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Coping with the Hereafter

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Few of us would consider our beliefs to be figments of a fevered imagination, as mere fantasies. Of course, we all dream about promotions, that perfect vacation, the esteem of others, and winning the lottery. But, aren't many such dreams mere excursions into fantasy, magical thinking? Surely, the most common, and powerful, form of magical thinking are our efforts to deal with the mystery of nothingness. Of all human concerns, the hardest one to grasp, to cope with, is what happens when we die. It seems perfectly normal and predictable that we humans would be anxious, even scared, about dying. Just consider the potential pain of those final years and hours, the losses all around. But, maybe most of all, how impossible for us to grasp even the idea of a nothingness after death. After all, what is "nothingness"?

It follows--rationally, I think--that we, all of us, resort to imagination to create a "something" existence in The Hereafter; the need to fill in that black hole of nothingness. And when I consider the spiritual acrobatics that human societies have engaged in for this pursuit, it is truly remarkable: the creative ways we find to side-step the mystery and anxiety, the mash-up of belief and mere ritual. But these seekings can also end up being the basis of violence, abuses of greed and power, and cruelty. For good or ill, seeking answers about our mortality is one of the great motivators of all human society, extending beyond cultures and over the centuries.

One "something" is to believe that our dead loved ones simply pass into a magical spirit world. Their ghostly selves live on, and may even "live" among us; some providing inspiration and guidance to those left behind, while some create mischief and "bad luck."

And this leads me to those important human needs which are essential, and thus universal. I am thinking about the need for religion, spirituality, and community in people's lives. All cultures of which I am aware struggle to find ways to deal with the mystery of who created the universe and the creatures in it; how to explain luck, fate, and destiny; whether humans have an immortal soul, a spirit that somehow endures. My reconstruction of how religion has come to play its essential role derives from two basic human needs: a) The inexorable curiosity of humans to try to explain whatever they don't understand; and b) the need to try to cope with what happens after death, surely *the* most profound mystery and source of anxiety that we all share.

It's understandable that so many people want to fend off thoughts of the so-called Hereafter. Until we get old, or are in the grips of a terminal disease, there just isn't much salience to the idea that you are going to die someday—despite the daily reality of death occurring all around us. But as we approach The End we wonder: *What if there is an afterlife, the one the religious people talk about non-stop?*



Similar fantasies occur across all religions. Consider: that heavenly Muslim garden for so-called martyrs, with good weather, nice music, and beautiful virgins; the Buddhist & Hindu ideas of the cycle of rebirth with bad people ending up as cockroaches, the good ones as what? And, what about the Christian's Disneyland-like conceit of angels and Pearly Gates versus Dante's Inferno? While all want to calm their fear of the Great Beyond, each society creates its own explanations, and ordering fantasies.

So-called traditional, or less "modern" cultures, have somehow retained at least some of their historical beliefs that they (and their ancestors) have an afterlife. This allows the living to call up the departed souls and spirits, using shaman-priests, séances, ritual dancing, and spirit costumes. Well-secularized western artists--like Picasso, Matisse, and Gauguin--admired the spiritual qualities and emotional intensity of the art works from tribal Africa and the Pacific islands. These artists sought to reproduce the other-worldly essence of these mystical works and to convey a feel for it to western viewers. In addition to their appreciation of the aesthetic and mystical quality of "primitive" art, did they also realize that these cultural artifacts also represented a missing dimension in industrialized cultures?

Surely, exposure to these disappearing practices of human culture influenced the transition of western art from various degrees of figuration and abstraction, to more purely abstract forms, such as cubism, surrealism, and on to today's art based upon the individual and the development of a unique personal perspective.



People's concerns about the Hereafter seem inevitably to generate a religious *class* (e.g., gurus, Mullahs, priests, Rabbis, prophets, saints), usually organized into some kind of *bureaucracy* in order to serve as people's religious intermediaries.

A major form of help to Christians is to support the myth that we inheritors of the curse of the Garden of Eden sinners will be "saved," but only if we believe what the church-bureaucracy says, and follow its dictates. Otherwise, Satan and Hell await. No one dare challenge the mastery of god-given truths and supporting rituals of the priestly class. And the masses go along with it, too worried about coping alone with anxiety about the Great Beyond to challenge the authority of these self-appointed representatives of the deity (ies). The church also inserted itself in people's lives by controlling key areas of their daily existence, such as marriage, baptism, confessions, annulments, pardons, last rites, and blessings. And, just to *ensure* compliance, the church instituted excommunication, the elimination of heretics, and the Inquisition.

And, to assure influence with, if not control over, any rivals the Papacy even maintained its own army from the 8th to the 19th century. Inevitably, something called goal displacement ensued, given the propensity of religious bureaucrats to pursue self-interest over the original goals. While the Christian bureaucracy did succeed (wildly) in developing a sustainable religious movement, they also (inevitably) violated the values and examples of the religion's nominal founder. When I see the trappings of Christian churches--all the gold, decoration, absurdly elaborate costumes,

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and palaces--I am reminded that He-who-started-all-this was a simple, probably illiterate, peasant who preached poverty and humility, and who led by example. How could the human propensity to greed and self-interest so readily allow the church leaders to ignore their declared model and inspiration?

