

After 'God', seeking new stories



The discussion of faith after the death of God was part of the Cambridge Festival of Ideas. Photo provided by Andrew Brown

Andrew Brown, minister at Cambridge Unitarian Church organised an event to discuss faith after the death of God. Here's what he and Philosopher **Rupert Read**, had to say:

Rupert Read

'The way you use the word 'God' does not show *who* you mean, but *what* you mean'. - Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Religion is and always has been much more and much other than just g/God, and certainly than the God of the Abrahamic religions. It is an awesome mistake to tie religion closely only to God, let alone to God as a lone super-person. As the philosopher Wittgenstein once, wonderfully, put it: It is very important that we talk of God's eye, but not of God's eyebrows – or eyelashes.

What form of religion suits our time?

If we look back to the beginnings of religion, what we find is far indeed from theism. What we find is animism. Everything being alive, everything en-spirited. Animism makes great sense as a religion for hunter-gatherers, who exist in a roughly egalitarian relationship with all the beings around them.

Polytheism came next: polytheism fits the Agricultural Revolution, where the human connection to particular great spirits of fertility and of the weather and so forth takes centre stage. While wild animals and so forth fade rather into the background.

Eventually, one of the gods becomes jealous of the rest: the stage is set for mono-theism. A form of practice and belief best-suited to large-scale, non-local, pre-scientific agricultural civilisation.

That time is ending. What form of religion best suits our own time?

Well, what is our time?

It is a time where religion itself is under threat. And a time

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Andrew Brown

The historian in me wanted to begin by simply outlining the history of the death of God. But this is not about the *history* of the death of God – by which is generally meant the history of the death in our culture of the idea that there exists an actual, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient being – but rather about how religion might, or might not, remain a live option in response to the general background fact that the God is, for a very large number of people in Europe today, a dead, or at least dying, concept.

Although Nietzsche and those who followed him were acutely aware that acknowledgement of the death of God would bring with it a realisation that the world did not possess the stable, objective (behind-the-scenes) eternal value or meaning we once believed it had, and that this, in turn, would precipitate what is called nihilism, many people began to see that it could also, as the contemporary philosopher Mark Wrathall has observed, '*open up access to richer and more relevant ways for us to understand creation and for us to encounter the divine and the sacred.*'

Take natural world seriously

I'd like to introduce just two of the most important, basic, ways I see this opening-up happening within the liberal religious Unitarian, Universalist and Free Christian movement.

Firstly, perhaps the most important thing to have occurred, is that the natural world is now being taken with an increased religious seriousness – a fact that connects strongly with our current ecological concerns and crises. Although this process began in the physical realm during the Renaissance with Copernicus (1473–1543) and then Galileo (1564–1642), after Nietzsche's proclamation there was simply no longer even a metaphysical need to split the world into the heavenly and earthly, into God 'up there' and creation 'down here' and this, in turn, has resulted in an increasingly complex intermingling of ideas about the sacred and secular, the holy and profane. This latter, philosophical process was well underway by the end of the 18th century when pantheism began to become very influential – especially via Idealist philosophy and the Romantic movement. As Frederick C Beiser¹ puts it, '*Spinoza's famous phrase "deus sive natura" made it possible to both divinise nature and naturalise the divine. Following that dictum, a scientist, who professed the most radical naturalism, could still be religious; and a pastor, who confessed the deepest personal faith in God, could still be a naturalist.*'

This move to divinise nature and naturalise the divine, has continued apace and continues to play an important part in the development of a much broader modern movement known as 'religious naturalism'.

Combine wonder and naturalism

Religious naturalism is a philosophy that combines a naturalist worldview (namely, that the natural order is all there is, and that nothing, including a deity, may exist or act in ways that are independent of the natural order) with various perceptions and values once commonly associated with religion, such as gratitude, wonder, awe, humility and compassion, etc.

Religious naturalists of all kinds take nature to be the proper focus of their religious commitment and concern. In saying this they do not (generally) mean that nature is somehow to be

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