

John Waters Unchained

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Advent reappraisal: The God Hypothesis in a time of spiritual warfare

For 33 months, with God diminishingly plausible, humanity has been under spiritual attack. A series of pre-Christmas articles ask: Is this an ineluctable fruit of 'progress' or a reversible condition?



John Waters ✓

43 min ago



Part 1: God, Under a Cloud

In the summer of 2012, a WIN-Gallup poll, 'Global Index of Religions and Atheism', was published, purporting to outline what was called a 'religiosity index' of people globally. In Ireland, the locally based polling company Red C, in summarising the results, announced that Ireland now rated as one of the world's 'least religious countries', with less than half of Irish people self-describing as 'religious', a decline from two-thirds as indicated in a poll taken six years before.

But what did this mean? It wasn't that the findings did not appear to be the truth. And yet, there was something about them that demanded to be looked at and even questioned.

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The main question put to the 59,000 people from around the world who were invited to participate in the poll was: 'Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious

people would knowingly agree to such a definition of themselves?

It was obvious that the WIN-Gallup/Red C poll was conducted and published with a certain ideological agenda in mind. This intentionality was clear from the published details: for example, the analyses of the findings were liberally sprinkled with giveaway references to concepts like ‘religiosity among the poor’ and tendentious generalisations like, ‘the richer you get, the less religious you define yourself’. The ideological context of the poll could be summarised as: ‘Religion, being related to fear and superstition, is a symptom of poor, uneducated societies’. This assumption dripped from virtually every finding and turn-of-phrase in the published poll documents, and would most likely have been clear also to many of the people surveyed, as they answered the questions. In media reports of the poll, unsurprisingly, it was clear that the findings had been attributed concrete meanings to do with a shift in Irish society away from transcendental understandings, in the direction of ‘rationalism’.

But could this be anything other than a nonsensical exercise? Could anyone ask any kind of straightforward yes/no question about ‘religion’ with any confidence of encountering a consistency of understandings among people about the meaning of the word?

Some people think of religion as referring to membership of a certain club or tribe, adherence to particular sets of rules, or just to a belief, or ‘faith’, in something called ‘God’.

But what is ‘God’? What is ‘faith’? The poll assumed that these meanings were fixed and commonly agreed. In Ireland, though, someone confronted with such questions might be as likely as not to interpret them as either straightforward questions about religious observance or designed to tease out views relating to the role and record of the Irish Catholic Church, particularly in relation to the much publicised controversies concerning clerical child abuse. It would not have been surprising if many people had felt the necessity to use their answers to indicate disapproval under such headings.

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I have no doubt that many Irish people now hate the Catholic Church, and that they are prepared to express this hatred in any forum that becomes available. This is obvious from virtually any article about Catholicism in any Irish newspaper, and from the random tweets and other electronic missives that cross my sphere of vision courtesy of people who think I might be interested. As to what one might expect from an opinion poll — the medium is almost by definition incapable of addressing such a topic, because opinion polling belongs to the three-dimensional, manmade, bunker-construct of reality in which most of us nowadays live most of the time.

Really, the ‘religiosity’ poll as it related to Ireland highlighted a historical problem which has little or nothing to do with clerical abuse: the de-absolutised nature of our bunker culture, as defined by Pope Benedict XVI in his remarkable speech in the German Bundestag, less than a year before the Red C poll I refer to. Here is an article I published last year, analysing that speech:

John Waters Unchained

The Effacing of Mystery

We don't think much about the way we think. We just think. Or so we think. The idea that our thinking is not a free-flowing, organic process, but something constructed in us by the interaction of inherited beliefs, the surrounding culture, self interest and given ideology is not something we give much time to thinking about. Similarly the idea that ther...

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But the couching of the question, unsurprisingly, was careful to exclude any kind of answer that might have opened up the relevant boxes or cans of whatever. Because the questions, as asked by Red C, had nothing to say about, or do with, people's sense of, or desire for, connecting with something transcendent, the answers were of limited use in measuring or understanding how 'religious' or otherwise Irish society might at that stage feel itself to be. Even then, in 2012, it was clear that a tsunami of ideology was threatening to engulf Western civilisation, as though to wrench it from its foundations and cast it to the four winds; to the benefit of whom was not entirely clear. Since then, the storm has not abated, and now seems set to complete its project of de-civilisation, de-Christianisation and nihilisation before the present decade terminates in the New Normal of unfreedom and unhope.

