

A Humanist Theology

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You cannot, says Karl Barth somewhere, talk about God simply by talking about man in a loud voice. But it may be asked whether, if you talk about man loudly enough, he does not *eo ipso* become a 'god' in some sense – in the sense in which St Paul says that the god of some men is their belly (Jung, rather unkindly, applies the same text to Freud), and in which the Psalmist said that the gods of the heathen were but idols. These uses illustrate the difference between what one might call the objective and subjective meanings of the word 'God'. The Being 'who alone exists of himself, and is infinite in all perfections' (a well-known objective definition of the God in whom Christians believe) is an object of worship, of valuation above all else, for Christians (i.e. is their 'God' in the subjective sense). I call a humanist theology the intellectual formulation of a religious attitude which makes man its 'god' in the subjective sense. Someone might object that to call this a theology is an abuse of the term; yet such an abuse may be justified in as far it draws attention to interesting, and possibly disturbing, analogues to theology proper.

Men seem to have a disposition to talk about whatever they value most highly in a way comparable to Christian talk about God. As creatures prepared by creation to know and love God, we might be expected, when we do not believe in him or when we temporarily forget him, to apply the concepts we should have reserved for him to other objects. The Austrian biologist Konrad Lorenz finds that he can train goslings of the Greylag Goose to treat him just as though he were their mother goose. H. G. Wells admitted to what he called a 'God-shaped gap' in human consciousness; in a similar way there was a goose-shaped gap in the soul of the goslings, which in default of the real goose could be filled by Konrad Lorenz. So much for the justification of the locution 'humanist theology'. I shall continue with a brief account of the subject, merely sketching its beginnings in Hegel's philosophy, and giving somewhat more space to its more thoroughgoing manifestations in the work of Auguste Comte and, more recently, Sir Julian Huxley.

It is a commonplace that the biblical criticism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cast doubt in the minds of many educated

people as to whether there was any reliance at all to be placed on those historical records, the Gospels, the substantial veracity of which had always been a basic assumption of Christian theology. It was almost bound to occur to someone to ask whether Christian theology, with its proven aesthetic and moral value, to which so many works of art and acts of self-denial were witnesses, could be salvaged from the wreck of the belief on matters of historical fact on which it had been based. In his *Life of Jesus* (1835) D. F. Strauss urged that the Gospels should be regarded as myths, as stories illustrating ideal truths, with the very minimum of historical basis. In the same work he proposed the following solution to the problem of Christology. There is no need to go on applying the doctrine of the Person of Christ to a particular historical individual. All the difficulties and contradictions in the doctrine will be ironed out if it is applied to mankind in general. 'It is humanity that dies, rises and ascends to heaven. For, from the negation of the phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life . . . By faith in this Christ, especially in His death and resurrection, man is justified before God; that is, by the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity, the individual participates in the divinely human life of the species'.¹ In this portentous passage lies the whole of humanist theology in embryo.

Strauss was a follower of Hegel. The parting of the ways between Christian and humanist theology is to be found artfully concealed, yet in the light of subsequent history clearly enough, in the works of that greatest of all masters of ambiguity. Hegel's way of philosophizing about Christianity may be summarized as follows. The primitive religions conceived God either as in the world, or as over against the world; in either case God was objectified as something apart from man. Christianity proclaims that God has become man, which is as much as to say that man has come to the point in his intellectual and moral development where he can make the equation, 'God equals man'.² A beautiful compromise between theism and atheism is provided by this formula; it soothes both parties to this ancient dispute, provided they do not look at it too closely. Suppose I interrupt two persons arguing whether dragons exist or not by saying 'Of course, dragons are really serpents'. If they accept my formula, each disputant can claim he was in the right – one because, since serpents exist and for 'serpent' you may

¹George Eliot's translation, p. 780; quoted J. M. Creed, *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*, p. 55.

²Cf. his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, tr. E. B. Speirs and J. B. Sanderson.

read 'dragon' therefore dragons exist; the other because the exotic sort of dragon which is meant by everyone who uses the word without apologetic preoccupations has been more or less admitted not to exist. Naturally, Hegel's followers divided into a party who said that Hegel had proved God's existence after all, and a party who maintained that the proper interpretation of Hegel, or at least the next logical step forward from his position, was atheism.

