

Do We Need God?

The Loss of God and the Decay of Society

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“Over half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia [in the 20th century]: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1983 Templeton Address

Is secularization a sign of social progress? Is belief in God a superstition that is no longer warranted in a civilization as advanced as ours? In this video we explore the phenomenon of religion, the concept of God, and whether a religious revival could heal many of the ills that plague modern society.

The five major religions of history, be it Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, all have lifespans that far exceed any secular social movement, dynasty, empire, or state. Religion has played an important role in every society we know of, and even though its popularity waxes and wanes, the majority of men and women from all time periods and across all regions of the globe, have believed in some form of god and practiced some form of religion. But what is religion?

Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon, but at its essence it is the attempt to connect man with the divine. Religious rituals, forms of worship, ceremonies, moral codes, and belief systems help bring us into harmony with the supernatural. One can find religious thinkers, from both East and West, in agreement on this point. The great Indian Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda said that:

“The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here – in realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point.”

Swami Vivekananda, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Volume 1

William James in his series of lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, echoes this point:

“. . .one might say that [religion] consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

This definition leads to a more fundamental question: What is the divine, the supernatural, the sacred, or what in the West is typically called God? In most languages the word god can be used in two different senses, often differentiated by a lower case ‘g’ and upper case ‘G’. The lower-case god is a divine being who inhabits the universe and rules over it. Some religions claim that there is only one such being, others claim that there are multiple. Some believe that this being is omnipotent, omniscient, and full of love, others have conceived these gods as possessing flaws and capable of evil. The idea of god as a divine being, is fraught with difficulties and pushes many in the direction of atheism. For where is this all-mighty being or beings? What evidence do we have for their existence? And is belief in such a being not just a superstition on the same level as belief in fairies, witches, or demons?

There is, however, another conception of God, the capital-G conception, which better aligns with many of history's major religious traditions, be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, as well as some forms of paganism. To understand the upper-case 'G' conception of God we will start with a question that Iain McGilchrist puts forth in his book *The Matter With Things*:

“How does it come about that there is a process, or motion, or a point in time, at all – now or ever?”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

McGilchrist is not asking a question of cause and effect. He is not asking: *What physical processes set the universe in motion?* He is asking a more fundamental question. Why is there anything at all? Why is there something, rather than nothing? And as McGilchrist explains:

“The answer to this question is of an altogether different order, and must lie on a plane different from, and deeper than, everything else. The question cannot be answered in terms of a physical entity or process, because that already presupposes what we are questioning – why there are physical entities and processes. The proper object of this question is that which underwrites, timelessly and eternally, whatever is: in other words, the ground of Being.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

The ground of all Being is a mysterious phenomenon. It is beyond our powers of rationalization, and it is the height of folly to claim that we can know its ultimate nature. Our language is too limited and our powers of conceptualization too restricted to fully grasp this phenomenon – hence why those who speak about it are often forced to use symbols, images, parables, and myths. But as incomprehensible as it may be, men and women of all ages have been drawn toward it, and to communicate with others their awe and wonder regarding this phenomenon, a word to represent it has been required, and as McGilchrist writes:

“What we need is a word unlike any other, not defined in terms of anything else. . . This is no doubt why in every great tradition of thought – and perhaps beyond that, in every language of every people – there is such [a word]. It holds the place for a power that underwrites the existence of everything – the ground of Being. . .”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

The word for the ground of Being has differed across cultures. The Hindus call it Brahman, Heraclitus called it Logos, Hebrews refer to it as YHWH, Lao-Tzu called it Tao, in Zen it is Ri, Arabic people call it Allah, while in the West, it is typically called God with a capital G. Or as David Bentley Hart writes in *The Experience of God*:

“To speak of “God” properly . . . is to speak of the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things. God so understood. . . is not a “being,” at least not in the way that a tree, shoemaker, or a [lowercase] god is a being; he is not one more object in the inventory of things that are, or any sort of discrete object at all. Rather, all things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite wellspring of all that is, in whom all things live and move and have their being.”

