

# humanist outlook

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## RELIGION IS PROTEAN\*

But our chief concern is with the humanistic approach to religion. - the consideration of religion as a function of the human organism, a natural product of human nature; and it is to this that we must return. There are many people who, though they claim to freethinking and independent judgment in religious matters, will not accept such an idea as possible, and many others who will say that they cannot see how religion can be defined in terms of human function. To them religion inevitably connotes the worship of an independent and divine Being; and the main emphasis in their thought is the relation of religion to the God instead of its relation to the man who practices it. They too are victims of the attitude of which I have already spoken - caught in the theological ideas of past ages, they have not yet succeeded in piercing beyond the products of religion to the religious impulse itself. They have accepted the orthodox idea of God at its face value, and have not perceived that God, in the current sense in which they use the word, is the creation of man.


But, you will ask, eliminate the idea of a Divine Person or Being to be worshipped, prayed to, or propitiated, and what remains of religion? A great deal, I would answer. For what all sorts of religions have in common is, first, a reaction of the human spirit to the facts of human destiny and the forces by which it is influenced; and secondly, a reaction into which enters a feeling of sacredness. This may seem so vague as to be no definition at all; yet religion is protean, and, like life, eludes precise or detailed definition. Life can scarcely be defined more specifically than as a capacity of certain kind of matter for continued cyclical reproduction. But, granted this general property, particular circumstances mould it into characteristic forms of the utmost concreteness, each vitally itself, and yet specifically interlocked with a specific environment and way of life, each with its own limitations, yet each alive and real. This general property of a certain kind of matter has permitted the development of oak-tree, toadstool, squirrel, and hawk, each gaining the matter for its self-reproduction in a different kind of way; has moulded the salmon to the water, the deer to the plains-ground, the swallow to the air; has produced creatures as differently organised as lobster, fish, and octopus, all equally well adapted to their surroundings, and yet each possessing its own type of organisation, wholly different from that of others; and, finally has given origin to a true progress, in which we can discern higher and lower organisations, and trace the real advance of some lives and the degeneration of others.

So, with religion. The capacity for religion, in the sense I have defined it, is a general property of the human mind in the conditions of existence upon this planet. But its manifestations, moulded by different environments, differences of tradition and training, variation in the natures and capacities of different human minds, and the histories of different human communities, are almost as varied as those of life.

\*Julian Huxley, *What Dare I Think*, Chatto & Windus, London, pages 192 - 3  
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## EDITORIAL

### Reflections on Ethical Resoluteness



The central message in the three episodes covered in Professor DeSouza's excellent lecture is that of ethical resoluteness. It is not a controversial message. Everyone agrees that we must have the courage of our convictions, that we must not compromise on our core principles. So why is it necessary to talk about something on which there is universal agreement? There is a good reason: while everyone agrees that we should act according to our firmly-held convictions, only a small percentage are able to do so in actual practice. One word that is surprisingly missing from our discourse on ethical behaviour is *akrasia*: a Greek word denoting weakness of will; acting in a way contrary to one's sincerely held moral values. To a greater or lesser extent we are all prone to *akrasia*. The examples - incredible but true - set by persons like Socrates, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or Suu Kyi need to be held up to us periodically to strengthen our resolve.

The idea of ethical resoluteness, however, does put out several threads of enquiry that are worth pursuing - hopefully without getting tied up in knots. The nature of the convictions being uncompromisingly followed assumes great importance. Are these convictions always right? The most telling example is that of the suicide bomber. To some, and it would not be easy to refute them, this may represent the ultimate in ethical resoluteness: courting certain death in pursuit of an ideal. Someone delivering an inspirational lecture on ethical resoluteness in Teheran would probably cite Ayatollah Khomeini, who said "Those who follow the rules of the Koran are aware that we have to obey the laws of *qissas* (retribution) and that we have to kill... War is a blessing for the world and for every nation. It is Allah himself who commands men to wage war and kill." How many lives have been given up, and taken, pursuing the ethics enunciated here

Possibly with this this difficulty in mind, Professor DeSouza (replying to a question from the audience) said: "I think resoluteness is basically to a core of principles that actually are *constitutive of a decent society*" Mere resoluteness is not enough. The cause - or course of action - has to be ethically right ie, following Professor DeSouza, "constitutive of a decent society". But the Taliban will argue (and in many cases quite sincerely) that that is exactly what they are fighting for so resolutely: a decent and God-fearing society. Clearly, ethical resoluteness can be a deadly weapon if the ethics are wrong or misguided. But who is to decide what is wrong or misguided?

Before this question is pursued further, another line of enquiry - which, as we shall see, has a bearing on Humanism - insinuates itself into the discussion. This has to do with dogmatic certainty. While not all acts of ethical resoluteness may involve dogmatic certainty, it would be difficult to deny that ethical resoluteness, so uncompromising as to lead one to kill, and to give up one's own life - through fasting, self-immolation or the explosives

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belt - implies a total . (one could say: dogmatic) certainty as to one's beliefs. Humanism, on the other hand, is opposed to dogmatic belief-systems. HE Bell perhaps expressed it best when he wrote: "Only reason can convince us of those three fundamental truths without a recognition of which there can be no effective liberty: that what we believe is not necessarily true; that what we like is not necessarily good; and that all questions are open." Narsingh Narain said: " I would go so far as to say that it is better that a man should hold a wrong belief undogmatically than a true belief dogmatically." The native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er as much by an open mind as with the pale cast of thought. In the balance, we welcome it.

We now revert to the question: But who is to decide what is wrong or misguided? The followers of traditional religions - especially monotheistic religions of the book - feel that they are on safe grounds here. Their scriptures are a sure guide to what is right and what is wrong in the eyes of God. Total certainty as to the rightness of his beliefs is, therefore, not an issue with the true believer, so his ethical resoluteness is basically a function of the strength of his will, his courage. Humanists, and others not so firmly committed to traditional religions, are unable to enjoy this kind of certainty and may not be prepared to kill or be killed for their beliefs. So ethical resoluteness - at least in its extreme forms - is much more likely to be prevalent among the followers of dogmatic religions than among humanists and secularists. There is a demographic imbalance here; the followers of traditional religions far outnumber humanists or secularists. The high incidence of suicide-bombings and sectarian violence in certain parts of the world bears this out.

Since, for a true believer, it is not the strength of his convictions but the strength of his will that stands in the way of his taking extreme steps to ..... *akrasia* may be a blessing in disguise after all. This is a knotty problem: if everyone followed his inner convictions to the hilt, there would be perpetual conflict. This suggests that ethical resolve and ethical evolution must go hand-in-hand, but with ethical evolution in the lead. The chief obstacle to ethical evolution - at least as Humanists see it - is dogmatic religion. It is no wonder that the International Humanist Movement was founded to provide an alternative to dogmatic religions, which means an alternative to God-fearing morality.

While ethical resolve has been highlighted in the episodes chosen, an equally important thread common to the three protagonists is compassion. In fact, in all ethically crucial issues, compassion (compassion for all, not for one's fellow-believers only) must play a large part. Every Humanist pondering on these episodes will draw his own conclusions; but a little reflection will bring out four basic features of the Humanist outlook: the autonomous (not God-given) nature of morals; the primacy of ethics - ethical resoluteness being an instrumental value; the primacy of compassion in ethics and the primacy of reason in realising ethical values. This last being summed up beautifully in HJ Eysenck's celebrated phrase: "Reason in the service of compassion".

Vir Narain

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## **50TH ANNIVERSARY LECTURE**

### **A HUMANIST MESSAGE IN THREE EPISODES\***

**Peter DeSouza**

I do know that supernatural help has no place in the platform of the Humanist Union. But, I would request you today to give me a temporary dispensation. Please allow me to invoke help from all quarters in the challenging task before me: to give a lecture that is appropriate for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Indian Humanist Union. To speak in celebration of an idea, a movement and an institution requires such assistance. Ladies and Gentlemen, at the outset, let me say, how honoured I am by your request. I do hope that I can at least partly meet your expectations.