We come now to Auguste Comte, a younger contemporary of Hegel and the founder of positivist philosophy and the science of sociology. I believe that he is a very important philosopher of religion, though he had a very bad press – which is, perhaps, not surprising in view of his truly phenomenal self-conceit. He remarks characteristically in his *Catechism of Positive Religion* (1854) that his career would have been merely that of an Aristotle but for the influence of a certain lady, but for whom he would have lacked the energy to become a St Paul as well.³ As it was, he was able to set the crown of positive religion on the head of positive philosophy. Religion (he says) may be defined as the regulation of human impulses and their subordination to a common end, at both the individual and the social level. The traditional religions had this function in common, and all their various and conflicting beliefs in supernatural beings and discarnate spirits were but means to it.⁴ Up to Comte's own time, the scientific spirit had been tainted at once with intellectual pride and with contempt for the emotions. In order to give proper place to these, positivism must transcend the incomplete state in which it still exists in the majority of its adherents, and the true philosophy must find its consummation in the perfect religion. Religious people for their part must learn to detach their religious feelings from such an unworthy object as the God of traditional religion, whose arbitrary and capricious behaviour is, indeed, but a consequence of his omnipotent power. But this does not mean that these admirable feelings will have to atrophy; their focus must simply be transferred to the new Great Being, Humanity. This is also a more suitable object of our worship in that it is not fundamentally different in nature from ourselves, and in that our struggles and failures in pursuit of the good are truly shared by it. Yet a man in worshipping Humanity is not worshipping himself, for humanity in its full extension through space and time is vastly greater and better than any single individual.⁵ Positive religion

³R. Congreve's translation, p. 18.

⁴*ibid.*, p. 47. ⁵*ibid.*, p. 64.

or sociolatriy consists of a system of thought, a cult and a way of life, in which a man's intellect, feelings and activities respectively may find full scope.⁶ The private prayer of the new religion disdains petition as ignoble as well as fruitless; its chief content is meditation on the idealized representatives of Humanity, or 'guardian angels'. A man's guardian angels are typically his mother, wife and daughter, while for a woman the two last are replaced by their equivalents of the opposite sex; in cases where the actual parent, consort or child is unsuitable as an object of veneration, the conscientious positivist will find a suitable replacement among the circle of his present and past acquaintance.⁷ The other great institution of positive religion besides that of the guardian angels is that of the nine social sacraments, which consecrate, as institutions of the traditional religions did, the most important occasions in a man's life. The last three of these, at any rate, merit detailed attention. At the age of sixty-three the male citizen retires from active life, naming the successor to whatever post he holds, and thenceforward retains a merely advisory capacity.⁸ At death, where Catholicism, we are told, shows all its inherently anti-social tendencies by tearing a man away from thoughts of his nearest and dearest and making him stand alone before the throne of God, the positive religion, in its ceremony of Transformation, 'mingles the regrets of society with the tears of his family, and shows that it has a just appreciation of the life that is ending'.⁹ Nor is this necessarily the end; in cases of exceptional merit the priesthood may decide on the 'Incorporation' of the remains, once they have made a careful study of the life of the deceased. 'Seven years after death, when the passions that disturb judgment are hushed, and yet the best sources of information remain accessible . . . , the priesthood . . . presides over the transfer, with due pomp, of the sanctified remains. They had previously been deposited in the burial-place of the city; they now take their place for ever in the sacred wood that surrounds the temple of Humanity.' On the other hand, we read, there is 'a waste place allotted to the reprobate', including 'those who died by the hand of justice, by their own hand, or in a duel'.¹⁰ Since the principal task of woman is to form and protect man, it is appropriate that the elect should be buried with their guardian angels.¹¹ (We are not told what happens to the guardian angels of the reprobate.) With such responsibilities on their hands, we are not surprised that priests must be of the highest intelligence, must have a thorough grounding in science and

⁶*ibid.*, p. 67.⁷*ibid.*, p. 120-2.⁸*ibid.*, p. 134.⁹*ibid.*, p. 135.¹⁰*ibid.*, p. 136.¹¹*ibid.*, p. 137.

the arts, and cannot be ordained until they are forty-two.

While private worship is centred on the guardian angels, in public worship 'the present glorifies the past, in order the better to prepare the future'.¹² Comte did not leave the matter or the manner of this glorification to chance; he actually compiled a Positivist 'Calendar of 558 Worthies' to replace the calendar of the saints. This calendar is well worth a look. It divides the year into thirteen months of exactly four weeks each, which of course leaves one day over, and two in leap-year. The number 558 is due to the fact that each month has an extra-special worthy, and that some days are devoted to different worthies in leap-year. The first month, Moses, is devoted to theocratic civilization; the second, Homer, to ancient poetry. After living through the months of Aristotle, Archimedes and Caesar we reach the sixth month, St Paul, which is dedicated to Catholicism. The last and holiest day of each week is devoted to a worthy after whom the week as a whole is called, and the weeks of this month are St Augustine, Hildebrand, St Bernard and Bossuet. Oddly enough, the penultimate day of the last week of this month is devoted to William Penn, and to George Fox in leap-year. I do not know how Héloïse found her way to the fifth day of the third week. The remaining months are devoted to feudal civilization, modern poetry, industry, philosophy, statesmanship and science. Of the two extra days, one is devoted to remembrance of all the dead – a feast which, Comte patronizingly informs us, he was not ashamed to adopt from Catholicism; the second, which only occurs in leap-year, is the Day of All Good Women.

