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GOD CREATED HUMANISM

The Christian basis of secular values

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To my wife Tess, who must love me

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Introduction

Let's begin at the beginning. This is the thing we seem to find hardest when thinking about the moral and political basis of our society – simply beginning at the beginning; easier to get stuck into this or that debate (in which we're very sure we're in the right), and to evade first principles. Let's try to begin at the beginning.

We in the West believe in something; something more than shopping and pleasuring ourselves. Really, we do.

Is it liberal democracy? Not quite: that's a form of politics (and quite complicated to articulate). We need to talk about the world view, or ideal, that underlies it. It might sound hopelessly naive or vague or earnest, but it is the belief that all human lives matter and should flourish, and that part of such flourishing is the freedom to express one's core beliefs; it of course entails 'human rights'. I think we must call this ideology 'secular humanism' – despite great risk of being misunderstood. It is secular in that it expresses itself in non-religious terms, which doesn't mean it's anti-religious but that it seeks to include those of all faiths and none. This is important to underline because 'secular humanism' is often used to mean the rejection of religion: a softer term for atheism. I'm suggesting that secular humanism is the outlook that underlies 'liberal democracy', which is a more complicated phenomenon, referring to a form of politics in which certain basic individual rights are protected, and in which participation through regular elections is guaranteed. The average Westerner would struggle to define liberal democracy, but has a visceral sense of what secular humanism is.

I suggest that we need to be clearer, and prouder, that this moral ideal underlies the West. It is a core part of our more concrete allegiance, to the nation. (If a Western nation were taken over by a regime that rejected secular humanism, it would lose most citizens' allegiance – one hopes.) In reality, of course, this ideal blurs with mundane pragmatism and national self-interest, and personal self-interest – but worldly-wise people who dismiss this ideal as nebulous and naive are themselves being naive (without the redeeming idealism). For it is there, this moral vision, at the heart of our politics and culture. In our public discourse

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it is taken for granted that all human lives are valuable and of equal worth, and that all human suffering is a matter of urgent concern. This assumption is our form of the sacred, in a sense (thus we have various taboos about saying things that go against it).

But there's a problem. It seems that secular humanism is too vague, too broad, too thin to function as a strong, emotive creed. It feels empty until we add more detail. And so we angrily disagree about what is the right detail to add – socialism, atheism, the free market, national security, whatever. And in the bitter spats, common ground is eclipsed; we fail to affirm the core basic ideology, the shamefully vague humanist ideal. It slips away; or we somehow do not quite get round to reflecting on it, affirming it. It is still there, quietly underlying our culture, but invisible. The attempt to focus on it seems rather foolish to opinion-formers on all sides. Left-wingers see secular humanism, on its own, as too weak to challenge an unjust system, and therefore as a useful fig leaf for powerful elites. Right-wingers see it as nebulous, corrosive of firmer social bonds, prey to trendy causes and political correctness. All these people wonder whether there's anything here worth discussing, let alone celebrating.

Why are we so inclined to avoid dwelling on, and affirming, this basic common ideal? It is because this thing is so amorphous, elusive, unclassifiable. It is hard to say what sort of thing we're taking about when we talk about secular humanism. This intersection of politics and morality is awkward. When we say that everyone is equal, is that a statement of fact or a moral aspiration? It must be a moral aspiration, but it's so built into the culture that we don't really link it to personal morality: we are in the habit of seeing secular humanist morality as *just normal*, the default position of civilized people, not a moral commitment one has to think about, work at. It's a sort of morality that is public rather than personal; a morality that society does for us, perhaps, for it is built into our politics. Is it a form of moral idealism? Yes and no: for it is ordinary, expected of us, and we think of 'idealism' as something more than that.

There are other causes for evasion, and faint praise. We don't want to sound naively optimistic, as if we think that history is inevitably moving to a happy conclusion: in the past, secular humanism was closely associated with such a belief in rational progress, and it's still haunted by it. We must dispel the old association, insisting that secular humanism is not the rational solution to history that inevitably

triumphs, but simply the *right moral ideal*, whether or not its influence is spreading. Also, we don't want to sound arrogantly imperialistic, telling all the peoples of the world how to live. Maybe secular humanism is right for us, but we shouldn't try to push it on others – so we mute our affirmation of it.

