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Miserable Comforters:

An Atheist's Feeble Attempt to Console the Bereaved

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah said, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces." But Susan Jacoby believes that Atheists can comfort the bereaved at least as well as those who cling to a god. According to her, Atheists can tell the bereaved, "May you find solace in the knowledge that the suffering is ours, but that those we love suffer no more." Theists generally offer the hope of some form of continued existence, while Jacoby's comfort is that death brings relief to the all the misery and suffering of life. Is that really such a comforting notion? The vast majority of humans believe that existence is better than non-existence. It is no coincidence that most religions throughout history have offered the promise of some kind of afterlife. It is only in the last few centuries that Atheism has become a viable belief, and even now there are not as many who find it comforting as Jacoby seems to think. Even the religiously unobservant generally have some vague belief in the spiritual, and the possibility of an afterlife. Of course majority vote does not settle such an issue. Nevertheless, the Atheist's creed that Jacoby holds to and tries to use for comfort is profoundly depressing. Two very different famous figures, Job and George Bailey, uttered it in moments of great desperation: "It would have been better if I had never been born!" While Jacoby does not explicitly say this in reference to those who are suffering, if she is intellectually consistent with her view that non-existence is a good thing if it means relief from misery, she must also endorse that sentiment.

Despite the troubling aspects of Jacoby's position, her claim that atheists can offer the same amount of comfort as theists can is not completely baseless. Her idea that non-existence

after death is as comforting as an after life is flawed of course. There is something within the human spirit that values existence. Jacoby might disagree, but I believe a vast majority of grieving family members would be happier to hear that their lost relatives still live on in some form than to know that they had ceased to be. But she is partially right that Atheists can be as comforting as theists, because many theists' version of the after life is not particularly comforting. The Atheist can tell the grieving parent that now her child is free from the misery of existence. Maybe the parent will feel mildly comforted: at least the child is not suffering. However, many theists are not particularly comforted by their own version of an afterlife. The vaguely religious politician who offers platitudes about the child flitting around as an angel, or perhaps coming back to visit the parents as a spirit, is not so very comforting either. In both cases the parent will continue to grieve, and wish her child were still alive. Thus, Jacoby is right: the Atheist is as comforting as most theists, because neither offers genuinely satisfying comfort.

Of course there is one system of belief that Jacoby is not really talking about, the Orthodox Christianity held by the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" for centuries. Jacoby believes she sufficiently addresses Christianity along with the other theists, covering all non-Atheists with one broad stroke. She is partially right about the generic theism that she primarily writes about, as it is not very comforting. However, the religion that she ignores has the answer to a fundamental question she leaves unanswered. Jacoby does not try to understand why death exists. All of humanity agrees on this if on nothing else, that death is not a particularly good thing. It is so obvious that she does not even seem to notice it. Death is clearly at the center of the article, but instead of addressing the existence of death she focuses her energy on showing why death is not so bad after all. Atheists and generic theists comfort by explaining why death is not so bad, but in the end they are left with the fact that death is bad, and they do not really know

why it exists. To this difficult question, the audacious religion founded by the God-man offers real answers.

Christianity is the only religion that truly comforts because it does not ignore the difficult parts of life, and describes the defeat of death. Unlike the other beliefs, orthodox Christianity does not shy away from the evil of death. It sees the world as incredibly flawed, and recognizes that death itself is the worst part. Death is not simply a part of life; it is an awful perversion of life. The Christian understands sin and sees all the suffering as a direct result of that sin. He recognizes what Jacoby refuses to see, that death is something for which there is no easy solution, and that platitudes about death “freeing us from suffering” offer little comfort. But Christianity also recognizes that not all death is equal. Because of a divine intervention into human history, in which God became man, lived, died, and then rose again, death has been defeated forever, and what we now call death is but a shadow of its former self. To those whom God loves, death is not the end of life. It is the end of the miserable, toilsome thing that we call life, and the beginning of the real thing. Because of the work of Christ, the Christian can experience heaven not as a consolation for no longer living, but as a genuinely good thing. The life we experience after death is first of all far superior to the peaceful non-existence that Jacoby finds comforting. But beyond that, it is in fact infinitely superior to the present life, with every good thing we experience magnified a thousand fold, and every evil one eliminated. If Jacoby correctly understood this view, perhaps she would not find her own notion of peaceful non-existence so very comforting in contrast.