they believe in God or not. Either they are devoted believers and say yes with a mixture of pride and defiance, or they are secular and find no difficulty in disavowing any belief in a mythological figure, a mere figment of outdated superstition. But if you ask them about believing in the Soul, the secular man may find it harder to deny. While God is at best an external abstraction, the Soul is internal and intimately known. To deny its existence, would be to deny their own inner being, and what then would be left for them to care about? To say yes, would hence be an admission of the kind of spirituality on which religion thrives, to say no, would be dishonest. If you have no Soul, why should death matter to you? If people have no souls but are mere soulless automata driven by impersonal physical deterministic forces, what would there be left of morality? And why would we even bother about its loss? In fact Darwin's theories of natural selection as an explanation for evolution did away with God, and contrary to common belief this was not actually such a big deal, but to include man among the animals was something else. Wallace balked at this, and drew the line. And today neurological research into the meaning and emergence of consciousness, does not as much threaten us as seem irrelevant. How can such materialistic stratagems capture the depth and evasiveness of the Soul, we ask ourselves. It is not that the Soul is the last bastion of religion, it is the very source of it. The very idea of God is created by the Soul, or if you prefer, God is just the form of what the human Soul is but an imperfect manifestation. The Soul provides the gate into mysticism, and out of the experience of the Soul both Descartes and Berkeley drew their far-reaching conclusions. This book is intended for the atheist with a soul. To the modern man, who has given up the belief in an anthropomorphic deity as childish Santa-Clausism, but still retains his spiritual thirst. Just as the classical religions did not spring ready-made out of nothing, but emerged piecemeal incorporating the best out of various pagan traditions, a new kind of tradition could be consciously shaped, using the best and well-tested part of traditional religion. One should not call it religion, because only people of the greatest charisma could possibly create one¹ but instead a secular tradition acknowledging the basic psychological needs of man and inspired by religious practice devise suitable rituals. In other words to satisfy the spiritual needs of people who have opted not to adhere to classical traditions. This is a very reasonable ambition except that it is hardly feasible, if for no other reason that the strength of a tradition to a large extent is to be found in its extended perseverance, to have survived over many a generation and thus in the process have bound them together. With extended age comes authority, this is the essence of induction, what was good yesterday is good today. Nevertheless if ambitions is set lower and we simply study religion as a human

¹ In the end of the book he refers to the misshapen attempt of the French sociologist Comte to create a rational and spiritual religion by making himself a Head of it.

phenomenon and interpret its arcane rituals in the light of modern psychology we define an interesting and rewarding exercise, which the author is eminently qualified to tackle.

Religion addresses a variety of needs. There are on one hand the purely human, our need for social support and acknowledgment, our need to forgive and be forgiven, our need for consolation. On the other hand our need for the proper perspective. Art and culture is supposed to pander to the latter, while various rituals and idolatry to the former. But secular culture is somehow shallow, art and literature are not connected to daily life nor to a higher being, but are merely intellectual exercises at best and tedious rigmaroles at worst, drudges to pass through a tedious ritual of education. The dignity of religious ritual, sanctified by millennia of practice, probe deeper psychologically than mere latter-day emulation. Religions are well-established brands as well as well endowed institutions with many corporate aspects. This thought struck me once during a visit to the V&A museum looking at some Tibetan artifacts. It depressed me and impressed upon me the ultimate shallowness of religion as a mere human invention. The author also brings it up as a crucial explanation of the power of religion. Such power, going back so long and unbroken, gives authority. That authority was of course challenged by the Enlightenment, but the latter was not able to replace it as opposed to remove it.

The main question remains, and one which the author does not address. Does religion make us better human beings? This is the ultimate ethical question you can ask from the secular non-believing point of view. And better in the sense of more content, more peaceful, more constructive in social relations. Sharing in religious ritual may be wonderful, but as the examples of the former Yugoslavia and India shows, it is no guarantee against violent conflict. It is a two edged sword that cuts both ways. People with ostensible religious convictions may be as driven as others when it comes to careers, making money, vying for power and status. Mere rituals are not enough, just as you can be exquisitely cultured with a good taste for literature and art, and yet engage in atrocity. But it only shows that true religion is a calling for which few are truly selected. The idea of an alcohol free and decaffeinated religion does not really seem to work. The taste is still there, but the magic is gone. As a child I enjoyed the Biblical stories very much, as an adult I rationalized this by their literary appeal, but is this not a subterfuge? Had I not in some naive sense believed them as true, would I have taken to them at all? A colleague of mine once suggested that in order to truly enjoy the music of Bach you needed to be a believer. He himself was not, and his suggestion was one of regret rather than one of dismissal. Others deny such connections. It is an interesting question pertaining to the relation between an artists emotion and that of his public as transmitted by the work of art. For religion to work, it has to be felt as true, not just as useful. One abstract interpretation of God is disembodied Truth, an interpretation that makes sense of much religious exhortation such as 'Love the Truth' without expecting Truth to love you.

But one very useful aspect of religion is humility. Instilling the feeling that you are entitled to nothing, that worldly success pales before the humble good deed, and that you need to be submissive as to what happens to you. This is an ideal attitude if we want to face environmental challenges seriously and sincerely pursue a sustainable living. To promise rewards in an after-life that never will come, is of course an act of duplicity, but as we can never call the bluff before it is too late, such a betrayal is beyond the pale and

thus condoned. And it does have very good effects, first and foremost on the collective, and then by implication on the individual.

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