

# The Humanist: *A Dialogue*

by Hugo Meynell

*A* In the first place, I should like to know why you call yourself a humanist rather than an atheist or agnostic.

*B* Because both of these terms suggest that one's whole attitude to life is oriented on one's rejection of traditional religion, rather than on some positive alternative. I agree that 'humanist' is a term often used to describe those who were better called 'atheist' or 'agnostic'.

*A* Can the humanist, then, as well be called religious as irreligious?

*B* I won't say *tout court* either that he is religious or that he isn't; and the reason why I don't have to is that there are a number of attitudes and dispositions expected of a man who is called religious, some of which the humanist would lay claim to, some of which he wouldn't. A man can be religious in the sense that he feels awe at what is greater or better than himself, horror at the desecration of nature and humanity, and even respect, however qualified, for venerable institutions based on false beliefs, without giving his assent to any allegedly revealed dogmatic system. And he may gain valuable insights into his own nature and situation from writers who are religious in an unqualified sense. Just because I'm not a Christian, I don't have to deny that Augustine was a genius in the fields of ethics and psychology.

*A* You would regard as unfair, I take it, the suggestion that these kinds of insight cannot well subsist, at least for long, outside the framework of belief within which, as you admit, they arose as a matter of fact?

*B* I think it was one of the Greek apologists who said that Christians were the inheritors of whatever was best in pagan culture? I really don't see why humanists, by their own lights, should not have equal rights with regard to the great modern religions, including Christianity.

*A* A Christian might say that belief in a God-man is itself a kind of humanism.

*B* Or, indeed, Christianity might be described as the historical transition between theism and humanism. But the similarities ought not to be exaggerated. It is of the essence of Christianity that the ideal for human aspiration – the blueprint, as it were, for what man is to strive to become – is given once and for all. God really exists, for the Christian, and not merely as an ideal picture of the absolutely greatest and best; furthermore he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, thus giving to man an ideal

*ab extra*, so to speak, and pre-empting man's right to lay down ideals for himself.

A Is this right of man's not, in fact, admitted by many Christians?

B Well, once 'God' and 'Christ' are used as terms denoting only the human ideal, rather than a Being objectively existing and a particular historical individual, Christianity becomes nothing but humanism expressed in terms misleadingly reminiscent of revealed religion. The humanist has no given ideal of manhood; he does not think that this is because such an ideal really exists but at present eludes him; he has, on the contrary, to construct it himself. A Christian is hardly a Christian unless he accords absolute primacy to the data provided by the Bible and the tradition of the Church in the formation of his ideals – though I suppose he can without gross inconsistency allow a secondary place to the data of other traditions of human thought and experience. The stage secularist, no doubt, is as *a priori* in his rejection of data provided by the religions as the Christian is in his acceptance of the primacy of the Bible and his own tradition. The humanist – who very possibly has himself had that experience of 'the numinous' which is sometimes claimed to be the basis of religion – uses his own moral judgment and aesthetic taste in building up his ideal picture from religious and secular literature, and from the hints thrown out by science.

A But as aesthetic tastes and moral attitudes vary, it may be inferred that the ideals constructed on the basis of these tastes and attitudes will vary. Now I realise that you can make what seems at first sight an attractive contrast between the somewhat monolithic and exclusive ideals set up by the great religions and the mutual toleration of various forms of human aspiration which characterize humanism. But there seems to me no guarantee that such ideals, if each were given a free rein, would be able to settle down with one another.

B Certainly I'm committed at this point to what amounts to an article of faith. However, others have been allowed their articles of faith – some of them, I flatter myself, less plausible than this one. I believe that a wide literary and scientific education, given a world fairly free from physical, religious and political fear and distress, tends to favour those forms of life which go with a toleration of other forms of life. Erich Fromm somewhere contrasts the unconditional love and reverence for one's fellow men, whether this calls itself religious or not, with the sacrifice of them to an idol, which nowadays is inclined to be in the form of an abstraction like Science or Progress. If *this* is where you draw the boundary between religion and irreligion, then humanism in my sense is a religion; and some Christians at least, whose God seems little more than a projection of their fear of and repressive attitude towards their own desires and those of other people, are idolaters. It has been said that the true atheist is the man who handles holy things without feeling. The

humanist does not find adequate grounds for believing that there exists objectively anything more holy than man; and man is holy both for what he is and for what he may become. Whatever is holier than man is an ideal that he sets himself, and has no other existence.

