

Rav Kook - Zironim

The foundation of religious faith is rooted in the recognition of the greatness and perfection of the Infinite. Whatever we conceive of it is insignificant in comparison with what by right we should conceive of it, and what we should conceive of it is not much more significant in comparison to what it really is. Whatever we may say of the good, of mercy, justice, might, beauty, of life and the beauty of life, or of religious faith, or of the divine---what the soul in its authenticity aspires for is above all these. All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word "God." Every definition of God brings about heresy, every definition is spiritual idolatry; even attributing to Him intellect and will, even the term *divine*, the term *God* suffers from the limitations of definition. Except for the keen awareness that all these are but sparkling flashes of what cannot be defined---these, too, would engender heresy. Among people who have lost this basic awareness they have indeed engendered gross heresy. If we become alienated from this basic perception, our faith will be impoverished and become valueless. ..

When one submits to a service of God on this empty basis, according to the confused notions that are engendered in the soul when one thinks about God without enlightenment and without Torah, we have here a lower form of piety severed from its source, which is the higher piety. The person increasingly loses the splendor of his world by orienting himself to a lower level of intellectual life. No grandeur of God is then manifest in the soul, but only the lowliness of wild imaginings, than conjure up a form of some deceptive, vague, angry deity that is dissociated from reality. It confuses everyone who believes in it, depresses his spirit, blunts his feelings, inhibits the assertion of his sensibilities, and uproots the divine glory in his soul. If such a person should repeat all day that this faith is the faith in the unity of God, his statement would be empty, and it would register nothing in his soul. Every sensitive spirit must turn his mind away from this. And this is the atheism which is due to arise prior to the messianic liberation, when the knowledge of God is due to run dry in the household of Israel---and in the entire world...

The tendency of unrefined people to see the divine *essence* as embodied in the words and in the letters alone is a source of embarrassment to humanity, and atheism arises as a pained embarrassment to humanity, and atheism arises as a pained outcry to liberate man from this narrow and alien pit, to raise him from the darkness of focusing on letters and expressions, to the light of thought and feeling, finally to place his primary focus on the realm of morals. Atheism has a temporary legitimacy, for it is needed to purge away the aberrations that attached themselves to religious faith because of a deficiency in perception and in the divine service. This is its sole function in existence---to remove the *particular* images from the speculations concerning Him who is the *essence* of all life and the source of all thought. When this condition persists for a period of several generations, atheism necessarily presents itself as a specific cultural expression, to uproot the remembrance of God and all institutions of divine service. But to what uprooting did divine providence intend? To uproot the dross that separates man from the truly divine light, and in the ruins wrought by atheism will the higher knowledge of God erect her Temple. To cleanse the air of the arrogant and evil aberration of focusing thought on the divine *essence*---a preoccupation that leads to idolatry---a thorough going atheism arises, in itself no better than he former but opposed to it in absolute terms. Out of the clash of these two opposites will mankind be aided greatly to reach an enlightened knowledge of God, which will bring near its temporal and eternal happiness...

The violence of atheism will cleanse away the dross that accumulated in the lower levels of religious faith, and thereby will the heavens be cleared and the shining light of the higher faith will become visible, which is the song of the world and the truth of the world...

Whoever recognizes the essence of atheism from this perspective embraces the positive element in it and traces it back to its origin in holiness. He glimpses the awesome splendor in the ice-like formations upon the celestial horizon (Cf. Ezekiel 1:22)...

When one discovers the stern protest embodied in rebellion and atheism, which seeks to repudiate the good of our ancestral inheritance in pursuit of some new vision, one finds the element of good inherent in it. It is in truth a general aspect of penitence stirring the heart. It is the kernel of repentance that seeks to redress everything lowly and defective, and as a result of it one also comes to redress the defect that is represented in its destructiveness...

From time to time there is exposed the admixture of the pure belief in one God with the obfuscation of ascribing corporeality to Him, and whenever an aspect of anthropomorphism falls away, it appears as though religion itself has fallen. Soon, however, it turns out that religion has not fallen, but has become clarified. In the recent turn of the human spirit toward pure faith the last subtle shell of anthropomorphism is giving way, which consists in ascribing the attribute of general *existence* to God, for truly whatever we ascribe to the term *existence* is immeasurably remote from the divine. This denial has the sound of atheism. It is, however, the highest expression of religion when it becomes well clarified, and the human spirit grows accustomed to hearing the message of religion in terms of actions and influences, the phenomena of existence and the phenomena of the Torah and of morals—the recognition that the *divine is the activating influence on existence and is therefore, obviously above existence*. What looks like atheism, cleansed of its defilement, thus returns to the highest realms of pure religion. But this denial of *existence* [in God], which is a return to the vision of God as the source of all existence and to the most ultimate essence of the majesty of all existence, requires the most scrupulous understanding. Each day it must be traced back to its authentic purity...

On seeing such convulsions people believe that religion is dying, that the world is being overturned. In truth, however, the shadows are stirring, they are in flight in order to make room for the light. If religious faith is to be revitalized, a great effort is needed to deepen the knowledge of God, to follow the most subtle paths of mystical thinking through which one rises above every kind of limitation in God...

But it is precisely when the lights are in convulsion, and the vessels that have housed them seem about to break, that there is need to proclaim that indeed the letters, the words, the actions, are not the essence of the light, but they are vessels, the organs of a living body, which bears within itself a soul. But alas for anyone who denies them even the role of vessels. Whoever denies the holiness of the letters, the words, the actions and the forms within their own domain, will render himself speechless, without utterance, without any inner conceptual image, and altogether without the power to act, flooded by various forces that will disturb him altogether body and soul.