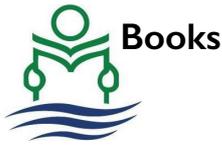


Deities of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow



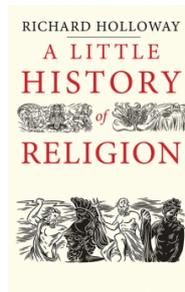
WHAT is religion? It's certainly open to liberality of interpretation. Take *A Little History of Religion*, the latest book by Richard Holloway. He is the former Bishop of Edinburgh who resigned in 2000, declaring his loss of faith and, more recently, describing himself as an 'after-religionist' with strong faith in humanity. For him, religion arises in the attempt to answer two basic questions: where did the universe come from, and what happens to us when we die? Its answer to the first question is that the universe was created by a power beyond itself that some call God. In response to the second, religion posits that death is the entrance to another phase of existence.

Holloway's book is an engaging and readable introduction to the main religions, beginning with Hinduism, followed by Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. At only 237 pages, it cannot be more than an appetiser, and the reader who wants an in-depth study will have to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, it wears its learning lightly and is written with clarity and wit.

It has to be said, though, that Christianity receives the lion's share; indeed, it is covered in more than half of the text. There are several chapters covering various historical stages and sects, such as the Reformation, the English 'Middle Way', Mormons, Quakers, Seventh Day Adventists, and Scientologists. The non-Christian religions are discussed early on and largely fade out of the story in the second half.

On the other hand, what should particularly attract non-believers is Holloway's sympathy for Humanism, which he believes is as sound a basis for morality as religion. And, he adds, "secular spirituality finds meaning and beauty in *this* life" (p236). While Holloway doesn't explicitly state that secular Humanism will completely replace religion, the thrust of his argument is that it would be no bad thing if it did.

While we may think that Holloway's conception of religion is too narrow, there is no doubt that Yuval Noah Harari's is much too wide. In *Homo Deus* he defines it as "anything that confers superhuman legitimacy on human social structures" (p181). But he then includes communism, liberalism and Humanism as religions. Later, he tells us that "the humanist religion worships humanity, and expects humanity to play the part that God played in Christianity and Islam, and that the laws of nature played in Buddhism and Daoism" (p221). Here he repeats the bullshit he wrote in his earlier work *Sapiens*. It must be stressed again that



A Little History of Religion (Yale, 2016)
Homo Deus (Harvill Secker, 2016)

Humanism is NOT a religion, and Humanists do not worship humanity because we are all too well aware of its imperfections. Nor is our morality based on the principle that "something can be bad only if it causes someone to feel bad" (p225). In fact, much of chapter 7 of *Homo Deus* – entitled 'The Humanist Revolution' – is misconceived. He is correct in suggesting that Humanism has no viable alternative today but, as in his earlier work, he is wrong to label it exclusively 'liberal' rather than a mixture of liberalism and socialism.

Harari argues that Humanism will inspire us to seek immortality, bliss and divinity in the 21st century. It is hardly surprising, he says, that a humanist civilisation will want to maximise human lifespans, human happiness and human power. But attempting to realise this humanist dream will undermine its very foundations, by unleashing new post-humanist technologies. We are about to face a flood of extremely useful devices, tools and structures that make no allowance for the free will of individual humans. These technological developments will make humans economically and militarily useless, for these tasks are based on pattern recognition, and non-conscious algorithms may soon excel human consciousness (which embraces feelings) in recognising patterns.

So which is really important: intelligence or consciousness? At least, for armies and corporations, intelligence is mandatory but consciousness is optional. The same may be true in education, the law, medicine, pharmacy etc (in 2011 a pharmacy opened in San Francisco manned by a single robot). The question is: what will conscious humans do, once we have highly intelligent algorithms that can do almost everything better? If intelligence and consciousness are decoupling, then we will be in the same situation as other animals who have suffered at the hands of the possessors of superior intelligence.

What new religions might then fill the vacuum and guide the subsequent evolution of our godlike descendants? He suggests Dataism – a belief in the power of algorithms or data flows – as a possible new god of the future. Will 'a new race of upgraded superhumans' be in charge or will non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves and do to us what we have done to other animals?

Harari's dystopian vision is presented as a warning, but it isn't new. The whole idea of gods implies a gigantic computer (or computers) controlling us. Harari is just bringing them back, stripped of the consciousness we ascribed to them. Humanism is against all gods invented by humans, whether conscious or mechanical, and its philosophy of humanness will prevail. **BMCC**