To address the Indian Humanist Union, a full member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union on its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is a singular privilege and a big responsibility. Such an anniversary lecture requires one to speak to a history, stretching from the Italian Renaissance through the intellectual debate from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to the three Humanist Manifestos of 1933, 1973 and 2003. To speak not just to a history but to a philosophy of rationalism, empiricism and an ethical credo that is rooted in and stems from human need and interest and finally to speak to a politics committed to an open and participatory democracy. This task is a little daunting and a little super natural help would do nicely, but, since that it is not available to me and the dice fall on my lot, let me try and offer you some reflections.

Let me use an outflanking strategy to present my argument rather than analytically engage with the seventeen aspects of the Humanist Manifesto of 1973, which by itself is a very powerful normative agenda - or even the six primary beliefs of 2003 Humanist Manifestos, although, that too is very tempting since each of them is relevant to seventeen themes that have been set out.

Let me begin the discussion by inviting you to reflect on something that occurred just a few weeks ago. Please recall the recent episode of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. At the ceremony the chair that was to be occupied by the 2010 Laureate Liu Xiaobo was kept vacant. A vacancy symbolic of his absence, and also of the absence of a commitment to Human Rights in China. Neither he nor his wife nor his friends were permitted to attend. For a risen China, wooed and courted by the world, to feel threatened by a mere intellectual. - one of the authors of Charter 08 - who is committed to democracy and human rights! Such a risen China chose to block all persons close to Liu Xiaobo from attending the award ceremony. And, moreover, it used its monetary muscle to get countries to boycott the event. That seventeen countries fell in line is really sad but not unexpected. What can one expect from a country that cynically supports North Korea, Sudan and Myanmar? But China's behaviour is not the story I want you to reflect on. China's disregard for *Humanist Outlook- Winter 2010*

ethical constraints on foreign policy is no surprise. In fact, Liu Xiaobo, sums it up very well, when he comments on this moral failure - and I quote – he says “the fact that I am closely monitored by the police for the past nineteen years poses no challenge to my courage. When a government resorts to using its State apparatus against a defenseless intellectual it only means that the regime has long been rotten at its core and its violence is only an expression of its waning power”.

But, as I said, it is not China that I wanted to reflect upon. What I do, however, want to reflect upon is the absence of the Philippines from the award ceremony. The President of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino III, whose reforms at the moment enjoy a 7 to 10 support: out of every 10 people 7 people support his reforms. He has a huge legitimacy. This is according to the newspapers. He defended the Philippines Government’s decision to be absent from the Nobel Ceremony on the grounds that “it was for the protection of the interests of the Philipinos.” When pressed by a journalist for justification he said “I put the Philipinos first, if that is a sin, I will commit that sin over and over again”.

Now you can argue with me and say, but this is realpolitik; and for me to demand an ethical foreign policy from a popular Head of State is just very unrealistic. Political leaders do not act ethically. They only act tactically. Do we not know this to be the case in the India of the day? So if you would accept that political leaders do not act ethically and only tactically, let me complicate the argument a little further. Let me remind you of another inconvenient fact. President Aquino’s father, senator Benigno Nino Aquino, was a staunch defender of human rights. A fierce critic of the authoritarianism of Marcos. In fact, his political life was a struggle for these beliefs. Senator Aquino was shot dead on August 21, 1983 as he stepped off the plane in Manila International Airport. When he returned to his country despite advice from his friends who had warned him that it was unsafe, he ignored that advice because he felt that his country needed him and the deteriorating situation in the Philippines required his presence. His death sparked off a huge movement against Marcos, producing what at that time was a great new political democratic innovation - people’s power - and it returned the Philippines to democracy.

And yet the martyred senator’s son, who, one would expect, would be deeply committed to the values of freedom, for which his father gave his life, now supports a regime that imprisons a man leading a similar movement for freedom and democratic rights. What is the nature of the ‘first for the Philipino’ that President Aquino based his decision on when the Philippines stayed away from the ceremony - fear of Chinese reprisals, fear of standing up against an authoritarian regime? It is this pragmatism - a politics which sees

everything in terms of instrumental calculus, of supporting the winning rather than the principled side, a politics that allows a coalition dharma to acquire a preeminence over the key norms of a democratic decent society is the challenge that the Indian Humanist Union must strive to engage with. The story that I have just narrated may seem trivial but to me it is a symptomatic of a wider malaise to which all of us are not immune. It calls for a deeper probing into the folds of that story because it is hidden in such folds that lie for us the lessons for the India of today. When will we draw the line? When will we reject the culture of abandoning our principles if the price is right? I dare say we are all tarnished by this brush of ethical compromise, because not a day goes by when we do not have a story that describes a Nation that is ethically adrift. Now this what I have just said, is not a pulpit statement, it is not a sanctimonious lament, it is, in fact, an analytical challenge to the free thinkers of the Indian Humanist Union. It is an analytical challenge, I say, because I want to ask you to answer the question – what was it that caused the son of a martyred senator who had fired up the imagination of the Philippino people to mean when he said that I put the Philippino first and therefore we are boycotting the peace prize ceremony. Why was the ‘Philippino first’ of his father different from the ‘Philippino first’ of his son.? What is the rational calculus that produced in the son a decision that looks like a betrayal of his father’s death? It is questions such as these that we need to ask. Would I be stretching the point if I said there is a clue in the Yudhishtira story? Let me for a minute stop this line of interrogation. This story is not one of the three episodes that are there in my title. In fact, it came into my line of vision after I had submitted the title. I had chosen in fact three episodes, which tell just the opposite story to the one that I have narrated: of ethical firmness, not ethical compromise, of changing the world by an ethical resoluteness and of not adjusting to the world through ethical compromise.

A Humanist Union, in the best traditions of free and skeptical enquiry, must work out the different political trajectories that this very fine distinction between ethical resoluteness and ethical compromise produces. This is its task. On this fine distinction is a decent society built. The first episode which I present to you - and these episodes I will present in chronological sequence and one at a time because they have occurred historically in chronological sequence. The first is Gandhiji’s last fast. I am not a Gandhian scholar so I am sure many of you probably know this story much better than I, but, I think it is important for me to invite you to remember that event. It is important for us to collectively explore that last event and explore it in the words of D.G. Tendulkar ‘Quoting Gandhi – Commenting on Gandhi’. It is a story - the story of Gandhi’s last fast – that is my first episode. It is a story that must be told and retold in every village and every mohalla in this country. I quote – now Gandhi .....<sup>th</sup>, I returned to Delhi from Calcutta. I was to proceed to the West Punjab but that was not to be. Gay Delhi looked a city of the dead as I alighted from the train. I observed gloom on every face I saw. Even the Sardar, whom humor and the joy that humor gives, never deserted  
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no exception this time. The cause of it I do not know. The Sardar, on the platform to receive me, lost no time in giving me the sad news of the disturbances that have taken place in the metropolises of the Indian Union. At once I realized that it had to be in Delhi and 'do or die'." Then he goes on to say "I yearn for hard friendship between the Hindus and the Sikhs and the Musalmans. It subsisted between them only the other day. Today it is non-existent." In the flash of the moment, Gandhi decided what he needed to do. He decided to fast on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January. The period of his fast was to be indefinite. It would end only when he was satisfied that there was genuine reunion of hearts of all communities. He begged of his friends, please do not dissuade him from undertaking the fast. He requested them not to tell him that things had been set right when the process itself was incomplete. He asked people to turn the searchlight within.