We live in times that are without parallel in human history. Young people today step out into a world radically different to the one I grew into a half-century ago. The changes are so eclectic and incoherent that I sometimes do not know how to speak to others about them. Speaking to a young stranger, I may find him edgy and wary of any conversational straying into the religious realm; an older person will not have the same resistance but very likely my words will short-circuit on his assumptions of how this topic tends to go.

Something fundamental has changed in our cultures, which on the surface appears to be related to leaps in communication and technical possibility — what technology now appears capable of delivering to us, or us to, compared to even two decades ago. There is a sense that everything has changed, that some cosmic cleaver has come down hard upon our culture, severing the lines of connection to the past, and rendering us inarticulate in the face of a future that seems to have a mind of its own. It can be hard to argue against these changes, especially when they are presented by their sponsors — as they usually are — in the guise of 'progress'. There is a kind of reflex response in most people that these changes are good because they are 'new', 'smart', 'scientific' — and therefore not to be argued with. Still, it is clear that, more and more, people appear to be imprisoned within technological compounds in which their immediate desires and requirements are gratified, and yet their most basic questions are not merely ignored but actively suppressed. There is an escalating sense that people are slipping into an adjacent but unreal world, in which they can act out the fantasy of living while actually avoiding the reality. And, strangely, bang on cue, the technocrats who wait in the wings begin to nudge forward proposals for us all to live in a virtual world, in which we will 'own nothing and be happy', while we graze the internet in search of diversion and sensation, as our bodies go to seed and our hearts become numb from disuse.

In these conditions, reality becomes distorted, so that both the veracity and relevance of the transcendent are cast in the harsh light of implausibility. The idea that the human person is constructed so as to raise his gaze to, and then beyond, the horizon, is deleted from the coding of the human. What used to be

the ubiquitous cultural quality of 'faith' seems superfluous to a life that the culture now holds can be made comfortable and satisfying by the unquestioning acceptance of a more passive and consumerist version of the human journey. Without anyone necessarily orchestrating things this way, we appear somehow to have generated a form of culture in which 'not hoping' — in the infinite/eternal sense — appears increasingly to us to be the natural order, the most 'reasonable' response and the easiest way of 'getting through'. Today, it seems, the human person can remain outside the sway of the bunker only for a brief period in childhood, between the dawning of consciousness and its capturing by 'education', when what the world calls 'innocence' prevents him being caught up in the collective mindset — and in extreme proximity to death, when he will, unless somehow sedated into obliviousness, come to realise that nothing of what he has lived or learned in the cocoon of modernity serves his needs in those guttering moments.

Otherwise, when you raise such questions — particularly with younger people — there comes back a shrug: 'What's the problem, why do we need to solve anything? We just *live*, we enjoy our lives. Why bother to wrestle with these questions?' Who needs hope when we have pleasure and diversion? Why not just enjoy it? What, beyond the allotted lifespan, is there to hope for? Why not abandon all notions of long-distance hoping and live the moment instead, and just 'hope' for more moments, greater moments, perfect moments right here in the here and now?

I have always found it telling that such responses tend not to be heard in the hospital ward, or under the bridge where the winos sleep, or in the old people's home, or in the graveyard while four strong men shovel the earth on top of the oak casket or coffin made from sustainably sourced indigenous material. They arise, invariably, in comfortable rooms, in a public house or at a dinner party, or in a radio or television studio, where the participants are people on the right side of a certain temporal tipping point, with a seeming infinity of time to postpone all questions of infinity and transcendence. In such rooms it is indeed possible to say: 'Why bother our heads with all this?' In such rooms, it is easier for us to disregard the nature and total implications of reality, to forget whatever experiences of darkness we may have encountered, to discount any prior brush with loneliness, hopelessness or despair. Only under conditions of the utmost stress — illness, addiction, bereavement, despair — when reality encroaches with a radical determination, is the human person placed again in front of the questions which define him or her.

