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Christianity: the true humanism

by Jon Thompson

Man is the measure of all things.   Protagoras

What is man, that you are mindful of him?   Psalm 8:4

Summary

This paper argues that Christianity is the most coherent form of humanism. By contrast, secular humanism is historically and philosophically dependent upon Christianity's view of the human person. In a survey of the origins, emergence and development of secular humanism, this paper explores that historical connection before examining some of the implications which flow from a divorce of human values from Christian belief.

Introduction

On a beautiful, busy Saturday afternoon in Cambridge there is a massive queue outside the Cambridge Union. Meandering through an alley and taking a right angle down the street, it is full of scores of people from all walks of life, all age ranges, and all levels of education—everyone eagerly awaiting entrance to hear the philosopher Alain de Botton. While it is striking in itself to see a philosopher draw such a large crowd of non-academics (try to imagine 12 year-old children showing up to a lecture on epistemic warrant and error), the content of the lecture is even more surprising: religion for atheists. In this lecture (and in a book by the same title), de Botton attempts to use religious ideas and practices as a means to help secular people find moral direction and meaning for their lives—the two areas secular thought has perennially struggled to address.[1] But de Botton's project is really nothing new. He represents one in a long line of thinkers known as secular humanists—those who attempt to ground human values in atheistic terms. It is the wide appeal and readership of de Botton's work which suggest that the secular humanist movement is very influential today and therefore worthy of close consideration.

What is secular humanism?

Secular humanism is a philosophy of life which affirms the universal and unique significance of humanity, universal human rights, objective moral values, optimism concerning the future of the human condition, and meaning and purpose in human life.[2] Secular humanism affirms the above while simultaneously denying the existence of God or anything supernatural. It is the philosophy of life that drives the British Humanist Association, the 'Brights' movement and the 'New Atheists'. But can these affirmations and denials be held simultaneously? Can secular humanism give a coherent and meaningful account of human values—one as coherent as the Christian tradition has done? This paper argues that the positive human values of secular humanism are historically and philosophically dependent upon a Christian view of reality, particularly in the areas of human nature, morality and the meaning of human life.

The *imago Dei*

Christianity holds that humanity is made in the image of God.[3] In creating humanity in his image, God gave human beings a nature unique in its very essence,[4] and God also declared that human beings possess the utmost moral significance and moral responsibility.[5] This concept of *imago Dei* was vitally important for Jewish thought, but it was not extensively developed within the Old Testament itself. It was in the theology of the New Testament and the early Christian church that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* gained its deepest significance.

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1   Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, Hamish Hamilton, 2012, p.12.
2   Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: What's in the Word*, Rationalist Press Association, 1997, pp.87–90.
3   Gen. 1:27.
4   Although the above characteristics are not the foundation of the *imago Dei,* they are expressions of this essential nature.
5   Gen. 9:6.

The new humanity

According to Christian theology, Jesus Christ embodies the union of the perfect and holy God with human nature, a belief expressed as the Incarnation. From very early on in Church history, Christ's Incarnation was understood as the 'recapitulation' of the *imago Dei*—its fullest and clearest revelation.[6] This doctrine of the Incarnation burst into first-century Mediterranean society like a brisk wind, upsetting and challenging the established religious, social and political orders of the pagan culture. It originated in the outlying district of Judea and was condemned by the Roman political authorities, who regarded it as 'atheism' at best and treason at worst. But what was so radical, so disturbing about this belief in the Incarnation? It was of course that the one Creator God had somehow become a human being (a thought as offensive to Cicero as to Hume). But it was also that in Jesus' death and resurrection this God had created a 'new humanity'—one which united Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and free.[7] And the head of this new humanity was not the Emperor of Rome, but Jesus Christ. The scandal of this early Christian belief is difficult for a modern person to grasp, as we live in a culture shaped by two millennia of Christian influence. But the entrance of the doctrine of the Incarnation into Western thought is of vital importance if we are to understand and analyse humanism. Contrasting Christianity with its pre-Christian counterparts helps one to gain some sense of its weight.[8]