As the fast continued and as the Nation became concerned by the fact that he was losing two pounds a day and I think by the third day, in fact, he kept losing weight and his kidneys were failing, a Central Peace Committee was formed with 130 members representing all communities. They worked honestly to fulfill Gandhi's conditions and slowly peace returned and it was only on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, five days after the fast, at 12:45 p.m. Gandhi broke his fast. Again it is worth quoting from Tendulkar to convey the emotion of that very moment when the fast was broken. But, the firmness of ethical purpose - the point I was making a little earlier - of a resoluteness that showed both the spirit behind the act, a resoluteness that is not looking at consequences but is looking at just the purity of the act itself. But not just resoluteness of the spirit behind the act but a resoluteness which produces an outcome. A metropolis that had gone mad now returned to sanity, collective action. And I think this is important, because quite often we tend to forget how an ethical stand can produce an ethical action.. Collective action of a humanist kind replaced collective action of a barbaric kind. A nation and a city was returned to sanity. Ethical resoluteness was not susceptible. Gandhi ethical resoluteness unlike, many instances that we see today, was not susceptible to a tactical reasoning.

And now let me quote again from Gandhi's response. There is a conversation that is taking place and I quote again from Tendulkar - "Mr. Gupta - speaking next, described touching scenes of fraternization between the Hindus and Muslims which he had witnessed when a procession of 150 Muslims was taken out that morning in Sabzi Mandi and was received with ovation and offers of fruits and refreshments by the Hindus inhabitants from that locality. He was telling Gandhi about this great occasion of fraternity between the two communities. Gandhi said in reply that what they have told him had touched him indeed deeply. Indeed they had given him all that he had asked for but if their words meant that they held themselves responsible for the communal



peace in Delhi only and what happened in other place was no concern of theirs then the guarantee was worth nothing and he would feel - and they too one day realize - that it was a great blunder that he had given up his fast. If they were sincere in their professions surely they could not be in different to outbreaks of madness in places other than Delhi. If they could not make the whole of India realize that the Hindu, Sikhs, Muslims were all brothers, it would bode ill for the future of both the dominions. What would happen - Gandhi asked - to Hindustan if they quarrelled with one another?. Here Gandhi broke down owing to overwhelming emotion. What were the elements of this overwhelming emotion? There is something almost sacral about that moment - a deep yearning for what he called a hard friendship, for which he was prepared to die. Humanist Union I believe must decode what this hard friendship consists of. How it is brought about? Who can subvert it and when? Who can nurture it and how? Now, Gandhi's fasts are full of moral learning.

This last fast is about fraternity between communities. This last fast is about fraternity between Nations. It is of course the main message that you get from the story. But I would again invite you to look at the smaller story within the big story. And I quote again from Tendulkar - "the Government of India, owing to the dispute in Kashmir, have been withholding from the Government of Pakistan Rs. 55 crore which they have previously agreed to hand over to them as part of the division of asset of the whole of India. This story is .....<sup>th</sup>, India decided to implement immediately the financial agreement with Pakistan, to remove the one cause of suspicion and friction. Gandhi's last fast was to put moral pressure on his own Government. No tactical reasoning here. He could not in all justice, as he said, give confidence to his Pakistani friends if he accepted the Govt. of India's withholding of assets due. The refugees were enraged and shouted slogans outside the Birla House: 'Blood for blood. We want revenge. Let Gandhi die'. But, principle prevailed and peace returned.

Now if this sounds like a fairy tale today, something that we cannot imagine would take place in our own times, then let me now move to the second episode that I want to talk about. On February 11<sup>th</sup> 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from Robben Island. He had spent 26 years in jail - a majority of which was a solitary confinement. His daughter was born when he was in jail. His youth had been spent in jail and all because he believed in a democratic and free South Africa. Such a story of struggle against tyranny is not unusual and, while I want to salute it, it is not from such heroism and courage that I want to draw my humanist lesson. Of course, I do not, in any way, want to diminish this great and heroic sacrifice. An extraordinary commitment to freedom from Apartheid that Madiba's life signifies, but, what is amazing about his life - this is my second episode - is his first speech after his release. This is the man who had spent 26 years in jail, a majority of those years in solitary confinement, I know I am repeating myself but I think it bears *Humanist Outlook- Winter 2010*

repeating, his youth had been spent in jail, not to be got back. His daughter was born when he was in jail and here is this man walking out of the jail. ....<sup>th</sup> February 1990. In his biography, 'Long Walk to Freedom', he movingly talks about that approaching moment when he would be free. I quote – "I did not dwell on the prospect of my release, but on all the many things I had to do before then. It so happens in life that the momentousness of an occasion is lost in the welter of a thousand details. There were numerous matters that had to be discussed and resolved with very little time to do so. A number of comrades of the Reception Committee, including Cyril Ramaphosa and Trevor Manuel who were in the House bright and early. I wanted initially to address the people of Paarl who had been very kind to me during my incarceration, but the Reception Committee was adamant that this would not be a good idea. It would look curious if I give my first speech to the prosperous white burghers of Paarl. Instead, as planned, I would speak first to the people of Cape Town at the grand parade at Cape Town.

Just imagine this man – he is being released from 26 years in jail and what is his thought? I want to give my first speech to the prosperous white burghers of Paarl to thank them for their kindness in jail. There was a man who is leaving jail without even a tinge of bitterness; who is leaving jail wanting to thank the people of a race that had supported the regime that had put him in jail. His people were in the township, theirs were people in the Town Hall. His people were denied the public sphere, theirs were the sole occupants of it. His people were victims of countless brutalities, theirs the perpetrators of these brutalities, and yet there is no bitterness, not even a tinge of the desire for revenge. What did he want to do instead? Give his first speech to the white burghers of Paarl. Was this simply a softness of the head that comes from too many years in jail, or do we see in this a deeper ethical frame of a higher order which perhaps will become clearer soon? It soon did. It was for solidarity, it was for reconciliation. Mandela reached out to the whites. Now this is really the first speech he gave that was what he thought he would do. I quote "we call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is a political home for you too. Our march to freedom is irreversible, we must not allow fear to stand in our way". He says in conclusion: "I quote my own words during my trial in 1964. they are as true today as they were then. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal I hope to live for and to achieve, but if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

That was Mandela's first public speech. Now was this tactical reasoning or ethical resoluteness? Was this the big gesture that brought peace to South Africa, that separated South Africa from the chaos that was threatening to engulf it? In fact, the chaos was very much at the door when Mandela was

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going to give his first speech. There were hordes of people in that stadium and his car was surrounded and he could not get in and for an hour he was strapped in the car, and everybody was so excited to see Mandela. The driver panicked, reversed the car and drove to one of Mandela's friends' houses and when he got there he got a call from Bishop Desmond Tutu. And this is what Desmond Tutu says to him - he said "Nelson you must come back to the grand parade immediately. The people are restless. If you do not return straight away I cannot vouch for what will happen. I think there may be an uprising." Mandela immediately returned and he spoke of peace and racial harmony to the restless crowd who were actually I suppose yearning for revenge, longing for a kind of black majoritarianism. But it was Mandela's commitment to humanism that ended that political possibility. He, along with Desmond Tutu, gave us the idea of truth and reconciliation. I quote again from his first speech after his election. "The struggle for democracy has never been a matter pursued by one race, class, religious community or gender amongst South Africans. In honouring those who fought to see this day arrive we honour the best sons and daughters of all our people. We can count amongst them Africans, coloureds, whites, Indians, Muslims, Christians, Hindus Jews - all of them - in a common vision of a better life for the people of this country. It requires all of us to work together to bring an end to division, an end to suspicion and to build a nation united in our diversity. We place our vision of a new constitutional order for South Africa on the table, not as conquerors prescribing to the conquered. We speak as fellow citizens to heal the wounds of the past with the intent of constructing a new order based on justice for all." Can you imagine a statement like this from somebody who has spent 26 years in jail? What do we find in such a statement? What do we find in the sentiments behind that statement, in the moral principles behind that statement that allowed Mandela to pull South Africa from the brink of chaos. From the violence that threatened to engulf it, a sentiment that sought to heal the wounds. A higher morality of healing. I believe the world today requires such moral leadership. Not of the sanctimonious kind which only blames, but, of the uplifting kind which heals. Now what can the IHU do in such a situation. This brings me to the third episode for our humanist reflections. If I can test your patience a little longer. let me introduce a third story that I feel is equally surprising.

