

One

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 titled "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."¹

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."² 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 all 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."³

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.⁴ 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 ways that are not easy to answer.⁵

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 who had been more nominal in their relationship to faith while the devoutly religious in the United States and Europe are growing.⁶

Belief in God makes sense to four out of five people in the world and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.⁷ 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 opinion among Chinese social scientists that the Christian idea of transcendence was the historic basis for the concepts of human rights and equality.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Social sciences may be able to tell us what human life *is* but not what it ought to be.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ There are many 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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Paul 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.”²¹ 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— . . . world that is self-evidently *not* the world we live in.”²²

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.²³

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.”²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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?²⁷

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.”²⁸

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.”²⁹

Lisa Chase, the widow of the prominent journalist Peter Kaplan, also rejects the closed, totally secular view of the world. She believes her departed husband is still alive in spirit. At the end of her essay in *Elle* she quotes her grieving son, who says, “I wish we lived in a magic world [rather than one] where science wasn’t the answer to everything.” Chase, though living in the heart of sophisticated, progressive Manhattan, concludes that her son’s description of a “magic world” is closer to the truth than the secular one.³⁰ Her intuitions about the reality of the transcendent beyond the natural became too strong.

Sometimes this intuition triggers a protest against the way secularism seems to flatten and reduce life so that “all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death.”³¹ Other times it is a more positive apprehension of realities that our objective reason tells us can’t really be there. Julian Barnes, for example, finds himself moved deeply by certain works of art that he realizes should not really do so. Mozart’s *Requiem* relies on the Christian understanding of death, judgment, and afterlife for its stunning grandeur. With his

objective reason Barnes rejects these ideas. He believes there is nothing after death but extinction. Nevertheless, the *Requiem* moves him—and not merely the sounds but the words. “It is one of the haunting hypotheticals for the nonbeliever,” he writes. “What would it be like ‘if [the *Requiem*] were true’[?]”³²

Philosopher Charles Taylor asks if people like Barnes can explain *why* such art affects them so deeply. There are times when we are “hit” with such experiences of overwhelming beauty that we feel forced to use the term “spiritual” to explain our reaction. Consistently secular thinkers such as Harvard scientist Steven Pinker teach that the origin of our aesthetic sense must be, like everything else about us, something that helped our forebears stay alive and then came down to us through our genes.³³

Reductive explanations such as Pinker’s, however, actually make Taylor’s case. Most people, and not just nonreligious ones, will protest “No!”—that beauty cannot be only that. “Here the challenge is to the unbeliever,” Taylor writes, “to find a non-theistic register in which to respond to [great works of art] without impoverishment.”³⁴ I believe Taylor means something like this. If you are being swept up in joy and wonder by a work of art, it will impoverish you to remind yourself that this feeling is simply a chemical reaction that helped your ancestors find food and escape predators, and nothing more. You will need to shield yourself, then, from your own secular view of things in order to get the most out of the experience. It is difficult to get “very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion.”³⁵ Leonard Bernstein famously admitted that when he heard great music and great beauty he sensed “Heaven,” some order behind things. “[Beethoven] has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.”³⁶

Is it possible, then, that art will continue to provoke in people the inescapable intuition that there is more to life than scientific secularism can account for?

The Experience of Fullness

Religion also makes sense to many people because of a direct experience of the transcendent that goes beyond the fainter intuitions of the aesthetic experience.

In his essay “Is That All There Is?” Wood discusses Charles Taylor’s description of “fullness.”³⁷ Sometimes one experiences a fullness in which the world suddenly seems charged with meaning, coherence, and beauty that break in through our ordinary sense of being in the world.³⁸ Some who experience this know unavoidably that there is infinitely more to life than just physical health, wealth, and freedom. There is a depth and wonder and some kind of Presence above and beyond ordinary life. It may make us feel quite small and even unimportant before it, and yet also hope filled and unworried about the things that usually make us anxious.

