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Pheby-McGarvey, Sam (2019) On a Wing and a Prayer. In:
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On a Wing and a Prayer, by Sam Pheby-McGarvey

“God is Dead”, Friedrich Nietzsche proudly proclaimed. Over 100 years after Nietzsche’s death many people still believe in God. Being pronounced dead does not automatically cause people to stop believing in your existence—Nietzsche is dead, although his philosophy lives on. And whether Nietzsche or God have been cast into the ‘nine circles’ is for Dante and Virgil to discover.... So, for a moment let us put to one side the question of the existence of God, and turn to the more pressing question: when we leave this earthly domain, should we invite God along for the ride?

Slightly re-appropriating an age-old atheist argument, that non-believers only disbelieve in one god more than believers, which God, or which gods, should we as a society take with us? Shall we take the God of the Old Testament? This God is described by Richard Dawkins as ‘the most unpleasant character in all fiction’ (2007, p. 51). Arguably, this ‘genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully’ (Dawkins 2007, p. 51) is a very different God to the one worshipped on BBC One’s Songs of Praise. But as all roads lead to Rome, so all religion leads to scripture, depending on that which has been passed down in writing to inform its teachings, traditions, authority and morals.

Richard Dawkins argues that no one really does get their morals from the Bible, or any other classical religious text, as ancient stories that would have seemed normal, or moral, when originally produced would now offend our twenty-first century morals. To paraphrase Dawkins, the changing moral zeitgeist of society moves on (2007, pp. 268-316). Do morals then come from some kind of ‘naturally’ occurring religious presence, which exists beyond scriptural evidence or traditional religious teachings? In his book *The Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*, nineteenth-century writer Jeremy Bentham, under the pseudonym Philip Beauchamp, argues against the possibility of a natural religion. Specifically, he questions the effect of the Christian notion of Heaven/Hell on human behaviour, concluding that people tend to think much more about the afterlife when they are potentially close to death, old or unwell, and these possibilities move from being abstract concepts to something they may soon experience. Additionally, he suggests that individuals don’t tend to consider the possibility of Hell when they are committing acts that might be considered morally wrong, such as stealing or killing. In sum, this proposed form of immortal reward or punishment does little to affect people’s behaviour and instead causes them undue fear. If this system of reward and punishment did work we would not require temporal punishment, such as prison, suggests Bentham (2002). Dawkins argues that ‘morality in the absence of policing is somehow more truly moral than the kind of false morality that vanishes as soon as the police go on strike or the spy camera is switched off, whether the spy camera is a real one monitored in the police station or an imaginary one in heaven’ (2007, p. 263). If people are only doing good to please God, and to subsequently gain a one-way ticket to heaven, are they truly good?

By expressing the above I am not wishing to imply that non-believers are inherently better people than believers, or vice versa; I only mean to suggest that the morals we live our lives by and the

inherent altruism humans exhibit does not come from religion alone. Dawkins comments on Marc Hauser's study, which asks people to respond to hypothetical moral dilemmas and collects the results; he says 'the way people respond to these moral tests, and their inability to articulate their reasons, seems largely independent of their religious beliefs or lack of them' (2007, p. 255). Where morals come from is a question that has troubled philosophers for decades, and in my own view, evolution rather than the presence of God offers a more compelling argument for the existence of morality. Altruism is evident in animals and has clear evolutionary advantages as Dawkins suggests:

We now have four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic, generous or 'moral' towards each other. First, there is the special case of genetic kinship. Second, there is reciprocation: the repayment of favours given, and the giving of favours in 'anticipation' of payback. Following on from this there is, third, the Darwinian benefit of acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness. And fourth, if Zahavi is right, there is the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising. (2007, p. 251)

Considering the phrase 'God is Dead', I conclude that this may be true, but I believe the bullet was not fired by the enlightenment of Nietzsche's time. The bullet will instead come through the science that has allowed us to colonize a new world, the theories that allow us to travel through space quicker than the speed of light, and the genetic engineering that will allow us to engineer plants capable of surviving on this new world. It will come through the technology that allows us to terraform planets, shape them, make them liveable and thriving. The Bible's 'In the beginning there was God' (a paraphrase of John 1:1) could be re-written as, 'In the beginning there were humans.' When technology allows us to be the primordial movers, similar to the God of Genesis, what separates us from God?

Perhaps there is a place for a God, or for multiple gods in this new world, but is this not a chance to change what God means to people? Is this not a chance to throw out scriptural lessons and traditions that have no place within twenty-first century society, but which some religions still cling onto? After all, it is not ancient wisdom, biblical scripture or belief in God that will have allowed us to colonize another planet, but instead it will be science, algorithms, chemical reactions and wings of steel that will have taken us across the stars—not a wing and a prayer.

References

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