Thanks to its "success" the Catholic Church became one of the richest entities on the planet, by soliciting gifts, as well as selling indulgences and pardons. At one point in the Middle Ages the church owned as much as one third of all the land in several European countries. Whatever happened to morality, witness the sexual conduct of its supposedly celibate priests for hundreds of years, and their blatant yet unpunished pederasty.

Yet, given people's need to cope with their fear of The Beyond, all this priestly physical and symbolic superstructure worked. For at least two millennia the priest-bureaucrats have been able to maintain their influence over millions of people by promising that there *is* an afterlife, a Heaven, and that it is really such a nice place; indeed a paradise.



The long goodbye of organized religion and spirituality

A series of tectonic developments occurred in Europe that gradually put a definitive end to the dominance of the Catholic Church, and indeed to a thousand years of deep-dyed spirituality.

Socio-economic change. Great socio-economic change began around the year one-thousand with the reduction in pillage and violence in Europe. Among other things this facilitated the rise of trade, an entrepreneurial class, and the growth of urbanism. These factors also signaled the displacement of land with money and credit as the major source of wealth, and with it the weakening of the wealth and power of the monasteries.

Gutenberg. The introduction and rapid spread of the printing press in the mid 15th century began the era of mass communications. Once a symbol of wealth and status, the written word could now reach the commoner, giving rise to literacy, and conveying information and ideas that threatened those in power.

The Reformation. A perhaps inevitable reaction to the corruption of the Catholic Church, was the 16th century Reformation movement ushered in by Martin Luther. The Reformation helped to move medieval religion away from mystical beliefs and practices and away from a controlling, all-powerful church, and gave rise to deep and lasting political changes. These included an intellectual and cultural flourishing, as well as the rising power of capitalism, which emerged from earlier trade once merchants had acquired sufficient wealth to begin investing in increasingly productive technology. It arose when people's natural entrepreneurialism was freed from the constraints of feudalism, and facilitated by urbanization.^[7]

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was an intellectual and philosophical movement that occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its central doctrines were individual liberty and religious tolerance, in opposition to an absolute monarchy and the fixed dogmas of the Church.

Mass industrialization, technological developments, and the power of capitalism. All these developments during the 18th and 19th centuries took place over a relatively brief time span profoundly changing people's relationship to work, and signaled a change in their relationships to their traditional communities. The now powerful use of capitalism to enable these changes also began to decline of land-owning families in favor of more democratic governance systems.



The onslaught of all these powerful developments over a mere few hundred years has changed our world in many fundamental ways. Together they have shifted our lives in a secular direction. The massive socio-economic and technological changes of modern times continue to shunt our concerns and values away from the spiritual world. Our belief in religion-based fantasy and magical thinking over millennia has been disappearing with the growth of secular society. And this has been replacing all forms of spirituality and extra-sensory life.

In our modern culture, losing something to believe in outside our daily lives, and lacking the communal underpinnings of extended families, has resulted in a crippling loss of identity, feelings of insecurity, and the growth of situational values. Belief in something larger than oneself has given way to a superficial seeking of pleasure, distraction, and the pursuit of material things. We now live in a self-interest free-for-all.

And despite all the negatives that one can apply to past beliefs and organized religion, their gradual disappearance has come at a huge cost. For example, one positive impact of earlier forms of Christianity was via “. . . the role of religious practice in the way it helped people make sense of, and managing both daily life and the effects of religious and social change and conflict.” (Duffy) It is easy to criticize the seemingly negative church practice of forcing people to live with guilt, which they can mitigate only via the confession booth. And yet, as Duffy observes, for most people “Confession was about the maintenance and repair of community relationships rather than the anxious introspection of the soul.” (Ibid.)

And, while modern society confers many benefits, Mother Nature never gives something for nothing. In losing the spiritually-based societies and sureties of the past, we have also lost our grip on what is important in life, such as the central role of family and community. And it now seems that religion-based fantasies are being replaced by secular fantasies, such as QAnon and other bizarre creations of alternate truths. We now suffer from an era of the politics of grievance and with it the power of tribal passions and fears of not belonging. In an era of “truthiness, alternate truths, and alternative facts,” what scope is there for anything approaching human values, goodness, and even a grasp of “truth” itself?

Added to these attacks on our senses are other sources of feelings of fear and dread. In *Farewell to Arms*—written a year after his father's suicide—Hemingway stated that the world was malevolent and implacable, and that it would beat you down, crush you. That you had to have the courage to fight against all odds in order to be who you wanted to be, do what you wanted to do. His favorite motto was *il faut d'abord durer* (first of all, endure). And then, only 61, at the top of his game, the most famous

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living writer in the world—he couldn't take it. He blew the top of his head off with a shotgun.

And, if all this is true, what happened to people's overarching concern about what happens after death? Now that neither religion nor society provides "the answers," where do people look for them? Are materialism, alternate truths, and self-interest the new gods?

End notes:

Wikipedia articles on: The Reformation; Gutenberg; The Age of Enlightenment; and Capitalism.

Eamon Duffy, "Why was there a Reformation?" *New York Review of Books*. 25 Feb '21, p.42.