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Aung San Suu Kyi had spent 15 years under house arrest. She went to look after her mother in 1988. A phone call came when she was with Michael Aris, her husband - informing her of the fact that her mother had suffered a stroke. I quote her husband who described that moment "So she went in 1988 to look after her mother and on her arrival there she witnessed the brutal killing of 5000 demonstrators by the military regime on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1988. Within a month she formed the National League for Democracy; within a month she was incarcerated by the military regime. She was placed in detention. Her husband Michael Aris soon after was diagnosed with a terminal case of prostate

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cancer during her period of house arrest. When she was offered release to go and see him in England she refused for fear of not being allowed back into the country.

In this difficult choice between her personal desire and her public duty, between the man she loved and the country she loved, she chose to stay on in Burma. Michael Aris passed away in 1999, she had last met him in 1988. I quote from Michael Aris's notes from the day she left - this is there in her book 'Freedom from Fear and Other Writings'. "It was a quiet evening in Oxford like many others in the last days of March 1988. Our sons were in bed and we were reading when the telephone rang. Sue picked up the phone to learn that her mother suffered a severe stroke. She put the phone down and started to pack. I had a premonition that our lives would change forever that .....<sup>th</sup> March 1999 that, according to close friends, Mr. Aris was unflinchingly supportive of his wife's decision and never once complained that she should abandon the mission and come home. On what basis did she make her choice.? First: to look after her mother when she immediately packed her bags to go to Burma, then to look after her country.

Was it a higher duty to serve her country and not be with her husband? This is an issue we need to debate. I don't have a clear position. Aung San Suu Kyi was released and, in a telephone interview to the Indian Express, she mentioned - and this I must say because it pleased me to read this in the interview - that her stay in Shimla at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies was the happiest period in her life. That was actually the last time she spent with Michael Aris. This is a very special little episode in the history of the Institute.

Now, I began my lecture by indicating that I would adopt an outflanking strategy to reflect on the idea of the Humanist Union: on a movement and on an institution. Hence, for the last half hour, I have not engaged philosophically with the 13 aspects or the six primary beliefs. This is the task that needs to be done and can be done. Instead I have given you three episodes and perhaps one inconvenient fact. Each has been accompanied by several questions. I have listed these questions, I have formulated these questions, because I wish to invite you on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to reflect on what is the key to all these episodes. What is the key to all these episodes is, I believe, the choice between ethical firmness and ethical compromise. A choice that we all make every day - in the small events that dot our lives as well as the larger questions. Each choice of ethical firmness and ethical compromise produces a trail of consequences, which three perhaps of the four episodes that I have presented so poignantly illustrate. When President Aquino took one choice and that produced a trail of consequences and the other three took one choice and the consequences are in the other directions. It is in such contexts

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that we need to place ourselves.

In a fluid world we pretend that the distinction is hard to make between ethical firmness and ethical compromise: that there is a grey area. Today if you look at a lot of ethical debates, if you look at newspapers, if you look at our commentaries, we like to pretend that this is the distinction that is very hard to make. That there is a grey area within which all of us are located. What is ethical resoluteness may actually be ethical compromise and the other way around. But, I believe this is just an abdication. It is easy to abdicate. Are we not all abdicators? Is that not the reason for our personal and national moral drift? Is that not why we in India today have every institution on a moral dock, from the judiciary - the other day we had a statement in open court where there is something rotten in the State of Denmark being said, to the Press, which has now been unmasked; to the bureaucracy; to the academy; to the political parties; to even our lowly panchayats. And yet I have given you three instances when in more difficult situations: the blood-letting of partition, the ending of Apartheid, the tyranny of military dictatorship. when three extraordinary people made different and personally costly choices. No ethical compromise here, but ethical resoluteness. So I don't believe that the argument that we live in a fuzzy world and we live when boundaries are not very clear is an argument that we hide behind.

But, if I may be permitted one last reflection before I conclude then it is this. The humanist message can be read in the big episodes, the three big episodes that I have told you as well as in the little stories. Gandhiji's fast against the madness in Delhi and the Nation – the big episode. Mandela's speech of one nation and reconciliation – the big episode; Aung San Suu Kyi's moral protest against military dictatorship – the big episode, these are the big episodes from which we draw great moral lessons. And they are great moral lessons for all those of us who are engaged with and are committed to the humanist cause. But, do not ignore the small stories as well. The 55 crores to be given to Pakistan. Just try and imagine what Gandhi must have been thinking when he made that point. The Sardar was very unhappy when the Cabinet reversed that decision. But to Gandhi it was as important - not just the ending of the unrest in Delhi but that 55 crores have to be returned to Pakistan because that is the commitment we made. Think of the small stories from which we draw a lesson. Think of Mandela's thoughts when he thought that he would give his first speech to the white burghers of Paarl. He knew that there was a big crowd waiting for him in Cape Town, but, yet in the sentiment of those moments before his release - he is feeling a sense of solidarity with the people who were kind to him: the white burghers of Paarl. Completely innocuous, but, he thought that he must go and thank them for the consideration, as he says, they have shown me in my years of incarceration. Think of Aung San Suu Kyi's acceptance in that lonely moment that she would never see her husband again. In these small stories is also a humanist message. I am tempted to give *Humanist Outlook- Winter 2010*

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you my version of the humanist interpretation, but, I think it more appropriate in this 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year to invite you all to reflect on the small stories as well - to leave my analysis a bit incomplete. I would invite you to do your own readings of these three episodes. On the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary each of us has to do his own reflection. So let me conclude then by congratulating you on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Indian Humanist Union. May you have all power in the next 50 years. Thank you.

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### **Some Observations from the Audience**

## **Against Humanism**

Mary Midgely

Does the term “humanism” really stand for a new and better form of religion? If so, what is that religion? Or is it something designed as a cure for religion itself, a way to get rid of it on Christopher Hitchens’s principle that “religion poisons everything”?

Many people, no doubt, agree with Hitchens. But Auguste Comte, the founding father of modern humanism, would not have been one of them. For him, “humanism” was a word parallel to “theism”. It just altered the object worshipped, substituting humanity for God. He called it the “religion of humanity” and devised ritual forms for it that were close to traditional Christian ones. He thought – and many others have agreed with him – that the trouble with religion was simply its having an unreal supernatural object, God. Apart from this, the attitudes and institutions characteristic of religion itself seemed to him valuable, indeed essential. And he certainly had no wish to get rid of the habit of worship, only to give it a more suitable object. Surely (he said) worshipping human beings – who are real natural entities – would easily be able to replace the existing idle and artificial practices? So he ruled that, for instance, the enlightened citizen should start his day by worshipping first his mother, then his wife and then his daughter – after, of course, ensuring that they all did exactly what they were told for the rest of the time. And the other occasions of life could be similarly hallowed. This would all be part of his positivistic enterprise of developing the human scientific faculties that would finally enable us to abandon superstition

These precepts, however, did not work out easily. Comte’s new Christian-like institutions withered like alien vines once they were applied to their new objects, even though he carefully policed them and trained his priesthood in the newly-discovered skills of Sociology. I once saw the still extant Comtian temple in Paris, a tidy little Victorian church with round (not Gothic) arches, its walls lined with statues of the Saints of Humanity – Plato, Newton, Shakespeare, Beethoven. I asked its gloomy concierge whether she thought anybody ever worshipped there but she replied, “Nobody. I think, never.”

Plainly, Comte’s simple recipe for grafting a new object on to traditional institutions – a new head on to the old body – did not produce the improved life-form he hoped for. This may seem odd. It should (we think) surely be possible simply to celebrate and admire the lives of past and present humans without getting committed to any questionable doctrines – without those suspect claims to a background beyond familiar facts which create the poison of religion for people like Hitchens. And of course we do celebrate people unpretentiously in this way. But our doing so hardly seems to constitute an ism, a cause, a distinctive attitude that says something about the whole human species. There is also the further question – even if you want to get rid of God, is the human

even to earthly life? Considering that it is already making other species extinct at an increasing rate, do we really want to give it a kind of divine status?

