September 29th, 2023

Social Stability Without Religion

Having a conversation about religion is like walking through a minefield. We all have our own soft spots and limitations on how far we are willing to admit that the stories we grew up with and the traditions we adore are part of something that is (at its very core, whether by design or otherwise) *a lie that makes us feel good*. If I haven't stepped on a mine already, please bear with me on this one-way conversation about how (I believe) there is a way to avoid the false promise of heaven and the vile threats of hell while still generating something that can help individuals—from the poorly educated to the scholar—feel a sense of unity, compassion, inspiration, and above all morality.

Part 1: the good, the bad, and the difficult conversation

I'd like to start on a positive note. As a scientist and aspiring historian I have a hard time painting a good picture of religion. But there are "good" things about it. Without a doubt. We don't have to go very far to find evidence of this. At the personal level, believing that there is something out there that is watching out for us—and that no-matter how cruel the world may seem, things will turn out alright—is a powerful feeling to have; it sometimes leads to impressive stories of human ability that defy logic and our understanding of the world[1]. At the interpersonal level, knowing that our loved ones share our beliefs, and having a reason to congregate and express adoration towards a common supernatural entity, can enrich our lives on a level that is rarely achieved by any secular activity[2]. At the level of society as a whole, the benefits come in many forms. From the formation of charitable initiatives[3] to the manifestation of some of the most impressive and timeless artistic expressions humans have ever created[4].

However, the dangers and issues with religion are plentiful as well. Let's go down the same ladder we just went up on: at the level of society as a whole, the contradictions across religions and even within a specific religion, provoke the aforementioned metaphorical minefield to become literal—and has led to some of the most regrettable events in human history (ancient[5] or modern[6]). All of which often arise from a lack of common ground or a skewed perception of reality. Then, at the interpersonal level, it can create power structures that often lead to (1) unfair treatment of their lowest members or (2) unfair economic gain. These can range from (at their most benign state) a very strict family unit or wasted pocket change, but also (at their most evil manifestation) human abuse at the level of slavery or life-crippling scams. Finally, there is the personal level, which is the hardest landmine to avoid given that we often guard ourselves behind the all-too-common "religion is a personal thing".

Boom! Bye…

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[1] *e.g.* we've all heard stories of people recovering from terminal diseases through prayer

[2] *e.g.* pilgrimages and religious retreats are sometimes referred to as life-changing experiences, but when was the last time you felt this about a sporting event or a music festival?

[3] *e.g.* Feeding America or St. Jude Children's research hospital

[4] *e.g. t*he renaissance or the classical period

[5] *e.g. t*he persecution of the Jewish people, the crusades, and the caliphate

[6] *e.g. g*enocides in India, China, Armenia, and events like 9/11 or every other shooting on the news today. Plus, Jewish people are still struggling with discrimination today.

If you are still here, there are two personal aspects of religion that in my opinion should be considered dangerous. The first one simply has to do with the skewed perception it generates of the world as it is. If we believe our actions are controlled by a supernatural being and that there are magical reasons "working in mysterious ways", we are neglecting one of the most important survival skills that humans have evolved: trial and error (*i.e.* hypothesis and experiment). This is what our tree-climbing ancestors relied on to understand the world; a pseudo-scientific method based on experiments (*e.g.* "What if I put this part of the plant under the earth and add water"), measurements (*e.g.* "I got a carrot out of it"), creating a record of knowledge, and improving upon it. If, on the other hand, we believe that one could dance to bring rain, or that one can stop unfortunate events from happening through prayer, we are creating a skewed perception of how the universe works. In today's world the belief that one could dance to bring water is no different than praying to stop mass shootings from happening. It is simply barking up the wrong tree, and people are dying because of our misconceptions and our (personal) inaction. The second (negative) personal aspect of religion is also related to the obstruction of human potential, and it extends to our offspring. Take, for example, the simple questions that as kids we ask so naively but as adults become sources of anxiety and fear, such as *what happens when we die?* Or *is Earth the only place where life exists?.* If we answer these using fantastic tales of life after death or egocentric ideas such as "God created all of this for us to enjoy", it closes a door of wonder and curiosity that could have otherwise led to new philosophies, testable hypotheses, and/or potentially scientific breakthroughs. It stops the inquiring child and kills their curiosity before it has time to flourish. It could stop the next Newton from coming up with world-changing ideas[7].