David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God

Or as the fifth-century mystic and Christian theologian Dionysius the Areopagite put it:

“[God] is the cause of being for all, but is itself nonbeing, for it is beyond all being.”

Dionysius the Areopagite, The Divine Names

If God is conceptualized in this manner, then what is the purpose of religion? Why not just accept that the mystery of Being will forever remain mysterious and move on? Because as Hart explains:

“All [the major religious traditions] agree . . . that God can genuinely be known: that is. . . intimately encountered [and] directly experienced with a fullness surpassing mere conceptual comprehension.”

David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God

The rituals of religions, be it meditation, prayer, time spent in solitude or absorbed in beauty, reading sacred texts, attending holy places, participating in religious ceremonies, or reciting chants, hymns, or mantras, are the devices that help bring us into harmony with God. At its most effective, therefore, religion is an active pursuit and it consists of more than the mere acceptance of dogmas or the shallow professions of faith. Or as Karen Armstrong explains:

“Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle. Without such practice, it is impossible to understand the truth of its doctrines.”

Karen Armstrong, The Case for God

Or as Vivekananda said:

“Religion cannot be swallowed in the form of a pill. It requires hard and constant practice.”

Swami Vivekananda, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Volume 1

This raises an important question: In order to connect with God do we need to adhere to the rituals of an organized religion? Or can we devise our own set of practices? In *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James provides examples of individuals who spurred all established religions, went their own way, and cultivated a connection with the divine – but these cases are rare. Most people are better served by turning to the traditions of an established religion, as these traditions, for thousands of years, have proved effective in cultivating the disposition of awe and wonder that facilitates the experience of God. Or as McGilchrist explains:

“I cannot possibly penetrate to the core of the enigma of life by my own efforts. Nor can I wilfully invent myths or rituals without their being trivial and empty. This is why we have traditions of art, philosophy and, above all, religion.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

It does not follow, however, that one must become a strict adherent of any specific church, creed, or sect to make use of its rituals, practices, or forms of worship. For many organized religions have become corrupted by social trends and stunted in their development by a literalist interpretation of scripture, and so a full-scale adoption of any specific organized religion may impede our religious aspirations and thwart our ability to live a fulfilling life. Vivekananda, in recognizing the corruption of organized religion, recommended an eclectic approach to connecting with God. We should study the traditions of various religions, take

part in their practices, and adopt the aspects of these religions that help move us in the direction of God, or as Vivekananda said:

“If you want to be religious, enter not the gate of any organized religions. They do a hundred times more evil than good, because they stop the growth of each one’s individual development. Study everything, but keep your own seat firm. If you take my advice, do not put your neck into the trap. The moment they try to put their noose on you, get your neck out and go somewhere else. As the bee culling honey from many flowers remains free, not bound by any flower. . . Religion is only between you and your God, and no third person must come between you.”

Swami Vivekananda, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Volume 1

A dedicated religious practice, when successful, leads to the religious experience, wherein one feels they have established some sort of connection with the divine. These experiences are of a profound nature, and as McGilchrist writes:

“[The religious experience] allows us to acknowledge that there is something way before, behind, above, and beyond our selves; that that something is not inert or remote, but ‘speaks’ to us and calls to us to respond, and that we feel the need to do so with seriousness, reverence and gratitude. And that is what gives meaning to life. In short, creation and the mystery of what lies behind it become sacred; and the disposition that sees it thus is what is meant by a religious disposition. It is a disposition that perceives depth.

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

While the precise quality of the religious experience is indescribable, its effects can be reported. The religious experience engenders feelings of harmony with all other beings and the universe at large. It promotes compassion, trust, and peace of mind, and imbues life with a sense of meaning and purpose. Or as Carl Jung writes:

“No matter what the world thinks about religious experience, the one who has it possesses a great treasure, a thing that has become for him a source of life, meaning, and beauty, and that has given a new splendor to the world and to mankind. He has pistis and peace. Where is the criterion by which you could say...that such an experience is not valid?”

Carl Jung, The Collected Works Volume 11

The religious experience also acts as a means of salvation for a broken life, as such experiences tend to reveal that there is much more to the universe than the rational mind can conceive of, and the experiencer learns that he or she shares in this more. Or as James writes of the individual who has a religious experience:

“He becomes conscious that his higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.”

