

I.

INTRODUCTION:
THE DEATH OF GOD

S

For a great many people, in large parts of the world, it has gradually become impossible to believe in anything divine. However consoling and uplifting it might be to have faith, there are simply too many rational arguments that stand in the way of being able to trust in stories of powerful, benevolent deities who have our interests at heart and will ensure our ultimate redemption. As Friedrich Nietzsche tersely – and legendarily – put it: ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’ (The Gay Science, 1882).

The standard atheist view is that this is the end of the story. Once belief has been dismissed, and God’s existence proved impossible, everything about religions should henceforth be ignored and disappear. The door can be closed on millennia of belief in what is, when viewed without sentiment, mere hocus pocus.

However, this view neglects how much of religion has never been about belief. A great deal of the practical activity

6

Introduction

and psychological insight of religion has been independent of prayer, levitating angels and supernatural incidents. Religions have put on communal gatherings, helped us with relationships, marked out the seasons, written ethical codes, buried us, celebrated births and rites of passage, tried to encourage kind and forgiving behaviour, built sublime gathering places, connected us to nature, commissioned works of art and organised meals, periods of fasting and pilgrimages. In other words, alongside spiritual redemption, religions have been interested in our ethical and emotional wellbeing as well.

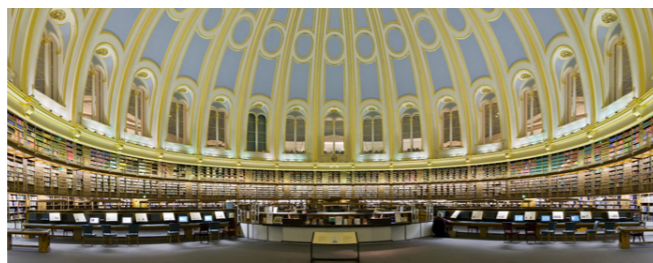
When belief first went into decline in north-western Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, many commentators wondered where humanity would – in an increasingly secular future – find the kind of guidance that religions had once provided. Where would ethical counsel come from? How would self-understanding be achieved? What would determine our sense of purpose? To whom would we turn in despair? Where would we gather for a feeling of belonging?

One answer – hesitantly and then increasingly boldly articulated – came to the fore: culture. *Culture could replace scripture*. There was, it was proposed by certain theorists, a convincing set of substitutes for the teachings of the faiths within the canon of culture. The plays of Sophocles

7

and Racine, the paintings of Botticelli and Rembrandt, the literature of Goethe and Baudelaire, the philosophy of Plato and Schopenhauer, the musical compositions of Liszt and Wagner, the architecture of Palladio and Wren: these would provide the raw materials from which an adequate replacement for the assistance and consolations of the faiths could be formulated.

With this idea in mind, an unparalleled investment in culture followed in many decreasingly faithful nations. Vast numbers of libraries, concert halls, university humanities departments and museums were constructed around the world with the conscious intention of filling the chasm that religion had once occupied. Lest we miss the point, the designers of the British Library's new reading room specified that its vast central dome should have precisely the same circumference as St Peter's in Rome.



Culture will replace scripture.

When commissioning its new national museum, the Netherlands entrusted the task to the foremost church architect of the day, Pierre Cuypers, whose Rijksmuseum was indistinguishable from a home for worship. Museums were – as the rallying cry put it – to be our new cathedrals.



The cathedrals of secularism.

That culture might replace scripture remains an intriguing and compelling concept. And yet it has, to all intents and purposes, been entirely ignored. Culture has *not* in any way replaced scripture. Our museums are not our new cathedrals. They are smart filing cabinets for the art of the past. Our libraries are not our homes for the soul. They are architectural encyclopaedias. And if we were to show up at any university humanities' department in urgent search

of purpose and meaning, or break down in a museum gallery in a quest for forgiveness or charity, we would be swiftly removed. The intensity of need and emotional craving that religions once willingly engaged with have not been thought acceptable within the contemporary cultural realm. The implication is that any moderately educated and sensible person already knows how to manage the business of living and dying well enough. Those who have produced culture may have sought to transform and inspire us; those who guard and interpret it have restricted themselves to a sober and curatorial interpretation of its function. No wonder we may still be casting around for ways to arrange our minds in the wake of religion's ebb.

The faiths may have gone away, but the emotional needs which led us to invent them remain highly active within us, still seeking urgent care and resolution. No less than our ancestors, we crave to learn to live and die well, to connect with others, to atone for our faults, to find redemption for our mistakes, to mark the passage of time and to be uplifted and consoled. Much that is in religion is intermittently too wise and too useful to be restricted merely to those who happen to believe in it.

The proposed way forward is not to dismiss religion altogether, *it is to strive* (as this book will attempt to show) *to replace it*. This replacement has nothing to do with

updating the supernatural or obedience-based aspects of religion. The effort proceeds, in a spirit of radical modesty, in the opposite direction: towards a close understanding of what religions were able to offer us *outside of the supernatural, in the aesthetic and psychological spheres*, with a view to making some of this available, in an updated and digestible form, for our own times.

Within the project of replacing religion, The School of Life has been both inspired and cautioned by the example of a man who attempted just this: the French sociologist Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte began with a familiar and sensible starting point: an awareness that religions had ceased to be believable to most people, but that aspects of them continued to offer us a great deal. His idea was to mine religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, for ideas and resources in order to launch a new ideological movement that he termed 'a religion for humanity.'

Comte's replacement religion was a mixture of the charming, the useful and the unfortunately (though not necessarily fairly) easy-to-ridicule. In two volumes outlining its contents called the *Summary Exposition of the Universal Religion*, Comte announced that the new secular religion would have twelve updated 'saints', no longer supernatural heroes and heroines, but great figures from politics, science and the arts (Descartes, Goethe and