If I have managed to cross this minefield, allow me to continue with a sentence that would have blown up almost immediately had it been my first: *What if we remove religion from society altogether? Wouldn't it create a much more sensible society with a common understanding of the world?* It would be like that song by John Lennon, *Imagine*. All we would need is to educate the believers, through evidence, and they will realize that the universe is more beautiful than the heaven they were promised—that nations and human ethnicities can coexist, and that life before death is more important than life after death. I have thought about this deeply and have looked for examples of such initiatives (historical and recent), and I am starting to become a bit weary of the prospect of eliminating religion completely for reasons that I explore below.

Part 2: The dangers of removing religion.

Many people I admire have expressed the desire of creating a society that does not rely on religiosity to function[8]. Others have offered alternatives to inspire awe without invoking the supernatural. From Sigmund Freud's *Future of an Illusion* to Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and even Christpher Hitchens' *God is not great* there is but a slight change in tone and persuasive capacity. I have read these books with great interest and I couldn't agree more with their assessment of the situation. I relish when I hear that *The God Delusion* is the most illegally downloaded book in the Arab world, and I can't help but smile and nod when I observe the upward trend in people who identify themselves unaffiliated to any religion in the United States[9]. My simple-minded self reads these books

[7] Yes, yes, I know, Newton was very religious. But his religiosity never led to any breakthroughs. In fact it brought him a lot of pain and took him down many intellectual dead ends.

[8] One of the most recent and ridiculous is "Rationalia", proposed by Neil deGrasse Tyson

[9] People who identify themselves as atheists or agnostics have increased by 24% in the past 50 years (link)

and sees these trends and thinks that *if I can live a decent and fulfilling life without a fantastic tale to believe in or a supernatural being to worship, then everyone should be able to*. Easy. But then I think a bit deeper about what would happen to those aforementioned "good things" religion offers (recall: personal feats from faith, interpersonal experiences, compassion, empathy, inspiration, etc.) and I start to understand the difficulties that arise when trying to instill these on *average* individuals, using logic—or as Nietzsche would have preferred, using force. What would happen if we remove a core belief from people's minds? Or as Freud put it, what if we take the sleeping pills from someone who has used them for years? We could go way back in time to find out; to the XIV century BCE when the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten attempted to—in a single lifetime—remove polytheism in Egypt and replace it with a single god. He forced people to destroy their temples and forbad them from worshiping any other god but the sun god, Aton. This had severe consequences that led to violence and brought Egypt to the brink of a civil war. Shortly after Akhenaten's death, polytheism was restored and was stronger than ever! An inevitable backlash from the reactiveness of the human mind. Like telling a child not to do something that gives them instant gratification—whether using logic, authority, or persuasiveness—they are going to do it anyway. It takes time to make these changes. It takes trust for these changes to last. And most importantly, they cannot be done using force. A similar backlash was observed in India in the III century BCE when the "philosopher" king Ashoka attempted to bring Buddhism to his people using edicts and even gentler forms of persuasion such as lavish gifts and temples. It didn't work either. Buddhism ultimately emigrated and found followers elsewhere (China).