Frederick Harrison, Comte's chief English disciple, published the English version of the Calendar on Galileo day of the month Bichat, year 105 of the French Revolution – for those who unregenerately hanker after the old reckoning, December 9th, 1893. He tells us that the author intended the Calendar as 'a concrete view of the preparatory period of man's history, in order to impress visually upon the mind a general conception of the Past. The names are chosen from all ages, races and countries', not too impartially, I should say. German critics in particular do not trouble to conceal their fury that the Latin element in the Calendar so prevails over the Teuton. Still, St Francis' Day of the old reckoning goes to Beethoven, and to Handel in leap-year. Though Buddha and Mohammed each come at the head of a week, Christ is conspicuous by his absence – perhaps because Comte doubted whether he ever existed.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 140.

Comte conveniently illustrates a kind of limit to which *ersatz* religions tend, since he deliberately and thoroughly stripped the cultic and moral flesh from the metaphysical skeleton of traditional religion. He must be respected and taken seriously as someone who asked the question: if religion is really an unrivalled psychological force shaping the lives of individuals and nations, and if the factual and metaphysical beliefs on which the traditional religions are based are respectively false and meaningless, how can religious emotions be detached from the illusions and applied to the realities? The positive religion, curious as it is, seems to be the most thorough and honest attempt to date to do this. That kind of religious modernism which teaches that God is as dependent on man as man is on God, and that the nature of man is not fundamentally different from that of God, does not seem clearly distinguishable from a fuddled Comtism dressed up to look as like Christianity as possible.

Sir Julian Huxley, like Comte, is quite aware that religion as a force in men's lives is likely to continue, and therefore had better be put to use; but, good Teilhardist that he is, he by no means repudiates metaphysics. T. H. Huxley stigmatized Comtism as Catholicism without Christianity. He might for similar reasons have called his grandson's system Thomism without Christianity. I will try to illustrate this by reference to the introduction and essay which Sir Julian wrote for *The Humanist Frame*, an important volume of essays which he recently edited.

There are (he writes) no absolutes in the system of humanism. For instance, morality and truth cannot be absolute, since each of them is relative to the stage which evolution has reached at any particular time.¹³ How curious it is, then, that this same entity 'evolution' should have much the same relation to the phenomena of the world as 'God' as defined by the first three of St Thomas's Five Ways. Evolution is indeed the absolute in this system without absolutes. It neither comes into being nor passes away, but all else comes into being and passes away by its agency, and remains in being by virtue of the ontological stability which for a time it provides. Suppose one asked Sir Julian how evolution came into being, and whether it could pass away. I think he might say that the idea of evolution itself coming into being or passing away made no sense, since the schema of evolution is itself that in terms of which all coming into being and passing away is understood.

¹³*The Humanist Frame*, p. 14.

Evolution, in other words, necessarily exists.¹⁴ Sir Julian tells us that the world was not created, but evolved.¹⁵ But St Thomas is at pains to point out that the world's creation is logically quite distinct from its having come into existence in time;¹⁶ and as St Thomas conceives creation, the giving of existence by that which necessarily exists to that which comes into being and passes away,¹⁷ it is astonishingly like that fact of the mere existence of anything at all which Sir Julian refers to as the ultimate and impenetrable mystery.¹⁸ And if one is to follow Sir Julian in talking about man's 'destiny', one is surely getting entangled in that terminology of final causes which is the starting-point for St Thomas's Fifth Way. Of course, the Thomist has no more right to say that Sir Julian's system is an interesting approximation to Thomism, than Sir Julian has to say that St Thomas brilliantly, though not entirely accurately, anticipated the truth which was later to be discovered. When St Thomas says, at the end of the first three ways, '... and that all call God', Sir Julian might reply, 'On the contrary, some call it evolution'; and if St Thomas were to argue that it was useless to wrangle over a definition, Sir Julian might object that the word 'God' is unfortunately associated with the giving of alleged revelations of matters of fact which the advance of knowledge has now shown to be untrue, and of moral precepts which social changes have outdated even where they were at one time appropriate.