These experiences are probably more frequent than is thought, because most people who tell of them do so very reluctantly, knowing that their friends and family will think they have gone off the rails. Frank Bruni wrote in the *New York Times* about experiences like this that leave people feeling in the middle “between godliness and godlessness” because they seem to lead to the conclusion that there is something beyond the material, seen world.³⁹ Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly call the experience “The Whoosh.”⁴⁰ English philosopher Roger Scruton speaks of the sense of a “sacred order” that keeps erupting into our consciousness.⁴¹

A classic example of this is what happened to Lord Kenneth Clark, one of Great Britain’s most prominent art historians and authors, and the producer of the BBC television series *Civilization*. In an autobiographical account, Clark writes that when he was living in a villa in France he had a curious episode.

I had a religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes, my whole being was radiated by a kind of heavenly joy,

far more intense than anything I had ever experienced before. This state of mind lasted for several minutes . . . but wonderful as it was, [it] posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion, for I was in every way unworthy of such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But I had “felt the finger of God” I am quite sure and, although the memory of this experience has faded, it still helps me to understand the joys of the saints.”⁴²

A similar experience happened to Czech writer and revolutionary-turned-statesman Václav Havel. One day when he was in prison he looked out into the crown of a great tree and suddenly was “overcome by a sensation” that he had stepped “outside time in which all the beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced existed in a total ‘co-present’”—what traditionally would have been called eternity. He was “flooded with a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony” and felt he was standing “at the very edge of the infinite.”⁴³

Atheism with a Wild God

While Clark and Havel gave religious interpretations to their encounters with fullness, there are others who maintain disbelief in God yet have no way to account for the experience rationally.⁴⁴ In the *Paris Review* Kristin Dombek writes, “I have been an atheist now for more than fifteen years, and I have been able to explain to myself almost everything about the faith I grew up in, but I have not been able to explain those experiences of God so real he entered the bedrooms of his own accord, lit them up with joy, and made people generous. . . . It [was] like you’ve glimpsed the world’s best secret: that love need not be scarce.”⁴⁵

Atheist Barbara Ehrenreich, best known for her seminal work *Nickel and Dimed*, wrote a memoir titled *Living with a Wild God*, which centers on a life-changing mystical experience she had in May 1959 as a seventeen-year-old. She had begun a “quest” at the age of thirteen to find answers to the questions What is the point of our brief existence? and What are we doing here and to what end?⁴⁶ Ehrenreich was raised by atheist parents, and her efforts to answer these questions were carried out on a strictly rationalistic basis. This led her into what she calls the “morass” of solipsism. She felt there was no way to know right from wrong or true from false.⁴⁷ But then at age seventeen, on an empty street just before dawn, “I found whatever I had been looking for since the articulation of my quest.” It was an experience that, as others have also said, could not be described. “Here we leave the jurisdiction of language, where nothing is left but the vague gurgles of surrender expressed in words like ‘ineffable’ and ‘transcendent.’”⁴⁸

*There were no visions, no prophetic voices or visits by totemic animals, just this blazing everywhere. Something poured into me and I poured out into it. This was not the passive beatific merger with “the All,” as promised by the Eastern mystics. It was a furious encounter with a living substance. . . . “Ecstasy” would be the word for this, but only if you acknowledge [that it] does not occupy the same spectrum as happiness or euphoria, that it . . . can resemble an outbreak of violence.*⁴⁹

Now that she had every evidence that there was at least the “possibility of a nonhuman agent . . . some mysterious Other . . . could I still call myself an atheist?”⁵⁰ She decided she could. Why? She says that her experience bore no resemblance to the “religious iconography” she had grown up with.⁵¹ First, this Presence did not seem to be solicitous toward humans at all. “The most highly advertised property of the Christian . . . God [is] that he is ‘good.’” But her experience had connected her with something “wild,” unconditioned, even dangerous and violent, not anything she could consider nice or good. Second, her experience did not come “with

ethical instructions.” She heard no voices. “Whatever I had seen *was what it was*, with no . . . reference to human concerns.” And yet, she says, the immediate result was that she was shaken out of her claustrophobic philosophical conundrums and swept out into “the great plain of history—the downtrodden against those who do the down-treading, the invaded against the invaders. I had been swept up in this struggle.”⁵² She became a social activist and has remained so for the rest of her life.