The two examples above are hard enough, and they were replacing one religion with another. It is much harder to replace one with nothing. We could also look at more gradual or (if you will) natural declines of religion in history. The historian Will Durant observes that this has happened more than once in ancient history (Sumeria, Assyria, Greece, Rome, and other ancient civilizations), and the process goes a bit like this:

> The intellectual classes abandon the ancient theology and—after some hesitation—the moral code allied with it; literature and philosophy become anticlerical. The movement of liberation rises to an exuberant worship of reason, and falls to a paralyzing disillusionment with every dogma and every idea. Conduct, deprived of its religious supports, deteriorates into epicurean chaos; and life itself, shorn of consoling faith, becomes a burden alike to conscious poverty and to weary wealth. In the end a society and its religion tend to fall together, like body and soul, in a harmonious death. Meanwhile among the oppressed another myth arises, gives new form to human hope, new courage to human effort, and after centuries of chaos builds another civilization.

Today, one could argue, we are riding this wave of "exuberant worship of reason", and perhaps reaching the onset of the "paralyzing disillusionment with every dogma and every idea". Conversely, one could also argue, as many scientifically oriented intellectuals would, that things are different today because our understanding of the universe and its complexity is far beyond what any ancient civilization had. But this understanding only applies to the scientifically oriented and the curious minds. As far as the average individual is concerned, the theories[10] that explain some of the deepest facts about the universe or the technological advances that may be used to disprove religious beliefs, hold as much meaning to

[10] Here, the term theory is used in its scientific meaning; like the theory of gravity or the theory of evolution. As opposed to its common use, meaning hypothesis.

them as a fable. It will take more than a scientific paper or a life-changing gadget for the masses to replace simple moral stories, fantastic tales, and magic tricks with complex theorems and counterintuitive logic. Durant's mention of an "epicurean chaos" is also relevant today. We have an ultra-wealthy class that is starting to compete with that of the elite class during the decline of the Roman empire, the French tennis courts at the onset of revolution, or the Russian Tzars at the end of the XIX century—if it hasn't surpassed them already. Furthermore, and most troubling, is the conscious poverty in which the new generations of educated individuals in the second quarter of the XXI century are learning to live with. This includes the near impossibility of owning a place to live, the cost and impotence of higher education, the awareness (at least in the US) of social security programs no longer being active by the time they will need to rely on them, and above all the spiritual poverty that comes from the knowledge that our actions may render the Earth uninhabitable. All of this makes morality and a sense of purpose much more difficult to maintain on the average individual. Could it be that we are headed towards this "harmonious death" of the soul and body of civilization if we simply take the faith from underneath the masses, among this chaos and wealth disparity? I am genuinely terrified of this prospect.

There is an additional risk that may already be unfolding in front of our eyes at this very moment in history. The term "substitution hypothesis" has recently been coined and it centers on the idea that when people become disillusioned with established religious beliefs, they turn around and believe whatever nonsense they get presented with to fill the void of comfort and sense of belonging that the religion leaves behind. This can take many forms: from horoscopes, to crystals, to palm reading, and other centuries-old beliefs, to more modern ideas including non-religious but "spiritual" organizations[11], man-made sources of "energy"[12], and even the usual mention of "there must be something out there"[13]. All of which could be considered benign enough if we use the old adage of "as long as they are not hurting anyone, they can believe whatever nonsense they want to believe", yet there are all sorts of second-tier religions which start that way, but it doesn't take long for them to turn downright dangerous. Some of these are already starting to show the cracks and are negatively affecting society at large, such as the belief of various conspiracy theories, the woke or cancel-culture, the obsession with physical appearance on social media, the worship of money, etc. Any of these "substitutions", one could argue, have none of the good of religion and all of the bad.

One final concern, although not necessarily dangerous, is the loss of tradition. There is a sense of identity and belonging that simple rituals bring to the human mind (uneducated or otherwise) which make human existence bearable. Winter holidays, weddings, return of spring holidays, lunar rituals, etc. Even seemingly secular celebrations can have a much deeper meaning if we bring in something worth venerating and admiring such as a supernatural creator (or destroyer?). Are we willing to lose those because we are angry at these man made gods?

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[11] e.g. NXIVM, the church of satan, or The Order of the Solar Temple

[12] There are people who pay top-dollar to get a satellite to focus a beam "energy" around their house to help them accomplish whatever they want. Or even those who think the Egyptian pyramids hold some kind of special "energy".