Evolutionary humanism, we are told, is capable of providing the hope and assurance of the traditional religions; evolution has brought mankind thus far, and this is ground for hope that it will carry us much further.¹⁹ Indeed, we are at present witnessing an unprecedented change in the mode of evolution. 'Today, in twentieth century man, the evolutionary process is at last becoming conscious of itself and is beginning to study itself with a view to directing its future course.'²⁰ Here, surely, we have what amounts to the doctrine of the incarnation of evolution. Hegel and Strauss had suggested the interpretation of Christianity as

¹⁴I wonder whether the stress on the Divine *will* in Scotus, and the opposition to the older proofs of God's existence in Ockham, do not spring partly from the fear that the 'God' or 'that which all call God' which comes at the end of each of St Thomas's Five Ways might be construed as himself part of the world-process, or such that the world-process was bound to issue from him; and so bereft of his freedom and omnipotence become something like Sir Julian's 'evolution'? Certainly this preoccupation with God's independence of His creation underlies Karl Barth's well-known repudiation of natural theology.

¹⁵*op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁶Opusc. IV, *De Aeternitate Mundi contra murmurantes*.

¹⁷*Summa*, I, xliv, I.

¹⁸*op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁹p. 22.

²⁰p. 7.

man's consciousness of his own divinity, while Comte set out to destroy the metaphysical concept of divinity and to replace it with a disposition on man's part to worship his collective self; now Huxley is putting back the metaphysics, and indeed 'God' in some not unrecognizable sense of the word, while denying that this 'God' has any goodness or intelligence apart from our own actual or potential goodness or intelligence. We must detach, he says, the feelings which the idea of divinity arouses in us from any supernatural being, and use the subjective aspirations of religion in the process of divinizing ourselves.²¹ Here one might ask tentatively whether 'evolution' as that which underlies every thing else, the *natura naturans* which gives rise to the *natura naturata* of our immediate experience, is not 'supernatural' in at least part of the usual sense of the word. I suspect that Sir Julian, if taxed with this, would admit some analogy between his evolution and God in those aspects of his being and activity in which St Thomas held that his existence could be proved by the first three Ways, while denying that this 'God' had revealed, or conceivably could reveal, say, a moral law against abortion.

I hope this is enough to show that this way of thought is not without interest; its shortcomings are not far to seek – indeed it might be held that in such a place as this it is hardly worth rehearsing them. Bertrand Russell among many others has talked about the isolation of men amongst unconscious forces which are immeasurably more powerful than them; T. H. Huxley contrasted in the strongest terms those moral dispositions which evolution set at a premium and any that could be regarded as tolerable by a decent society. Professor Medawar, in his review in *Mind* of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, refers sarcastically to the author's assumption that evolution is a cosmic process, when the evidence goes to show that it characterizes only a tiny fragment of the universe. Sir Julian sees in the universe a trend towards mind, and in the evolution towards mind on this planet a proof of the overall importance of mind.²² Yet surely, unless good reason can be given for extrapolating the planetary process of evolution onto the cosmos as a whole, a more obvious lesson is the utter unimportance, on a cosmic view, of life and *a fortiori* of mind.

One may well feel sympathy with Sir Julian when he remarks on the contemporary chaos of conflicting ideologies and says: 'It is necessary to organize our *ad hoc* ideas and scattered values into a unitive pattern

²¹pp. 43, 46.

²²p. 18.

. . . Only by such a reconciliation of opposites and disparates can our belief-system relieve us from inner conflicts'.²³ But surely there are at least two senses of 'necessary' which it is important to distinguish here. It may be necessary for me to believe all kinds of things in order that I may work industriously at an unpleasant job or avert psychosis; but it is a necessity of a different kind which compels me to believe that twice two is four, or water a compound of hydrogen and oxygen. One cannot help feeling that the confusion between intellectual and emotional necessity is a potent influence in this system of ideas. Why should we believe that the working-out of natural processes defers to our own sense of value? Of course, if the Christian doctrine of Creation is true, we have some ground for holding that our sense of value is not totally unrelated to the way things are. But apart from this doctrine, Nietzsche is surely nearer the mark in saying that in the interests of truth we ought rather systematically to disbelieve than to believe any theory about matters of fact which either flatters us or gives us grounds for hope. We may feel that this position is somewhat exaggerated, and that we are entitled to take an optimistic view of matters on which we have no means of reaching certainty. But for the most part we ought carefully to separate the questions 'What is likely to be true?' and 'What is it most socially and psychologically desirable for us to believe?'