Contrary to her interpretation of her experience, however, it does indeed fit in with much of the Christian and biblical theology of God. She says that it was a “wild, amoral Other,” not “the enforcer of ethics,” but a reading of the book of Job that shows that human beings have encountered him as both.⁵³ In biblical accounts of encounters with the divine (see Exodus 3 and 33 and Isaiah 6) the human recipients feel utterly insignificant. These texts also reveal a God whose presence is violently traumatic and lethal yet compelling and attractive at the same time. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, describes a preconversion experience of God that he could describe only as “the flash of one tremulous glance” that gave him a dazzling but threatening glimpse at something wholly other.⁵⁴ Later, after he met God through Christ, Augustine’s encounters with the divine were marked by “the union of love and dread” (*Confessions* XI, 11). Oxford historian Henry Chadwick, in his book on Augustine’s theology, explains:

*The dread [was] induced by the contemplation of the unapproachable Other so distant and ‘unlike’, the love by the awareness of the Other who is so similar and so near.*⁵⁵

Even Ehrenreich’s offhanded comment that *it was what it was* sounds like God’s word to Moses “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). The “wildness” Ehrenreich describes fits in completely with many of the descriptions of God in the Bible.⁵⁶ God appears as a hurricane (Job 38:1); in other places he comes as a blazing fire (Exodus 3:2) or as a smoking furnace or searing lightning (Genesis 15:17).⁵⁷ Ehrenreich’s experience sounds uncannily like Rudolf Otto’s famous description of the “Holy.”

She had come, as he writes, “upon something inherently ‘wholly other,’ whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.”⁵⁸

Despite all this, she remains an atheist. Nevertheless, we might say that her strictly secular frame is no longer complete or closed. She says she is “no longer the kind of scornful, dogmatic atheist my parents had been.” When asked on a TV show about her atheism,

I said only that I did not “believe in God,” which was true as far as it went. Obviously I could not go on to say, “I don’t have to ‘believe’ in God because I know God, or some sort of god anyway.” I must have lacked conviction because I got a call from my smart, heroically atheist Aunt Marcia saying she’s watched the show and detected the tiniest quaver of evasion in my answer.⁵⁹

Charles Taylor argues that “fullness” is neither strictly a belief nor a mere experience. It is the perception that life is greater than can be accounted for by naturalistic explanations and, as we have seen, it is the widespread, actual lived condition of most human beings regardless of worldview.⁶⁰ The challenge for both believers and nonbelievers is how to make sense of this lived condition of fullness within their belief structures. If this life is all there is, why do we long so deeply for something that doesn’t exist and never did? Why are there so many experiences that point beyond the world picture of secularism, even by those who do not welcome such perceptions? And if this life is all there is, what will you do with these desires that have no fulfillment within the closed secular frame?

Why It Is So Natural to Wonder

The limits of secular reason, the ordinary experience of transcendence in the arts, and the extraordinary experiences that rend the secular frames

even of hardened atheists—all of these explain why religious belief keeps reasserting itself even in the heart of the secular West.

Actually, it is quite natural to human beings to move toward belief in God. As humanities scholar Mark Lilla has written: “To most humans, curiosity about higher things comes naturally, it’s indifference to them that must be learned.”⁶¹ Strict secularism holds that people are only physical entities without souls, that when loved ones die they simply cease to exist, that sensations of love and beauty are just neurological-chemical events, that there is no right or wrong outside of what we in our minds determine and choose. Those positions are at the very least deeply counterintuitive for nearly all people, and large swaths of humanity will continue to simply reject them as impossible to believe.

Many ask: Why do people feel they need religion? Perhaps now we see that the way this question is phrased doesn’t explain the persistence of faith. People believe in God not merely because they feel some emotional need, but because it makes sense of what they see and experience. Indeed, we have seen that many thoughtful people are drawn toward belief somewhat unwillingly. They embrace religion because they think it is more fully true to the facts of human existence than secularism is.

But Still—Isn’t Religion in Decline?