[13] I would put things like karma under this category, or even just plain, boring agnosticism… click-boom! Footnote mine!

Part 3: The alternative

So how do we do it? How can we keep traditions, a sense of belonging, a feeling of purpose, and a common belief—without the power structures, the fanaticism, the abuse, the lies, and this monopoly on morality that religions seem to think they have? All of this all the while avoiding foolish or dangerous human tendencies for centuries and millennia to come?

It has become clear to me that any solution that requires intellect is not a good solution. As much as I admire Carl Sagan's approach to inspire awe and reverence through the beauty of nature and the sagacity of human intellect, I don't foresee humans at all levels of society finding meaning or morality behind natural beauty. This doesn't mean, however, that we can't use science as a building block of a new religion (I wish I could just use another word). If we look at their foundations, we've used science from the beginning to build our religions: the tracking of the stars and the explanations of other celestial events have always been reasons for ancient peoples to write down moral codes that ensure this order and these omens are maintained. Let's add this to an ongoing list of requirements that bring forth the aforementioned positive aspects of religion: it **must make the connection that our individual behavior is ultimately what keeps our society healthy and prosperous (P1)**. We also must consider the backlash that may come from an attempt to remove (gradual as it may be) the deities that virtually every human culture holds as their everyday companions. Therefore, **it must sublty replace the current beliefs over a period spanning several generations (P2)**. It must also **inspire reverence and bring people together in admiration (P3)**. And finally, there is a powerful aspect of religion that ties all of the above together: the fact that these supernatural beings are always watching us; **it must inspire goodwill even in our privacy and even through the most difficult life circumstances (P4)**.

Then we have to consider the requirements to avoid the negative aspects of religion. In Part 2 of this document, we mentioned the dangers of the substitution hypothesis, therefore **it must fulfill the desire for fantastic tales that we humans love so much to avoid other nonsense from creeping in (N1)**. **It also must avoid any power structures or priestly tendencies (N2)**. And perhaps the one thing that no religion in the past has been able to achieve, **it must not be hostile to other deities, in fact, it should celebrate them (N3)**. For this last reason I don't think a monotheistic religion can ever be the solution.

There are two examples that come very close to this. The first one happened in ancient Greece during the so-called Heroic Age, before the siege of Troy. Back then, depending on the region in which you were born, you'd be considered yourself the descendant of a particular demigod—some of which, the record shows, may have been real people. People from Attica considered themselves descendants of Zeus and Athena, while the Peloponnesus island was named after the hero Pelops and his descendants included Agamemnon himself. The very name Hellas (after which most Greeks called themselves) came from the god Hellen, and Ionia from Ion. Each god or hero effectively colonized their respective regions with their descendants—and this brought them a major sense of identity, pride, and veneration[14]. Every group of people had their reason to come together and celebrate the fact(?) that their blood comes from a lineage of fantastic individuals who are worthy of reverence and who were either watching them, or at the very least their name and memory deserved good deeds. This falls short on N3, given that wars were still fought because of disagreements. It also falls short on N2 because priests still held a significant stronghold on the masses. The second example is the *Día de los Muertos* in Mexican culture. It brings

[14] This was later borrowed by the Romans, who believed Aneius, offspring of Aphrodite Venus, escaped burning Troy and migrated to Italy. Eight generations later, Romolus and Remus founded the city of Rome.

people together and no-matter who it is that you are celebrating that day, everyone is welcome to it (possibly the only centuries-old spiritual practice that fulfills N3).

My idea[15] combines Greek polytheism and the *Día de los Muertos*, while using science to anchor it to reality.

