

SPIRITUALITY AND THE NEW ATHEISM

NEIL BROWN

MANY PEOPLE in the Western World today, and statistics tell us their number is increasing, live *without* any belief in God. They live according to their own lights, take their values from wherever they can find them, receive the support they need from family and friends, ride the ups and downs of life, often give back to the community in many ways, and find sufficient meaning in their interests, enterprises, work, and from whatever modern culture is able to provide. In short, they would say, if asked, that they lead good and happy lives to the extent that fate allows.

In a post-Christian society, even though they may not give it much thought, many of their basic assumptions, values and moral principles, will be relics of what went before, such as the belief that human life has worth, that somehow the universe favours human efforts, and that love is the summit of human existence. Theirs is a shifting amalgam of value and meaning, in which nothing is ruled out and spirituality is a search for whatever might seem to enrich their lives. It does not matter whether it is something borrowed or something new.

Explicit atheism, on the other hand, is a thorough-going *denial* of the existence of God and soul, which seeks to sweep into the dustbin of history all relics and implications of previous theistic beliefs and to replace them with a more consistent set of meanings and values. What then does ‘spirituality’ look like in such a scenario?

Most dyed-in-the-wool atheists regard talking about spirituality as akin to supping with the devil—one slip of the tongue and you’re tasting the devil’s fare. Some brave ‘souls’,

however do tempt fate!

Kerry Walters, for one, claims that while there can be no ‘intrinsic meaning’ for human life, a ‘significant life’ is worth pursuing, and can be the foundation for a ‘spirituality’¹. The real threat to such meaning is, of course, the transitoriness of life, when ‘my’ meaning ceases. But, he claims, faced honestly and courageously, this may add poignancy and enhanced appreciation to one’s life:

At the end of the day, the atheists’ search for meaning and purpose is inspired by Sisyphus’ courageous acknowledgement of the way the world is: celebrating its joys and beauty while accepting, as best one can, its tragedies. Meaning will always be provisional. Purpose will always be contingent. Narrative will never be completed. But for all that, life is worth living.²

Even for an atheist, Walters says, peak experiences, being stirred to the depths, beauty and wonder, are important features of life. Is a sense of ‘mystery’ then possible? Richard Dawkins answers ‘no’, in that nothing is ‘forever ungraspable’³. Walters maintains, however, that such experiences do point beyond themselves, not to God, but to something ungraspable—many people, he says,

think of themselves as spiritual because they sense something in their experience that can’t be adequately captured by either traditional religious idioms or straightforward empirical descriptions. Instead it can only be gestured at with the evocative language of poetry, metaphor, and simile. Thoughtful atheists can accept this understanding of the spiritual.⁴

This experience, he alleges, has previously been colonised by religion, but rather, from modern science, we can now understand it as

our sense of the interconnectedness of all things and of our place within the whole, our celebration of it, our wonder and gratitude at the intricacy, beauty, and mystery of it all, and our ‘puniness’ within it.⁵

Alain De Botton, like many before him, sees ‘culture’ as the solution to the gap left by religion’s demise. He believes ‘culture is more than adequately equipped to confront our dilemmas without having to rely on religious dogma.’⁶ The crucial issue, of course, is that modern culture is part of the spiritual problem, a fact which he, at least implicitly, recognises:

The signal danger of life in a godless society is that it lacks reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and eventual annihilation. When God is dead, human beings - much to their detriment— are at risk of taking psychological centre stage. They imagine themselves to be commanders of their own destinies, they trample upon nature, forget the rhythms of the earth, deny death and shy away from valuing all that slips through their grasp, until at last they collide catastrophically with the sharp edge of reality.⁷

The arts, however, he thinks, are capable of meeting the demand, even if under current conditions they do not always do so:

good art is the sensuous presentation of those ideas which matter most to the proper functioning of our souls—and yet which we are most inclined to forget, even though they are the basics for our capacity for contentment and virtue.⁸

A.C. Grayling’s *The God Argument* is more polemical in tone than the previous authors. He advocates a ‘humanism’ (not a spirituality) that calls upon ‘our most generous and sympathetic understanding of human nature and the human condition’⁹. This is brought about through ‘the arts and literature, through history and philosophy, through the magnificent endeavour of science, through attentive personal experience and reflection, through close relationships, through the conversation of mankind...’¹⁰



Fr. Neil Brown taught at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for thirty-four years. He is currently the Parish Priest of Bondi Beach in the Sydney Archdiocese.

