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Isn't Religion Going Away?

You have picked up this book, which shows you have some interest in the question of whether religious belief is possible in our time. But really, should you keep reading? Isn't a book about the relevance of religion nothing but a desperate, rear-guard action? Isn't the greater reality that "nonbelief is on the march"? That religion in general and Christianity in particular are spent forces, inevitably declining? Aren't increasing percentages of the population, especially millennials, finding that they have less need for God and faith in their lives?

A woman in my church brought a colleague from the business world to visit a Sunday worship service. The man, in his late fifties, was stunned to see several thousand professionals present, mostly young and living in Manhattan. He found the service helpful, thought provoking, and even moving. Afterward he admitted to her that the experience was unnerving. Why, she asked? He answered: "It has always been a settled belief of mine that religion is dying out, at least among educated people and certainly among the young. Oh, I can understand young adults being attracted to the Christian rock-concert-type things. But my experience here puts something of a hole in that assumption."

After a major new study by the Pew Research Center, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled "The World Is Expected to Become More Religious—Not Less." While acknowledging that in the United States and Europe the percentage of people without religious affiliation will be rising for the time being, the article distilled the research findings, namely, that in the world overall religion is growing steadily and strongly. Christians and Muslims will make up an increasing percentage of the world's population, while the proportion that is secular will shrink. Jack Goldstone, a professor of public policy at George Mason University, is quoted: "'Sociologists jumped the gun when they said the growth of modernization would bring a growth of secularization and unbelief. . . . That is not what we're seeing,' he said. 'People . . . need religion.'"

Many readers of the *Washington Post* article had the same reaction as the man who had visited our church. They found the study's findings unbelievable. One opined, "It's easy to get rid of religion just by educating people about other religions, or even giving them a secular, non-biased look at the history of the religion that any given kid has been raised in." In other words, as long as education levels rise and modernization advances religion has to die out. In this view, people feel they need religion only if they are untutored in science, history, and logical thinking.

The Pew study, however, threatened these deeply held beliefs about why people are religious. Not long ago, leading scholars in Western society were also nearly unanimous in thinking that

religion was inevitably declining. They thought the need for religion would go away as science provided explanations and aid against the natural elements better than God ever did. In 1966 John Lennon represented this consensus when he said, "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and will be proved right."

However, this hasn't happened as advertised. As the Pew study proves, religion is on the rise, and the emergence of the more strident and outspoken "new atheists" may be in fact a reaction to the persistence and even resurgence of vibrant religion. Nor is the flourishing of faith happening only among less educated people. Over the last generation philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Alvin Plantinga have produced a major body of scholarly work supporting belief in God and critiquing modern secularism in trenchant ways that are hard to answer.

Demographers tell us the twenty-first century will be less secular than the twentieth. There have been seismic religious shifts toward Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa and China while evangelicalism and Pentecostalism have grown exponentially in Latin America. Even in the United States the growth of the "nones" has been mainly among those previously identified but nominal or disengaged with a faith while the devoutly religious in the United States and Europe are growing.

Belief in God makes sense to four out of five people in the world and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The immediate question is, then, why? Why does religion still grow amid so much secular opposition? Some might answer that most people in the world are simply undereducated, while others might be a bit more blunt and respond, "Because most people are idiots." But a more thoughtful, less misanthropic answer is in order. There are two good answers to the question of why religion continues to persist and grow. One explanation is that many people find secular reason to have "things missing" from it that are necessary to live life well. Another explanation is that great numbers of people intuitively sense a transcendent realm beyond this natural world. We will look at both of these ideas in turn.

An Awareness of Something Missing

Some years ago a woman from China was doing graduate work at Columbia University in political theory, and she began attending our church. She had come to the United States to study partially because there was a growing body of thought among Chinese social scientists that the Christian idea of transcendence—that there was a supernatural reality—was the historic basis for the concepts of human rights and equality. After all, she said, science alone could not prove human equality. I expressed surprise at this, but she said this was not only something that some Chinese academics were arguing, but that some of the most respected secular thinkers in the West were saying it too. Through her help, I came to see that faith was making something of a

comeback in rarefied philosophical circles where secular reason—rationality and science without any belief in a transcendent, supernatural reality—has increasingly been seen as missing things that society needs.

One of the world's most prominent philosophers, Jürgen Habermas, was for decades a defender of the Enlightenment view that only secular reason should be used in the public square. Habermas has recently startled the philosophical establishment, however, with a changed and more positive attitude toward religious faith. He now believes that secular reason alone cannot account for what he calls "the substance of the human." He argues that science cannot provide the means by which to judge whether its technological inventions are good or bad for human beings. To do that, we must know what a good human person is, and science cannot adjudicate morality or define such a thing. Social sciences may be able to tell us what human life *is* but not what it ought to be. The dream of nineteenth-century humanists had been that the decline of religion would lead to less warfare and conflict. Instead the twentieth century has been marked by even greater violence, performed by states that were ostensibly nonreligious and operating on the basis of scientific rationality. Habermas tells those who are still confident that "philosophical reason . . . is capable of determining what is true and false" to simply look at the "catastrophes of the twentieth century—religious fascist and communist states, operating on the basis of practical reason—to see that this confidence is misplaced." Terrible deeds have been done in the name of religion, but secularism has not proven to be an improvement.