*A* A Christian would probably say that such an attitude amounts to an inchoate Christian faith; that an attitude which refuses to sacrifice man to any abstraction (or for that matter individual men to the abstraction 'man'), when it is fully conscious of itself, will become explicitly Christian. For Christianity demands of men nothing less than to develop to the full the potentialities which their Creator has given them.

*B* If you *mean* by 'men fulfilling the task laid upon them by their Creator', nothing different from 'men realizing their potentialities to the full', then, surely, the boot is on the other foot. Christianity is revealed as inchoate humanism, not *vice versa*. On this view one might sketch the development of religious thought like this: The Jews worshipped a God who transcended man; the Christians a man as the epiphany of this God. Humanists worship man as God – though, to be sure, not so much what man is now, even at his best, as what he may become.

*A* That sounds dangerously like the sacrifice of present men for the sake of future men, which would make humanism an idolatry in the sense you have just suggested.

*B* I think this is a danger. For humanist worship not to degenerate either into idolatry or into self-conceit and self-indulgence, man's present happiness and future development have both constantly to be kept in view.

*A* These two ideals must often conflict with one another.

*B* Certainly they do. Humanism has to face squarely a fact that was glossed over by the traditional religions – that morality and self-interest do not ultimately coincide, in this life or in any hereafter. To return to my comparison of humanism and traditional religions – one might put it that transcendent theism is heteronomous religion, or man's worship of something totally distinct from himself. Humanism, or man's worshipping of ideals which he constructs for himself, is the true autonomous religion. Christianity, the religion of God made man, is of tremendous though, *sub specie aeternitatis*, transitory importance as the path from one to the other.

Karl Barth castigates the Protestant liberal theology of the nineteenth century for so understressing the transcendence of God that talk about God approximated more and more to talk about man. And an English theologian actually wrote early in the present century that Godhood was manhood at its highest power. If this means that man at his best is the proper object of religious worship, then it is simply humanism dressed up in traditional Christian language. Barth himself, of course, as transcendentalist *par excellence*, deplors the development. I agree with him

about the fact of the development, but as a humanist I approve of it, and consequently deplore Barth's own counter-revolution.

Another comparison occurs to me. When a neurotic is obsessed by an emotional involvement with one or both of his parents which he ought to have outgrown, the psychoanalyst has to free him in two stages: first, by making himself the object of the neurotic's obsessions; next, by curing the obsessions themselves through the relationship so established with the patient, thus enabling him to stand on his own feet. Christianity might be called the first stage in the cure of what Freud called the universal neurosis of religion; but the cure of the neurotic is not wholly achieved till the second stage, when the patient is emotionally independent not only of his parents but of the psychoanalyst as well. The humanist should perhaps reverence Jesus Christ as the great psychoanalyst, who cured men's devotion to the cruel and licentious pagan gods by fixing it upon himself. But the cure, on his view, will not be complete until the devotion which was lavished first upon the pagan gods, and later on the God revealed in Jesus Christ, shall be diverted to securing the happiness and improvement of humanity.

*A* Unfortunately, if God exists and has actually given the ideal for man in Jesus Christ, the best way to human happiness is presumably to follow this ideal; and we are not only insulting God, but also wasting our own time, in trying to construct another.