But the thing that makes secular humanism really tricky is religion, for this moral idealism overlaps with religious idealism in a very problematic way. For many people, religion is the real source of this moral vision, and a secular version is suspect. And many atheists say that this moral vision can only be clarified and completed if it is explicitly anti-religious. In other words, the humanist ideal is divided by the question of religion. This is chiefly why secular humanism is so difficult to think about: its relationship to religion is powerfully unclear.

Was it ever thus? Yes and no: this tense relationship was, until rather recently, softened by a liberal religiosity that fused with national identity. In the twentieth century, the big ideological battles did not expose this tension; rather fascism and communism could both be fought by a vague alliance of religion and secular humanism. But the principal ideological enemy of our day, militant Islam, is different. By accusing Western freedom of being godless and selfish, it drives a wedge into our creed. It sows opposition between believers and non-believers. The former want to say: 'Don't call us all godless, many of us dissent from secularism'; the latter want to say: 'Yes, our creed certainly does reject religion, thank God.' (And more moderate Islam has the same effect: it makes the old fusion of liberal religion and national identity seem unsustainable; for many Muslims want their religion to be expressed in public life in a way that makes the average agnostic recoil from the whole concept of religion being expressed in public life.)

I suggest that we must get beyond this internal rift, this religious–secular civil war, and affirm secular humanism as the basic public creed of the West. This means challenging a deep-seated assumption: that this sort of discussion, about our core political morality, should make little or no reference to religion. Instead, I suggest, secular humanism can only be strongly affirmed if its positive affinity with religion is emphasized. The task is to show that this moral idealism that quietly unites us has a vast amount in common with the religious tradition of the West. Secular humanism, despite being secular, is firmly rooted in Christianity. Its moral universalism is an adaptation, or mutation,

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of Christianity. Only if this paradox is acknowledged can we address our paralysing religious–secular split, and reaffirm our public creed.

To claim that Christianity is the primary source of secular humanism might sound excessive. But where else did secular humanism get its optimistic moral vision, its idea that human beings ought to seek the well-being of all other human beings? Is this just the morality that comes naturally to all human societies, the evolved instinct for altruism perhaps? No – that sort of instinctive morality certainly exists, but it is frail, ambiguous: it might come naturally to protect an orphan of one's own tribe, but it also seems to come naturally to see other tribes as enemies, and to treat their orphans with less care. Maybe a widening of morality comes with the development of rationality. But the morality of the brainy ancient Greeks was limited, hemmed in by fatalism, militarism, hierarchy, slavery (their rationality, as we'll see, was intrinsically elitist). 'Yes, but modern humanist thinkers overcame such limitations,' says the atheist, 'and discovered the great truth of human equality, of universal rights.' OK, so how did that happen? When one bothers looking into the matter, one finds that these humanists were almost all Christians, or semi-Christian believers in a rational God – 'deists'. Secular humanism very gradually emerged *within* Christian culture. Which means that the modern humanist principles of liberty and equality are rooted in Christianity. It does not come naturally to us to believe that we can move towards a world of ever-greater justice for all, that all lives are of equal worth, that oppression and discrimination must end. It comes far more naturally to us to see drastic inequality as inevitable, and distant others as inferior.

'Maybe Christianity played a historical role in founding secular humanism,' some might say, 'but that's all in the past.' No: secular humanism has continued to be shaped by its Christian basis, in recent times. Two examples: in the mid twentieth century the ideal of universal human rights was launched by mostly Christian thinkers and statesmen. And a bit later, Christianity was central to the civil rights movement in the United States, with its vision of future harmony. Before that movement, secular humanism did not entail the urgent commitment to racial equality it now does.

Am I saying that secular humanism is 'really' a form of Christianity without knowing it, maybe that it is the final expression of Christianity? No: it is something else, something distinct, but it has Christian roots. Christianity gave rise to a moral universalism that is in a sense more

advanced than it – for secular moral universalism is capable of being more universalist, in that it overlooks religious difference in asserting fundamental human unity.