Evidence for Habermas's thesis comes from recent research on the history of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century. Thomas C. Leonard of Princeton University shows that a century ago progressive, science-based social policies were broadly understood to entail the sterilization or internment of those persons deemed to have defective genes. In 1926 John T. Scopes was famously tried under Tennessee law for teaching evolution. Few people remember, however, that the textbook Scopes used, *Civic Biology* by George Hunter, taught not only evolution but also argued that science dictated we should sterilize or even kill those classes of people who weakened the human gene pool by spreading "disease, immorality, and crime to all parts of this country." This was typical of scientific textbooks of the time.

It was the horrors of World War II, not science, that discredited eugenics. The link between genetic makeup and various forms of antisocial behavior has never been disproved; indeed, the opposite is true. Recent studies, for example, show that a particular receptor gene decreased boys' likelihood to stay in school, even with compensatory support and help from teachers and parents. There are many other links of heredity to disease, addictions, and other problematic behavior. Thomas Leonard argues that "eugenics and race science were not pseudosciences in the . . . Progressive Era. They were sciences." It was perfectly logical to conclude that it would be more socially and economically cost effective if those genetically prone to nonproductive lives did not pass on their genetic code. However, the death camps aroused the moral intuition

that eugenics, while perhaps scientifically efficient, is *evil*. Yet if you believe that it is, you must find support for your conviction in some source beyond science and the strictly rational cost-benefit analysis of practical reason. Where can you look for this support? Habermas writes: "The ideals of freedom . . . of conscience, human rights and democracy [are] the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. . . . To this day there is no alternative to it."

None of this denies that science and reason are sources of enormous and irreplaceable good for human society. The point is rather that science *alone* cannot serve as a guide for human society. This was well summarized in a speech that was written for but never delivered at the Scopes "monkey trial": "Science is a magnificent material force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine. . . . Science does not [and cannot] teach brotherly love." Secular, scientific reason is a great good, but if taken as the sole basis for human life, it will be discovered that there are too many things we need that it is missing.

Facing Death and Finding Forgiveness

A popular book that makes similar points is the best-selling *When Breath Becomes Air*, the reflections of a young neurosurgeon, now deceased, who wrote about a journey back toward faith when he was dying of cancer. Kalanithi had been an "ironclad atheist." His primary charge against Christianity was "its failure on empirical grounds. Surely enlightened reason offered a more coherent cosmos . . . a material conception of reality, an ultimately scientific worldview." But the problem with this whole conception became evident to him. If everything has to have a scientific explanation and proof, then this "is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hate, meaning—to consider a world that is self-evidently *not* the world we live in."

All science can do, Kalanithi argues, is "reduce phenomena into manageable units." It can make "claims about matter and energy" but about nothing else. For example, science can explain love and meaning as chemical responses in your brain that helped your ancestors survive. But if we assert, which virtually everyone does, that love, meaning, and morals do not merely *feel* real but actually are so—science cannot support that. So, he concluded, "scientific knowledge [is] inapplicable" to the "central aspects of human life" including hope, love, beauty, honor, suffering, and virtue.

When Kalanithi realized that there was no scientific proof for the reality of meaning and virtue, things he was sure existed, it made him rethink his whole view of life. If the premise of secularism led to conclusions he knew were not true—namely that love, meaning, and morals are illusions—then it was time to change his premise. He found it no longer unreasonable to believe in God. He came to a belief not only in God but also in "the central values of Christianity—sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness—because I found them so compelling." Paul Kalanithi had

also found that, in Habermas's phrase, the completely secular point of view had too many things "missing" that he knew were both necessary and real.

Kalanithi refers in passing to forgiveness as one reason he left secularism behind. He does not elaborate but another account may shed light on this. Author and teacher Rebecca Pippert had the opportunity to audit some graduate-level courses at Harvard University, one of which was "Systems of Counseling." At one point the professor presented a case study in which therapeutic methods were used to help a man uncover a deep hostility and anger toward his mother. This helped the client understand himself in new ways. Pippert then asked the professor how he would have responded if the man had asked for help to forgive her. The professor responded that forgiveness was a concept that assumed moral responsibility and many other things that scientific psychology could not speak to. "Don't force your values . . . about forgiveness onto the patient," he argued. When some of the students responded with dismay, the professor tried to relieve the tension with some humor. "If you guys are looking for a changed heart, I think you are looking in the wrong department." However, as Pippert observes, "the truth is, we *are* looking for a changed heart." Secular reason, all by itself, cannot give us a basis for "sacrifice, redemption, and forgiveness," as Paul Kalanithi concluded in his final months.

A Sense of the Transcendent

A second reason why, even in our secular age, religion continues to make sense to people is more existential than intellectual. Harvard professor James Wood, in a *New Yorker* article "Is That All There Is?" tells of a friend, an analytic philosopher and a convinced atheist, who sometimes wakes in the middle of the night haunted by a visceral angst:

How can it be that this world is the result of an accidental big bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose? Can it be that every life-beginning with my own, my husband's, my child's, and spreading outward-is cosmically irrelevant?

Wood, who is a secular man himself, admits that "as one gets older, and parents and peers begin to die, and the obituaries in the newspaper are no longer missives from a faraway place but local letters, and one's own projects seem ever more pointless and ephemeral, such moments of terror and incomprehension seem more frequent and more piercing, and, I find, as likely to arise in the middle of the day as the night."

What is this "incomprehension" that can suddenly grip even secular persons? Wood's friend's questions reveal more an intuition than a line of reasoning. It is the sense that we are more and life is more than what we can see in the material world. Steve Jobs, when contemplating his own death, confessed that he felt that "it's strange to think that you accumulate all this experience . . . and it just goes away. So I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your

consciousness endures." It seemed to Jobs untrue to reality that, for something as significant as the human self, death would be just an "off switch," so it is merely "*Click!* And you're gone."

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