*B* Granted, given both those assumptions. But *does* God exist, and if so *has* he shown us the ideal of manhood in Jesus Christ? The metaphysical arguments adduced to prove the first proposition seem far from adequate, and in any case theologians seem largely to have abandoned them. And as for the old problem of evil, which tells heavily against it – one can only say that an era in which unsatisfactory solutions were offered by philosophers and theologians seems now to have been succeeded by one in which there is not even an attempt at a solution. The term 'God' is used to denote both the creative principle underlying nature and the being who is the sum of all perfections – who is all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on. The humanist reaffirms the old Marcionite objection that these two beings cannot be one and the same. An all-good, all-wise and all-powerful Being cannot be the cause of nature as we know it. The historical evidence for the second proposition (that, assuming that God exists, he has revealed the ideal to which men should aspire) seems to me to be insufficient. Again, contemporary theologians often seem to admit this, but they say that the nature of faith is such that it demands our credence with no appeal to our reason. This sounds like a counsel of despair; little was heard of it until the rational arguments had been discredited on other grounds. Some talk about the proof from religious experience. I have myself known, and valued deeply, experience which I take to be religious, when confronted by beauty in

nature or intellectual or moral greatness in men. But such experience does not seem to me to prove the existence of a God who transcends man and nature, or even to provide any foundation at all for such a proof. *A* I admit the gravity of the problem of evil. I think something like the following solution might be offered by a theologian who was pressed. It was better that there should exist rational beings, whether human or angelic, who were to obey God freely, than that such beings should not exist. And the free obedience of such creatures necessarily involved the possibility of their disobedience. As to the metaphysical arguments, I think you treat them rather too cavalierly.

*B* Well now, it would take all night if we went into them at length. But one might sum up the objections, made by Kant and others, like this: our reasoning is fashioned in such a way as to cope only with phenomena within the world. When it tries to transcend the world (for example by arguing from the fact that there are always causes of the events that constitute the world to the theory that the world as a whole has a transcendent Cause) then it is transgressing its proper limits.

*A* I see no reason whatever for accepting your premiss, and a Christian most certainly wouldn't. Anyway, what authority have you for saying what reason is or is not fashioned for?

*B* I'm sorry; I should have been more cautious. Let me put my general contention about the question of theism another way round. I think that we have now sufficient knowledge of what state of affairs is most conducive to human happiness, and of how to achieve it, to frame our morality accordingly. The moral injunctions which God is alleged to have given us may agree with such a morality in many important respects; but in others they definitely conflict with it. Many people find, for instance, the Christian rulings about sexual behaviour an almost unendurable burden. And this doesn't apply only to an especially severe interpretation, but to any account of the subject which can be called Christian at all. It seems to me quite certain that some people cannot be happy without being promiscuous in a manner that no Christian could approve while remaining Christian. There's no need for me to multiply examples. I sum up: we know in general by what means we can achieve happiness; a law allegedly revealed by God frustrates it; naturally we want to be sure that there is a God – and furthermore whether he has revealed a law, and whether it is this law that he has revealed – before we forsake the happiness that we know. The burden of proof, to say the least, lies on those who assert the existence of God rather than on those who deny it. Meanwhile, until such a proof, or even a balance of probabilities, is available, I prefer to try to increase happiness by the means through which, so far as I can judge, it can actually be increased.

*A* You are not impressed, I take it, by Christian efforts to become 'up to date' in sexual and other morals?

*B* I just ask myself what these people are trying to do. Are they trying to find out the will of a transcendent God? Or are they starting from human nature and trying to infer what is best for man by a study of the sort of being he is? Or is the first question, so far as they are concerned, merely a rather sententious way of expressing the second? I cannot see that the method they adopt is consonant with the former alternative. And the latter is the way of the humanist, whether one chooses to conceal the fact by using traditional religious language or not.

*A* I don't think your dilemma is a fair one. The theologian may feel, as Aquinas did, that man as a being within nature may gain moral insight apart from special revelation, but that only by means of special revelation can he gain insight into his supernatural destiny and the moral consequences which derive from it. Reason and revelation, on this view of the matter, may and should work together in showing what is right for man. Another way of putting it is that God reveals what man ought to do both directly by revelation, and indirectly by the sort of creature that he has made man to be, and the conduct which is appropriate for him in consequence.

*B* I agree with you that, on the hypothesis that a transcendent God exists and wants man to behave in a certain way, the Thomist position manages to preserve some vestiges of humanism without *prima facie* inconsistency. But I think my claim holds good of quite a high proportion of Christian moral theory; that where it does not exalt God's command at the expense of man's happiness and fulfilment, it tends to treat 'God's command' as just a polite paraphrase for 'the rules which man finds suit himself best'.

