

Religious Belief and its Nemesis

Kai Nielsen

It has often been said that people draw their moral strength from religion. Such sayers usually go on to say that is what religion usually does for many people. It psychologically and morally grounds them. It, they say, is the means by which they make sense of their lives and of the world around them and of their place in it and of their relationships to others. For many it is the bedrock of their community and their identity. I agree with this, old atheist that I am. And I also agree that in one degree or another it is true about all cultures and about most people in all cultures. Anthropology teaches us that. But not everyone in every culture is like this. There will always be some who will sit uneasily around their tribal campfires. This will even be so for the most homogenous cultures. They will have their skeptics and critics, though in some places more than in others. Everywhere there will be or have been those who do not warm themselves around the tribal campfire.

This is increasingly so as modernity with its advantages in education meanders along. The Alasdair MacIntyres and Charles Taylors of the world have been unable to stop it or to do much to slow it down. Darwin (his wishes to the contrary notwithstanding), Marx, Freud, Weber and Durkheim along with the physical sciences have left their mark. I have spent a large part of my life trying to show there are purely secular alternatives to religion that are better. And this is not to Dworkin-like have a religion without God. We do not need any kind of religious orientation, not even Theravada Buddhism, to make sense of our lives and of the world around us or to find our grounding and its bedrock in community and identity. I have tried to show, *pace* Kierkegaard, that we do not have to crucify or disregard our intellects to make sense of our lives and to have a secure identity in the world or to have a secure orientation as to how to try to act in it. We do not need religious faith

for any of that. That is just at best a false compliment that some people give themselves. They are being led down the garden path.

There are some people who are helplessly in horrible circumstances in our heartless world as Marx saw it. He went on to say not only that religion was the opiate of the people but that it was the heart of a heartless world. (*Sometimes* metaphors are useful.) For some of these people it may well be the case that religion may be the only way they can gain some surcease. It may be the only way that they can find to somehow manage. I do not say that is the best way for people so situated to manage, let alone the only way. But I do recognize that at least for many it is the only way they find and that without it they will feel anchorless and utterly despairing. I do not say that it will always be so and I hope that it will eventually not even be for anyone. But hope is one thing and belief is another. Indeed, for some of us who have read some anthropology, it will seem very unlikely.

I am not like one of my graduate students, now a retired professor, who once said to me, “Kai, why do you go around trying to take candy from children?” Aside from being incredibly paternalistic towards religious people and religion, it is not at all what I have tried to do. I have tried instead to free those who are both torn by and about religion and as well about unbelief. I have tried to show them that they do not need religion to make sense of their lives and of the world.

I have also been said to be an evangelical atheist. Well, if to do what I have tried to do as I gestured at above or to be a critic of religion is to be an evangelical atheist, then I am an evangelical atheist. But to be an evangelical atheist is to go around preaching atheism as a faith. To stir up people into atheism as something they must believe in. Not even Nietzsche did that and I certainly don't. The very phrase 'evangelical atheism' is a *persuasive* redefinition of 'atheism'. It is not anything that an atheist need be or indeed should be. I hope that some of my writing helps to free those who are both ambivalently torn by religion and about unbelieving as well and trying both to understand their world and change it as well and to make sense of their lives. I say to them that they need go neither

Kierkegaardian nor leftwing Catholic or a Catholic or Protestant at all, nor in anyway religious. Not a Jew, Christian, Hindu or any such thing. Moreover, 'atheism' need not be another such thing.

I have been said to be an evangelical atheist. Well, in trying to do what I have just said, I have tried to understand religion and I have been a critic of religion as well. But I have always tried to be reasonable and undogmatic about it. Along the way I, like others, believers and unbelievers alike, have no doubt made mistakes. But never dogmatically so or fanatically so. I have always tried to be in accord with reason or at least reasonability. That does sound like evangelical atheism and I don't think it is because I do not preach the abandonment of religion. Moreover, to so label me is to employ an unjustifiable *persuasive redefinition*. If someone thinks they need religion, I, *if asked*, try to show them they do not need it and that being non-religious will not cripple or lessen them. And I have tried to put these arguments with rational care. Perhaps I am mistaken? I am a thorough fallibilist but again not as a matter of faith. As I grow older and older I am less and less attuned to religion, even to making critiques of it. But I am perfectly aware of and respectful of the fact that that is not the way all people go. But like Richard Rorty, I am more and more bored by religion.