Perhaps the place where the unique Christian understanding of the human person is best expressed is in practices of the early Christian church. Graeco-Roman culture had emphasised the importance of the virtues, but Christianity reworked the order and primacy of these virtues. Because Christ was *agape* incarnate,[9] and because he had given his life for all humanity, sacrificial love (charity) became the primary Christian virtue.[10] This charity was extended especially to those who had been ostracised and overlooked by pre-Christian culture. Pagan culture allowed the exposure of disabled and unwanted infants, most of whom were girls. These infants were seen as lacking a *persona*, or social and legal identity, and therefore morally irrelevant.[11] Christianity viewed infants as full persons and therefore disallowed this practice.[12] The plight of the socially disadvantaged was also dramatically eased: widows were placed in the centre of the church's concern and women abandoned by their husbands were entitled to compensation for the first time.[13] One of the starkest examples of Christian charity was the persistence of Christians in caring for the sick and dying victims of the great plague of AD 251–266, long after the pagans had left the North African cities of Alexandria and Carthage.[14] Of course, Christians have by no means always lived up to this view of humanity—in the past or present. But this does not negate the fact that the Christian understanding of the Incarnation put forth a novel and radically ennobling view of human beings. Historian David Bentley Hart argues, 'This immense dignity—this infinite capacity—inheres in every person, no matter what circumstances might for now seem to limit him or her to one destiny or another. No previous Western vision of the human being remotely resembles this one.'[15] It was this deep respect for human beings—and the charity that flowed from it—that helped spread Christianity and replace the pagan view of the human person with the *imago Dei*. As the pagan emperor Julian wrote, 'It is [the Christians'] philanthropy towards strangers, the care they take of the graves of the dead, and the affected sanctity with which they conduct their lives that have done most to spread their atheism.'[16]

The early church's conception of the human person not only affirmed individuals' moral worth, it also infused their lives with a deep sense of meaning. If God has indeed taken human form in the person of Christ, the question of whether human life is meaningful ceases to be a meaningful question—it is so clearly true. Because Christ had put on human nature and transformed it, human beings were able to participate in the character of God through Christ. Fifth-century theologian Cyril of Alexandria expresses this reality as the 'participation' of humanity in the divine nature.[17] Christianity held that *every* human being could become one with Jesus Christ. The slave or the soldier, the child or the statesman, could all become 'partakers of the divine nature'.[18] They could grow in their resemblance to Jesus Christ and thus come nearer the ultimate purpose of their lives. Every single human action then had significance in the eyes of God, for every action and experience had the potential to serve this end.

Renaissance humanism

It is often thought that the Renaissance was a period when advances in human thought and human flourishing were brought about by a denial of Christianity and the adoption of a secular, pre-Christian mindset. However, Renaissance thought worked largely within the Christian framework, and advances in human rights and human dignity were often dependent upon theological assumptions.[19] One example of this was the Renaissance theologian Francisco de Vitoria, who articulated one of the first conceptualisations of universal human rights. De Vitoria's account depended upon the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and it criticised the subjugation of the native peoples of South America by the Spanish conquistadors. Brian Tierney argues that this was one of the first considerations of natural rights:

> The issue concerned theologians, Vitoria explained, because the Indians were not subject to the Spanish by human law; hence, their status had to be considered in relation to divine law, presumably the divine natural law that initially conferred dominion on humankind.[20]

The vital concept of Vitoria's argument is the claim that the natives of South America had been given dominion by having been made in God's image—an image which included human dominion.[21] De Vitoria implemented the same high view of human beings that had characterised the early church—the *imago Dei*—to defend the rights of those the West largely viewed as morally irrelevant.

Enlightenment humanism

In contrast with the Renaissance, Enlightenment thinkers were more committed to grounding human values without appeal to theological discourse and terminology. Many eighteenth-century 'Radical Enlightenment' thinkers, including Diderot, Condorcet, and Voltaire, saw religion as evil and the cause of the stifling of human flourishing. They were doubtless right about many forms of Christianity they faced. However, many Enlightenment figures worked within the framework of Christian thought to bring about

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6   Col. 1:15; John 1:14; cf. St. Irenaeus.
7   Eph. 2:15.
8   See historian David Bentley Hart's account of this transformation in *Atheist Delusions*, Yale University Press, 2009, pp.111–218.
9   1 John 4:8.
10   1 Cor. 13:1–13; Matt. 22:39; Gal. 5:14.
11   See Aristotle's *Politics* 7.16.1335b 20–25, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1984, 2:2119.
12   Hart, p.160.
13   Hart, p.161.
14   Hart, p.165.
15   Hart, p.211.

16   Julian, Epistle 22, written to Arsacius, the high priest of Galatia, quoted in Hart, p.154.
17   Daniel Keating, 'Divinization in Cyril', *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria*, ed. by Weinandy and Keating, T&T Clark, 2003, p.151.
18   2 Pet. 1:4.
19   Indeed, the term 'humanist', when applied to Renaissance thinkers, has none of the atheistic or anti-supernatural connotations of today's secular humanism.
20   Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights*, Scholars Press, 1997, p.265; quoted in Luis Cortest, *The Disfigured Face*, Fordham University Press, 2008, p.23.
21   Gen. 1:26–27.

constructive political change. John Locke, for example, was deeply influenced by the Christian view of the human person. Indeed, Locke grounded his influential argument for human rights and universal equality in the concept of the *imago Dei*.[22] Locke scholar Jeremy Waldron goes as far as arguing that there is no way to ground Locke's version of human rights without reference to Christian thought.[23] The fact that such an influential understanding of human rights is dependent upon Christianity displays the humanising nature of the Christian view. This is not meant to downplay the role of thoroughly secular thinkers in the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Rather, it is simply meant to point out that the popular narrative of the Enlightenment's wholesale denial of Christianity's view of the human person (and the supposed liberation of humanity from darkness and superstition) is a misleading account.