I can certainly imagine a reader at this point conceding much of what I have been saying, that secularism cannot account for many aspects of human experience, and that a great number of people have a strong sense of a transcendent reality. But, you may counter, nevertheless, are not far more people losing their faith than are gaining one? One writer in the *Times* of London assured readers that religion is inevitably waning among the people of the world, “as the unfairness of divine justice, the irrationality of the teaching, or the prejudice . . . begin to bother them.” He

concluded that “secularism and milder forms of religion will win in the long run.”⁶²

Many people have a great investment in this account of things. Nevertheless, the evidence is strongly against it. Sociologists Peter Berger and Grace Davie report that “most sociologists of religion now agree” that the secularization thesis—that religion declines as a society becomes more modern—“has been empirically shown to be false.”⁶³ Countries such as China are becoming more religious (and Christian) even as they modernize.⁶⁴ Other sociological studies, such as the pathbreaking work by Georgetown professor José Casanova, have found no simple downward trend for religion as societies become modern.⁶⁵

Most striking of all are the demographic studies that predict that it is not religious populations but secular ones that are in long-term decline. The April 2015 Pew study projects that the percentage of atheists, agnostics, and the religiously unaffiliated will slowly but steadily decline, from 16.4 percent of the world’s population today to 13.2 percent forty years from now. University of London professor Eric Kaufmann, in his book *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?*, speaks of “the crisis of secularism” and argues that the shrinkage of secularism and liberal religion is inevitable.⁶⁶

Why? There are two basic reasons. One has to do with the trends of retention and conversion. Many point to the rising percentage of younger adult “nones” in the United States as evidence for the inevitable shrinkage of religion. However, Kaufmann shows that almost all of the new religiously unaffiliated come not from conservative religious groups but from more liberal ones. Secularization, he writes, “mainly erodes . . . the taken-for-granted, moderate faiths that trade on being mainstream and established.”⁶⁷ Therefore, the very “liberal, moderate” forms of religion that most secular people think are the most likely to survive will not. Conservative religious bodies, by contrast, have a very high retention rate of their children, and they convert more than they lose.⁶⁸

The second main reason that the world will become more religious is that religious people have significantly more children, whereas the more irreligious and secular a population, the less often marriage

happens and the smaller the families.⁶⁹ This is true across the world and holds within every national group, within every educational level, and within every economic class. So, for example, it is not the case that religious people have more children because they are less educated. Religious people, when they become more educated and urban, continue to out produce their less religious counterparts “by a landslide.”⁷⁰

It should be clear that no one is making the case that always “the more children, the better.” Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs has argued well that overpopulation and exorbitant birthrates are major contributing factors to world poverty.⁷¹ Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think there is no opposite problem. Cultures that do not have a replacement-level birthrate die out as they are displaced by other populations and cultures. As Kaufmann and others show, the most secular societies are maintained through the immigration of more religious peoples.⁷²

In the United States and Europe, liberal religious bodies will continue to lose members, who are swelling the numbers of the secular and unaffiliated, while traditional, orthodox religions will grow.⁷³ This is hard for cultural elites to grasp, since liberal religions are the only ones that secular thinkers believe are viable. In the Broadway hit *The Book of Mormon* the main characters are missionaries with traditional views, but in the end they come to regard the stories of their scripture as only metaphors which lead us to love and make the world a better place. Certainties about the afterlife and even God are unnecessary. This “all horizontal and no vertical” liberal religion plays well to secular American audiences, but as the sociologists have shown, it is the kind of faith that is dying out most quickly in the world.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the faiths that rely on conversion are growing exponentially.

Some years ago I spoke to a man who had been a minister in a liberal, mainline denomination in Manhattan for four decades. He told me that when he had been trained for ministry in the early 1960s, he was confidently told by his teachers that the only religion that would survive in the future was the most mild, modern kind that did not believe in miracles or the deity of Christ or a literal, bodily resurrection. But when

I spoke to him he was nearing retirement, and he observed that most of his generation of ministers presided over empty church sanctuaries and dwindling, aging congregations. “Ironically,” he observed, “they can only keep the doors open by renting them out to growing, vibrant churches that believe all the doctrines we were told would soon be obsolete.”

