

# Post-Atheist Humanism

Martin Spence argues that reductionist atheist humanism is the mirror image of fundamentalist theism and that the humanist tradition offers a richer idea of humanity.

## The problem

My understanding of SOF (Sea of Faith Network) is that it advocates a non-theist Christianity. That is to say, it rejects the orthodox notion of God as a distinct, objectively-existing being ‘out there’, and is committed instead to exploring and validating Christianity, and religion more widely, as a human creation. I am sure that many SOF members regularly have challenging encounters with others, for whom belief in the literal, objective existence of God is the whole point of religious faith. And I am sure it is very difficult to convince such people that it is possible or desirable to untangle Christian commitment from this particular belief.

As a non-Christian humanist, I face a similar problem. I regularly encounter decent, honest people who regard themselves as committed humanists, but who subscribe to a form of atheism which is the mirror-image of orthodox theism, and who regard this atheism as a logical consequence, or even as the cornerstone, of their humanism.

With all due respect to their genuine belief, I think they’re wrong. I think that this equation of atheism with humanism is based on a misunderstanding of the humanist tradition, and loses sight of much that is valuable in that tradition. I also think that the challenge I face as a humanist is related to the challenge faced by many SOF members in their encounters with theist Christianity, because orthodox humanist atheism and orthodox Christian theism both have the same roots. Both are rooted in *realism*, and realism has a lot to answer for.

## Realism

Philosophical realism is a viewpoint regarding the status of human knowledge about the world. It holds that there is an external reality ‘out there’ which has its own objective existence, is independent of anything we may think or say about it,

but of which we can nevertheless have direct and effective knowledge.

Realism is an epistemological stance: that is to say, it addresses our *knowledge* of reality, but not the *substance* of that reality. It does not therefore, by itself, constitute a rounded world-view.

However, it contributes to rounded world-views by attaching itself to other, ontological claims about the substance of reality. Consequently, there are different forms of realism. There is religious realism – theism – for which the essential external reality is God, whose objective existence ‘out there’ is a fact. And there is naturalist realism for which the essential external reality is physical nature, whose objective existence ‘out there’ is a fact. While the content of these two forms of realism is different, their structure is therefore the same. In each case, emphasis is laid upon the independent objective existence of its particular version of external reality, and upon our passive knowledge of that reality.

Many naturalist realists, convinced that reality ‘out there’ consists only and entirely of physical nature, go on to draw the conclusion that God therefore does not exist. Some have produced long books to spell out this argument, but it is really very simple and easily summarised: if the only reality ‘out there’ is physical nature, and if science is right in its assumption that nature is subject to natural laws, then firstly God is unnecessary because scientific explanation fits the facts of nature better than divine creation; and secondly God is impossible, because the ubiquity of law-governed nature simply leaves no room for supernatural divinity.

I don’t accept this version of atheism because I don’t accept the realist framework from which it derives. It denies the existence of an independent, objectively-existing God by asserting the existence of an independent, objectively-existing nature. It is stuck fast within a sterile, zero-sum game of rival

ontologies. Of course naturalist realists are at liberty to put it forward as an argument, as a contribution to debate. But I object when they try to claim that in doing so, they are putting forward a 'humanist' view, or even that humanism itself is rooted in naturalist realism. These claims I don't accept, because they misrepresent the humanist tradition.

## Humanism

Let's remind ourselves what humanism is. It is a world-view which emerged in the Renaissance, which takes the human, secular, cultural and historical world as its starting point. It is not a tightly-argued philosophy or moral code, but rather a loose bundle of perspectives and practices held together by the conviction that human activity in the historical world has intrinsic meaning and value. By 'historical world', we don't mean some dusty academic realm of interest only to historians. The historical world is the living world of cumulative human activity and experience through time, to which each successive generation makes its contribution. It is the practical, sensuous world of human life to which we all contribute simply by living our own lives, by encountering each other and the natural world, by acting with and against each other, by making our own histories.

This humanist emphasis on the secular historical world need not deny the presence of other worlds. Humanism doesn't deny the presence of nature or the value and efficacy of natural science – though it will always resist any attempt to reduce human meanings to the passive fulfilment of natural laws. And equally, humanism is compatible with religious faith, though it will always resist any attempt to reduce human meanings to the passive realisation of divine purpose.

Maybe because of the affinity of 'humanism' to words such as 'humanitarian' or 'humane', some have understood humanism to be a vaguely moral stance which calls on us to be nice to each other. This is a misunderstanding. In fact humanism has a rather dubious moral record. Its fascination with the human secular world includes a fascination with political ambition and statecraft, which has often led it into a worldly acceptance of *realpolitik*: Machiavelli was a humanist scholar. Its enthusiasm for the past and the interpretation of ancient texts has sometimes taken the form of a complacent, elitist celebration of 'great men', such as the 'great men' of classical Greece and Rome. And in its Enlightenment form, which privileges abstract notions of 'reason' and 'progress', it has been

deeply implicated in the bureaucratic and technological triumphalism and hubris of modernity.

But both despite and because of all this, humanism's role in shaping our culture has been undeniable. It helped form both the Reformation – Calvin and Luther had humanist training – and the Counter-Reformation – the Jesuit educational programme was influenced by humanist principles. It informed socialism and communism; Marx equated communism with 'positive humanism'. And it has inspired whole new intellectual disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics and sociology, which sit alongside traditional disciplines such as history or philosophy in 'the humanities'.