The rise of secular humanism

However, the nineteenth century did see a more systematic movement away from a Christian form of humanism. This was partly due to the perceived inability of the Christian intellectual system to cope with the explosion of scientific discovery and industrial advances.[24] The social and physical sciences were rapidly increasing their scope and explanatory power, and many posited they would provide humanity with the authoritative method for improving politics, ethics and society. Additionally, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing and was thought to be able to give human beings the tools needed to achieve these improvements. This unprecedented progress aided the spread of the view that the concept of God was at least irrelevant and at most hostile to human flourishing. Human beings—in their creativity, ingenuity and power—looked more and more like gods. French philosopher Auguste Comte took this observation to new levels, initiating the creation of a 'Religion of Humanity'. He hoped this religion would replace Christianity, since it placed humanity as the central object of worship. Theologian David Friedrich Strauss pushed a similar line of thought in Germany. Horton Harris summarises Strauss's humanism, a secular version of the Incarnation: 'The unity of god and man had been poured out, not into one specific individual in history, but into humanity; the divine predicates, which the Church had ascribed to Jesus, belonged to mankind as a whole.'[25] These cultural leaders helped galvanise the notion that humanity could ascend to greater heights than it had under Christian influence. As secular humanist Nicolas Walter observes, 'The influential publications of David Friedrich Strauss, which insisted on a naturalistic interpretation of the Gospel stories and…which insisted on the replacement of God by Man, prepared the ground for the spread of the use of the term Humanism.'[26] Secular humanism declared that humanity had not in fact been made in God's image; rather, God had been made in the image of humanity.

Nietzsche and secular humanism

Secular humanism in the nineteenth century had sought to maintain a highly elevated view of humanity—humanity envisaged as a future state of the human perfection or potential. Thus, the Christian narrative of a 'new humanity' through Christ was replaced by the narrative of a new humanity realised through science, technology and perhaps even evolution. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, this secular optimism underwent a radical critique, headed by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He argued, 'Humanity does not constitute a whole: it

is an indissoluble multiplicity of ascending and descending organisms—it knows no such thing as a state of youth followed by maturity and then age.'[27] The reason for Nietzsche's pessimistic view likely lies in the fact that he was among the first philosophers to gain prominence after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. If naturalism (the view that there exists no God and nothing supernatural) is true, then Darwin left no room for the traditional, elevated view of human nature. Nietzsche seemed to be correct in arguing that the concept of humanity, as the secular humanist conceived it, depended upon the assumption that humanity is developing in some discrete direction. But the naturalistic picture alone did not give any justification for such a view. If Nietzsche's criticisms hold true, then the ideas of Strauss, Comte and other radical humanists could not be correct. All conceptions of humanity as semi-divine or special were ultimately misplaced.

Twentieth-century secular humanism

Secular humanism in the twentieth century made one of its key aims the development of a science of morality, and the naturalistic view of humanity outlined above had to play a determining role in this account. Secular humanism therefore has sought to ground the value of human beings in an empirical attribute—consciousness. Richard Norman, contemporary proponent of secular humanism, writes that moral dignity is grounded in the fact that 'Each human being is a unique centre of consciousness.'[28] But if this is the determining characteristic of moral status, does secular humanism run into problems? Peter Singer, a leading utilitarian ethicist, takes the most painstaking efforts to carry the above assumption to its logical conclusions. If consciousness is the only morally relevant factor, then there seem to be certain human beings who count neither as persons nor as morally significant. Infants and perhaps some of the very elderly may fall outside this range because they either have not yet developed or have lost the capacity for conscious reflection.[29] Reflecting on the question of the morality of infanticide, Singer suggests that the primary question is whether the child is wanted, either by the mother or some members of the society in which it is born.[30] He argues that the Western prohibition against infanticide is a Christian aberration from the cross-cultural norm and that 'the cultures which practiced infanticide were on solid ground.'[31]

Although this hardly seems a view that contemporary society would seriously countenance, it is precisely this implication which some academics in the field of bioethics are now entertaining.[32] As two Italian bioethicists pointed out in a 2012 paper (published by the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics), if one takes Singer's consciousness criterion as the determining factor in the question of personhood, there seems little room to resist the claim that infanticide is morally acceptable. This is because, under this view, personhood belongs to conscious individuals, and infants do not meet this minimal standard.[33] While one would hope that most secular humanists would deny this conclusion, it is in no way clear how a naturalistic account can guarantee the universal moral status of human beings.[34] Indeed, Singer himself points out that the *imago Dei* undergirds our societal and personal resistance to the idea of infanticide and