Serious celebrations of individual human merit do not usually take us in this direction. We do not celebrate people simply for being specially human but for particular things they have done or said. They have changed our attitudes to particular ideals and values, and this new thinking can inspire quite new visions of reality. When a fresh prophet – Newton or Blake or Pythagoras or Jesus or Nietzsche or Darwin or Marx or Einstein or the Dalai Lama – appears among the existing Saints of Humanity, this contribution has wide consequences. Not only can it alter our map of human life, it can also call on us to change our whole world-picture. New ideals do not just alter our conduct. They can gradually change our whole conception of reality.

The reason why we revere these people is that they have extended the bounds of human experience, showing us things that the rest of us simply had never thought of. They have therefore encountered quite new problems and have had to describe them in new language, often using rich seams of metaphor that can never be unpacked literally. Subsequent efforts to work out their meaning can call for profound shifts which make everything appear differently – including, of course, both some splendid inventions and some fearful mistakes. And these shifts often change the way in which we conceive reality itself.

In doing this, we are not forced to stick to the revelations of a particular group of prophets who were specially revered during the Enlightenment. Indeed, even if we wanted to halt there we could not do so. There is no fixed, unalterable background map of the “familiar facts” that must survive all such shifts, and certainly no fixed schedule dividing real entities from fishy, imaginary ones. Entities like Fate and Progress and the Logic of History and the Hidden Hand of the Market come and go.

Materialists take matter to be what is typically real, but matter itself is not at all what it used to be. Newton’s reassuringly solid, inert particles are long gone. Energy, which succeeded them, seems now to be dissolving into a succession of more exotic possibilities. At present, many respected physicists advocate belief in the Multiverse, by which they do not mean just a crowd of existing extra universes but an apparently limitless string of new ones that continually come into being all the time whenever a quantum event is needed to decide between two possible alternatives. This idea strikes many of us today (as it would have struck most people earlier) as not just unlikely but meaningless, yet it is now viewed as the kind of thing that can merit Nobel Prizes.

Changes like this in ontology – in what is considered to be real – are known to be so common in human history that it seems surprising when people treat a current doctrine about it as a timeless truth. That, however, is what has happened to the rather crude form of materialism that Comte himself enshrined by his positivist doctrine. Positivism got rid of Cartesian dualism – the twofold world of Spirit and Matter that had seemed so obviously final to Newton – not by rethinking it but by simply eliminating Spirit, leaving Matter to manage on its own. The main reason for doing this was undoubtedly the fear of religion.

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The whole concept of Spirit was seen as too dangerous because of its history, notably, of course, the political oppression of the churches. Thus, as often happens, the new insight was shaped chiefly by contrast with the previous one and taken as a final refutation of it.

But Matter had been so carefully defined by dualists as inert and alien to life that it was really hard to see how it could do all that was now expected of it – how it could be the source of conscious, active living animals, including ourselves. The unlucky consequence of this clash can be seen in what is now called the Problem of Consciousness, the desperate ongoing attempt by many scientists to find ways of talking about human experience in “scientific” language – language that has been carefully designed to make all such talk impossible.

This problem began to distress people during the 1970s because that was when the behaviourist veto on ever mentioning subjectivity finally lost its force. Behaviourists had been following positivist principles in dismissing the phenomena of consciousness as effectively unreal, since they could not be described in physical terms, and they concluded that psychologists could only study outward behaviour, taking no notice of experience.

Not surprisingly, this worked so badly that the theory was officially abandoned. Yet the general suspicion of talking about conscious experience remained very strong. Odd though it sounds, psychologists seem still to have thought that attending to subjectivity was the same thing as being subjective – that is, biased and uncritical. The world, in fact, consisted solely of objects with no subjects to observe them. As Marilynne Robinson has lately pointed out in a very sharp little book called *Absence of Mind*, this meant that our inner life – the place where the whole drama of human thought had till now been carried out – had somehow been scientifically proved not to exist. Thus our only source of information about the outer world was no longer available.

Despite this ruling, however, the difficulty of discussing observation without an observer – the absurdity of enquirers trying to leave themselves out of their own enquiries – increasingly bothered scientists, especially ones concerned with evolution, where the role and origin of conscious experience needed to be considered. It is all very well to eliminate God from the intelligible universe but eliminating ourselves from it blocks all sorts of enquiries. Not much of a human world is left once this is done. Accordingly, in the '70s consciousness itself began to be officially rated as a mentionable scientific problem. A few other terms too have since gradually been readmitted to polite society, including, in recent times, even daring adjectives such as spiritual.

The emphasis is still, however, on the need to reduce these concepts to Matter as traditionally conceived – to bring them within reach of the abstractions used by the existing physical sciences. The search for a “scientific explanation of consciousness” which goes on at the yearly conference at the Center for Consciousness Studies in Tucson, Arizona still centres not on trying to be scientific in the sense of using suitable methods, but on making consciousness respectable by somehow bringing it within the range of physics and chemistry, mainly at present through neurobiology.

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What the positivist pioneers don't seem to have noticed is that if you ditch one of two supposedly fundamental substances you have got to ditch the other. The mistake does not lie in the faults of the rejected substance but in the whole idea of dividing the world in this way in the first place. Body and Mind are not separate entities. The unit is the whole person. "Body" and "Mind" are just names for different aspects of that person which need to be studied in their own distinct ways, as do shape and size or age and position.

The language that has been developed over the centuries for talking about the mental and spiritual side of life is not some feeble, amateurish "folk-psychology". It is a highly sophisticated toolbox adapted for just that difficult purpose. The vocabularies of the sciences are also well adapted for their own purposes, but this means they cannot be used anywhere else. Physical truths can only be answers to physical questions. Indeed, the great achievement of Galileo, Newton and their friends consisted in narrowing the scope of those sciences to concentrate them on topics where their methods were wholly suitable. People who are now led by that success to treat them as a panacea for other kinds of problem are being naive.

The moral of all this is, I think, that Hitchens is simply wrong. The poison does not come from religion itself but from political misuses of it. The kinds of idea that we class as religious actually range from the excellent to the awful, from the poisonous to the most nourishing. But there is a general tendency for new imaginative ways of understanding life to emerge from religious thinking – that is, from thoughts which go beyond current human horizons. This is bound to happen simply because they have quite new kinds of truth to convey. Thus the Greeks, when they came to grasp the idea that the earth as a whole bountifully supplied all their needs, worshipped it under the name of Gaia, mother of gods and men. And thus Pythagoras, when he discovered a new mathematical order pervading phenomena from the heavens to the laws of sound, naturally conceived that order as something greater than humanity; something therefore that should be deeply venerated.

In this way many of the moral insights we value highly today – for instance, the coherence of the cosmos and the value of the individual soul, as well as the conviction that All is Number – have originally been shaped in religious contexts. If we decide to drop those contexts as obsolete we lose half the meaning of the ideas themselves. Thus, of the nine possible "saints of humanity" – that is, typical inventors of really useful concepts – whom I listed just now, five were strongly religious thinkers and only two (Marx and Nietzsche) were explicitly anti-religious. (Einstein, though no worshipper, always stressed the need for religion, while Darwin said little about it.) And if we looked beyond Western culture, this preponderance of religious sources would be even more striking.