It takes a tremendous amount of energy to be truly human in a culture dominated by such denial. If you insist on remaining connected to the totality of reality, existence involves a constant struggle; on the other hand, if you agree to relinquish elements of your humanity, life becomes easier, everything seems to be truer, more plausible, without any of that old-fashioned God stuff. Occasionally, the rosy picture may briefly disintegrate, because fundamentally it is false, but in general if you accept the illusions of the world, life becomes much more simple. Getting up in the morning becomes easier, day by day. You have a certain set of reasons for being and doing, and this can persist for the greater part of a lifetime, until one day, reality can no longer be avoided, and the only insulation to be obtained is from a bottle or a syringe.

Most of the people, most of the time, have a very strong vested interest in believing in the fiction presented by the bunker culture. Only in certain moments of extreme stress, need, fear, disturbance, do we realise that none of this is

adequate and very little of it is actually real. The bunker does not need to worry about this, however, because those moments are occasional in any given instance, almost always occur in private, and almost invariably affect people at moments of their life when they are no longer centrally involved in the culture, if they ever were. Older people, for example: At that certain stage of our lives when it becomes impossible to avoid the fundamental essence of things, we find ourselves no longer part of the public conversation, and by no means accidentally. Thus, the culture can safely discount the extent to which an inevitable disturbance enters into the hearts of humans, as they grow older.

The dissonance about bunker fictions builds up in you as you age, because nothing you 'know' seems true anymore, and you cannot any longer escape the knowledge that you are going somewhere that is not acknowledged. And it is not simply that it is intolerable to be told that human life makes no sense and is not supposed to, that existence only begins to acquire a kind of ironic coherence when you accept its ultimate meaninglessness. It is that these propositions are implausible because they do not accord with the total evidence that is there to be seen if we wish to look for it. It is that a human person naked before the facts has no choice but to revolt when he is given only notions of randomness and pointlessness to cling to. By the time most people get to crystallise such questions for themselves, by the time such questions become totally alive to the extent that they cannot be suppressed or held to in silence anymore, the individual human person, cast back into the assumed 'aloneness' of his gestational period, has started to become detached from the bunker culture. The experience or perceptions of reality experienced by humans at this stage, however, is not a problem for the bunker, but something that afflicts only themselves. If someone starts pushing these questions too hard in a public way, he becomes peripheralised, defined and diagnosed as an eccentric, probably experiencing some kind of pathological problem. Conditions like Alzheimer's and dementia are extraordinarily useful cultural tools in this context, because they enable a kind of censorship by condescension to be exercised against the old. More and more, I believe, our cultures will come to see religious faith in this way. And, of course, on the terms of the bunker culture, it is true: The person who continues to speak of transcendence is indeed a problem, an anomaly which must be explained away. But the pathology is entirely within the culture. In fact, in insisting on speaking about the unmentionable facts and questions, the person is adhering to an authentic humanity, acknowledging his frailty, the fact that he is made, is dependent, is mortal. But this is a battle that the human person cannot win, because 'they' — the bunker regime, which is also 'us' — owns the language; 'they'/'we' own the culture and therefore all you/I can do is speak against it, which risks coming across as speaking against human happiness and even human reason. 'They'/'we' can be relied upon always to mediate and interpret and translate and ultimately distort what the misfit is saying, so the curtain falls back into place.

For the most part, our increasingly 'secular' cultures regard any kind of 'religious' understandings as merely overhanging loose ends from a past when faith seemed 'simple' and 'straightforward' because people knew no better. To the extent that our cultures respect these residual beliefs, they do so only in accordance with some notional requirement of a society self-styling as 'democratic' to pay a little heed to the needs of simple-minded people in the matter of otherwise obsolescent questions, overtaken by 'the science'. Too polite or 'liberal' to dismiss outrightly the ignorance, backwardness and feeble-mindedness of their grandparents, the new generations affect an exasperated tolerance in the face of what they deem to be mere superstition. The 'problem',

