



RELIGION

In a Culture of Science, Skepticism, and Do-It-Yourself Spirituality

The following article by John Gresham, Ph.D, was published in the September 2009 edition of Liguorian magazine. If you have a family member who struggles with the issue of God and science, you may want to share this article with him/her. Gresham, a seminary professor, writes:

For many people, religion has become like an old grandfather tucked away in a senior citizen's home. People stop by to see him when they are in town, mostly on Christmas and Easter, and listen to him ramble on about the good old days, but most of what he says does not seem relevant to their modern lives. They kindly pat him on the head before leaving, then quickly forget what he said as they seek their way through this modern world that has passed him by. And if religion in general is out of date, for them, Catholicism is surely irrelevant. Although some religions change and adapt to the world, the Catholic Church with all its traditions is hopelessly stuck in the past.

*How has religion come to such a state? **Three aspects of modern culture have rendered religion irrelevant to many.***

- *The first is the advancement of science. Many think of religion as a mythological view of reality that has been disproved and displaced by modern science. Science has answered so many questions that people no longer look to religion for answers.*
- *The second aspect is **skepticism**. Science answers so many questions and provides so much certainty about the physical world that many have given up on the possibility of finding the universal truths and morals religion once provided. Many conclude that in the realm of value and meaning, it is up to each person to construct his or her own private sense of truth and morality.*
- *This leads to the third aspect of our modern culture that seems to render religion irrelevant—the **pursuit of a personal spirituality severed from organized religion**. Again and again we hear the refrain, "I'm spiritual but not religious." In a world in which each*

person constructs his or her own meaning and purpose in life, spirituality becomes a private and individualistic pursuit. The outdated rules and rituals of organized religion seem irrelevant to the personal pursuit of spiritual meaning.

In this modern culture of science, skepticism, and do-it-yourself spirituality, is religion still relevant? Does religion have something to say to modern scientists, skeptics, and spiritual seekers? In particular, is the Catholic religion still relevant?

A closer look and a more careful consideration of each of these three dimensions of modern culture might show that religion still has something to say and that the Catholic faith in particular has immense relevance to the modern outlook.

Science and the ultimate questions

First, has science rendered religion irrelevant? It did seem so with the materialistic and mechanistic science predominant at the beginning of the twentieth century. Science portrayed the physical world as nothing but matter and energy interacting, according to deterministic laws of cause and effect, like a well-oiled machine. The world machine explained itself and seemed assured that as science continued to advance, religion would give way to a naturalistic, materialistic world-view. However, with the quantum revolution in physics and the genetic revolution in biology, science itself moved away from that mechanistic and materialistic model. Instead of mere matter and energy, scientists in many fields now speak of nature as matter, energy, and information. The more science has advanced, the more it has discovered patterns of mathematical symmetry and order in nature.

*In physicist Stephen Barr's book **Modern Physics and Ancient Faith**, he argues that modern advances in physics, rather than confirming a materialistic worldview, have suggested a view of reality more congruent with the ancient worldview of religion: a universe with a beginning, special and uniquely fine-tuned characteristics that make it hospitable to life, and capabilities of human thought to transcend and reach beyond matter.*

*Within the life sciences, geneticist Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome project, in his work **The***

Language of God, claims that his study of the genetic code strengthened his faith in a divine Creator.

Neither scientist rejects modern scientific accounts of the origin of the universe and the evolution of life on this planet, but both claim science points toward God as the ultimate Source of the complexity and order they discover within nature.

As science advances, it asks increasingly complex questions about the universe, eventually arriving at questions scientific methods are incapable of answering. In his history of the big bang theory of the origin of the universe, astronomer Robert Jastrow describes scientists as slowly climbing the mountain of knowledge, following the evidence that leads them step by step to the very beginning of the universe—only to arrive at the top of the mountain and find theologians already there with answers to their questions. With its amazing capabilities to answer questions of “What?” and “How?” science does not contain within itself the means to answer ultimate questions of “Why?” Why is there a universe? What is its meaning and purpose? Those questions remain relevant, and we must turn from science to religion to find answers.

Scientific advances in genetic engineering, embryonic stem-cell research, and human/animal hybridization, to name a few, raise profound ethical questions science cannot answer. What is the value of the human person? What distinguishes what we can do scientifically from what we ought to do (or avoid doing) ethically? If science cannot answer these questions, where can we turn?

Perhaps we should reconsider the relevance of religion with its rich and ancient reflections on human morality and universal codes of virtue and value that have been applied and adapted again and again to the ethical challenges that have arisen through the ages.

Catholicism becomes uniquely relevant to these modern challenges. The Catholic Church has a long history of reflection on the natural moral law and its application to changing historical and cultural challenges. At the center of the Church’s reflection on the ethical issues raised by scientific advances is an unwavering commitment to the dignity and value of each human. According to Catholic teaching, each person is created in the image of God, each person is loved by God, and each person’s life is a gift from God. Catholicism finds that dignity enhanced even further by the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. God became man in Jesus Christ, thereby uniting himself to every human. In an age in which the potential misuses of science threaten human life and dignity, this profound affirmation of the dignity and value of each person assures the continuing relevance of the Catholic religion.