An ominous aspect of this *hiatus* in the system is the place it accords to the individual within society. Every individual, Sir Julian tells us, is able to contribute something of unique value to the whole by means of the development of his personal potentialities. Yet surely, except on the theory of a kind of spiritual Lamarckism, the individual's personal development usually does not add to, and often actually conflicts with, the development of the race. Sir Julian provides no adequate assurance that the full development of individuals and the progress of society really tend to foster one another. That evolution does not proceed along the old path of the elimination of the weak, once it has reached the 'psycho-social' stage, is a convenient dogma, no doubt very necessary from the emotional point of view, for which the evidence seems very sketchy; one should contrast with Sir Julian's view not only that of his grandfather (who ought to figure in any future calendar of Humanist worthies) but that of such contemporary biologists as David Lack. Some might even be excused for thinking that they could see the mailed fist glinting through the velvet glove on page 24, where there is a scathing reference to 'the democratic myth of equality'. And

²³p. 22.

they would hardly be reassured by the bare statement, on the same page, that the members of the Humanist society, for all their inequality, will be free – this at least seems to be clean contrary to the experience of the majority of human communities to date. Sir Julian calls himself a good Darwinian, in morals as elsewhere; but the Nazis also called themselves good Darwinians, and it seems to me that, if one's morality is really to be constructed with reference to evolution, that the Nazi morality is the more consistent. Surely the belief that charity is the best means to evolution by natural selection is one which does more credit to the heart than to the head?

On the question of life after death, Sir Julian's attitude is characteristic; he says we are to disbelieve in it not because it is likely to be false, but because it distracts us from our tasks within the present life. He reckons that hope for the future of the race is at least as strong an incentive as our own future individual fate. Teilhard's remark that, but for hope in a future life we might all just as well go on strike, while it does less credit to its author's heart, shows a better insight into the real nature of human hopes and fears. For a moment considering the qualities of Humanism as a religion, as the vision of a goal providing incentive for action for every individual in the society in which it prevails, one may say that if it does not lack hope, it ought to lack it. Why should we fix our eyes on the millennium rather than on the colossal suffering and waste on the way to it? It may not be logically impossible that the greatest possible self-fulfilment of each individual should be the means to the quickest possible evolutionary advancement of the race – but it does seem intuitively unlikely, and is disputed by competent biologists. It therefore needs more evidence to support it than reiteration and the fact that, apart from religious eschatology, it is emotionally necessary for us to believe in it in order that we may fulfil the destiny which we, or rather a very few of us, or perhaps evolution incarnate in our intelligentsia, has chosen for us.

The opponent of dogmatic religion is on much stronger ground when he says that man should do without the ill-founded hopes and fears which it provides. But Sir Julian wishes to show that the evolutionary world-view will do for the aspirations and emotions of ordinary people what the religions did for them. Yet the dogmatic religions really do have something for the individual, and it is a cliché (though it apparently needs reiterating) that nature has considerably more concern for the race than for the individual. With the best will and the greatest intellectual labour in the world, you cannot derive the Kantian injunc-

tion, to treat each individual as an end and never only as a means, from moral premisses based on evolution. And Gilson has remarked that Kant's postulate is descended from the Christian doctrine of the value of every individual in the sight of God. But the cult of humanity, and *a fortiori* the cult of evolution incarnate in humanity, can only concern itself with the individual as individual by a fortunate inconsistency.

The Aftermath of Brussels

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Now that the negotiations on Britain's application for membership of the European Economic Community have broken down, many people are asking what will happen next. Few are suggesting that the Common Market itself is in danger of disintegration because of the arrogant manner in which General de Gaulle chose to break off the negotiations, with complete disregard for the wishes of France's fellow members. There can be no doubt that France never wanted Britain to join, for the reasons given by General de Gaulle – if really representing the motives for the French action – should have led France to have rejected the idea of British membership at the very outset. The negotiations were, in fact, a farce, and one can only accept the explanation given by Mr Macmillan in his broadcast to the British people: France brought the negotiations to an abrupt end when they appeared in danger of succeeding, not when they looked like breaking down. What France had hoped for, throughout the eighteen months of negotiations, apparently, was that agreement would prove impossible, and that Britain would be kept out of the Common Market without France having to incur the odium of exercising her veto.

France's partners in the Common Market are, no doubt, displeased with the use of the veto, and above all the manner of its exercise. The Common Market will remain, however. The Five may feel that for some time to come, they must assert themselves in the internal discussions of the Common Market. They will show stronger opposition