This strange dynamic has not been easy for Christianity: it has not really known how to relate to the new ideology that it gave rise to. The loudest Christian voices have always responded defensively to secular humanism, attacking it as spurious and shallow (and in recent decades such voices have held the intellectual high ground, due to a strong anti-liberal reaction in theology). This response is understandable, for secular humanism has been most strongly voiced by atheists, who say that religion gets in the way of the simple, objective rational good of human flourishing, that it fatally muddies the waters of humanism. It's the idea enshrined in John Lennon's song 'Imagine': if we all stop believing in heaven, the brotherhood of man is round the corner. Atheists define secular humanism in anti-religious terms, which gives it an aura of clarity and strength. Because secular humanism can be expressed in this anti-religious way, the Christian is likely to be wary of it.

Instead, I suggest, the Christian should affirm the secular humanist vision of universal human flourishing, for a public ideology must take secular form – and this is the best imaginable public ideology (by 'public ideology' I mean an ideology that underlies politics, that unites a nation, or aspires to).

Am I saying that Christianity should admit that it has been superseded by secular humanism, and so throw in the towel? Absolutely not! This must be underlined from the outset, for a lot of modern Christian theology did suggest that a rational-humanist sort of religion was the way forward. Instead, Christianity should affirm secular humanism *as a public ideology* but also say that it is inadequate, it is limited to the practical public sphere, the surface of life; it has no strong account of life's meaning and purpose, but gravitates to an evasive shrug. Its universalism is fuller, in the sense that it can bypass the questionable particularity of religion, and theoretically include everyone irrespective of their belief. But it is also *thinner*: it cannot say why we should affirm this moral universalism, and it evades the full drama of this moral vision, which is its absolute and perfectionist desire for the good of all humanity – a desire that clashes with the fact of human fallibility.

So secular humanism has an element of dishonesty: it advocates an absolute good, justice for all, but finds it possible to do so on the cheap, without facing the fact that this ideal is indeed absolute, perfectionist.

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It finds it possible to affirm this ideal in a muted, pragmatic, sceptical way, to believe in the good of all within reason, up to a point that is deemed sensible by the culture of the day. And it assumes that it is *normal* to espouse this ideal; it is what is expected of all rational civilized people. A huge, culture-sized, convention calls this a coherent enough position. But is it? I suggest that it's a timid dilution of moral absoluteness, and that the full and direct expression of Christianity is still needed, if one is seriously to affirm the fullest moral universalism, the fullest humanism. To the assumption that it is clear enough how to be good enough, we must say: 'No! Good enough isn't good enough.' Serious pondering of 'the good' involves us in awkward and embarrassing wrestles with absoluteness.

I am offering a new understanding of Christianity's relationship to secular humanism. They are two halves of the same vision, two opposing sides of the same coin. In other words, the religion–secularism split is overcome when we understand secular humanism to be based in religion. And yet the vision must remain unsynthesized, dialectical. Instead of forging a stable new Christian-based secular humanism, we must accept the endless creative tension between Christianity and the fuller but thinner moral universalism it has produced.

I am saying that we must affirm secular humanism with new vim, and I am also saying that secular humanism is not enough, that it is shallow and rather dishonest when severed from its religious roots. Is this a contradiction? No, it is a paradox. The moral-political tradition we inhabit is paradoxical: it is post-religious, yet incoherent when separated from its religious roots.

Arguing for the Christian roots of secular humanism means challenging the conventional story of modernity, which goes something like this: secular humanism emerged when people gradually dared to question religion and to see that morality could exist without it, on both an individual and a cultural level – they thus discovered the true universal morality, compatible with rationality. What's wrong with this story? It implies that this non-religious moral vision is natural, is just there, waiting to blossom forth once religion is replaced by rationalism. In reality, this universal humanism was *shaped* by the Christian centuries. Humanitarian ideals are not natural, nor are they rationally deducible; they are complex cultural traditions, brewed over centuries. And the main ingredient in this brewing was the story of God taking the side, even taking the form, of the powerless victim; and the promise

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that the humble shall be exalted, and the higher sort knocked from their glamorous perches. Only after centuries of this myth having a dominant cultural place did the idea of the equal worth of all human beings begin to seem axiomatic.

As we shall see, secular humanism emerged within religion; it came from religious reform movements of various types. But did it not then detach itself from religion? Well, yes and no. Its optimistic universalism is so fundamentally indebted to Christianity that its distinctness is somewhat fishy. Though it sidelines religion in its grand universalist narrative, it is not cleanly post-religious.

