

CAN AN ATHEIST FIND INSPIRATION IN RELIGIOUS MYTH?

Atheism is on the attack and the church is in retreat, either busying itself with internal squabbles about sexuality and gender, or with marginal attempts to engage the populace, although no one is quite sure what message is being conveyed.

Current atheist populism is destroying religious belief with a nihilistic view that offers no philosophy to replace religion. I admit the atheist hypothesis, while at the same time I believe that elements from religion can add value when they undergo substantial re-interpretation. In my new book, *Enlightened Philosophy*, I explore a **synthesis of meaningful metaphysics in philosophy with the power of myth in religion**.

I argue that religion that is only doctrine, phenomena and ritual that are inadequate and meaningless compared to religion that is interpreted more powerfully as myth. Myth has a history of being despised as a weak word for a weak idea—it can even mean simply “untrue” in common speech. And yet, myth classically understood offers significant open meta-narratives with value, hope, virtue, dilemma, heroism, tragedy, failure, redemption, resurrection, love, evil, and justice.

The atheist or agnostic argument is strong. There is no proof of God. People live their daily lives on the basis of encounters with demonstrable reality. They wake up to a physical world each morning and interact with a real world. Yet, daily reality also includes metaphysical feelings and emotions, hopes and loves, expectations and disappointments, ideas and uncertainties. Even if there is no God and no separate human soul, a metaphysical does still exist.

People who see and acknowledge only physical reality have little scope for development beyond the physicality of consumerism—this has become the dominant paradigm of post modernity. As an alternative, those who are more aware of their metaphysical nature can engage with **open meta-narratives inspired by myth to develop their spiritual lives**. When we are more focused on inner life than on outward possession or impression, with kindness, forgiveness, care, generosity, love and loveliness than with consumption, then we are open to a worthwhile, rewarding **synthesis of philosophy and religion** – whether we subscribe to atheism, agnosticism or religion.

We see that many people are not “believers” due to a lack of demonstrable evidence, and because evolution has displaced creation, because of defective moral aspects of religious faith,

because of technology's superior determining effect on human life, and because of the prevalence of reason and logic that derived from the Age of Enlightenment.

What therefore is society's current thinking? What is the predominant philosophy? One sad answer is that within post modernity, humanity is simply thinking less and focusing on feeling more.

Where does the current synthesis of atheistic philosophy and post-modern experience leave us? Post modernity has been interpreted in architecture, arts and literature, yet its fundamental force is in reaction to the sovereignty of reason, logic and intellect established by the Enlightenment. Post modernity, therefore, is a shift in the holistic paradigm, pushing freedom and feeling to the fore of the human experience. Post modernity will undeniably remain with us, with some fundamental weaknesses, relying on the reason, logic and sheer productivity of the modernity that it eschews.

The most serious defect of post modernity is that the alternative sovereign power to logic and reason is crude, naked feudal power. We have been there before, and I see real signs of this becoming the dominant power structure again. For instance, if politicians continue to be allowed to act without accountability, then feudal power is back. Our only hope is to build a value system with common appeal. **This is where atheist conclusions and new interpretations of old, misinterpreted religions may generate the synthesis we need.**

In seeking to build synthesis, rather than set in concrete the growing separation of religion from today's culture, there are several strands of potential connection. Religion may need to shed its doctrinal framework, forget its phenomenological baggage, and minimize ritual, while helping to define a divine that is offered, yet not imposed.

Is there a version of contemporary spirituality that can co-exist with an atheist position on the existence of an exogenous God? Can the sacred and secular meet? Can religious text open meaningfully for free exploration, fresh encounter and valuable interpretation? Can its poetry convey more meaning than doctrine and dogma that have been wrung from it?

A re-reading of the Bible and religious texts can emphasize myth as the meaningful interpretation against literalism, doctrine or creed, taking meaning where it offers virtue, leaving aside or rejecting text at will, and attaching no *a priori* status or authority to the text. The Bible may or may not be the word of God, yet it might be valuable, and where it is, **we can take that value and use it to help construct our preferred, personal divine.**

If we choose to acknowledge our own construct and concept of what we regard as divine, if we enthrone justice as god, then we have a shepherd in life, a guiding principle that brings with it a peaceful, fulfilled life, untroubled by fear, including fear of evil. Paranoia and pervasive enmity fade away. Life feels and is enabled. Every day is characterized by goodness. Mercy prevails, love is constant, big shot celebrities no longer fill the screen of our consciousness and dominate human society, and humility is restored as a virtue. Truth is

valued and its liberating quality is released.

Do we need God for this? No. We can grasp divine values without any God belief. We can become disciples of values. Not only our life but our world will be better for it. No one and no institution can own, dictate or define this discipleship for us. It is ours, for each person to find, to define for themselves, to treasure and to live by.