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Mary McCarthy
Collapse of religion is inevitable

Reason will win out over religious faith, which just allows us to do and suffer wrongs, argues **LLOYD REINHARDT**.

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MOST of religion seems to me a bad thing. The position of the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, opposes birth control and curbs the activities of priests who have supported poor people against oppression. However, especially in the United States, secular liberalism seems to be on the defensive. It oughtn't to be. Reason is on its side and eventually will prevail. The enlightenment will not be reversed. I hope.

Abraham Lincoln once said to one of us atheists: "Sir, your arguments against the Christians are enough to convert me!" But that suggests that Lincoln was not a Christian. If the suggestion is true, then, since Lincoln was a good man, it is false that to be good requires belief in God or other religious conviction. There are those, Dostoyevsky, for example, who have held that atheism entails license and wickedness. Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, maintains that if God does not exist, then anything is permitted. Riposting, I believe that to advocate this view is stupid and bad.

Dostoyevsky is an apt butt for a barb from Mhort Sahl, a San Francisco comedian of the '50s. Sahl, an atheist, told of walking and arguing with a religious acquaintance who refused to believe that he was an atheist. It was a rainy night, and Sahl helped a wet cat to a dry place. His companion gloated: "See! You do believe in God!" We find a similar theology in

the French philosopher Simone Weil: "God is the Good; the Good is Desire for the Good; so God is Desire for the Good." Vulgar versions abound in churches in America where theology is often diluted to the doctrine that God is (in the sense of "equals") love. If true, it must be difficult to be a happily married atheist.

Those who connect decency and deity mean to show that ethics makes no sense without religion. On the contrast, religious thought is an offshoot of ethical thought (and metaphysics). That being so, religion still seems as doomed as it did when I was an undergraduate, though it is a longer time dying than we hoped. Bernard Williams, an English philosopher, says the vacuity of modern theology and the plethora of fanatical sects are both symptoms of the decline of religion. Fanaticism is inversely proportional to the degree of rationality informing its convictions.

Another prop for collapsing religion is, to borrow the title of the ABC program, "the search for meaning". Of late we have been cursed with versions of finding it all meaningful that have the imprimatur of scientists, Paul Davies being the most visible. But arguments that claim to establish God's existence on the basis of the order of the world were demolished by David Hume in the 18th century. A new idea, the anthropic principle, says that any theory of the universe that rules out creatures capable of knowledge (or error) about the universe must be wrong. So our existence is meaningful because if things had been different, we wouldn't be here. The kindest response is: "So what?"

It is good to understand the natural order and it is good to live happily, perhaps even to live meaningfully, though I don't know what that means beyond caring about some things more than others and finding that one's cares, or failures to care, do not lead to misery. That takes luck. Because it does take luck, and is beyond our control, people may continue to want prayer in their lives, which is, at best, an effort to reconcile oneself to doing and suffering wrong, to the horror in the world, and an effort to overcome what Iris Murdoch calls our fat, selfish egos. But I agree with Mary McCarthy, who said: "Only people who are very good can afford to become religious; with all the others it makes them worse."

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