Someone might reply: 'This abstract theorizing is beside the point. My secular humanism is free of religion. I hope for a more humane future in which the rights of all are respected, and this is not based on religion, which feels irrelevant to me, and often seems a force for bad.' Am I claiming that such people have a superficial understanding of their own world view? Well, let's put it this way: such people express one aspect of secular humanism: its freedom to dismiss religion and to consider itself fully autonomous. I am inviting them to reconsider that assumption, to ponder their debt to Christian tradition.

Through discussing this strange dynamic I seek to persuade the agnostic reader that Christianity, despite its seeming mythic absurdity, demands to be taken seriously. If she values secular humanism, she should also value the source of this value. And I am also seeking to persuade the conservative believer that secular humanism paradoxically complements Christianity, that it is the right *public* ideology. ('Political' might be better than 'public', as Christianity is also public, but differently so.) Christians should affirm this post-religious ideology as well as spread the faith from which it flows. From a Christian point of view, this thin universalism is the proper icing on the thick religious cake.

This is my attempt to break the dull, dull deadlock that has dominated religion-discussion for a very long time. I'm tired of it, tired of religion that bigs itself up by bravely attacking secular humanism; and tired of secular humanism that knows how to sound impeccably concerned for humanity in a hundred with-it ways, but lacks the backbone to ask the simple – but hard! – question, of where its values come from. Enough already! Here's something new.

Here's how my argument unfurls. Chapter 1 asks why we are so inclined to take secular humanism for granted and to assume it comes

naturally: why do we resist seeing that it is a particular *tradition*? It then focuses on the recent atheists, who are secular humanists with a strange lack of self-knowledge. Their insistence that morality comes naturally, as long as it's undisturbed by false ideas, is flimsy. This chapter also considers some recent agnostics, who awkwardly grasp that religion is at the root of their inherited moral values. Chapter 2 traces the secular humanist potential enfolded within Christianity and considers other ancient ethical perspectives; it then looks at the medieval emergence of a form of secularism and its development in the Reformation era.

Chapter 3 is particularly action-packed: it considers two developments, or mutations, of Protestantism: the rise of religious rationalism (influenced by classical Stoicism) and the reformism that rejected theocracy and separated Church and state. These, together, sowed the seeds of the Enlightenment. Chapter 4 shows how, in the nineteenth century, secular humanism gradually took on its current post-religious character – but also shows that various Victorian atheists and agnostics were recycling Christian idealism (a phenomenon first identified by Nietzsche). Then, in Chapters 5 and 6, we follow the story into the twentieth century: just as secular humanism seems on the verge of smooth triumph, a major reaction against it emerges, leading to the horror of the mid century. Secular humanism then recovers, in practical terms, becoming the firmly dominant ideology of the West – but its theoretical weakness becomes more obvious.

The faith of the West today, the Preliminary Conclusion then explains, is not simply secular humanism but *Christian-based secular humanism*. Only if this paradox is acknowledged can we strongly affirm our public creed. Christianity's difficult task is to affirm secular humanism, relating it to the absoluteness of its own vision – but *also* to call secular humanism inadequate; it must say that more meaning is needed, that human lives need to be founded in the good myth, from which secular humanism derives. Christianity is the engine of secular humanism – and also a critical questioner of it, a spanner in the works.

Finally, Chapter 7 is a surprising changing of the subject – for my main argument, large as it is, is not enough. 'Even if Christianity is the source of secular humanism,' the agnostic might reply, 'it remains impossible to believe in – for the thuddingly obvious reason that its myths are plainly irrational. We have to move away from roots that are not credible.' My approach to this – not small – issue is to argue that

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Christianity is surprisingly able to accommodate rational scepticism. There is another paradox here, in the fact that authentic faith is an open conversation with unbelief. In this religion there is room for honesty about the clash between myth and rationality. I shall explain this partly with reference to Martin Luther, who insisted that Christianity is compatible with *honesty*: we must admit that this religion is impossibly morally demanding, and on one level impossible to believe in – this admission is central to authentic faith, for we must grasp God's otherness from us. In this way also, Christianity is surprisingly accommodating of our modern difficulties with religion. Its seeming weaknesses, when probed, oddly resemble strange strengths.

