

A Letter to Atheists

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One fault atheists have is their lack of appreciation for the role of religion in history. Europe, with its magnificent cathedrals, is a reminder of this. We have a hard time explaining this importance given to religion, since there is no land inhabited by human beings where religion has not had deep significance. We can give a multitude of reasons why people have supernatural beliefs, but we have no explanation for this importance. Some individuals have been *consumed* by religion, sufficiently to spend their lives in monasteries or forego marriage. And when whole populations are so enraptured, we find great achievement, like cathedrals, pyramids, temples, mosques and ziggurats, all with their magnificent art. In fact, not only did the great civilizations of history *begin* in such periods, they *ended* in periods of irreligion. Our modern age is an example, when it is not by coincidence that empty church pews accompany Europe's failing birth rate.

The reason for religion's acceptance is not difficult to perceive. We are a social species, and this human property is without doubt the reason for our unchallenged success as a species. Intelligence has had its role in our success, but even this was due to our social nature, indicated by intelligence being a feature common to all social animals, whether dolphins, elephants or apes. The reason speculated is that we need intelligence to get along with others. In the same way, any practice that would enhance our social propensity would give an evolutionary advantage, and that is what common belief does, especially when accompanied by rituals, symbols and aid for one another. The general religious practice of mass gatherings gives a sense of *belonging*, but it is not the only activity giving that sense. Military marching does the same, and is an unexpected contributor to men learning to fight as a unit.

So if the purpose of atheists is to remove religion from society, which it seems to be as in the books by Richard Dawkins, they have an enormous challenge on their hands. If effective they could actually be damaging the society around us which depends on common cultural understanding between people. But there can be little doubt that religion also causes enormous harm to society, especially when it suppresses rational knowledge as Christianity has done throughout the ages. More appropriately, we should see this willingness to suppress rational thought as due to the mystical and mythical foolishness that most if not all religions have taught, that should not be confused with the essence of religion per se.

Properly defined, religion is a belief system characterized by the hope of salvation through fidelity to the belief. The property of *hope* is generally acknowledged, whether of heaven, Nirvana or the blessings of deities, and this solicits loyalty to the belief. If one cannot *believe* he/she is automatically an outcast from the society of adherents, as are all others not sharing the same *hope*. Thus the terrible conflicts in the name of religion. *Loyalty* is a main ingredient of religion, that is emotionally driven and distinguishes it from rational belief. But nothing in this definition suggests religion *must* contain gods and demons, or any belief in the supernatural at all. Religion can be *secular*, and that is what the great political movements of the twentieth century were, held with fanatical faith. Thus, in an age of enlightenment if the mythical and mystical religions of the world are to be replaced so as not to lose the religious motivation for great accomplishment, the most effective way will *not* be with condemnation and ridicule, but with other religious beliefs that *can* be supported by rational thought, that are secular and in no small way *rely* on science.

We might think that such rational replacement would not be difficult. For instance, there can be faith that humanity has a destiny, which is a concept that has nothing mystical about it since it is derived from the record of our evolutionary past extrapolated into the future. Life evolved complexity over past aeons and there is no reason to speculate that it will not continue to do the same. Our concepts of morality and good behaviour are those that ally us with this evolutionary destiny. Indeed, what else are the concepts of morality proclaimed by moral teachers? They are exactly teachings removing us from our 'inner ape,' such as admonishments against anger, pride, lust, etc. and in general those we have when succumbing to the emotional behaviour of animals. This is the general position of humanists, and the atheist moral position is largely that of humanism. The trouble with humanism is that it does not fit into the definition of religion mentioned above. True, humanism does offer a kind of hope: if everyone behaved as fully evolved human beings we certainly would have a better world, but do we achieve that by believing in humanism? The hope of humanism comes from faith in human beings, and as we know, human beings can act despicably. How could we pledge loyalty to any entity with such moral frailty as the human species? To think that humanity will evolve on its own, in time, displays the greatest naïveté. The natural course of humanity is degeneration, as we see in the decay of great civilizations when they lose their moral purpose. Man is a false god.

So the question remains: if myth religion is to be replaced by secular religion, what could be the great secular hope offered and reason for loyalty? To be a candidate, the entity must be powerful, the more powerful the better, to be *believed* capable of fulfilling the hope promised. In the case of mythical deities great mystical powers could fulfill any promise, all of which are dispensed with by secular religion whose hope must be based in the real world we experience. For such religion there is only one possible candidate: government, and that is why secular faiths, like Russian Communism, have instinctively sought state power. When that ideology was found false the Soviet Union fell apart and Russia became the domain of oligarchs. Not only mythical ideologies can lose the hope of the people. German National Socialism was another secular ideology, one that impacted the German people so forcefully it took a world war to destroy. So it is not that secular ideologies cannot produce as much emotional inspiration as mythical, 'spiritual' ideologies. Humanity just has to find one that we can live with.