

SOMETHING MORE THAN ARGUMENT

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC
October 27, 2024

In Ross Douthat's New York Times column last Sunday, he observes that 20 years ago, the idea that the decline of organized religion would make the world more rational and less tribal seemed plausible. Today, it seems borderline absurd. The mood of secular liberalism nowadays, he says, is not rationalist optimism and humanist ambition, but rather existential anxiety and civilizational ennui.

He writes, "The decline of religious membership and practice is increasingly seen as a social problem rather than a great leap forward. People raised without belief are looking for meaning in psychedelics, astrology, U.F.O.s. And lately the rise of the "Nones" — Americans with no religious affiliation — has finally leveled off."

Given this evidence, it will not surprise you that Douthat, a social conservative and practicing Catholic, suggests that the world today seems open to religion as it was open to atheism 20 years ago. The evidence he puts forward as he reviews three recent books, however, has little to do with religion as a system of belief or an institution of meaning. Rather, it focuses on the quest for meaning as an individual search.

When external structures of meaning fall away or fall apart, in other words, the spiritual quest can easily turn inward and become self-referential, even narcissistic. If this assessment accurately describes what's happening today, and I believe it does, this would not be the first time in our nation's history that spiritual narcissism has taken center stage. Indeed, spiritual narcissism has arguably been the throughline of our religious history.

Our nation was founded on three pillars: a political theory of individual rights and civil liberties, an economic view of the beneficence of free markets, and a religious vision of souls emancipated from the bondage of original sin. This emphasis on the primacy of the individual in the political, economic, and religious realms is known as liberalism.

The religious consequences of liberalism were far-reaching from the start. In 1860, Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: "The stern old faiths have all pulverized. 'Tis a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions." It soon became clear where they would find these new religions. In 1871, the historian John Wiess said in his book *American Religion*, "America is an opportunity to make a Religion out of the sacredness of the individual."

The challenge for the individual, once emancipated from the need to seek salvation for the next life, was to find meaning and purpose in this life. The search for spiritual depth took myriad forms, many of them either generated or shaped by the

Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, sought direct mystical experience of the infinite, often through the contemplation of nature. Henry David Thoreau, in his cabin on Walden Pond, sought meaning in solitude. He put it this way: “To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone.”

Walt Whitman took the opposite approach. He viewed religions as landscapes: each has its own unique appeal. The goal, with religion as with landscapes, is to experience as many as possible. As Whitman put it, the goal is “to know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.”

This individualist approach to spirituality was sufficiently well established, and sufficiently worrisome, that the visiting Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville expressed his concern about it as early as the 1830’s. America is a novel expression of individualism, he said. When it comes to religion, however, the new democracy seems to throw each of its citizens “back forever upon themselves alone” and “to confine them entirely within the solitude of their own hearts.”

Even Walt Whitman, effusive champion of the open road, foresaw dangers ahead. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman describes the state of mind of a seeker who has been on the road too long.

Down-hearted doubters dull and excluded,
Frivolous, sullen, moping, angry, affected, dishearten’d, atheistical,
I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt,
Despair and unbelief.

Make no mistake: there is nothing wrong with the spiritual practices of contemplation, solitude, and exploration. In fact, they are much to be desired. But they are not sufficient, because none of them alone constitutes religion, which seeks to gather all aspects of life into a meaningful whole. The question confronting the individual seeker is whether the emancipation of our souls from the clutches of established religion leaves us restlessly exploring one new spiritual approach after another? Or does it enable us somehow to find our way to a new religious home? If so, what exactly would that home look like?

For his part, Ross Douthat recognizes that some current spiritual options mostly require the suspension of disbelief. He says, “A God of the philosophers or physicists is one thing, but a God of exorcists, miracle workers and near-death experiences is just a bit too disreputable.”

Even so, he wonders, can a world that’s unhappy in its unbelief be pushed back to religious belief? He concludes by saying that contemporary disillusionment with secularism may be enough “to draw people to the threshold of religion, but something more than argument is required to pull them through.”

I agree that disillusionment with the first fruits of secularism — existential anxiety and civilizational ennui — may be enough to draw us to the threshold of religion. I also agree that we typically need something more than mere argument — something more than reason and logic — to pull us into the circle of religious community. But in my view, experiences with psychedelics, astrology, exorcism, miracle workers, and near-death experiences — the focus of Douthat’s column — push us most of us away from religion rather than toward it.