If, then, the new kind of humanism that we hope to build aims to celebrate humanity as a whole – if it wants to pay comprehensive tribute to the achievements of our species – it has to take account of the religious thinking that has been so central to our species-life. The wider imaginative conceptions

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– the more hospitable world-pictures – that it uses must be taken seriously, as they were by the scholars who were called Humanists at the Renaissance, and as they have been ever since in the studies that are called “the humanities”. Much though we may want to ignore institutional religions and other strange beliefs, we cannot brush aside the individual experiences that lie behind them and the thoughts that grow out of them. William James was surely right to start investigating the matter by asking about the varieties of religious experience, confusing though those varieties are. In the whole sweep of our lives the physical sciences play only a marginal part, and the positivist approach that tries to rely only on them is not really workable.

At this point it is worthwhile to look at the message of the next prophet who shaped this concept after Comte, Julian Huxley. Huxley was largely responsible for giving this idea the form that it has today and in particular for placing the whole area so deeply in hock to science – that is, to neo-Darwinian ideas about evolution. He did, however understand that something more was needed. He was more aware than most of today’s science-worshippers of the rest of culture, particularly of the varied spiritual territories that we lump together under the name of “religion”, and he made suggestions about how humanism could occupy some of them. In particular, he grasped the ontological trouble that was making modern materialism unworkable and tried to do something about it. He is worth looking at, both because he played a great part in causing our present troubles and because he did try to do something about them.

Like Comte, Huxley retained the concept of worship and he rooted it in anthropological thinking. He writes in his *Essays of a Biologist* (1923), “The most fundamental need of man... [has always been] to discover something, some power, some force or tendency, which was moulding the destinies of the world – something not himself, greater than himself, with which he yet felt that he could harmonize his nature.” He quotes Matthew Arnold’s statement of the need to recognise “a power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness”. That power is (he says) not the human race itself but the evolutionary process that produced it and, behind that process, the whole evolving cosmos. Like Spinoza, he retains the term God and effectively equates it with Nature. “It is a simple fact that the conception which man has of the universe and its relation to himself exercises important effects upon his life. A name therefore is needed for this anthropological phenomenon. God is the usual name applied and we shall retain it in default of another, premissing that ... we apply it here in a peculiar and perhaps somewhat novel sense. God in this sense is the universe, not as such, but as grasped as a whole by a mind.”

Within this universe, however, he sees the human race as having a rather peculiar role at the forefront of evolution. Huxley goes to great trouble to explain – what today’s theorists usually just take for granted – why it is that he thinks humanity should be considered specially valuable and important. This (he says) is because the mental qualities that it is developing through emergent evolution – especially its capacity for intelligent worship of the universe through science – are the growing-point of the whole cosmic process. These mental

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properties are not something alien to the material properties that the physical sciences study but are continuous with them, so any materialism that fails to recognise their continuity is mistaken. The still-surviving Cartesian dualism that treats mind as a separate substance from matter must therefore be abandoned. Mind must be taken to have been somehow present in the cosmos from the start. “We come, that is, to a monistic conclusion . . . that there is only one fundamental substance, and that this possesses not only material [but mental] properties. We want a new word to denote this X, this world-stuff; matter will not do for that is a word which the physicists and chemists have moulded to suit themselves, and since they have not yet learnt to detect or measure mental phenomena they restrict the word ‘material’ to mean ‘non-mental’.”

Huxley, in fact, saw clearly – what few of those who now exalt science seem to have noticed – that this exaltation does not make sense unless we somehow enlarge the notion of reality to make room for mind. Doing science is, after all, a mental activity; it can hardly constitute the purpose of a purely physical universe. More widely, of course, Huxley’s whole way of conceiving evolution as purposive is itself profoundly religious. Darwin himself avoided such thoughts, as do most of those who claim to follow him today. Yet people still do often take it for granted that Evolution, like Progress, is directional – an escalator bound to carry us, or at least our descendants, safely on to higher levels.

How much of Huxley’s ideas about this remains with us today? What does remain popular is the concentration on the drama of human evolution, which has indeed become an obsession. Anyone who wants to explain some current piece of behaviour now is likely to do it by speculating about the early evolution of our species, even though we have no records of this time and other kinds of explanation often seem more relevant. And behind this emphasis on evolution lies Huxley’s glorification of physical science as the supreme human activity, though without the reasoning that Huxley used to support it. That glorification was, of course, part of Huxley’s legacy from Comte, whose positivism was central to his humanism. What has vanished today is the element of worship that Huxley (like Spinoza) saw as essential to physical science, and so to humanism itself.

Huxley’s anthropological argument here is surely quite sensible. Scholars now agree with him, however gloomily, that “the most fundamental need of man has always been ‘to discover . . . something not himself, something greater than himself, with which he yet felt that he could harmonise his nature’.” Such a religious quest does seem to be a human universal, leading sometimes to appalling results and sometimes to admirable ones. Scientific thought today now admits this but explains the habit as some sort of natural mistake – perhaps comparable to an optical illusion? – a squint which has unfortunately been universal till now but can be corrected in the light of modern science. Modern science, however, does not seem to be having this corrective effect. The religious quest still remains unquenched in our apparently scientific age, even though the visions we use to satisfy it are quite different. Scientific input

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does not improve these visions, in fact it makes them worse. The modern obsession with the evolutionary process surely shows many of the familiar features of a rather mean, self-serving religion. Evolution itself – more or less equated with Progress – simply takes the place of the previously expected journey to heaven, being seen as a benign force that will take us forward, however stupidly we act, through science and technology to an endless sequence of prosperity, probably in outer space.

It may well enable us to colonise alien planets, leaving earthly plants and animals to their fate on the old one. It justifies a glorification of current Western practice that is essentially self-worship. At other times, the more sinister and exciting dramas that people also require from religion are supplied by the mythology of the selfish gene, which dramatises the process as a scene of bloody-minded competition. Thus Richard Dawkins, in *River out of Eden* (1995): “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. ... DNA neither cares nor knows, DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”

This drama has not been revealed through physical science, which doesn't deal in matters like evil and good. It just works through old-fashioned personification. If there is no purpose and everything is impersonal, how can DNA be actively ruling our destinies? How can it feel “pitiless indifference” and make us “dance to its music”? The Cartesian drama of inert matter and active spirit is suddenly reversed here to show humans (and animals) as helpless objects – passive “lumbering robots” – stage-managed by plotting genes (and memes) that are sometimes helped by other entities such as market forces. The myth-building capacities that surround every new world-view are surely as busy here as they are in established religions. These visions perhaps offer the worst of both worlds – an ontology that is as bankrupt morally as it is scientifically. The imagery of science is used, not, as Huxley hoped, to ground a deep reverence for the natural world but to justify human alienation from it.

What, however, needs to be done instead? Materialism as now understood, which calls on us to consider ourselves only as physical entities, really doesn't make sense. Our inner lives are real parts of the real world. But once we grasp this and stop defining reality as confined to what can be known through physical science, we surely do not need to centre our notion of human activity on physical science at all. Comtian positivism evaporates, taking Comtian humanism with it.

There is surely no obvious reason why we should treat human scientific practice as constituting the growing-point of evolution. Indeed, a hostile witness might point out that our species, having lately been responsible for an alarming series of extinctions, does not actually have a very impressive evolutionary record – a point of which we have become much more conscious since Huxley's time. But then there is no reason why we should expect that there would be any such single growing-point. The Spinozan reverence for nature as a whole, to which Huxley appealed, has no tendency to call for any such exclusive

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## MORAL DILEMMAS\*

Steven Lukes

We humanists, I assume, both old and new, hold that there are actions and modes of behaviour that are right and others that are wrong universally. We believe that people everywhere on the planet are harmed if mistreated in certain ways. No one anywhere should be tortured, raped or denied a fair trial. They are harmed if they lack, but could have access to, certain basic preconditions for living minimally well – food, shelter and a range of resources, services and opportunities. We may disagree about which ways they ought and ought not to behave, about how they should and should not be treated, about which resources, services and opportunities are, in this sense, universally basic and about which, given scarcity, should have priority. But we agree that there are right answers to such moral questions – and when we disagree we disagree about what the right answers are.

