

After Meaning

Secularization, anxiety, ritual decline, and the search for coherence

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Modern societies have weakened many inherited systems of meaning faster than they have built durable replacements. The result is not simple unbelief. It is a crowded market of substitute meanings: politics, wellness, identity, fandom, therapy, productivity, nationalism, spirituality, conspiracy, and self-design.

This report draws from sociology of religion, psychology, public-health research, surveys of religious affiliation, work on loneliness, and theories of meaning. It avoids religious apologetics and avoids the opposite error of treating secularization as automatic progress. The central claim is modest: people need coherence, belonging, ritual, and purpose. When older institutions lose authority, those needs do not disappear. They migrate.

At a glance

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| What is the core claim? | Meaning needs persist even when inherited religious and civic structures weaken. |
| Is secularization the same as nihilism? | No. Many secular people live meaningful lives. The problem is uneven access to stable sources of belonging and coherence. |
| Where does meaning migrate? | Politics, wellness, online subcultures, identity communities, fandoms, work, spirituality, therapy, and lifestyle systems. |
| What is the practical implication? | Societies should take ritual, belonging, intergenerational continuity, and local association seriously as public goods. |

The disappearance that did not disappear

Secularization is often described as the decline of religion. That is too simple. Formal religious affiliation has declined in many Western societies, but the underlying human needs served by religion have not vanished. People still need a story about what matters, practices that order time, communities that recognise them, symbols that carry memory, and ways to suffer without becoming meaningless to themselves.

Pew's work on religious "nones" in the United States shows that unaffiliation is substantial, but not always anti-spiritual. Many unaffiliated people retain beliefs, moral seriousness, or spiritual openness outside institutional religion. The World Values Survey likewise shows that societies vary along traditional and secular-rational values, but this does not produce a single clean story of enlightenment replacing belief. Meaning changes form.

The important point is not that everyone needs the same metaphysics. A secular humanist, a Christian, an atheist scientist, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Stoic, an artist, and a devoted parent can all live meaningful lives. The social question is whether modern conditions reliably help people form durable meaning, or whether they leave many people assembling identity from unstable fragments.

Why inherited meaning weakened

Several forces weakened inherited meaning systems: scientific authority, pluralism, consumer capitalism, mobility, individualism, scandals within institutions, political polarisation, and the decline of local communal life. Some of this weakening was morally necessary. Many inherited systems were coercive, exclusionary, or tied to unjust authority. The problem is that liberation from a structure does not automatically create a better structure.

Modern culture often offers choice in place of formation. Individuals are told to build a self, choose values, curate identity, optimise health, find passion, develop a brand, manage mental health, and design a life. This can be freeing for people with resources, confidence, and community. It can be exhausting for those without stable support. The burden of meaning moves from institution to individual.

The internet intensifies this burden by making every worldview available and socially comparable. A person can move between political outrage, spiritual practices, productivity systems, therapy language, doom news, fandom, conspiracy, and aesthetic identity in a single evening. This abundance can inspire, but it can also prevent depth. The self becomes a feed of possible selves.

Meaning, loneliness, and mental strain

Loneliness research is relevant because meaning is rarely private in practice. People need to matter to someone. WHO's Commission on Social Connection, OECD work, UK loneliness data, and youth well-being studies all point toward the health and social importance of connection. A life can have abstract beliefs and still feel empty if it lacks recognition, shared practice, and dependable contact.

Anxiety also has a meaning dimension. Some anxiety is clinical, biological, economic, or trauma-related. It should not be romanticised. Still, diffuse anxiety can be intensified by a lack of coherent orientation. If the world feels dangerous, institutions feel untrustworthy, the future feels unstable, and the self must be continuously invented, anxiety becomes a rational response to excessive interpretive burden.

Ritual helps reduce that burden. Ritual does not need to be religious. Shared meals, holidays, civic commemorations, seasonal events, mourning practices, initiation rites, graduation ceremonies, weekly gatherings, and local customs all tell people where they are in time and who is with them. A society with fewer shared rituals leaves more emotional work to the individual.

Substitute meanings

When traditional meaning weakens, substitutes appear. Politics can become a source of moral drama and belonging. Wellness can become a purity system. Work can become salvation through productivity. Therapy can become a language for selfhood. Fandom can become shared myth. National identity can become sacred history. Conspiracy can offer hidden order. Online subcultures can provide initiation, vocabulary, humour, status, and enemies.

