

## A Lifescape work in progress

### In search of the secular soul

Do we we need God to be good; or faith to be happy; or would a world and a personal psychological and spiritual life WITHOUT God and religious belief be the ultimate liberation...?

When I received my Spring 2007 issue of the magazine **Resurgence** I saw that the main question posed was 'Do we need God?'. The purpose of the question was to mount a two-pronged attack on Richard Dawkins' new book the **God Delusion**. In the editorial Satish Kumar seems to argue that science is simply one way of seeing the world - the new kid on the block lacking the wisdom of the old ways. It's a rollicking piece of writing (though certainly not based on an analysis I share) as he seethes at how "*Godless science, secular sociology and politics and profane technology have given us global warming, nuclear weapons, a population explosion and umpteen other environmental, psychological and geopolitical problems*" and eulogises a mythical time when, long ago, everyone rejoiced as they discovered a word "*that would encapsulate the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, the physical and the non-physical, the material and the non-material*" and "*after a long search, a word was found, and it was God*".

This is followed by an article by spiritual writer Deepak Chopra, who lays into Dawkins and sets out an alternative vision, that claims to be as scientifically valid as what he calls Dawkins 'absurd position'. Chopra's view is one which sees "*God as a quality of consciousness*" rather than "*an unnecessary burden on human intelligence*". In his piece he does something that is becoming common in the self-help, personal development genre. He accuses Dawkins of being stuck in the science of the 'material universe' and then claims some greater understanding: that the quantum universe is somehow consistent with a 'designed' one, an intelligent one; and therefore, hey presto, there **is** a God (I simplify his argument a little - but not that much!). Needless to say, the science of these claims is pretty speculative, and his interpretations possibly deeply questionable.

As I would usually have considered that these three immensely intelligent men would share a broad core of values about human beings and the planet, I can only conclude that Dawkins is right that the God agenda seems to blind some people to the really important issues - which I guess is the whole point of his book! And having read and loved the God Delusion, I also was left with a question about whether Chopra and Kumar had actually read the same book as I had, or even (whisper it!) read it at all!

The debate in Resurgence, has, however, raised some big questions for me. As a therapist I think about the spiritual experience as being part of our psychology - whether person or collective - so while I may not give much thought to the question of God, I often think about the 'soul' experiences of my clients. So the debate has led me to think about the 'soul' again, and whether we can even think about it as a core concept for human beings without it being sucked back into supernatural belief; or whether, as the evolutionary psychologists might have it, 'soul' is a concept that has had its day, and human behaviour and motivation should now be explained in terms of biological and cultural evolution. And I've also been reminded that for some time, I, like many others, may have been stuck in a kind of liberal limbo: we oppose authoritarianism, prejudice, discrimination - of course we do - so we accept everyone's right to believe what they want, and even celebrate this as part of a diverse, multiculturalism. But, as we've seen, the rise of fundamentalist Christian and Muslim activism has shown that actually there are plenty of people out there who while benefiting from this inclusivity, don't believe in diversity at all. They think that only they are right and are prepared to go to some drastic lengths to get everyone else to believe this too.

Behind all of this, many people (some who come to talk to psychotherapists) who are searching for meaning, and their place in this world; and some who are trying to come to terms with suffering that can result from religious teachings and practices. Perhaps this search for meaning and understanding is because they know, instinctively, that they have been short-changed by religious belief systems, handed down over centuries, that are no more than institutionalised superstition; but in losing the security that religion provided, they feel cast adrift.

## In search of the secular soul **continued**

But where does this leave the soul? The concept is usually regarded as a religious one. In most spiritual traditions - including Chopra's new-age mission of "*bridging the technological miracles of the west with the wisdom of the east*" (is there no technology in the east or wisdom in the west worth bridging?) - the soul is associated with life after death: it reassures us, gives us hope (so goes the argument) that we (and our loved ones) live on in some way.

There is an argument that modern psychological suffering (and, Kumar might argue, the desecration our planet too) emerges from the spiritual void of the secular age - valueless, without real boundaries of behaviour, with no God to turn to for comfort. For me, many of the most ethical people I have known either have no religion, are de-facto cultural adherents to a faith or are out and out atheists. In short they want to be good for the sake of goodness and the wellbeing of others, not because their faith tells them too. And maybe the spiritual void can be filled with something else?: a wonder for the world; a sense of solidarity and love for our fellow human beings; the development of fulfilling relationships; being creative and the following of our destiny.

This destiny is what James Hillman calls soul - the acorn we are born with, the tree we grow into, our innermost being. It is, like other useful things in psychology, a metaphor, but one that can be immensely powerful and liberating. The old adage "know thyself" was at the heart of Freud's work and maybe we can't properly know ourself, if we turn to 'God' to know our spiritual 'self'.

So my answer to the question, 'Do we need God?' is "I don't think we do"... We can have experiences of joy, bliss and transcendence without faith and belief. We can be good without God; save the planet without God; make peace without God; love without God and explain how we got here without God. And as Dawkins points out the universe is a spectacularly, wonderful enough place without God, and would almost certainly be a better one without religion.

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### **Notes:**

This is a shortened early version of a longer piece that will be posted and published in due course. In the meantime I'd be interested in responses to this piece and any ideas around the idea of the 'secular soul'.

The editorial by Satish Kumar and the article by Deepak Chopra, can be found in the current edition of Resurgence, and online at: [www.resurgence.org](http://www.resurgence.org)

Deepak Chopra's website is: [www.chopra.com](http://www.chopra.com)

Richard Dawkins' website is: [www.richarddawkins.net](http://www.richarddawkins.net)