

Introduction

This book sets out a radically new exploration of the question: what are the origins of the secular mind? This question has an urgency at the start of the twenty-first century that modernist thinkers of the twentieth century could not have anticipated. According to mainstream Western ways of thinking, religion was a relic of pre-Enlightenment culture, and its disappearance was inevitable, as a fog dispersed by the sun. This 'sun', according to the view of the secular mainstream, was science and rationalism. But 9/11, the rise of militant Islam, and the rise of the religious right in America, suddenly made the secular assumption of the death of religion untenable. It became necessary, urgent, even, to attempt a new understanding of religion: everywhere the question of religion has had new debating grounds. But what is missing – and which this book attempts to address – is a new debate about *secularism*.

Painful as it might be, this book takes apart the assumption that science and rationalism are as the sun to the fog of religion and spirituality. The uncomfortable fact needs acknowledgement: that a huge range of scientists and thinkers, from the Enlightenment onwards, find no contradiction between their outer pursuit of science and rationalism, and their inner pursuit of faith and spiritual enquiry. What makes it possible to gradually understand this so-called contradiction is a recognition that 'religion' is not the monolithic entity that either Western faith traditions like to assume, or that secularists have *inherited* as an assumption, exposed as they are mainly to defensive accounts of religion put forward by theologians. This book explores instead the idea of 'spiritual difference' – religion, or spirituality, as an expression of a wide range of spiritual impulses, some of them congenial to science and rationalism, and some of them deriving instead from the devotional, the moral, the intuitive, the poetic, and the aesthetic. When secularism applies its own well-

developed language of pluralism to the phenomenon of religion and spirituality, instead of lazily assuming the monolithic nature of religion, then the first step is taken of engaging with the subject. To taxonomise a domain is to have respect for it. But, crucially, this articulation of spiritual difference also allows for a radically new understanding of the origins of the secular mind.

In exploring the history of spiritual difference the turning point in Western history – the Enlightenment – is reconsidered. Instead of understanding this moment in history as the beginnings of a process that would inevitably bring about the death of religion, we can see instead that the secular mind arose out of a purely negative legacy of that period. It was not the death of religion that was made inevitable by the Enlightenment, but the gradual confounding of its secular legacy. Slowly, it becomes clear that the adventure of secularism has gone wrong by betraying its Enlightenment roots. Secularism became a caricature of Enlightenment thought, an unbalanced extremity of assumption, and, in its forced and reluctant re-engagement with religion, it now has the opportunity to repair a breach in the very fabric of society.

This book opens up a conversation between religion and secularism in a way not previously attempted. It sees their apparently opposing worldviews as not intrinsically antagonistic, but only so through accidents of history. Once those accidents are exposed and accounted for as partially wrong turnings, a new rapprochement can take place. But the conversation pursued here has a third partner: the New Age. Usually dismissed by both the other parties, it has elements within it that are important to the debate, particularly its open enthusiasm for the spiritual life. By the term 'New Age' the broad phenomenon of new religious movements, adoption of Eastern practices, and revival of pre-Christian religions is meant.

Hence we have in this book a conversation, and the development of a vocabulary for the wider dissemination of a conversation, between the secularist, those who pursue faith traditions ('old religion'), and those who pursue new religions or popularisations of Eastern religious movements. For simplicity, these three groups will be referred to as secularists, religionists, and New Agers: we can understand the new cultural landscape of the twenty-first century as a three-way contest between them. Each group has unique insights and limitations of thought, and a conversation must start with the awkward acknowledgement of those limitations. As this book begins the conversation with the idea of spiritual difference, we need to address it through that virtuous hallmark of the secular

era – pluralism. Religionists, secularists and New Agers, each in their own way deny the idea of spiritual difference and spiritual pluralism: old religion through its absolutist certainties and war on 'heresy'; the secular world through indifference, and the New Age through an uncritical acceptance of all and everything – its mantra that 'all is one'.

Freud criticised monotheistic religion in particular for its 'narcissism of minor difference'. He meant by this the small differences in religious belief that separated groups, which otherwise shared vastly similar ideas, and which could lead to the most appalling violence between them. If we characterise old religion as suffering from the 'narcissism of minor difference' then we can characterise secularism as suffering from the 'narcissism of self-sufficiency', indicating the false belief that humanity had grown up and out of the need for any kind of spirituality (a key shibboleth of secularism). The New Age in turn can be said to suffer from the 'narcissism of difference denied' – its tendency to downplay spiritual difference in the interests of a superficial harmony.

Chapter One outlines the contours of the contemporary secular worldview, using some case studies in cultural production, including literature and film. It explores the role that science, philosophy, language, psychology and neurology play in constructing the shibboleths of the secular mind.

Chapter Two presents a two-fold Model of Spiritual Difference to provide the necessary detailed articulation of spirituality for the subsequent chapters. It highlights the difference between the devotional and non-devotional spiritual impulse (usefully articulated in Hinduism as *bhakti* and *jnani*), and looks at pathologies and correctives in the spiritual life.

Chapter Three starts with a detailed consideration of the alienation of the modern, secular mind, and then works backwards through Western history to identify the major factors in the abandonment of religion as a credible cultural force. It considers both the rise of science and the legacy of religious cruelty as factors, and concludes that these were insufficient to account for the 'death of God'.

Chapter Four considers the rise of Christianity as a devotional religion with Hebraic roots, as juxtaposed to the Hellenic modality of the spirit: a contrast between the profoundly different spiritualities identified through the terms *bhakti* and *jnani*.

Chapter Five reconsiders the Enlightenment, not as the triumph of rationalism, but as the re-assertion of a non-devotional world-curious spirituality: the atheist Enlightenment thinker being the

exception, not the rule. It is shown that the 'death of God' was not intended by almost any serious Enlightenment thinker, but that they defended a conception of 'God' that was more Hellenic (or *jnanī*) than Christendom could bear.

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