*A* Do you think human beings understand their own happiness well enough to be capable of laying down principles for its achievement?

*B* If you will forgive my saying so, you have brought up the silliest and most maddening of all the usual objections to humanism from the religious point of view. All the same I am grateful to you, as there are a number of important points to be made in this connection. While we may not be able to give an exact specification of the material and spiritual states which conduce to the greatest happiness, we all have a perfectly adequate general idea of them. It is better to kiss one's sweetheart than to burn one's finger, to know rather than not to know when and how one is going to get one's next meal, to live in a properly built and furnished house rather than in a damp corner of a ploughed field. The question 'What is happiness?' is perfectly easy to answer, in an informal way, by enumerating happy states, and contrasting them with unhappy ones, until the questioner gets the idea. Now that, at any rate in this country, we have some respite from the grosser occasions of unhappiness, we can address ourselves to the subtler ones, like neurosis, family tyranny, over-indulgence in sweets, whiskey and

tobacco, and so on. If someone goes on to ask 'Ah! But what is happiness *in itself?*', I realize that he is simply indulging in the sort of tomfoolery that is best left to professional philosophers.

A That happiness is not too abstruse to be worth striving for seems to be agreed upon by the Old Testament prophets and Jesus Christ as well as by the humanist. But I agree with you that, for a number of different reasons, modern theologians and philosophers have made the notion appear more problematic than it really is. One might contrast the Christian with the non-Christian humanist position rather as follows: the Christian believes that, when we are trying to find out what conduces to man's happiness, his supernatural destiny, and the commands of the God who has destined him for it, have to be taken into account. The humanist does not. Both parties agree that happiness is a vitally important if not the overriding moral criterion. The contrast which I have heard made between Christian morality as obedience to rules for its own sake, and humanist morality as suiting the rules to the situation, is seriously oversimplified. Christians too, or a large proportion of them, regard the rules as justified by the situation, but they differ from the humanist as to what the situation is, and so their rules differ accordingly.

B Very well, I'll confine myself to saying that belief in a transcendent God *tends* to frustrate inquiry into the most effective means of securing human happiness, even if it *need* not do so.

A *Abusus non tollit usum.*

B When there is a great deal of *abusus* and precious little *usum*, I reckon that it does. But even if I concede this point of yours (which on the whole I think I do) it doesn't affect my central argument: that human happiness is *worth* achieving; that we know roughly *how* to achieve it, and will know more exactly the closer we are to doing so; that the alleged commands of a transcendent God tend to stop us from doing so; that consequently we want good evidence that there is such a God, and that he has given such commands, before we obey them; that such evidence is lacking, and what we do know seems to tell rather strongly against the hypothesis.

A To which Christians might reply: the evidence for the existence of God and of a future life is better than you think, and so is the evidence for God's coming among us. Some would base this claim directly on God's communication of himself, while others would ply you with metaphysics, history, or even the findings of psychical research. I agree that the abandonment of these kinds of argument by modern Christians is sometimes a symptom of their 'Christianity' approximating to mere humanism. It is as difficult to be honest to God as it is to be honest to oneself.

But I don't think we can move much further in this direction without getting inextricably tangled in details still vigorously disputed by philo-

sophers, scientists and historians. Perhaps by my fault, our discussion has tended to stress the polemical aspects of humanism, and the reasons why it doesn't issue in Christian theism. Could you enlarge a little on the sense in which it is useful to call the humanist attitude a religious one?

*B* Here I can't do better than refer you to two of the writings of Professor R. W. Hepburn, the last chapter of his *Christianity and Paradox* and his contribution to the symposium *Objections to Humanism*. In them he describes how the humanist must use a constantly more refined aesthetic and moral sense to build up, from the greatest prose and poetry, from precious fragments of rejected myths and creeds, and from the data of the natural and the human sciences, a new vision of human life with its tremendous possibilities of delight and achievement.

*A* Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heaven.

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