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# Beyond God and Religion

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If, as Humanists, we think that attacking religion is not enough, then we should be clear about exactly what it is that we are rejecting and why. We cannot move to a better world unless we understand what is wrong with this one. If we want people to behave in a more kind and loving way, then we need to analyse what is unkind and unloving about the present.

Of course, there is a well known Irish joke about an English tourist in the wilds of Connemara who asks one of the locals for directions to Letterfrack. The Irishman replies: "Well sir, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here". There is something of the wise fool in this response. If our goal is a new way of living in peace and harmony, then it may be better to start afresh rather than attempt to tweak an old system we have inherited. Instead of tinkering with the old model, we should get on with producing a new one. But this assumes that religion and its influence has been all bad. Are there not some things in our heritage worth preserving?

## RELIGION

RELIGION is a slippery concept about which there is much disagreement. Even the Latin origin of the word is disputed. Cicero (106-43BCE) thought it stemmed from the word 'relegare', meaning to reflect on something. Then, again, is it from 'relegere', to read again, or from 'religare', to bind fast? In the latter case it could refer to a bond of piety to any institution which binds people together, just like the family.

Definitions reflect this confusion and tend to be either too narrow or too vague. It may be taken to mean simply a commitment to certain ideals of life – any committed faith. For many, it is the more narrow belief in and worship of a spiritual or supernatural being or beings. Daniel Dennett defines religions as "social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is sought" (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006, p9). Yuval Noah Harari in his recent book *Sapiens* (Harvill Secker, 2014) defined it as "a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a super-human order". H.L. Mencken, in his *Treatise on the Gods*, said that "whether it happens to show itself in the artless mumbo-jumbo of a Winnebago Indian or in the elaborately refined and metaphysical rites of a Christian archbishop, its single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him".

In this narrow conception of worshipping and pleasing supernatural powers, an atheist cannot be religious, nor would he/she want to be. Humanists reject religion in the

narrow sense, and most of us think that the world would be a better place without it. I wouldn't say that religion is 'the root of all evil', the title of a TV documentary presented by Richard Dawkins in 2006. But in this doctrinal and dogmatic sense, it is oppressive, destructive and divisive. It has been a force for control, manipulation, repression and authoritarianism. It has suppressed free speech. It has restricted scientific advances. It has peddled a negative and repressive view of sexuality and morality.

Above all, religion has stirred intolerance, hatred and bloodshed because – and here in Ireland is a classic and tragic case – it promotes tribalism and violence. It divides insiders from outsiders, the saved from the damned. Rather than assuming good intentions, adherents are often taught to treat outsiders and non-believers with suspicion. "Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers," says the Christian *Bible*. "They wish that you disbelieve as they disbelieve, and then you would be equal; therefore take not to yourselves friends of them," says the *Koran*.

These destructive consequences of religion in the narrow sense have led atheists and Humanists to be highly critical. Some believers would say too aggressively critical. Yet a critical intellect is what we seek develop in our children. It is not something to be abandoned when we become adults. Humanists want to make the world a happier place. We cannot achieve that goal if we do not remove the obstacles to its achievement.

Yet we cannot spend all our mental energy being negative. Constantly knocking God becomes a sort of mental masturbation which doesn't produce anything constructive. We older humanists have been there, done that and worn the Atheist teeshirt. We need to move on to seek a positive philosophy beyond religion.

And, anyway, there is another conception of religion which doesn't seek orthodoxy of belief and creed but instead seeks orthopraxy, namely right practices and values. As Tim Whitmarsh points out in his 2016 book *Battling the Gods*, ancient Greek religion didn't have a fixed set of beliefs and there was no attempt to impose theological orthodoxy.

Another way of putting this is to say that ancient Greeks distinguished between mythos and logos. The latter was rational philosophy, but that was understood only by a few. For the earliest Greek thinkers like Homer and Hesiod, the myths spoke of the gods but they also embodied philosophical, psychological and ethical ideas about the real world. In his 1609 work *The Wisdom of the Ancients* Francis Bacon argued that these ancient myths are allegories which contain moral truths. In this sense, —>

religion conveys a much looser and broader idea about the nature of ultimate reality, whatever it is. Similarly, the ancient sages of India and China did not see religion as belief in a set of doctrines but instead a matter of work, values and discipline.

