

Castles in the Sky

Mysticism, Mystery, and Meaning in the Twenty-First Century

By Braden MacDonald.

Introduction

The term “non-theistic sacralism” covers a broad and diverse range of religious perspectives, including concepts from Anicca to Zen and religions from Buddhism to Unitarian Universalism. What these religious perspectives have in common is that although they reject belief in a personal God, they believe in some sort of Sacred Mystery, Higher Reality, or Transcendent Unity, and they believe that it is better to live a religious life than a secular life. To properly understand many forms of non-theistic sacralism, it is important to note that most have their roots in Eastern Philosophy – rather than the Western Philosophy that we owe to the Greeks. Eastern Philosophy characteristically focuses on cosmological unity (i.e. monism), assumes the divine (rather than skepticism), emphasizes the difference between reality and appearance (rather than assuming appearance represents reality), and encourages people to achieve some form of transcendence through self-awareness. To a mind shaped by a Western liberal arts education, the writings and teachings of these non-theistic traditions often seem to be question-begging, filled with too many assumptions, or entirely based on unproven assertions. Is this the case? Or do these traditions have merit in helping us to understand reality and live well? To answer this question, it helps to distinguish between four common types of non-theistic religious doctrine: Impersonal Absolutism, Mysticism, Existentialism, and Moralism.

Impersonal Absolutism (Impersonal Pantheism) and Non-Theistic Mysticism

Impersonal Absolutism is the view that all of Nature (the entire universe and all that it contains, whether physical or not) is God, but not a personal God. What makes this “God” more than a synonym for “Universe” is that the impersonal absolutist believes that God is fundamentally unified and indivisible. Things that exist, such as you and me, may appear to be different, but the reality is that they are the same thing. “The goal in human life is to understand how everything both mental and physical is part of a single comprehensive Divine, yet Natural, order.... One who succeeds in seeing the world this way experiences serenity, peacefulness, and joy.” (Angel 77). Or so the claim goes – however, it is difficult to make sense of this claim.

My body and conscious mind seem to be fully independent and essentially different than everything else that I perceive around me. The impersonal absolutist would assure me that this is an illusion, and that through meditation and similar forms of religious experience, I can become aware of my essential unity with the Divine. These experiences, and the pursuit of such experiences, are known as **non-theistic mysticism**. A non-theistic mystic might claim that through meditation, he can arrive at a state of pure awareness of nothing but the ineffable sense of the fundamental unity of all things. Based on this profound experience, he claims that all distinctions and differences are illusory.

One problem with this is that if our rational minds are illusory, on what basis can we claim that everything is an illusion? As I and others have argued previously, a religious experience alone is not sufficient to justify a belief. Also, the illusionary nature of the universe contradicts the concept of karma (fundamental to many absolutist world views) – if this world doesn't exist, if men themselves don't exist, if evil itself is an illusion, then the very foundations for the law of karma are missing. An action could be neither bad nor good if the action doesn't really occur. Further, there is no good explanation for how the illusion developed in the first place, and thus if we could break free of the illusion there is no assurance that the illusion won't develop again.

Impersonal Absolutism seems to be fundamentally disconnected from what I would call empirical reality; but this should not be a surprise, as many say that the only way to appreciate it is to assume that it is true and then work to disconnect your mind from empirical reality through techniques like meditation.

Non-Theistic Religious Existentialism and Moralism

Non-theistic forms of religious existentialism add a vague religious sense of the Absolute to the central ideas of existentialism (that “existence precedes essence,” and that individual humans create meaning for themselves). Paul Tillich calls this “absolute faith,” which he describes as “the accepting of the acceptance without somebody or something that accepts.... It transcends both mysticism and personal encounter, as it transcends both the courage to be as a part and the courage to be as oneself” (Tillich 179). To me, this seems to be merely a way of using religious language and ideas to emphasize and explore the fundamental mysteries of existence.

Moralism is the perspective that religious language, ideas, and activities are useful or even essential for encouraging people to live a moral life. Typically, religious phrases – including personalistic phrases – would be used metaphorically to express ideas and to develop a moral and fulfilling life. The main premise of moralism is that there are moral ideas that cannot be expressed properly or meaningfully outside of a religious context.

The natural question to ask is: are we better off expressing the mysteries of life and the concepts of morality in religious terms? I think not. Unless it can be established that there really is a personal God or an impersonal Ultimate Reality, religious language only provides an unnecessary layer of abstraction between our understanding of the world and the knowledge (or false beliefs) that our understanding is based on. Further, I would suggest that it may seem that some concepts can only be expressed in religious language, simply because many religious terms are vague or ambiguous; one can thus talk about “experiencing union with the godhead” as though that means something specific, when it may in fact be a very uncertain experience that one is referring to, which must be couched in ambiguity to be expressed at all.

One has only to read works by atheists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Kurtz, or even Richard Dawkins to see that deep, existential, and moral questions can be asked and explored in a linguistically rich manner without resorting to religious metaphors. Or, one can note that Albert Einstein used personalistic religious language frequently, even though he did not believe in a personal God, and this caused his

religious views to be regularly misinterpreted. He would arguably have been much better understood if he had used scientific or non-religious metaphorical language to express himself.

Conclusion

The various forms of non-theistic sacralism, which are often melded together into an idiosyncratic belief system, represent the constant attempt of humanity to appreciate and make sense of the mystery that pervades the human experience. However, these attempts often seem inconsistent, arbitrary, unprovable, or less than helpful. Is it possible to foster a sense of wonder and appreciate the mysteries of life without religious practices?

NASA scientist Carolyn Porco said¹, “Being a scientist and staring immensity and eternity in the face every day is about as meaningful...and grand and awe inspiring as it gets. We, especially the astronomers, confront the big questions of wonder every day, and the answers to these questions in the aggregate have produced – and this is with absolutely no hype – the greatest story that’s ever been told. There isn’t a religion...that can offer anything better. As Jules Verne said, ‘reality provides us with facts so romantic that imagination itself could add nothing to them.’ And I say amen to that.”

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¹ At the “Beyond Belief” conference, held at the Salk Institute (La Jolla, CA) in November 2006.

Works Cited

Angel, Leonard. Philosophy 349A: Philosophy of Religion Course Material. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2007.

Tillich, Paul. The Courage to Be. Glasgow: William Collins & Co. Ltd., 1952.