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Jung went as far as to suggest that unless a religion can generate the religious experience, its value is limited, or as he wrote:

“The teaching of the past, for example, of St. Paul or Jesus, can be edifying, but in itself does nothing. . . Unless there is a personal religious experience nothing happens.”

Carl Jung, Conversation with E. A. Bennet, 7 July 1959, Meetings with Jung

Having identified the essence of religion, explored the mystery of God, and examined the religious experience, we are now ready to take up the question as to whether a decline in religion is individually and socially destructive and whether more people cultivating a religious disposition can help heal many of the ills of the modern day.

In Volume 11 of his Collected Works, Carl Jung wrote:

“The more unconscious we are of the religious problem. . . the greater the danger of our putting the divine germ within us to some ridiculous or demonical use, puffing ourselves up with it instead of remaining conscious that we are no more than the stable in which the Lord is born.”

Carl Jung, The Collected Works Volume 11

In the late 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that God is dead. Christianity was in decline, many were moving in the direction of atheism, and science and the state were replacing religion as society’s organizing principles. As faith in God declined, nihilism, or the conviction that life is meaningless, would rise, according to Nietzsche. For religion was the primary source of life’s meaning and, in most societies, it shaped the values people strived for and the way they structured their lives. But nihilism did not spread to the degree Nietzsche prophesized, as most people find it far too difficult to live absent the belief in something bigger than their meagre selves. Instead, many flocked towards new gods, gods that were not divine but man-made and this trend has continued into the modern day and is responsible for many of our social ills, or as George Steiner put it:

“ . . . the political and philosophic history of the West during the past 150 years can be understood as a series of attempts – more or less conscious, more or less systematic, more or less violent – to fill the central emptiness left by the erosion of theology.”

George Steiner, Massey Lectures in 1974

Instead of worshiping the God that transcends the finite world and which grounds all of existence, many of us worship ideologies, our nation, politicians, celebrities, athletes, sports teams, consumer goods, drugs, or the sexual act, or we treat technology or science as new gods and believe that their advance will usher in a utopia and perhaps even grant us immortality.

These ideologies, social movements, and ways of life consume their adherents with the same power as a religion and as Iain McGilchrist explains they,

“ . . . may be savagely anti-religious, . . . may postulate a world without God and may deny an afterlife, but [their] structure, aspirations, [and] claims on the believer, are profoundly religious in strategy. . . ”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

But as man is flawed, so too are all variations of man-made gods. A politician elevated to the position of a deity, will be corrupted by power. If we worship drugs, sex, or consumer goods, we become their slave. If we believe an ideology has the power to remake the world and the nature of man, we are more likely to create a totalitarian hell on earth. A society devoid a

connection to the divine, is a society ripe for destruction by false idols and perhaps the most dangerous of these idols is the State:

“In order to free the...State...from every wholesome restriction, all socio-political movements tending in this direction invariably try to cut the ground from under religion. For, in order to turn the individual into a function of the State, his dependence on anything else must be taken from him.”

Carl Jung, The Undiscovered Self

For a society to be free and for men and women to flourish all man-made gods must perish, and there is no better way to accomplish this feat than an authentic religious revival. When men and women acknowledge their roots in a divine God, and when they orient their lives in pursuit of a harmonious connection with God, they do not unconsciously fall victim to inferior secular alternatives. Or as Jung writes:

““Principalities and powers” are always with us; we have no need to create them even if we could. It is merely incumbent on us to choose the master we wish to serve, so that his service shall be our safeguard against being mastered by the “other” whom we have not chosen. We do not create “God,” we choose him.”

