

If God is Dead, What Comes Next?

by
Tim Dean

Let's say Richard Dawkins and his compatriots are right: there is no God. Is that it? End of story? Unfortunately, no. Even if the so-called "New Atheists" are right, and all that's left of God is a chalk outline, that's far from the end of the story. Sadly, religion can't simply be surgically extracted from our lives, our culture and our society that easily. God's absence leaves a sizable void that needs to be filled by something. And atheism isn't it.

Now, I should flag up front that, as a rule, I no longer engage in the debate about whether God exists or not. He doesn't. And I'm as confident of that fact as I am that the Earth is round and that table manners are in sharp decline in the modern world.

I don't bother arguing about whether God exists anymore simply because there is already an overwhelming abundance of compelling arguments that not only convincingly state the reasons why it's vanishingly unlikely there is an Almighty, but the that also explain humans have been so consistently mistaken in believing there is one.

If someone is unpersuaded by these well-worn arguments, further rational bludgeoning by myself is unlikely to sway their views. Simply reiterating these arguments would be a waste of both of our time.

In fact, I find it troubling that so many words are spilt, and so many hours burnt, in fruitless toil over the debate about the existence of God. So many able minds that could be turning their attention to a vastly more important question: What comes after God?

This is a question that demands far more attention than it gets, particularly from those who have already rejected the supernatural but are too busy shouting into the void of faith, such as the New Atheists.

It's important because, for many people, abandoning God means also turning one's back on the church. And doing so doesn't come without a cost.

Religion is more than just a vehicle of worship. Religion is one of the pillars of our society. Religion is a glue that binds a community together. It's a support network that lifts you when you're down. It's a center of education, a hub of culture, a place where we're encouraged to consider things greater than our own petty concerns.

Consider that with the retreat of religion and community many people have withdrawn into a more insular, more individualistic, more hedonistic world of consumerism and vain achievement.

Yet, in this age of unbridled freedom of expression and unprecedented wealth, we're less happy now than we were fifty years ago. Today's so-called "epidemics" of obesity, anxiety, depression and suicide have all been linked to our ruthlessly competitive, individualistic and often isolating culture.

Many people simply aren't willing to abandon religion entirely, even if they harbor feelings of doubt or ambivalence over the existence of God. And the rise of evangelical strains of religion suggests there are many who are willing to turn their back on empty individualism in favor of being a part of a movement that seeks to elevate rather than isolate.

This is not to say that religion wasn't without its ills. There's no question that religion could also be stifling, repressive, dogmatic, authoritarian and intolerant of individual expression or dissent. And, of course, that its teachings hinge on a fiction.

But there's little question that religion played a pivotal role in our culture, as it did in every other culture throughout history. Abandoning religion, even with good cause, is not to be done lightly.

So with what to replace it? Atheism? Unfortunately, no. Atheism is fundamentally a negative thesis: it simply states that there is no God or gods. Atheism doesn't make any positive claims about how to live one's life, except to say that to do so under the impression there's a God is to live in error.

My beliefs about how to live well are no more defined by my atheism than my belief about how my day will unfold is informed by my disbelief in the tenets of astrology.

Science also isn't the answer—as much as people like Sam Harris would like it to be. Science tells us how the world is, but it doesn't tell us about how the world ought to be.

Certainly, once we agree on a set of values, science can inform us on how best to fulfill them, but science is necessarily silent on which fundamental values we ought to adopt. This means science is effectively silent on some of the biggest questions in morality and purpose.

Our current course of hedonistic individualism isn't the way forward. Many of us yearn for something greater than ourselves. And while the post-modern conquest of the late twentieth century made us each the arbiter of our own moral outlook, determining that moral outlook is a heavy burden to bear, and many of us yearn for moral guidance and leadership.

Self-help books, for all their good intentions, are a one-to-one affair that often reinforce the “you-can-do-it-if-you-try” meritocratic dogma that only leaves us even more deflated when we can't do it, even though we try.

What I suggest we need is a new institution (or institutions) to replace super-naturalist religion, one that takes from religion many of its beneficial cultural and community-building tools, but is based not on absent divinity but on solid, secular, naturalistic, rational, compassionate principles.

More than just secular morality, we need secular religion (whatever name it might go by—call it secular culture, if “religion” bothers you). Sure, we already have Humanism. And yes, Humanism does embody many of the values I just mentioned. But Humanism is an ideology—and one spelt out in the language of reason - rather than a culture, an institution, a way of life.

Humanism might well evolve into a culture of sorts—and there are some, such as the Institute for Science and Human Values in the United States that are leaning that way—but it has a long way to go yet.

Secular religion needs to be more than just a list of dry principles. It needs to appeal to more than reason. It needs to engage, inspire and give insight, and build itself into a cultural institution that

people can do more than just believe in, they need to be able to participate in it. If rational deliberation is the foundation, emotional engagement is the cathedral.

It should have branches everywhere. Have meetings every week. It should provide education, moral guidance, emotional support, social engagement. It should be a community center, an academy, a marriage counseling service and a church, all in one. All without God looming. This doesn't mean it can't also encourage worship, except it would be of the wonders of the natural world around us rather than an illusion of a world above.

If you've ever found yourself staring deep into the depths of the night sky, or marveling at a panoramic mountain vista at dawn, or reeling at the contemplation of our genetic code, you know that nature can inspire elevation and a profound awareness that ours is but a bit part in the infinite span of this incredible, natural, world.

One crucial element would be that such a secular religion—or secular religions - would need to learn from history and from the folly of religions and ideologies that have come before.

It would need to practice tolerance—including of existing supernaturalist religions—if remaining insistent that it represents a better path. It would also have to be pluralistic, allowing itself to adapt to local cultures and practices around the world, while stressing that in some matters there is very much a right and a wrong way to promote human well-being.

And like modern liberal democracy has learned to place checks and balances in the way of any slide toward autocracy, secular religion would need to employ checks and balances to prevent a slide into dogma. This is no small task, but I believe there to be many ways it could be achieved. One possibility is what I call the Little Book of Answers and the Big Book of Questions approach.

The Little Book of Answers is what gives inspiration and day-to-day guidance. It's accessible, written in the language of poetry and parable. But behind every proclamation in the Little Book of Answers is a corresponding entry in the Big Book of Questions, replete with rational argument, evidence, discussion and debate.

Disagree with something in the Little Book of Answers? Turn to the Big Book of Questions. Still unsure? Engage in the debate. It's peer-reviewed Wiki-religion. With the right framework in place, secular religion could be inspiring, self-regulating and robust.

While I don't doubt this is a mammoth task, it's at least something that ought to be discussed. And as long as the God versus no-God debate continues ad nauseam, we're wasting valuable time discussing it.

And as for those of faith who are yet to be won over by atheists' arguments, perhaps the visible example of a working secular religion, with a clear and strong moral code, that is unambiguous in its contributions to well-being in the world will provide the emotional nudge that is lacking in cold rational argument.

Unlike the overtures of the increasingly militant and exclusivist atheist movement, it would warmly welcome "converts" with open arms.

Atheism is just the beginning. It's what comes after God that will lay the path to a future governed by rational, secular principles. And this is a discussion that's waiting to happen. Some of us just can't wait any longer.

Tim Dean is a science journalist and editor of Australian Life Scientist magazine. He is completing a PhD in philosophy at the University of NSW, researching the evolution of morality, and he blogs at Ockham's Beard. If you want to join in the discussion about secular morality and secular religion, you can email Tim at secular.morality@gmail.com. This article initially appeared on ABC's Religion and Ethics Website.