

Beyond Belief?

Hugh Mackay

“In Australia, two factors may be contributing to a more sympathetic attitude towards the idea of nurturing the spiritual dimension of our lives – whether via religion or some other strategy. First, there have been some signs of a pulling-back from the rampant consumerism of the past thirty years, as Australians realise they may have been too dependent on the mining industry for a sense of economic invincibility that has, ironically, translated into record levels of household debt. At the same time, new research coming from the field of positive psychology is challenging the wisdom of our obsession with the pursuit of personal happiness and restoring some common sense to the debate about the sources of life’s deepest satisfactions. (It turns out they do not include holiday houses, swimming pools, renovated kitchens or new cars, though any of these things might make us happy, at least for a while).

None of this would lead anyone to predict a resurgence of religion in Australia on the scale of some other parts of the world – especially less-prosperous nations, where religion has always carried the implied promise of a better life, at least in the hereafter. But, if the swinging pendulum of history is any guide, it does suggest that some forms of religion – or possibly a more generic ‘spirituality’ – will make a modest comeback, and new forms of faith will continue to emerge.

It also suggests that much-maligned agnosticism – the position that reserves judgement about the existence of a supreme being in whatever form – may gain ground. After all, scepticism is a well-established principle of honest philosophical and scientific enquiry and the leap to doubt-free atheism is at least as bold as the leap to doubt-free theism. Already, the spirituality movement has captured the imagination of many people – especially young people – who vehemently deny any interest in religion but still want to explore the non-material values and concepts, and the meditative practices, traditionally associated with religion. Indeed, many people

are now seeking ways of making sense of religious ideas, including the idea of Christian faith, without relying on traditional notions of a supreme being, and without surrendering themselves to a conventional framework of doctrines and beliefs.

Beyond Belief is a response to that kind of quest. While it rejects superstition and resists any suggestion of the supernatural, it acknowledges that life, and faith, are full of mysteries. To find all the answers to those mysteries would be to strip away too much of the pleasing sense of wonder we gain from our encounters with them.

Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief: How we are Finding Meaning with or without Religion*, kindle loc, 138-159.