But we need to face a troubling question, rendered all the more insistent in a shrinking world in which multiculturalism and the politics of recognition flourish. Who are we to judge the practices and beliefs of other cultures? Who are we to apply our standards to the adherents of other moral and religious systems? After all, they may not agree with us about what are right and wrong ways of behaving, that what we take to be harmful is harmful, or about the preconditions we assume to be essential to any worthwhile life. They may indeed deny that all humans (for example, women) are entitled to have access to them.

Not everyone, I admit, is troubled by this question. The present Pope, for example, views the thought it expresses as moral relativism, which he sees as a pervasive threat that tempts those who “do not allow their reason to be guided by the Christian faith”. Religions do tend to protect you from it, for they offer foundations: that is their business. But we live, it is often said, in a “post-metaphysical age” in which our moral views are “without foundations”. Or rather (which is to say the same thing) there are too many foundations. As Anthony Appiah understates the case, “Judgements about right and wrong are intimately tied up with metaphysical and religious belief and with beliefs about the natural order. And these are matters about which agreement may be difficult to achieve.”

Moreover those whose views do rest upon metaphysical or religious foundations may disagree about moral issues, so what is the probability that any one denomination or school of thought will have attained knowledge of the truth, and how, lacking such foundations, would one know? And so it seems entirely natural to wonder what authority any given set of moral norms can claim and on what basis we can arrive at our value judgements. So the question raised above should trouble humanists.

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To face it we must address at least three other questions. First, how are we to distinguish those areas of life where the question matters from those where it does not? There are countless practices and beliefs whose diversity raises no dilemmas and is, indeed, a cause for celebration. Modes of dress, forms of greeting, cuisines, ritual rules, languages, legal procedures and traffic regulations all vary widely, some at home and all across the globe. It may upset us when such norms are violated, but it never occurs to anyone – because it makes no sense – to criticise those followed by others as wrong or harmful or damaging to a worthwhile life. In short, how are we to distinguish the moral from the customary and the conventional?

Second, assuming we have answered that question, it is not at all obvious how much real moral disagreement underlies all the apparent diversity of beliefs and practices. What looks like moral conflict may derive from discord over other matters. People may share the same principles and concerns but disagree about what the facts are, say, about the effects of pornography or child-rearing by same-sex couples. They may be morally on the same page but disagree over theories that purport to explain the facts: are economic woes caused by the impact of markets or by regulations interfering with them? Their disagreements may be over policy differences: how best to promote family values or the welfare of the elderly, over which they agree. Or they may live in conditions forcing moral choices on them that others with the same moral views do not face. Is child labour to be condemned in all circumstances? Did the Inuit, living a hard migratory life, not respect their elders when they walled them up to die? In short, how are we to know when the diversity we see amounts to genuine moral disagreement?

And third, assuming we have answered both of these questions satisfactorily, where are we to locate these moral disagreements? Do they derive from “cultures” and “religions”? But are these really integrated unities rather than internally contested, historically developing and porous to outside influences? Religious texts, even when thought to be divinely inspired, are always subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. And isn't Mary Midgley right to suggest that cultures differ but differ in the way that climatic regions and ecosystems do? Are we – some, admittedly far more than others – not mongrel selves increasingly living hybrid lives? The idea that “cultures” are unified wholes obscures the manifold ways in which people relate to what others and sometimes they themselves call their “cultures”. In more repressive regions of the world, it is the powerful who have the strongest interest in maintaining this misleading idea. It would be best to speak of “culture” adjectivally and adverbially, the better to perceive how people actually interpret the norms and values they live by. In short, to arrive at an understanding of moral disagreement we need to recognise its prevalence both within and across religious and cultural boundaries.

I will assume that, after answering these three sub-questions, the troubling question still survives to trouble us. People have serious moral disagreements about how to treat others, about the scope of moral concern, about what constitutes harm, about what makes life worthwhile. How, then, is the humanist to resist the moral relativist who concludes that the only appropriate response is moral abstinence: that is, refraining from judging others from one's own perspective? Notice that this response is not tolerance. The tolerant person judges others adversely but refrains from interfering with them; the relativist denies that they can be judged.

Let us make the troubling question more concrete with an example. Suppose that two people—a human rights activist and a wife-beating husband—are in disagreement over whether wife-beating is abusive or a necessary defence of marriage. The moral relativist has only two ways of judging this situation. One is to say that the husband's view is the right one, since what is right and wrong is decided by the prevailing views of the local culture (this is the cultural relativist view). Alternatively, given that each appeals to a different set of norms and values, the relativist will declare the disagreement to be only apparent, since each is right relative to each one's norms and values.

But the humanist recognises that there is a real conflict here. There are, I think, two ways of dealing with it, which we can call "Kantian" and "Aristotelian" respectively. The Kantian way (advocated in our time by Jürgen Habermas and Thomas Scanlon) is to ask what can be justified to all those affected by a given practice. Pursuing this idea requires us to recognise that people, not least those subject to abusive practices, will also be subject to powerful constraints that compel them to accept and even endorse them as justified while those constraints last. But, as studies of footbinding in China and female genital mutilation in Africa show, once the constraints are overcome by collective action, the acceptance and endorsement can disappear overnight. The Aristotelian way (advocated in our time by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen) starts from the idea that there are central human capabilities – abilities to function in a truly human way – recognised in very different cultural traditions and independent of any particular religious or metaphysical view. These dictate "core human entitlements that should be respected by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires".

Nussbaum has proposed a list of these entitlements, suggesting that anyone anywhere, given the right educational and material support, is capable of flourishing, while each is free to determine his or her own course. She sees this as a way of defending human rights that is freed of the claim, sometimes made, that talk of human rights is a form of Western cultural imperialism.

These are, I believe, currently the best available answers to the troubling question that besets, or should beset, humanists.

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## **True Disbelievers**

Theodore Dalrymple

The nearest I ever come to a mystical feeling, I suppose, is on drinking a glass of wine after a strenuous day. Then I suddenly feel, quite irrationally of course, that all is right with the world, in fact that, in the words of Julian of Norwich, All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

As the author of these words lived through the Black Death in her early childhood, I think she must have had at least two glasses of wine when she wrote them. While I understand the argument that the existence of unhappiness is necessary for us to be conscious of our happiness, it has always seemed to me that the total quantity of unhappiness in the world is in excess of what is strictly required for us to reach that consciousness; and that therefore the argument does not answer the problem of evil faced by those who propound an all-benevolent deity.

Indeed, the argument would work just as well, if not better, the other way round; that an all-malevolent deity allowed us just enough happiness for us to appreciate our own misery and the evil in the world. The Manichaean view, of a permanent and unresolvable conflict between the principles of good and evil, seems to me quite an attractive one, at least on the level of mythology.

But these are all old arguments. By now, I imagine, there is nothing new to be said about the existence or non-existence of God, or about His supposed attributes, if existent. For myself, I am no more convinced of the existence of a deity than ever I was; the arguments that persuaded me in my youth persuade me still. What has changed is my tolerance of, or perhaps I should say my sympathy with, religion. I no longer experience any visceral dislike of it, at least of all of it; and when those nice women come to the door to distribute Watchtower and Awake, I no longer wish to humiliate them by demonstrating my superior philosophical acumen (for I have read Hume and they have not), though I regret to say that I once did. I remember Mr Venus' words in Our Mutual Friend: "Don't sauce me, in the wicious pride of your youth."

It is not only that I have become aware of the terminal incompleteness of my own philosophical position (let alone my lack of understanding of modern physics and cosmology), that I do not now ever expect to be able to repair or make whole an awareness that seems to require both a degree of humility towards and tolerance of the philosophical positions of others; but I have rejected the historiography of religion of the adolescent or villageatheist, according to which religion is responsible for harm and evil and nothing but harm and evil.

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Of course, I still recognise that terrible things have been done in the name of religion, and continue to be done in that name. But it is possible to write the history of almost any human endeavour plausibly in the terms of the harm that it has done.