as they see it, appears to be no more serious than the need to make some degree of provision for those who are not as clever as themselves, but who will in any event soon die out and leave the world in peace with its rational thinking. The issue becomes, in this strategy, a problem of courtesy — towards those who happened to grow up with a particular understanding of reality and who, with a certain leavening of polite condescension, might be deemed to have a residual 'right' to be treated with strangled forms of 'respect', 'tolerance' and indulgence. This is how the questions of faith and religion are — at best — considered by our cultures today, when they are not being attacked or ridiculed or dismissed outright. But this misses something. Indeed, in a certain light, it misses *everything*. And this unwitting elision is not something that affects only its visibly disrespected immediate casualties: It affects everyone — those who know it is affecting them and those who think such an idea preposterous.

Whether we like it or not (and believers and unbelievers have different kinds of objections to this proposition), God has, through history, acquired a quasi-technological function in human society. If you seek to remove Him, you must find a way of doing so in awareness of this function and with an adequate proposal for its replacement. Because what is called secularism is often just an angry, neurotic reaction to religion, it tends to assume that the reality it takes for granted would have developed *willy nilly*, and, because God is merely a superstitious residue of an outmoded human mentality, that reality will function even better in His absence. The problem is that reality — in innumerable practical, imagination-centred and unseen ways — has been formed in our culture around the idea of God, just as a pearl is formed around a grain of sand. To remove the grain of sand you have to destroy the pearl.

Whenever this aspect of the subject is raised in modern Irish life, the assumption is generally immediately jumped to that what is at issue is purely societal morality. Immediately, voices emerge to demand whether it is being suggested that they, being unbelievers, are possessed of an inferior quality of morality to that characterising those who believe. If the answer comes back in the affirmative, an uproar is guaranteed, and religion once again indicted as adding insult to the injury of its pernicious control over human life. If the answer is 'no' or 'not necessarily' the protagonist shrugs: 'QED' But the point is that, even if it can be said — and usually it can — that the secular-atheistic protagonist is no less moral than the individual professing religious belief, the question needs to be asked as to where this moral outlook may have originated, and how it has been maintained. In other words, the idea that morality can be separated from a religious upbringing, or from the conditioning of culture, or from the saturation of a culture in the assumptions of such a moral schema, has never been tested in laboratory conditions. The verification of the secular hypothesis would require the elimination of religion and a lengthy observation of the consequences, and this has never successfully been achieved. On the contrary, history tells us that secular societies perish within a couple of generations, in part (not entirely) due to moral collapse.

It is a strange feature of a secular-atheist culture that, while claiming the capacity to countenance virtually anything, it does so in a language and logic that excludes most of reality, including most spectacularly the nature and original structure of the human being. Because positivist culture is unable to identify the spirit of man, it has been more or less declared that this cannot exist, and that a mechanistic approach to societal organisation is sufficient to maintain order and harmony. While it is possible for an individual to live a hopeful, meaningful and free life without God — albeit optimally in a society driven by a

collective or majority faith — there is no evidence that such a degree of existential functionality can be achieved by a society that lacks such a faith. We appear to have no concept of the extent to which many of the quantities we take for granted in our culture arise from the residual background radiation of a once intense, if flawed, cultural faith.

I would certainly say that most of what we recognise as secularism in the public domain of modern Ireland is so transparently lacking in philosophical rootedness as to expose itself as a neurotic response to a bad experience of Catholicism, which is to say a bad experience with a misperception of a certain exercise of earthly power. Thus, a mistaken rejection of a corrupted ideal risks restricting human peace and happiness on a permanent basis.

Despite having nothing to propose in place of religion, secularists do not simply desire that, for example, church and state be separated completely, or even merely that the power and influence of the various churches be neutralised, or even that the churches just slink away and die. What they desire above all is the vindication of their own positions and the standing down of the authority claimed for God over reality, because they reject this notion themselves. For all their inability to explain anything beyond a perfunctory interpretation of humanly-constructed reality, or to offer society an alternative source of moral or psychological praxis to that supplied under the heading of 'religion', the generality of secularists seem determined to employ their lately-acquired power to have it formally acknowledged that they in their atheism are right and believers profoundly wrong. This, they fancy, will set them free.

