

Ersatz Religion

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As World War I came to an end, returning Allied prisoners brought back stories of ersatz coffee. It looked genuine enough, but the similarities ended there. In reality, the warm brown liquid was concocted out of burnt acorns and barley. With every bitter, unsatisfying sip, the soldiers dreamed of the real thing.

Prisoners were not the only ones to experience the shortages of war-torn Germany. All sorts of ersatz foods were created to meet the dietary habits of the common folk. It was important that they **seemed** to be drinking a cup of coffee, or **seemed** to be eating a familiar cut of meat.

In the German language, *ersatz* simply meant “substitute” or “replacement.” For homebound troops, the word came to mean “fake” or “inferior,” and so it entered the ever-malleable English language. Today we have ersatz religion. It’s not the real thing, and like ersatz food, it’s intended to fill a void. In this case, the void is a loss of meaning.

One example is evolution. I am not a fan of labeling evolution a religion – at least not in the strict sense of the word. While the term *religion* is notoriously hard to pin down, the adherents of any particular religion generally:

- hold to a set of beliefs about the nature of reality and human existence,
- maintain a set of practices based on those beliefs, and
- are engaged in spreading those beliefs and practices.

This definition is broad, maybe too broad, but members of the evolutionary establishment generally stumble on the second point. Most evolutionists **don’t** practice what they believe. For a start, we would expect their overriding naturalism to lead them on a path to **existential nihilism**: the belief that our very existence is meaningless. Carl Sagan comes close when he declares the cosmos to be “all that is or ever was or ever will be.”¹ At this point a thoroughly consistent evolutionist should jump off the nearest tall building, but this rarely happens. Why? What keeps him from utter despair and self-destruction?

Sagan’s response is typical. He steps back from the abyss by assuring his audience that in our contemplation of the cosmos “we are approaching the greatest of mysteries.” We find

meaning, he thinks, by dwelling on who we are and why we are here – an activity, by the way, that is both uniquely human and utterly inexplicable in purely natural terms.

As I write this article, a new documentary series has started showing on cable TV: “Miracle Planet: The Evolution of Our World.” Countless nature documentaries follow suit; they push materialism while helping themselves to the language of design, purpose, and progress. A truly miraculous planet is unthinkable to evolutionists but so, apparently, is a world devoid of meaning.

We might expect a thoroughly consistent evolutionist to adopt **axiological nihilism**, which denies any kind of value. In a bleak material world, there is no good, no evil, nothing beautiful, nothing ugly, no right, and no wrong. And yet, evolutionists are constantly moralizing about our duties to humankind. Sagan assures his readers that compassion, a love for our children, and a “soaring passionate intelligence” are our tools for survival and prosperity. So much, I guess, for the blind, uncaring forces of nature.

The apostles of Darwinism are trying to fill a void. They are preaching an ersatz gospel to a culture where devotion to God is in short supply, but where spiritual habits and intuitions die hard. Like waking up to a bitter cup of *ersatzkaffee*, evolutionists must make do with a world of fake purpose, fake goodness, and fake beauty. It is an ersatz religion, not because the underlying doctrines are false (which they are), but because it strives for the spiritual while denying the Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:10-16).

Ersatz faith comes in many forms. The late Michael Crichton described environmentalism as “the religion of choice for urban atheists.”² In the church of the ecofriendly, we are all “energy sinners.” Recycle or perish. Bless the organic supper. James Herrick has noted the religious role of aliens in contemporary culture.³ For hard-core atheists and New Age spiritualists alike, extraterrestrials have become our elders, betters, creators, and saviors.

These pretend religions are not just missing the Spirit of God – they’re missing anything resembling a foundation for their hope (Hebrews 11:1). In reality, we cannot admire the creation without praising its Creator. We cannot act as stewards of the earth without acknowledging the privileged status of human life. Anything less is fake, inferior, and deeply unsatisfying.

¹ All quotes attributed to Carl Sagan come from *Cosmos*, New York: Random House, 1980.

² Michael Crichton, "Environmentalism as Religion," September 15, 2003. [Online] <http://www.crichton-official.com/speech-environmentalism-as-religion.html>

³ James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.