The history of medicine is a good example. At the time I qualified, the history of medicine was almost a form of ancestor worship. It was written mainly by retired doctors who wanted to keep in contact with the profession that had been the focus of their lives, and they assumed, almost axiomatically, that the task of medical history was to explain how past heroics had led to our current state of extreme enlightenment. This was the Whig interpretation of history applied to one small corner of human history as a whole.

Over the years, medical history has ceased, at least exclusively, to be written by medical ancestor-worshippers; the writing of it has largely been taken over by the sociologically minded, who have been more concerned to demonstrate the economic ambitions of the medical profession than its commitment to the betterment of mankind and success in procuring it. There has also been an enormous increase in the number of studies devoted to the absurd theories in which the medical profession long believed, and to the dreadful and harmful practices in which it long indulged. Quite a lot of famous people – as famous as Louis XIV and George Washington – were as likely to have died of their treatments as from the diseases for which they were being treated. Recently I reviewed a book, published by one of the most prestigious academic presses in the world, that purported to be a history of medicine as illustrated by the disasters it, medicine, wrought, on large scale and small.

Now the two kinds of history are both true and false. Both rely on what really happened; they do not falsify the record in the sense of fraudulently making up untruths of whole cloth. But neither tells the whole truth, which, of course, is complex. As a doctor, I am inclined to the Whig interpretation, because it seems to me as good an organising principle as any other, and it is flattering to me a member of the profession; but I do recognise that the fact that (for example) patients were bled by doctors for two millennia, not only without doing the pretty obvious experiments to establish the efficacy of this procedure, but without even realising the necessity to perform such experiments, is one that needs to be explained. From our current standpoint, at least, it is not one that is flattering to the collective intelligence of the medical profession. Similarly, it would not be very difficult, I think, to build up a dossier demonstrating the disastrous effect of science and technology on human life throughout history. To take but a single point: technology has almost always soon been adapted to military purposes, so that more and more people can be killed at greater and greater distance. It is a banality that it is one thing psychologically to kill someone in a hand-to-hand fight, and quite another to kill hundreds, thousands or millions

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at the press of a button. Even the comparatively low-tech Rwandan genocide was completely reliant on 20th-century technology for its consummation. It could not have happened in the 19th century, for example, because there was no radio to spread incitement through the land contemporaneously.

However, no one this side of out-and-out Luddites would claim that the effects of technology on human existence have been wholly negative. An examination of the facts of demography alone precludes such a conclusion; and not many of us would be willing to forgo the marvels that are the most elementary part of our daily lives, but would have made the Sun King gasp in admiration or incredulity. Thanks to technology, the comfort of our most ordinary daily lives is incomparably greater and freer of pain than that of the most extravagantly luxurious monarchs of history.

Now it seems to me that the balance sheet – of good against evil – of the history of religion is likely to be so complex as to be impossible to draw up. Perhaps even the attempt is ridiculous, or the question itself meaningless. Apart from anything else, it necessitates the employment of counterfactuals of the most doubtful kind. What would the history of Western Europe have been if it were not for the Catholic Church and the Reformation? One can, perhaps, say what the history of smallpox would have been without Jenner's discovery (though even this is not entirely without controversy), but surely not the history of Western Europe without the Catholic Church and the Reformation. Despite the intrinsic unanswerability of the question, I think there is little doubt that many atheists feel very deeply, even passionately, about the subject. Their passion, in fact, far outruns any possible factual or rational argument upon which it could be based. Several of what one might call the new-wave atheist books seethe with hatred of religion, not merely rejection of its arguments. One begins to suspect an overdose of religion in their childhoods to account for it.

Extreme forms of argument abound: such as, for example, that the religious education of children is a form of child abuse. This means that huge numbers of parents in the past, perhaps the majority of them, were child abusers (75 per cent of children in Britain attended Sunday school in 1900).

Of course, it might be argued that they were not child abusers at the time because religion was not then known to be entirely false, but now that we know all forms of religious belief to be entirely false, still to bring a child up in a religious tradition is a form of child abuse.

This, however, is nonsense. The fundamental arguments both for and against religion have been known for at least two millennia. No modern atheist really knows more, or has better arguments, than Lucretius had. Moreover,

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to use a term such as child abuse, with all its extreme connotations, of religious upbringing of children, however mild, is as intolerant in its own way, and certainly would be as nasty in its practical consequences if anyone took it seriously, as (let us say) theocratic Islam. Indeed, it smacks of very much the same mindset.

When I once published a small article in which I stated that by far the best and nicest people I had ever known were religious, I received a torrent of unpleasant letters that equalled in nastiness of tone the theocratic Islamic websites (that are easily found) that assert, without qualification or awareness that some might find the point of view morally repugnant, that the penalty for apostasy in Islam is death. I was not in any way endorsing the religious beliefs themselves, merely saying that, in these cases, they seem to have had beneficial consequences.

It goes without saying that I do not want to live in a theocracy, but I don't want to live in a militantly atheist state either: and to call religious education child abuse seems to me virtually to be a demand for a militantly atheist state. Indeed, most militantly atheist states (with the exception of Albania) did not forbid people to be religious, only to teach religion - precisely the policy that those who call religious education a form of child abuse might be expected to endorse. Not coincidentally, these militantly atheist states were among the nastiest in human history.

The role of rationality in human life is a lot more complex and less unequivocal than we sometimes like to think; this applies as much to disbelievers as to believers. Militancy is usually a sign of impatience, as well as of a lack of prudence, justice and temperance: and, as I am sure that I do not need to tell you, prudence, justice and temperance are three of the four cardinal virtues.

## Book Review

..... The Greatest Confidence Trick In History

By: Dennis Morris

Reviewer: James Lovell. Publisher: lulu.com

I have read all Dennis Morris' books since he first published in the early 1980's; this is the best ever. *An Alternative to Religion*, which is the first chapter of this book, is extremely enlightening. Modern sociology and the sciences can represent a different approach to religion, an approach which explains certain so-called religious phenomena in scientific, physiological, psychological and social terms, which are the paths followed by secular Humanists, Atheists, Freethinkers and likeminded people. Despite religion's vigorous and cruel suppression of rational thought and scientific knowledge over many centuries, human understanding has progressed enormously; it is religion that has remained frozen in time for thousands of years.

The Preface starts off by saying: 'regardless of what is written here, everyone is afforded the courtesy of free choice as to what they want to accept or reject'. A theory or belief is only valid for as long as it has not been disproved and exposed. After all, true freethinking includes pure observation without indoctrination.

The second chapter when as a child, the author was introduced into the sciences, critical and freethinking, meeting scientists at archaeological diggings at Sterkfontein and Swartkrans, South Africa's first World Heritage sites. From there, the routes the Neanderthal's and Cro-Magnon's might have taken can be followed. Years later the writer travelled extensively around the world observing different cultures, visiting and living in many monasteries of different religions.

The book outlines the evolution, contradictions, absurdities and legacy of the religious Scriptures, including the development of the English Bible. The ancient religions are explored, such as Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, including, the Chinese and Japanese philosophies, religions and more. The historical theme of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible is loosely adhered to, allowing for easy and understanding reading. How Mohammed plagiarised the Bible, including all the absurdities. It will reveal, how, out of the seed of our ancestors' primitive superstition, grew the religions that exist today and how religion has fed human pride, greed and ruthlessness. In the process, the power hungry have consumed the vulnerable and gullible with the promise of illusional and unachievable expectations. Morris then goes on to give a very comprehensive explanation as to why all religions are false. How they kept growing over the millennia to what they are today. He explains comprehensively how the Torah, Bible and Qu-ran grew out of the old Greek, Egyptian and Babylonian religions. How religion has become a money-making machine for political parties. Dennis Morris declares 'if anyone still chooses to indoctrinate their children into the narrow confines of religion, they are not only limiting their children's full potential but are guilty of mental abuse.

It is a book that opens the eyes of all who take the time to read it.  
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