In the face of this onslaught, what is called 'organised religion' has mounted the most feeble of responses, seeking to negotiate co-existence on the basis of toning down its rhetoric and visibility. Today, most of what is called 'religion' seems to offer only watered-down morality, a therapeutic prescription and, as though not to frighten the secular-atheist horses, a desiccated certitude concerning its own core beliefs — this achieved by limp assertion rather than reason, as part of an unconvincing and haphazard ragbag of rituals and dogmas amounting to what seems a determined attempt to elide a total affirmation of meaninglessness and emptiness. That is to say that the chief objective of most religious leaders appears to be to avoid what their own teaching has long proposed as the deep nature of reality. Christ is offered as a consolation — to which the bunker has no objection, because Christ offered like this is not a threat to anything, but becomes like a form of psychiatric medicine or therapy. This is because the Churches are part of the bunker too, having long since surrendered to it. They have acquiesced in the definition proffered by the bunker culture and tacitly agreed to purvey consolation, comfort, morals and a little bit of hope about something vague and unclear. In the Covid episode, indeed, they stopped doing even this, seeming as though to cast God under a cloud by behaving as if they truly did not believe in the Gospel accounts of the God-man who once, according to their own preaching, moved among the lepers. The aftermath is a kind of spiritual scorched earth, though in reality the consequence merely of a sudden acceleration of what was occurring anyway.

The voices of the Church of Christ continue to be heard, but mostly in the articulation of ambiguous, ambivalent pronouncements that might just as easily emanate from the heart of the bunker regime. They acknowledge nothing of what has occurred. It is as though nothing whatsoever has changed, except that the world has become more 'modern', time has passed, and the new underfoot conditions would perforce have disintegrated faith *willy nilly*.

The truth, objectively considered, appears to be that they no longer believe in any of it. The bunker has enveloped them and overcome them, and the case they make concerns not its erroneous interpretations of reality but their own survival within it. The world is more 'sinful', more selfish, more materialistic, and this is why their proffered 'Christ' is rejected. But the subtext, to be heard in the gaps, evasions and silences, gives it away: 'Okay, so everything is pretty hopeless but we insist that there is hope, even though there is very little reasonable evidence.'

'Even when the hopes you set out with have been dashed, hope must be maintained,' as the late Irish poet Seamus Heaney put the matter in an observation, much cited in secular-therapeutic platforms, delivered at a Commencement Ceremony at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, on May 12, 1996. An almost admirably tautologous construction, even for a poet.

Heaney seems to have drifted deeper into atheism as his life reached its end, but in this circular piece of reasoning he captured perfectly the 'religious' spirit of the age.

In other words, the kind of religion which is offered and talked about is actually part of the cultural prescription that is problematic. Faith and unfaith seek to lead us in the same direction. Where the final destination is we may only speculate about, though my guess is to something like a Church of the New World Order, where sex trumps soul as an access-point for teaching.

For about two decades now, I have tried to tease out the patterns and possible meanings of my own 'faith journey' with a view to confronting these tendencies of our culture, always struggling against the limits of language and the reductions which modern reality and its self-definitions and self-descriptions has succeeded in imposing on the great questions of existence. I am not a theologian. Neither am I someone with an agenda within the Catholic Church or any other religious organisation. I do not belong to any ideological faction. Although simply raising these questions leads to one's immediate ideological pigeon-holing, I am neither a liberal nor a conservative. I am a man who wants to know, to find words to speak what I have discovered and to initiate conversations to help myself and others. I come to these questions only from the depths of my own humanity, seeking to formulate sentences which might allow me and others to see more clearly. Of course, simply by electing to speak of such things, one inevitably becomes trapped on one side of a veil of cultural prejudice, thus rendering it almost impossible to communicate in ways that might alert and encourage someone who remains trapped on the other side of that veil. Such a person, I believe, has a right to be rescued, to know that his or her condition is not as he or she has been led to believe.