Carl Jung, The Collected Works Volume 11

Another factor contributing to society’s sickness is a tendency to view social and political issues through a utilitarian lens. Utilitarians believe that the best social policy is the one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The utilitarian, in other words, does not view the individual as possessing an innate worth, but instead as a resource to be used, or even sacrificed, to attain their vision of the greater good. Utilitarianism is a corrupt form of morality and the willingness to coerce and harm a minority, for the benefit of a majority, is indicative of a disturbed mind, or as McGilchrist writes:

“The tendency to adopt a calculating and utilitarian approach in judging moral issues is more marked in those with reduced aversion to harming others, lower trait empathy, higher psychoticism. . .and greater Machiavellianism. It is also characteristic of the moral thinking of psychopaths. . .”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

Religion, and the connection to God that it promotes, gives rise to a moral sensibility that counters the pathology of utilitarianism. For a primary effect of the religious experience is a feeling of harmony with, and connection to, humanity at large and all other life forms. The religious experience helps us to see other people as ends in and of themselves, not as tools, or resources, to be exploited for selfish purposes or political gain. And as McGilchrist explains, the religious experience induces:

“. . .a humility before the greatness of the cosmos. . .compassion for others and ourselves [and] reverence towards the living world. . .”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

A morality rooted in humility, compassion, and reverence, is the type of morality that can help fix the degenerate state of modern society, or as McGilchrist explains:

“When our society generally held with religion, we might indeed have committed many of the same wrongs; but power-seeking, selfishness, self-promotion, narcissism and entitlement,

neglect of duty, dishonesty, ruthlessness, greed, and lust were never condoned or actively and openly encouraged in the way they sometimes are now. . .we have lost all shame. And that can't help but make a difference to how we behave. Pride and arrogance, believing we know it all, are the opposite of the religious disposition of humility, reverence and compassion.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

While religion can improve the morality of those who strive to connect to God, a problem remains: There are a lot of corrupt and pathological individuals in positions of power. We cannot expect these individuals to turn toward God, nor will they abdicate their power voluntarily. To cure society requires more than just good people, it requires good people who are willing to stand up to, and defeat, corrupt authority. Religion can help accomplish this end as it is one of the most effective means of healing the diseases of despair that have turned so many people into passive and apathetic cowards.

“The evidence is that religious belief has a dramatic positive impact on both psychological and physical health, certainly comparable with, if not superior to, most ‘lifestyle’ changes known to modern medicine. . .”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

Whether one is an addict, a neurotic, a depressive, or overly anxious, religion can help. For thousands of years religious practices have provided ways and means of dealing with the trials and tribulations of life. Jung went as far as to call religions ‘mental pharmacies’.

“Religious ideas and convictions from the beginning of history have the aspect of the mental pharmakon [pharmacy]. They represent the world of wholeness in which fragments can be gathered and put together again. Such a cure cannot be effected by pills and injections.”

Carl Jung, Letter to Father David, 11 February 1961

Or as he put it in Volume 14 of his Collected Works:

“The great religions are psychotherapeutic systems that give a foothold to all those who cannot stand by themselves. . .”

Carl Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis

One of the ways in which religion helps cure the mind is through its capacity to generate meaning. When we strive for the divine our life is granted structure and purpose and when we attain the religious experience it feels deeply meaningful, or as McGilchrist writes:

“There is something much too small about a world in which we are isolated from the divine . . .one that has no place for the sacred, we ourselves loom, imaginatively, far too large. . .At the same time we see ourselves conceptually as diminished, because as soon as we pan out, we see ourselves dwindle to a pointless speck in a barren cosmos. A religious cast of mind sets the human being and human life in the widest context, reminding us of our duties to one another, and to the natural world that is our home. . .The world becomes ensouled. And we have a place in it once more.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things

When we feel our life is meaningful, and when no longer plagued by the burden of anxiety, depression, or addiction, our capacity and willingness to stand up to the forces that are destroying society will be heightened. We will no longer sit passively by, locked in our

cowardice, worshipping false idols, as we watch evil and degeneracy spread throughout society. Instead, firmly rooted in the divine we will possess the courage to resist corrupt authority and to act as a force of good in the world. Or as Jung put it:

“The individual who is not anchored in God can offer no resistance on his own resources to the physical and moral blandishments of the world. For this he needs the evidence of inner, transcendent experience which alone can protect him from the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass.”

Carl Jung, The Undiscovered Self