It turns out, then, that the individualism of modern culture does not necessarily lead to a decline in religion. Rather, it leads to a decline of *inherited* religion, the sort one is born into.⁷⁵ Religion that wanes comes with one’s assigned national or ethnic identity, as in “You are Indian, so you are Hindu; you are Norwegian, so you’re Lutheran; you are Polish, so you’re Catholic; you are American, so you should be a good member of a Christian denomination.” What is not declining in modern societies is *chosen* religion, religion based not on ethnicity or solely on upbringing but on personal decision.⁷⁶ For example, only evangelical Protestants, among all religious bodies in the United States, are converting more people than they are losing—which is exactly what Berger, Casanova, Davie, and other sociologists would lead us to expect.⁷⁷

In the non-Western world the growth of Christianity is stunning. Last Sunday there were more Christians attending church in China than there were in all of “Christian Europe.”⁷⁸ By 2020 Christianity will have grown from 11.4 million Christians in East Asia (China, Korea, Japan) in 1970 and 1.2 percent of the population, to 171.1 million and 10.5 percent of the population.⁷⁹ In 1910 only 12 million people, or 9 percent of Africa’s population, were Christians, but they will number 630 million, or 49.3 percent of the populace, by 2020.⁸⁰ Last Sunday in *each* of the nations of Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa there were more Anglicans in church than there were Anglicans and Episcopalians in all of Britain and the United States combined.⁸¹

Kaufmann, a Canadian academic and a secularist, answers the question of his book’s title—*Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?*—on the last page of his book with an unequivocal *yes*.⁸² In an interview with *New Humanist*, Kaufmann was asked whether secularism might turn the tide

and “do a better job of winning over [people].” He answered: “Religion does provide that enchantment, that meaning and emotion, and in our current moment we [secularists] lack that.”⁸³

Why to Keep Reading

So why read this book? One reason is practical. In this chapter I have not addressed whether religion is true. I have only sought to make the case that it is by no means a dying force. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Not in God’s Name*, concludes that “the twenty-first century will be more religious than the twentieth.”⁸⁴ He touches on many of the realities we have observed in this chapter. Secularism in the twentieth century has not proven it can give moral guidance to technology or the state. Many intuit faintly or strongly that we human beings and our loves and aspirations cannot be reduced to matter, chemistry, and genes. Finally, citing the low birthrates of secular countries, he argues that religion provides a basis for the growth rather than the decline of human communities. We need, then, to jettison the view that religious belief is not worthy of our attention because it is becoming irrelevant. I invite you to keep reading even if you’re not interested in Christianity, at least for the sake of understanding the faith of growing millions of people who are finding faith appealing.

The other reason to keep reading is a personal one. You may find that the descriptions of “fullness” and other such intuitions resonate with your own experience. But what if they don’t? You may say, “I feel no need for God in my life.” Faith, however, is not produced strictly by emotional need, nor should it be. Many of the secular thinkers we have cited have rather reluctantly moved toward religion not out of emotional need but because faith in God makes more sense of life than nonbelief. As we have noted, people come to faith in God through a mix of rational, personal, and relational reasons. We will be exploring all of these categories in this book.

Consider too what Saint Augustine says to God in his *Confessions*,

that “our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”⁸⁵ In other words, if you are experiencing unquiet and dissatisfaction in your life, they may be signs of a need for God that is there but which is not recognized as such. That is Augustine’s theory. It would be worth your time to explore whether or not he is right.

Two

Isn’t Religion Based on Faith and Secularism on Evidence?

Today’s media and literature are full of what could be called “deconversion” stories. S. A. Joyce gives us his.

In the years after leaving the military I went back to college—not as a serious attempt to earn a degree, but just to improve myself. . . . I came across and pieced together, bit by bit, a humanistic set of values which turned out to be far more self-consistent and pertinent to the modern world than a petrified Decalogue of biblical taboo. It was becoming clear to me that the universe behaved pretty much as might be expected if God didn’t exist, or at least didn’t care. It gradually dawned upon me that in the grand scheme of things there was in fact no grand scheme. . . . God performed no observable function and had no valid purpose. The question entered my mind, “What is a God without purpose and for which there is no evidence?” “Non-existent,” came the obvious answer. The blinders of dogma and the yoke of dread were finally off. For me the universe now shone in a wholesome new light, the comforting glow of reality no longer distorted, either by the almost cartoonish artificial “glory” of myth and miracle or by the dreadful glare of hellfire. I was free!

He titles his deconversion testimony “One night I prayed to know the truth. The next morning I discovered I was an atheist.”¹