Humanism is therefore a rich cultural resource, a broad tradition which takes human activity in the historical world as its point of departure, from which it addresses the full range of human creative activity, including the human creativity which shapes science and religion. However, despite this rich history and tradition, the word 'humanist' has more recently been appropriated as a convenient title for something quite different. In the middle decades of the last century it was seized upon as a useful unifying term to bring together various currents which had previously called themselves ethicists, or freethinkers, or positivists, or rationalists, or secularists. And during this process, the advocates of naturalism and realism, and hostility to religion in any form, increasingly held sway. The end result is that we have today a 'humanist movement' whose ideas and principles are significantly different from, and sometimes directly opposed to, the ideas and principles which have defined the humanist tradition over the last half-millennium.

## Non-realism

When I was particularly annoying as a child, I used to be told: 'Ask a silly question and you'll get a silly answer'. Realist theism, and realist atheism, are two silly answers to the same silly question, a question which assumes that there is an independent objective reality 'out there' which is at one and the same time known to us and yet beyond our reach. I find this assumption incoherent, because if a thing is known to us, if it is available to us as an object of knowledge and reflection, then it is by definition part of the human world, not 'out there' but rather 'right here'.

This is the point of departure for the alternative to realism. There is nothing new about it: in different ways and to different degrees it has been



Sandro Botticelli, *Mars and Venus* c. 1483. National Gallery. wikipedia.org

argued by Kant, Hegel, Marx, James, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and many others including many modern theologians. It has gone by various names, but for present purposes let's just call it non-realism. The essence of non-realism is that it conceives of human knowledge as creative activity, not as passive reception. We know what we know, not because we receive data from 'out there', but because together we construct patterns of understanding through our encounters with each other and with the world. In these encounters, by means of our symbolic systems including language and mathematics, we are active agents. *None of this denies the existence of a world external to ourselves* but it insists that any knowledge we have of this world arises from our own active, creative engagement with it. Its central concern is therefore not objective existence, but rather human meaning.

### God as human meaning

Non-realism offers a common ground to be shared by SOF with its conception of non-theist Christianity, and the broad tradition of humanism. For those who come from a background of religious faith and commitment, as many SOF members do, its emphasis on human meaning implies a focus upon the meanings of God, and the meanings of religious language and practice and tradition, *within* the human world. And, because 'meaning' involves the forging of associations and connections, a non-realist approach invites an exploration of connections between religious meanings and secular meanings, whether expressed through art or politics or whatever. In other words, a non-realist Christianity is necessarily a Christianity which is radically committed to the secular human world.

Of course, there is nothing new about the notion of a Christianity which is radically committed to the secular world: this has been a consistent thread in the Christian tradition throughout its history. But the point I'm making is rather different. The point is that, whereas for orthodox or theist Christianity commitment to the secular world is merely an option, for non-realist Christianity it is a necessity. Radical commitment to the secular world, radical engagement with all the messy business of secular human meanings, is entailed by non-realist religion. This, it seems to me, is entirely consistent with the SOF conception of 'religion as a human creation'.

As for those of us who have no background of religious faith or commitment, we may come from a different direction but a non-realist approach to the question of God nevertheless leads us towards this same common ground. It invites us to consider the connections between religious meanings and those aspects of the secular world – art, politics, whatever – which we value. It invites us to recognise God as a source of meanings which have resonance in our secular world, resonance for us, regardless of whether or not we 'believe'. It invites us to grapple with the many meanings which 'believers' draw from or invest in God, and the many ways in which those meanings find expression in our world. And it invites us to refrain from simply dismissing the notion of divine and transcendent meaning, and to reimagine divinity and transcendence as forms of human meaning which help to constitute our secular, historical world.

Non-realism, with its emphasis on human meaning, therefore allows us to make subtle connections which would forever elude realism, with its zero-sum commitment to competing claims

about the substance of objective reality. But non-realism is still only a point of departure. It still allows us to move off in different directions. For instance I imagine that some SOF members may agree about the importance of human meaning, and the value and integrity of the human historical world, but would wish to argue that there is nevertheless a category of religious meaning which has its own integrity and which is not reducible to culture or history. And at this point we would part company, because for me religious meaning is indeed a form of cultural and historical meaning. But at least we would part company as friends, from common ground. This is surely healthier and more constructive than the sterile stand-off between realist theists and realist atheists.

## Conclusions

I want to reclaim the rich, complex tradition of humanism, because I believe we need it. In a world which is ever more fractured and beset with rival fundamentalisms, humanism offers a worldview with deep historical roots and broad intellectual range, which takes as its starting-point not a religious text, nor a natural fact, but human experience and human meaning.

But reclaiming this heritage involves a direct challenge to the current orthodoxy that humanism is rooted in naturalist realism, and is intrinsically anti-religious or atheist. This challenge is a secular equivalent to SOF's own longstanding challenge to theism and religious realism. The two are mutually supportive, entirely complementary.

And so we arrive at 'Post-Atheist Humanism'. It's just a phrase, just a slogan, but I think it's timely. Firstly it expresses the nature of the challenge succinctly, because by separating atheism from humanism it immediately pinpoints the meaning of humanism itself. And secondly, by proposing a *post*-atheist humanism, it is a plea simply to move on from a peculiarly sterile debate.

So maybe the time is right to run up the banner of 'Post-Atheist Humanism' and see who salutes.

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Martin Spence used to be a full-time trade union negotiator, and now writes about history, politics and ideas.

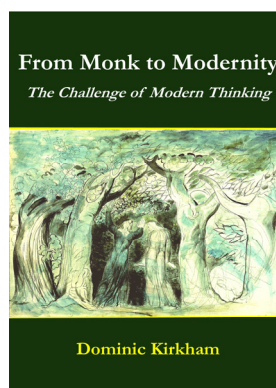
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