He states:

it is a failure of imagination not to see that when people go to concerts or exhibitions, enjoy country walks, gardening, gathering with friends round a dinner table, reading, creating something, learning, working at something absorbing and worthwhile.. they are in different ways satisfying the need for creativity, recreation, community and friendship which are vital to lives well lived.¹¹

Grayling shows no enthusiasm for any contribution of Christianity, in fact, he claims, if history had been different—

In place of Annunciations and Madonnas, Crucifixions and Resurrections, we would have more Apollos Pursuing Daphnes, more Death of Procris, more Dianas Bathing. By almost any standard apart from the macabre and gloomy ones of Catholic kitsch, an Aphrodite emerging from the Paphian foam is an infinitely more life-enhancing image than a Deposition from the Cross.¹²

De Botton, however, has a very different view, as he laments one of the greatest lacks of modern society:

Jesus’ story is a register of pain—betrayal, loneliness, self-doubt, torture—through which our own anguish can be mirrored and contextualized, and our impressions of its rarity corrected. Such impressions are of course not hard to form, given how vigorously society waves away our difficulties.¹³

If you leave aside any appeal to the arts and culture, scientifically minded Atheism seems to lead into a spiritual cul-de-sac, as Jesse Bering shows:

What's it all for? In the end, that's probably a false riddle. But never mind the mind of God. We can live for each other—here and now, before its' too late, sympathetically sharing snapshots from inside our still conscious heads.. But what you choose to do with your brief subjective existence is entirely up to you. If you choose to ignore this precautionary tale of a fleeting life without supernatural consequences, there will be no hell to pay. Only missed opportunities. And then you die.¹⁴

Most artists simply assume that the arts and literature, together with the everyday expressiveness of life with family and friends, are able to provide for all our spiritual needs. This assumption, however, has to contend with the 'art for art's sake' leitmotif of much of modern art—making it serve other purposes, many atheists say, would distort its integrity.

In *Art As Therapy*, Alain De Botton and the philosopher, John Armstrong, face this issue, suggesting perhaps the commissioning of art, as the Church has done, to help people be better versions of themselves. Art, they argue, has a manifold usefulness: as remembering, as inspiring hope, as reconciling us to the human condition, as rebalancing our lacks, as an aid to self-knowledge, as a means of personal growth, and as expanding our appreciation for life.¹⁵

It is true that we learn widely and deeply and in many different ways from the arts and literature, but it is also true that in its current form modern culture is diffuse, indiscriminate and subject to market and consumer demands, rather than directly providing for the kinds of needs a spirituality requires. The fact still remains that the arts and literature have their own focus, and anything other is a fortunate by-product.

Terry Eagleton, himself an atheist, in *Culture and the Death of God* asks whether it is possible for culture, notwithstanding all the value and meaning it brings, 'to inherit the sceptre of religion'. His answer is 'no':

Culture is more likely to reflect social divisions than to reconcile them. Once those contentions begin to infiltrate the concept of culture itself—

once value, language, symbol, kinship, heritage, identity and community become politically charged—culture ceases to be part of the solution and instead becomes part of the problem.¹⁶

Charles Taylor shows that the rise of modern atheism has been accompanied with the belief that it is an act of courage to face the ultimate meaninglessness of human life.¹⁷ There is, then, always this dampening effect weighing down any flights of spirituality, and in many cases preventing it from taking off at all. Nobel Prize winner, Czeslaw Milosz warns that there is a danger involved here—'boredom':

One of the warning signs is boredom. Why read novelists and poets when I know what I shall find: another treatise on the insignificance of man, of that creature in whom all is illusory except for physical pleasure and pain.¹⁸

Culture is indispensable to our humanity and to our spirituality. It is the springboard for a spirituality, but also its problematic. In our modern Western culture it must counter our acquisitive and consumer mentality, our lack of care for the earth, our narrow individualism, the growing divide between rich and poor, our propensity for violence, and the list goes on. This too is the challenge and measure for any religion which seeks to provide a spirituality to fit the present age, a test many religious attempts do not pass.