I have tried to elucidate — in my books and elsewhere — the things I have experienced in my own life and how I have sought to make sense of them: what I have felt, what I have learned. But more and more I have found that I communicate only with those who, conditioned by the model of 'bunker Christianity' on offer, believe they have already understood what I wish to say. I write in praise of freedom and they congratulate me for opposing immorality. I speak about being and they talk back to me about death. On the other hand, those whose outlooks most dramatically exhibit the bunker conditions that I seek to render visible are too solidly settled in their assumptions, or too resistant to the kind of language I must necessarily use, to hear anything I might struggle to articulate.

If this syndrome could be said to afflict only myself and my attempts to explain

my journey, it might not amount to a great problem. But I believe this condition is now widespread in what we think and speak of as 'the modern world'. More and more, it seems, words and self-descriptions tend to trap us in definitions which really amount to no more than reactions, or counter-reactions, to phenomena that provoke, alarm or antagonise us, but which all the time cause us to dig ourselves deeper into a hole of unhope. We become, more and more, political, mechanised beings, whose self-descriptions and outward manifestations of our self-understandings tend to be off-the-peg identikits which we inhabit by a process of willed certainty. We 'invent' ourselves by numbers, so as to avoid the friction which would inevitably arise from revealing inside the bunker any hint of a sense of the given nature of ourselves. The purpose of this constructed, imposed reflex is clear: control of the human person for the advancement of the ideologies and agendas of the bunker. But this project is invisibly riven by another tremendous paradox: It destroys that which the future survival of the bunker itself depends on. By dehumanising humanity, bunker culture puts at risk the continued existence of human nature, and therefore of human society, promising to become the ally of the bulldozers which will in due course demolish the bunker's walls.

Religious understanding is maximised human self-understanding, offering me a deeper capacity for awareness of myself and my place in reality. No amount of objective knowledge of the external world is of any use if I do not achieve a similar level of understanding of myself, of my essential structure, of how I relate to reality, of what patterns emerge from this relationship and what these tell me about what I call my freedom. It is here that religion has historically focused its attentions, sometimes ineptly (i.e. over-moralistically) but usually with the proper intention of offering to man the means to avoid the grief that comes from abusing his own freedom. Thus, my relationship with what is most real is defined not merely by the vast expanse of the defining mystery of total reality, but also by the internal dynamics which define my humanity, which is also profoundly mysterious. This fundamental structure of humanity is shared by believers and unbelievers alike, and does not change through time. The details of our personalities and our functionality may change, but we continue to be driven by a desire for something that does not appear to exist, or does not exist in what we can discover, but seems to draw us over the horizon towards what we cannot (yet) see.

By this schema, then, the answer to questions relating to 'how to live', or 'living a good life', suggest themselves as residing not in the pursuit of obvious freedoms but a far more complicated engagement with the totality of the facts, external and internal, because such an approach, to be successful, must take account of consequences, for myself and others, rather than simply be motivated by the pursuit of an immediate sense of my instinctual desiring. Only a religious culture is capable of imagining and tabulating this for mankind. And only a human society saturated with such understandings has any real hope of survival.

Of course, atheists will immediately jump up and assert something close to the opposite: that religion is at the root of all human evil. I don't propose to waste much time on this idea, and will simply observe that the various false oppositions secularists propose between religion and democracy, religion and freedom and religion and pluralism are not sustainable. In fact, modern democracy — rooted in the individual dignity of each human person — derives largely from Christianity, and freedom of conscience implies the formulation of what is by definition a collective. conscience, in which modern notions of justice and egalitarianism are grounded.

A healthy society would have respect for all viewpoints, not just those which exclude religious perception. Pluralism involves more than the valourisation of sceptical and pessimistic outlooks. When you live in a society, you accept the culture it has developed to defend and nurture itself. My position is that non-believers have a right to question, to dissent, even to protest, but they do not have a right to demand that the majority hide away the means by which access into the total dimension of reality is achieved. It would make as much sense, and be approximately as reasonable, to demand that the oxygen be removed from the air. Secularists may insist that their children have a democratic right to choke, but I reserve the right to protest when they insist that I or my child must choke too.