Part 4: ancestry as a form of worship

The tree of life, as revealed by evolutionary biology and magnified by DNA, (in my opinion) is *the most* fascinating of all the wonders of nature. The fact that we can trace our lineage to specific tribes that migrated from Africa 250,000 years ago, and that we can *quantify* the amount of genetic material that we share with trees, mushrooms, fish, and even bacteria, is mindblowing to those of us who have the education and the patience to think deeply about it. Richard Dawkins has written extensively about this topic, and I must agree with him that the natural world (specifically the living world) is far more fascinating than any fairytale humans have ever come up with. It is awe inspiring; worthy of reverence and celebration. Furthermore, it provides us with a sense of immortality and (if you will) "life after death" when we consider that our genes are in fact immortal, and as close to a soul as nature can provide. If that was not enough—if we need something more powerful and worthy of "creation" than a luke-warm Primordial soup—physics tells us that every atom inside our bodies was forged in cataclysmic events which are the result of powerful beings (stars) colliding or collapsing, dying and being reborn through events that over many miraculous circumstances led to us and the world around us. All of these realities (as revealed by science) makes us relate to Christiaan Huygens' maxim of "the world is my country, science is my religion". But it is not science, it is nature.

So, how can we create a story using these facts? How can we get the sense of fantasy that is often a prerequisite for reverence in most religions? What kind of temples, imagery, scriptures, do we need to provide the common folk with to inspire hope, respect, and morality? A scientifically oriented individual would say that science and fact should be enough, but as much as we would like to believe it, I don't think the average individual will be satisfied. Whatever our story is, it must be simple enough to be understood by children and it must make sense to them in their most basic understanding of the world around them. We don't need to lie, though. If we are going to use ancestry and material lineage we don't need to tell them that our ancestors or the stars are watching us and judging us. Shouldn't it be enough to tell them that they died for us? Because they did. And if we need a more human connection, we can use modern tools to track our lineage to specific individuals and reconstruct images of them. Such images could adorn our houses and we can talk to them and give thanks.

This belief, because I don't think we can call it religion anymore, which would be based on looking closely at our genetic material to find fascinating individuals, takes the *Día de los Muertos* to a deeper level. At the same time, the sacrifice and tremendous power that led to the creation of the Sun and the Earth serves the purpose of a Greek god. A comet that impacted our infant Earth gave us the water we need to survive. Could we give it a name and make a temple for it? A proto-planet called Theia made possible the moon and the tides, can we make this into an inspiring scripture? The Sun, possibly humanity's first god, provides the power that creates the wind and the energy for virtually all life forms on Earth. Blessed be thy name, Sol!

[15] An idea that I doubt is very original, and it shouldn't be taken too seriously… It's just a thought experiment.

We don't need to come up with all the details and commandments of such a movement at this moment. But we can start by creating stories around this ancestral worship. We could provide the services for average individuals to find out what fascinating lineage they may have, establish special dates to come together and worship their ancestry, build temples to stars, comets, planets. We wouldn't be Shia or Sunni, protestant or Catholic, Theravāda or Mantrayāna, we would each have our own "saints" who give us the inspiration to make life worth living, to be extra kind to those who share similar genetic material to us. What is more, if we go far back enough, we all worship the same saint—a Tiktaalik perhaps, or if that is too ugly for you, a sister of the Sun, or the supernova that created them.

Such a belief can easily give us a sense of belonging together (P1), and with the right stories it can give us a sense of reverence (P4) and morality (P3). In fact, it is so fascinating that it borders the fantastic (N1), with the benefit of not being based on any power structures (N2) because we all have the same level of access to our ancestry. And most importantly, it accepts and celebrates all of the millions and millions of ancestors that we have in common—or the billions and billions of miraculous events that made our existence possible (N3). The question becomes, can this be established with enough patience to avoid a backlash and an outright rejection (P2)? Well, it is up to us (prophets, if you will) to find the data, embellish our stories, establish the ways and dates of celebration, and spread the word. As long as it is inspiring enough to avoid Durant's disillusionment, fantastic enough to provide a way to get off Freud's sleeping pills, and as inspiring to all as Carl Sagan's Cosmos is intellectuals, we may be able to downgrade present deities to the level of mythology within a few generations. And most important of all, it would be based on reality.