A further word on the term 'secular humanism'. My choice of it might seem odd, in view of its association with atheism. But I want to contest that association. I want to delegitimize the assumption that there is an affinity between the secular and humanist creed that unites us, and opposition to religion.

1

The ideology in the room

This creed that I say unites us – surely it is the prime subject of our discussions, surely it is endlessly admired and assessed, and weighed and measured, and prodded and patted? Surely secular humanism is as widely affirmed and as hotly debated as religion was until recent times?

But this is not the case. Though its truth is assumed, it is seldom the focus of our attention. It is taken for granted, including in the sense of ignored. We avidly discuss secondary aspects of it but seem to lack a vocabulary for the thing itself – it is not even quite clear what to call it. It is the elephant in the room.

Our secular humanism is so deeply ingrained that it feels natural, part of the air we breathe, the landscape we inhabit. This might seem a good thing – for it's a good ideology. If this good ideology has become axiomatic, then isn't that a sign of our collective moral health? Yes and no: there's also a danger in seeing secular humanism as 'just there'; it means we are forgetting to see it as a tradition that needs conscious nurturing, and as a – rather complex – story we must strive to understand.

It cannot be doubted that secular humanism is taken for granted in our culture. For example, newspaper columnists decry the violation of human rights in a distant land but are highly unlikely to pause and ask why we are supposed to care about these far-off folk; it is assumed that we just do, or rather that we should. It is not widely wondered what 'human rights' are – such inquiries are dry academic affairs. Another example: a television presenter is forced out of his job when it emerges he has used a term with racist associations. It seems that equality is so sacred to us that even the slightest questioning of its authority is illicit. But this sacred aura is more likely to be expressed negatively ('You are not allowed to say x, y and z') rather than positively ('Here is what we think about equality, here is why we care'). To put it differently, the equal worth of all human beings is treated as a *fact*, denial of which puts one outside of civilized, sane society. This is presupposed in every news bulletin; indeed, 'the news', as well as

informing us, upholds the unspoken creed we share: it assumes we care about these victims of child abuse, of police racism, and that we still care about the victims of a long-ago genocide. In other words, an assumption circulates like blood through our culture: we care about the good of all humanity and the principle of equality. This is our 'sacred' cause, our binding assumption – so why don't we reflect on it more?

Some might say: 'Secular humanism does not unite us in the way you suggest, for it is only the liberal left that really believes in this cause; the right, which hugely influences mainstream society, merely pays it some lip service.' But in most of the West, the mainstream right is fully accepting of secular humanism: it justifies its policies in terms of creating wealth that will benefit all, and of course it seldom or never rejects the principle of secularism. The semi-exception is the USA, where the right has in recent decades been strongly influenced by a conservative religious lobby that uses both 'secular humanism' and 'liberalism' as boo-terms. Yet even at its height, this influence has been balanced by the US right's acceptance of the political liberalism enshrined in the constitution; indeed, it has fetishized the liberal revolution that founded the nation. (In the UK there is a version of this: Tory thinkers tend to flinch at 'secular humanism' and 'universal human rights', as ideals that lead to the neglect of national traditions of well-being; but on close inspection their argument is with the application of these ideals, and there is seldom any substantial dissent from the principle of moral universalism.)

Of course, there are different interpretations of what secular humanism entails. Most obviously, left and right differ over how far government should promote economic equality. But there is surely no denying that this is our common creed. The neatest proof is that no British public figure can dissent from it without facing a media witch-hunt.

Then why does it receive so little attention? 'Because it is too obvious and too vague', many will say. Yes, we theoretically affirm universal human flourishing, but so what? It's a rather airy ideal that gets elbowed aside by murky pragmatism in a hundred ways – so isn't there something pretentious and falsely pious about taking it too seriously? Isn't it hypocritical to profess belief in equality but to accept a system that thrives on inequality? Also, isn't it arrogant to think that we in the West have a monopoly on such idealism? Doesn't it just come

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it is taken for granted that all human lives are valuable and of equal worth, and that all human suffering is a matter of urgent concern. This assumption is our form of the sacred, in a sense (thus we have various taboos about saying things that go against it).

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