

HUMANISM AND ATHEISM

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

Some people allege that Humanism is just a euphemistic way of referring to atheism. They fail to understand that Humanism is a rounded philosophy of life and atheism is simply the answer to a particular question of whether or not a god (or goddess) exists or, indeed, gods or goddesses. Catholics and Protestants, for example, are theists, but they usually don't just describe themselves as such, because their religious ideology comprises more than is involved in such a description.

Atheism is of course a corollary of secular Humanism, but what most religious people don't realise is that the majority of Humanists simply don't think about the idea of a god from one end of the day to the other. When belief in a god is central to your Catholic or Protestant faith, you tend to define others in relation to their position on the subject, especially when it is negative; thus one is regarded not so much as a Humanist as an atheist. It is rather like the Catholic habit of referring to Protestants as Non-Catholics. Unfortunately, some Human-ists are induced into internalising the negative attitude to them of the religious by accepting that they should mainly designate themselves as atheists. Consequently, an affirmative philosophy is transmuted into a rejectionist assertion and thus diminished in the process.

Distortions

The presentation of Humanism mainly as atheism is an intellectual and communicative mistake. Firstly, it illogically uses a part to represent the whole; in other words, it exemplifies the fallacy of arguing from a particular to a general. Secondly, it underestimates the potency of false and hostile connotations which have been cultivated in relation to the term 'atheism'. Ever since the Middle Ages, atheism has

been portrayed as associated with all sorts of evil ranging from licentiousness to Satanism. The more outrageous depictions may have declined in modern times. But they have been toned down rather than eliminated. The atheist is still viewed by many as somehow, if not altogether clearly defined, as disreputable. And then the 20th century in particular saw atheism become a virtual synonym for communism. If you were one, you were the other. As a result, 'atheist' was often avoided by either phrasal or euphemistic means, e.g. simply 'I don't believe in a deity' or self-description as 'agnostic'. There is the tale told by Richard Dawkins of an American girl phoning her mother and saying "Mom, I don't believe in god anymore", and getting the reply "Oh, that's alright hone, so long as you're not a bloody atheist!"

The point is that one should not only refuse to acquiesce in those sorts of attitude, but also deal with them in a sensible and effective way. That entails explaining primarily what Humanism is rather than fronting with what it is not. Atheism then becomes one of a number of logical and reasonable inferences rather than isolatedly a simplistic and brash exclamation.

Atheism & Agnosticism

There are, of course, also sincere agnostics. 'Agnostic' in that case merely refers generally to what is not knowable, but is employed mostly in regard to the god question. Yet one still suspects on occasion that some avowed agnostics are, as indicated above, atheists who are reluctant to admit it, given prevailing attitudes of shock and horror. In other words, an agnostic may often be an atheist that dare not speak its name.

The fact is that one can be both an atheist and an agnostic. That is to say that

one can accept that it is not possible (at this juncture anyway) to *know* whether or not there is a god, yet *believe* that there is not.

Simple belief without certain knowledge is typical in life. When one goes out the door in the morning to work, one does not really *know* that one will come back through it again that evening, but one usually *believes* that one will.

Philosophical belief is something else. As for a god in particular, there are various reasons for not believing in one, even if one cannot absolutely know about such an alleged existence. The first consideration is evidence. There is an absence of credible substantiation, despite all the fanciful miracles and outlandish myths. But that absence does not of itself currently prove that there is no god. Then there is the consideration of how religion arose and the purposes it serves. Particular features and patterns are discernible and I have dealt with these in my previous article *Origins of Religion* (IF no. 196). It is this historical emergence and development of religion which does much to reduce its credibility.

Purposes of a God

The essence of the situation is that, while a god may not exist he (not 'she' of course) had to be invented, as Voltaire put it, to satisfy the ill-informed speculation of humanity about its origins as well as about all sorts of 'mysterious' events and in order to reconcile people to injustice in life and mortality. Such reconciliation is expected to grow from the mixed soil of disappointment and hope and is religiously cultivated accordingly.

There has also been the perennial problem for religious believers of an existing god who is supposed to be good and perfect yet allows the disaster, disease, famine, deformity, violence, and destitution that exists in the world. The limp answer here is that it is simply his will or a mystery which has to be accepted - or serves some greater good which we cannot understand! Otherwise, our own 'free will' is blamed. Such a mixture of obscurantism

and self-flagellation is truly astounding. But it is no more confused than asking us to worship a god who is to be both feared and loved at the same time. It was Machiavelli who suggested that it was better to be feared than loved and, better still, to be both feared and loved.

Belief & Faith

In general, it should be noted that most atheists do not set out to prove that there is not a god; they are merely unconvinced by the assertions or arguments that there is one. Moreover, if a god him/herself were out to win friends and influence people, i.e. to be much of a persuader, we would simply all have been rendered theists.

Belief in what will or will not happen is one thing in everyday life; it is another when it comes to the answers given by religion to the fundamental questions of existence. Such belief without knowledge is called faith. In fact, a test of faith is not only to believe in what one does not know, but in the

ludicrous. The prime example of this is the Trinity, i.e. three persons in one god. The only rational way of looking at such a proposition is to resolve that the god in question has a multiple personality disorder. A close competitor for primitive nonsense is parthenogenesis. But what really excels is transubstantiation whereby the quasi-cannibalism of wine supposedly being really blood and wafer really flesh is the ultimate test of religious fidelity. As for the resurrection after three days, it is hard to know what to infer from it other than that Jesus was not an early riser.

Investigation - Not Credulity

In summary, there is a difference between functional belief and explanatory belief. The first is existentially necessary, the second is intellectually challenging. That challenge can be approached either rationally and scientifically or naïvely and credulously, i.e. depending on either investigation or imagination. That is where the modern human stands. Investigation



may not have yet led to certainty and with that the mature person has to live in the immediate rather than filling what are gaps in current knowledge with references to a glorified Santa. However, that does not signify that the inevitable human unease with ignorance and uncertainty has to be just accepted; rather does it mean that it should be harnessed to continuing

exploration. We must swim searchingly into the future, not sink complacently in the quicksand of superstition.

May 2023

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