Some argue that we are all on a religious path because it relates to the philosophical questions about life and death that most of us have, at one time or another, asked ourselves and others. In this view, religion is the quest for meaning. In *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970), John Milton Yinger writes: "Religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life". Einstein said that he was religious in the sense that he was aware of something that the human mind cannot grasp and whose 'beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection'. The British philosopher and mathematician A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947) defined it mysteriously as "what the individual does with his own solitariness" – a very private activity indeed.

## SPIRITUALITY

YET, to use the word religion in this wider sense is misleading. I think that the word spirituality is more accurate. What do we mean by this term? In his book *Beyond Religion*, published in 2011, the Dalai Lama suggests that our basic human spirituality – an underlying disposition toward love, kindness and affection – is more fundamental than religion. For the Dalai Lama, spirituality is about cultivating those inner values which we all appreciate in others.

Yet we don't need to take only the Dalai Lama's word for it. Let's look at three of the most well known so-called New Atheists. Here's a quote from an interview: "Spirituality can mean something that I'm very sympathetic to, which is a sort of sense of wonder at the beauty of the universe, the complexity of life, the magnitude of space, the magnitude of geological time. All these things create a sort of frisson in the breast, which you could call spirituality. But I would be very concerned that it shouldn't be confused with supernaturalism". The speaker? It was Richard Dawkins on Al Jazeera TV.

And here is Sam Harris: "spiritual experiences often constitute the most important and transformative moments in a person's life. Not recognising that such experiences are possible or important can make us appear less wise even than our craziest religious opponents". That is a sentiment expressed in this book: *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, published in 2014. Harris, incidentally, defines spirituality as self-transcendence.

And here is Christopher Hitchens in a debate with Tony Blair in 2010: "There is something beyond the material, or not entirely consistent with it, what you could call the numinous, the transcendent... it's in certain music, land-

scape, certain creative work, and without this we really would be primates. It's important to appreciate this and religion has done a very good job of enshrining it in music and architecture". We should remember that, although Marx said that religion was the opium of the people, he also said that it was "the heart of a heartless world".

So both believers and non-believers can be moved to tears by a religious work like Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. But the music doesn't even have to be overtly religious. There is a flash mob of part of the last movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony taken in the Spanish city of Sabadell, north of Barcelona, which brings tears to my eyes. It has been watched about 75 million times. The 9th is a good example of a piece of music which is spiritual without being religious, and of course it is also the anthem of the European Union. The faces of the crowd including the children warm the heart and make us feel that "all people really are our brothers and sisters".

How do we connect these apparently diverse notions of spirituality? To realise that we as individuals are small and insignificant in the context of the cosmic vastness creates a feeling of solidarity and sympathy with other living things. Truly, we are all in it together. We then come to realise that we are only significant in relation to this larger whole. This knowledge opens our eyes to the truth about existence: that the meaning of life does not lie externally beyond life in some heavenly hereafter but it lies internally in the world beyond our own puny individual lives. In truth, the meaning of life lies in the contribution that we make to the lives of others and the living planet around us. To be spiritual is therefore to make our contribution to human happiness and wellbeing and to bring out the best and brightest in the human spirit.



Francis Bacon saw myths as allegories of moral truths

## A CALL TO ACTION

AS Humanists, one way is to promote the values we hold dear. They include love, freedom, equality, justice, happiness, compassion, reason and tolerance. These and many more are the core values of Humanism – though, like many religions, we too can claim that the greatest of these is love. Spirituality is ultimately what it means to be human and how we can best express our humanity. So we cannot leave the world as it is. The human spirit is too important to be left to priests, mullahs or spiritualists. We need to confront the unloving and materialistic nature of the present. We cannot just passively accept the sufferings of humanity; we need to overcome them. How do we deal with poverty, sickness, injustice, exploitation, discrimination, ruination of the natural world? So spirituality is not just passive. It is also a call to action. It is a call to a humane philosophy which is based on caring for others and other living creatures and the fragile planet we all share together. □