What does pull us into the circle of religious community? For some of us, it was a moment when we finally realized that we need other people to help us on our journey through life. It may have been a diagnosis, a divorce, an addiction, a devastating personal failure, a crushing loss of status or capability — something that finally convinced us that we can’t go it alone. We reached out for help, and we found it.

For others, it was an experience of the sublime, a sense of awe and wonder that we are part of a wondrously amazing world — yes, a small part, but even so an integral part. We realized that finding our place and fulfilling our purpose meant being part of something larger than ourselves. To discover how we belong, we joined a religious community of camaraderie and commitment.

In either case, what develops after we step into the circle of religious community is the realization that fulfillment comes not from agreeing to a certain set of beliefs but rather following a certain way of life. The “something more” that is needed is not exotic spiritual experiences or unreasonable religious beliefs, but rather a commitment to spiritual practice.

Ten days ago, New York Times art critic Holland Cotter reviewed a new exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art titled “Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350.” He points out the problem museums often have with presenting religious art. Non-Western art — from Africa, say, or Asia — can be presented as exotically spiritual, which fits in comfortably with the worldview of an increasingly secularizing public.

Christian art, however, whether in painting, sculpture, or other forms, emerged because of its usefulness in the practice of the Christian faith. Most of the objects in the Siena exhibition were used by the faithful to remind them of their commitments, renew their resolve, and focus their attention. Cotter says, “Devotional objects, from any culture, if taken seriously, make awkward demands on our attention, on our willingness or ability to meet them on their own terms.”

Put differently, the alternative to exotic experiences or unreasonable beliefs to resolve our spiritual restlessness is to take up a practice. Any spiritual practice worth taking up, as Cotter points out, will make awkward demands on our attention. It will take time, and patience, and most of all discipline. The root meaning of the word discipline, after all, is the same as the word disciple — someone who faithfully follows a path.

Passing through Dublin on the way from Belfast to New York some years ago, my wife Holly Atkinson and I paid a visit to an exhibition at Trinity College. My attention

was drawn to a small book called the Book of Mulling. Dating from the late eighth century, it was named after the monastery in Mulling, a coastal Irish town, as well as the head of the monastery, St. Mulling, who put the original manuscript together. The book itself contains excerpts from the four gospels, along with a service to use when visiting the sick and others in need. It also contains portraits of several apostles and a diagram of the monastery in Mulling.

Designed for use by Irish missionary monks travelling to the continent, the Book of Mulling was a pocket guide to everything the monks needed to maintain their spiritual practice.

For my part, I found myself drawn to the book not because of what it contains, but because of the unintentional double entendre of its title. To mull something is to ponder it, turn it over and over in your mind, perhaps even commit it to memory. On this more fanciful reading, the Book of Mulling is a perfect metaphor for the discipline that will move us from despair to hope, from disillusionment to optimism.

If we had a Book of Mulling for life's most challenging moments, what might it contain? For those times when we're feeling overwhelmed by the fret and fever of the day, we might practice these soothing lines by Elizabeth Bishop:

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling fingertips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.

For those times when we have failed ourselves or someone we love, Mark Strand has words we can practice and make our own:

And beyond,
as always, the sea of endless transparence, of utmost
calm, a place of constant beginning that has within it
what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand
has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart.
To that place, to the keeper of that place, I commit myself.

For those times when we may be feeling despondent, we can practice these words by Emily Dickinson:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers --
That perches in the soul --
And sings the tune without the words --
And never stops -- at all --

Jorie Graham has words we can practice when we're on the edge of an experience that beckons us and yet terrifies us:

motion that forces change--
this is freedom. This is the force of faith. Nobody gets
what they want. Never again are you the same. The longing
is to be pure. What you get is to be changed.

You get the idea. All of us need a guide to our daily practice of faith and faithfulness. That's one reason we gather each week as a religious community. It's part of our practice of reminding each other what we are part of and what we are committed to.

Whatever else we might practice, this one precious line by Emily Dickinson captures the spirit of our journey together:

I dwell in Possibility--

You may recall that the poem ends:

For Occupation-- This--
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise--

When you find yourself discouraged and disillusioned, take up the practice of mulling and perhaps even memorizing these sources of wisdom. Make them your own. They will remind you that your true occupation as part of this religious community is to open your arms to all that is past and all that is possible — an experience I call divine. When hard times come, say to yourself, “I dwell in possibility,” which you do. You are a child of God, and all God's children dwell in possibility. This truth is worthy of practicing, always and everywhere.