22 Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.25.
23 Waldron, p. 47.
24 Alan Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West*, Thames and Hudson, 1985, p.90.
25 Horton Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p.138.
26 Walter, p.24.
27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Allen and Unwin, 1909, p.271.
28 *On Humanism*, Routledge, 2004, p.104; cf. Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, Bantam Press, 2010.
29 This is to say nothing of people who are under the effect of anaesthesia or in a deep sleep, who do not clearly count as morally relevant persons either.
30 Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.211.
31 Singer, p. 215.
32 Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, *The Journal for Medical Ethics*, http://jme.bmj.com/content/early/2012/03/01/medethics-2011-100411.full
33 Giubilini and Minerva.
34 Richard J. Arneson, 'What, if Anything, Renders All Humans Morally Equal?', *Singer and His Critics*, ed. by Dale Jamieson, Blackwell, 1999, p.104.

euthanasia. The radical shift in moral thinking he advocates depends upon the abandonment of precisely this concept of *imago Dei*.[35] Singer states, 'Thousands of years of lip-service to the Christian ethic have not succeeded in suppressing entirely the earlier ethical attitude that newborn infants, especially if unwanted, are not yet full members of the moral community.'[36] It is not clear what one should call a view with such grotesque moral implications, but there does not seem to be a way to coherently and honestly call it humanism.[37]

Secular humanism today

Contemporary humanism struggles to provide an adequate response to the problematic conception of human nature and human worth outlined in the previous section. Instead, the intrinsic value of all humans is simply assumed and so, unwittingly, the Judaeo-Christian view of human nature is borrowed. In order to shore up a more appealing view of humanity, philosophers like Alain de Botton invite other secular humanists to create human-affirming institutions and practices. De Botton describes a hypothetical community guided by the virtue of charity, which would meet in what he calls the '*Agape* Restaurant'. This community would require participation by different races, creeds and strata of society, and he suggests that it would bring communities into perfect harmony:

> 'our fear of strangers would recede. The poor would eat with the rich, the black with the white, the orthodox with the secular, the bipolar with the balanced, workers with managers, scientists with artists. The claustrophobic pressure to derive all of our satisfactions from our existing relationships would ease, as would our desire to gain status by accessing so-called elite circles.'[38]

This picture is an admittedly beautiful one. But isn't this view of human nature out of place and misguided if we accept de Botton's assumption that the Christian view outlined above is false?

Contemporary historian John Gray echoes the worries of Nietzsche in this regard. He states, '"Humanity" does not exist. There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgment.'[39] De Botton's vision rests upon the assumption of our shared humanity, but how are we to ground this idea after the critiques of Nietzsche or Gray? Or how can secular humanism deal with the implications of Peter Singer's claim that only certain humans count as persons (an unsettling return to the pagan view)? If this naturalistic view is correct, how can we ground the dignity and worth of every human being? The view of human beings passed down from Nietzsche, Singer and Gray simply cannot supply such a vision. There seems then to be a stark divide between the intellectual superstructure of secular humanism and its stated values.[40] We should be exceedingly grateful that we agree on the unique and universal dignity of human beings. But it must be asked whether the fruit of social concord, tolerance and even sacrificial charity can be maintained when its intellectual root has been abandoned. Hart contends, 'as a cultural reality, even love requires a reason for its preeminence among the virtues, and the mere habit of solicitude for others will not necessarily long survive when that reason is no longer found.'[41] As argued above, early Christianity firmly established charity as the central virtue only because it reoriented its understanding of humanity around the incarnate God—the person of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

When faced with the choice between the secular humanist view of human beings and the Christian view, it seems that Christianity provides the most coherent intellectual framework for the notions of human dignity and human potential we hope to maintain. Many have accused Christianity of being a form of wishful thinking. But Christianity is the true humanism, not because it affirms all those things which human beings *wish* were true, but because it accepts as fact—through the revelation of Jesus Christ—a host of truths even better than humans had previously had the courage to imagine: that there exists a God of immeasurable love; that human beings were made in God's image and are thereby morally aware and of incalculable worth; and that human beings can realise their true purpose through union with Christ. Whereas secular humanism is constrained to affirm humanity as it is, Christianity envisions and affirms humanity as it can be in union with Jesus Christ.

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35   Singer, p. 221.
36   Singer, p. 131.
37   It is doubtful that most secular humanists would accept Singer's conclusion, but this denial demands an alternative grounding of moral status.
38   De Botton, p.48.
39   John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, Granta Books, 2003, p.12.

40   It is important to note that de Botton's *agape* is simply another word for the Christian charity of the early church, discussed above. If my thesis is correct, then secular humanism *must* draw on Christian ideas and practices in order to justify its elevated view of human nature because the secular humanist view is dependent upon the Christian one.
41   Hart, p.215.

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