These substitutes are mixed. Some are constructive. Mutual aid groups, local activism, philosophical communities, creative circles, and recovery groups can provide real meaning. Others become brittle because they lack humility, stable practice, or contact with reality. A political identity that supplies total meaning tends to require permanent conflict. A wellness identity can turn ordinary bodily life into endless self-surveillance. A conspiracy identity can protect meaning by rejecting correction.

The question to ask of any meaning system is not whether it is old or new. The question is whether it can carry suffering, correct itself, connect people across generations, encourage responsibility, and survive disappointment without requiring hatred.

The public task after meaning

A serious response would rebuild the middle layer of life: clubs, associations, libraries, local arts, faith communities, adult education, volunteering, public rituals, apprenticeships, intergenerational projects, and places where people are known without having to perform. Meaning is easier to sustain when it is practised with others.

Education should also treat meaning as a real human question without forcing a single answer. Philosophy, history, literature, religious literacy, civic education, and the arts help people inherit a wider vocabulary of purpose. A purely skills-based education may produce employability while leaving students metaphysically underfed.

The future is unlikely to be a simple return to old institutions. It will probably involve plural, layered meaning: some religious, some secular, some local, some digital, some philosophical, some artistic. The challenge is to make those layers durable enough to support life rather than merely decorate identity.

The sharp point: meaning did not disappear. It fragmented. The next serious cultural task is not nostalgia, but the rebuilding of forms that can hold freedom, belonging, and responsibility together.

The difference between freedom and weightlessness

Modern freedom often means freedom from imposed forms. That freedom matters. Many people have escaped oppressive families, rigid communities, abusive religious authorities, and inherited roles that left too little room for conscience. Any serious account of meaning must begin by admitting that older forms could wound as well as sustain.

The difficulty is that freedom from a form is not the same as having a form capable of supporting life. A person can be free to choose and still lack the materials with which to choose well. They may have options without orientation, networks without belonging, information without wisdom, and identity without continuity.

Weightlessness is the condition in which nothing binds strongly enough to carry suffering. It is not the same as atheism, liberalism, modernity, or youth. It can occur in religious and secular people alike. Its signs are fragmentation, performative selfhood, inability to commit, constant reinvention, and dependence on external validation.

What durable meaning tends to contain

Durable meaning usually contains time. It connects the person to a past and a future. This may happen through religion, family, craft, nation, art, science, education, service, or local place. A purely present-tense identity is fragile because it has no inheritance and no promise.

Durable meaning contains obligation. This is unfashionable but unavoidable. A life organised only around preference becomes thin when preference changes. Obligation to children, truth, craft, God, community, art, country, patients, students, friends, or the dead can give shape to action when feeling is absent.

Durable meaning contains practice. Beliefs alone are often too light. Rituals, study, service, exercise, prayer, conversation, craft, volunteering, and shared meals make meaning bodily and repeated. A meaning system without practice becomes content.

Durable meaning contains correction. A system that cannot be challenged becomes fanaticism. A system that cannot endure disappointment becomes aesthetic. The strongest forms of meaning can absorb failure without collapsing into cynicism.

Risks in the substitute marketplace

The substitute marketplace rewards intensity. A political cause, wellness regime, online identity, or spiritual system can gain power by offering total explanation and immediate belonging. That can be intoxicating for people who feel unseen. It can also narrow the world.

Therapeutic language can help people name harm and seek support. It can also teach people to interpret ordinary conflict as pathology, ordinary difficulty as trauma, and ordinary disagreement as danger. The result can be self-protection without growth.

Productivity culture can give structure and ambition. It can also turn the self into a permanent project and make rest feel like failure. Wellness culture can encourage care of the body. It can also become anxious purity. Political belonging can awaken responsibility. It can also become an identity that needs enemies to stay alive.

The test is fruit. Does the meaning system make a person more truthful, more responsible, more capable of love, more able to serve, more able to endure suffering, and more open to reality? If not, it may be offering stimulation rather than meaning.

A constructive settlement

A constructive settlement would defend pluralism while rebuilding depth. It would not force everyone back into one inherited structure. It would make serious forms of life easier to find and sustain. That means more local association, more public ritual, more intergenerational contact, more adult education, more spaces for service, and more respect for traditions that can still carry wisdom.

Institutions should become less embarrassed about formation. Schools form habits. Workplaces form character. Media form attention. Families form expectations. Platforms form desire. The question is not whether formation happens. It is whether it is conscious, humane, and answerable.

The cultural opportunity is large. People are searching because the need is real. A society that can offer freedom with depth, choice with formation, and plurality with belonging will be stronger than one that only offers consumption and argument.

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