Almost everyone I know in Ireland, including myself, has had a bad experience of Irish Catholicism. It's not that I want to deny this, or whitewash it, but my position remains that this doesn't change my fundamental structure as a human being. Secularism Irish-style, however, seems to have imagined that religion amounts to nothing beyond the existence and behaviours of particular institutions and that we can simply resign from the religious outlook as though from a political party and still expect the things we depend upon to sustain themselves without our support. Reality is not like that. Culture does not conform to such requirements for individual convenience and coherence. Sooner or later, the cumulative effect of the withdrawals of affection from Irish Catholicism expressed in so many different ways in our culture will bring us to a point of reckoning beyond which the things we take for granted may no longer be available. It behoves each of us to give deep consideration to such an eventuality and ask ourselves what may be required to avert it.

Modern-day scepticism is not at all a consequence of forward-marching time, or progress, or growing intelligence. It is a symptom of factors which man has constructed and built into modern culture, which function as impediments to his view of humanity itself. Atheism, far from being a rational response to reality, is a socially-constructed condition which crept into modern culture as one of the prerequisites of Marxism. As a response to the unknowable, it is no more 'rational' than any religion under the sun, and indeed, being a construct of the bunker, has the verisimilitude of reasonableness only while exercised *in the bunker*. Only if you ignore the mystery outside and the mystery that vivifies the heart of the human person, does it become 'rational' to suggest that the idea of God is impossible and ridiculous.

In the bunker, however, the mysterious, given humanity of the person remains bound inside the identikit personality constructed for the purpose of bunker functionality, as though trussed up in an ideological girdle.

Each of us is accompanied by something/someone, whether we wish to focus on such factors or not. Our being, existence, is defined by this subconscious sense of accompaniment, if only by our inexplicable sense of an utterly unasked-for condition of trajectory, a careering through the dizzying stratosphere of existence, talking silently, internally, 'to ourselves'. That we have no adequate words for this does not change it. What changes things is the feeling — picked up from the common conversation, from education, media, culture in general — that, because we have no words for it, and because the words we can think of seem to exclude it, this sense of a total trajectory in infinity must be an illusion.

A decision, tacit or active, to repudiate all forms of exploration under the heading of 'religion' or 'faith' seems to discount the burning desire that is the 'engine' of human propulsion. Openness to that which is encapsulated under the heading of

'religion' seems to render someone more open to curiosity, wonder and reason than someone who simply rejects the exercise entirely because of a prejudice based on either a bad prior experience or a refusal to consider more deeply matters of which there is minimal possibility of total knowledge. 'God' is just another word, a tool for getting to grips with what we cannot know but equally cannot ignore. But for all its booby-traps, 'God' is a word that, used in a careful way, can be made to open things up rather than close them down.

And, then, the ultimate paradox: All this is mere words, and God is beyond words, which renders the entire exercise as pointless as it is essential. In a certain sense, I accept, the very exercise of writing or saying all this makes no sense, and might even be seen as an act of unfaith because it seeks some kind of positivistic justification for the religious hypothesis. Only when belief becomes implausible, after all, do we need to zoom in and study its entrails. But these objections belong to a different moment, a climate of lesser urgency. Today, we live in a culture dominated by words from which virtually all traces of the transcendent have been rinsed, and so can rescue ourselves only by tracing our way back along the lines of parched, emptied sentences of the gone-astray culture that bought us to this point.

What is required of the collective of human beings tacitly identifying themselves as the contemporary incarnation of a society which developed around a 'religious' idea now in the process of being abandoned, is not merely to consider the likely consequences of this evacuation but actually to consider why, in the first place, these conditions came into being and what is now changed or changing.

We know the 'whys', at least in the sense that we have heard the rationalisation for abandoning faith and religion many times. What we have not heard is the rationale for abandoning *everything that religion has bequeathed us* — adequately inventoried and accounted. No one has yet outlined for us the total cost of the loss likely to be involved and declared himself sanguine about all this. And no one has rendered a calculus weighing both the consequences of the likely outcome of present drifts and the cost of striving to retain the tradition already present in our culture, rehabilitating it and making it fit for purpose in the age of knowingness we have now arrived at.

- *This series will run on a weekly basis until Christmas Eve. Part 2, next weekend, looks at some of the traps and contradictions of the secular rationalist worldview.*

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