Skepticism fails to satisfy

For many people, it’s not science but skepticism that makes religion irrelevant in the modern world. With so many religions and philosophies giving so many different answers, it is easy to dismiss them all and adopt a philosophy of relativism and an attitude of skepticism. Religion is irrelevant, modern skeptics assert, because it cannot provide answers for everyone. We must not impose our values on others, they insist, but let everyone formulate their own philosophy of life and find what is right for them.

Despite its initial appeal, skepticism cannot satisfy. No matter how much we assert a relativistic morality, we live our lives in such a way that a sense of a universal morality constantly reasserts itself. We still hold people accountable. When we judge the behaviors of other people, when we insist on justice in the world or complain about injustice, when we condemn evils in the world, we show our sense of a universal standard of morality to which all are accountable. We even hold ourselves accountable. When we violate certain standards, we argue with ourselves and justify our actions to ourselves.

Who are we arguing with? We may say it is our conscience and then try to dismiss it as the result of our upbringing. “It’s just that Catholic guilt!” we might say. And yet if we pay close attention to these interior debates, we become aware that our conscience appeals to a standard of measurement, a standard of right and wrong that is external to us and to which all are accountable.

Skepticism quickly loses its appeal when we encounter those who violate these norms of morality, whether in the name of political ideology, religious militancy, or personal gain. We easily see the evils of political ideologues, religious terrorists, and depraved criminals. No matter their cultural, religious, political, or personal worldview, we condemn those who murder the innocent.

Such evils have particularly characterized the contemporary world and have repeatedly shown the vacuous emptiness of relativism. Those hints of a universal morality within our own experience and the need for a morality to which all are held accountable should lead us beyond the narcissistic appeal of an individualized morality to consider that universal moral standard. Religion once again becomes relevant. Although religion has been used for evil, and some continue to foment violence under the guise of twisted religious ideologies, religion provides an ancient and continuing witness to the commandments, the values, and the virtues of the moral life.

With its teachings on the natural moral law, the Catholic faith is particularly relevant in an age of relativism. It appeals not just to Catholic believers but to all people of goodwill, as rational and free persons, to follow the universal precepts of the law we all share by our common human nature. But the Catholic message does not end with the natural law; the Church proposes a way out of skepticism through divine revelation: God has pierced the darkness of our skepticism with the illuminating light of his divine Presence in Christ. In our confusing age, in which truth can seem so elusive, it is easy to adopt a skeptical outlook. Yet the Catholic Church offers the hopeful proposal that God seeks to rescue us from our mental and moral confusion. God has stepped into history as man in the Incarnation of Christ, revealing the truth about God and humanity and offering that truth to us as a gift. The Catholic Church is called to witness to this gift of truth and to offer that gift throughout history. This gift has the utmost relevance to our confused relativistic age and offers the hope of attaining truth a skeptic ought not ignore.

Do-it-yourself spirituality

Having given up on religion as irrelevant, many people nonetheless are aware of a spiritual hunger within themselves. However, they do not look to the Church or to religion but seek to construct their own spirituality. People want to be spiritual without being religious.

And yet their quest for spirituality confirms what religion teaches. In its opening paragraphs, the Catechism of the Catholic Church proclaims, “The desire for God is written in the human heart” (27). It goes on to say that only in God will we find the truth and happiness we continuously seek. In this quest, the seeker ought not neglect or ignore the wisdom of many others throughout history who have pursued the same quest. Otherwise, the seeker may be condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Nor should the seeker pursue the quest alone, neglecting the supportive company of others. It is easy for a spiritual seeker traveling alone to lose his or her way. Religion provides that accumulated wisdom of the ages and the contemporary companionship of others on the spiritual quest.

CATHOLIC Tradition is particularly rich in this regard, with a long history of spiritual writings from the incisive sayings of the early desert fathers and mothers to the deep mystical insights of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila and on to the little way of love described by Thérèse of Lisieux, as well as those of countless others.


And this spiritual wisdom is not just a thing of the past. Spiritual seekers may be surprised at the wise and helpful guidance they find if they take time to visit a Catholic parish, shrine, or retreat center and talk to that “irrelevant” priest or sister they meet there.

Those on a spiritual quest soon discover their need for silence, and the quiet of a Catholic Church or chapel provides a much-needed environment for meditation and prayer. Catholics believe Christ is present there in a unique and special way, waiting to welcome the seeker. The One we seek is already seeking us. Jesus Christ offers himself to us first in the Incarnation and then again and again in the Blessed Sacrament. Those who take time to pray to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament may discover just how relevant he is to their questions and desires.

Scientific advances have made religion more relevant, not less. The Catholic Church proclaims Christ as the answer to the human quest for meaning, an answer that remains ever relevant, even in this age of science, skepticism, and do-it-yourself spirituality.

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Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.