Spirituality is about meaning and value, integrity and wholeness, an exploration of what our humanity might be capable of. The arts, literature, and the humanities make an important contribution to this search. But for A. C. Grayling that is as far as we can go. He asks:

the point worth making here is this: what would it add, to any of the above, to say that in addition to these considerations there is a deity or there are deities? What work would such a notion do, in adding or changing anything about good, meaningful, satisfying, creative, relationship-based lives....¹⁹

To answer Grayling's question, 'God' introduces a totally new *register* for humanity,

which is released from the confinement of its own concepts and products and has opened up for it the possibilities of a radically different future. Even though those possibilities are not always realised, at times they are: Hans and Sophie Scholl were young Christian university students in Germany during the Second World War, whose faith led them, together with some of their friends, to form the 'White Rose', a non-violent resistance group opposed to Nazi atrocities and as a result they were executed at Stadelheim Prison in Munich in 1943. Such examples allow us to glimpse the attainable.

Speaking in the broadest terms, 'God' is:

- an answer to our unlimited questioning and wondering, an end to our ever increasing desiring for the 'more' of life, and for our ceaseless searching for a better self and a better world, all of which would otherwise remain locked in materiality, a pursuit of more and more of the same;
- a ground for the ultimate worth and seriousness of our human freedom and striving - our choices for good or ill matter because we have a future and our world has a future—a motive to cross the boundaries that divide our world and add to its pain and suffering;
- an offer of redemption for the victims of injustice and atrocity, for personal guilt and frailty, for the inextinguishable sense of loss and anguish, where no other answer is possible;
- a hope beyond mere optimism that allows us to see our struggle as worthwhile even when the odds seem insurmountable, as they did for Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friends;

- a vision of the universe, our world, our own lives and those of others as 'gift', a vision that frees us from the shackles of 'insignificance' and offers our relationships with one another new depth and meaning.

It seems that once you allow for the possibility of a spirituality it is very difficult to shut God out. Wonder, depth of meaning, mystery, and value, are all 'wormholes' for God to appear, as Terry Eagleton sees:

What Nietzsche recognises is that you can get rid of God only if you do away with innate meaning. The Almighty can survive tragedy, but not absurdity. As long as there appears to be some immanent sense to things, one can always inquire after the source from which it springs. Abolishing given meanings involves destroying the idea of depth, which in turn means rooting out beings like God who take shelter there.²⁰

To remain consistent it seems, atheism must exclude or at least severely limit 'spirituality'. The question then becomes: Can we attain the potential of human life in the world as it is, with all its shocks and travails, without a spirituality? We haven't been able to in the past. In a 'brave new world' that may be possible, but at what human cost?

Can the Church learn anything from this discussion? Yes, in particular, that the spirituality it offers should not remain solely in the 'temple', as it has largely during the Counter Reformation centuries, but, like Jesus, should move out into the cities and towns, the highways and byways, to engage people where they are at in the culture, to engage the 'wonder' that the modern sciences awaken, and to address the lacks and wounds our culture has opened up.

NOTES

1. *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010) 144.

2. *ibid.*, 155.

3. *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 2006), 19.

4. *Atheism: A Guide*, 160-1.

5. *ibid.*, 169-176.

6. *Religion for Atheists* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012) 160.

7. *ibid.*, 200.

8. *ibid.*, 217.
9. *The God Argument* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 140.
10. *ibid.*, 256.
11. *ibid.*, 148.
12. *ibid.*, 240.
13. *Religion for Atheists*, 222.
14. *The Belief Instinct* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011) 204-5.
15. *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013) 7-80.
16. *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 120-2.
17. *A Secular Age* (London: Belknap Press, 2007) 361-9.
18. *The Land of Ulro*, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1984) 157-8.
19. *The God Argument*, 174-5.
20. *Culture and the Death of God*, 155.

St Augustine said that we must return to our own heart to find God. We have to go down into the depths of our own soul to realize our profound personal need of life, of love and of meaning.

We must find through faith and reflection the answer to our own questioning in the Heart of Christ, i.e. in the depths of his personality, where human yearning and God's graciousness meet in redemptive incarnation. Then, fashioned by these forces, our own heart will be an understanding heart, open to, feeling for, and giving to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We will not be disheartened or discouraged in the face of difficulties. We follow Christ who 'loved with a human heart'...; he shared our humanness that we might know that over us all is the everlasting love of the Father.

In God's good time the omnipotent love of God will have its way. It is in this love that we have learned to believe.

—Cf. E.J.Cuskelly, MSC, *Jules Chevalier, Man with a Mission*, pp. 127-129.