

## **Why Humanism?**

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### **Introduction**

It's a pleasure to give the third Bentham lecture, sponsored by the UCL Philosophy Department and the Humanist Philosophers' Group. I suppose there is a kind of natural connection between humanism and UCL: this institution was the first university in the country to admit students who had not signed up to the 39 articles of the Anglican church. It was therefore the first university to admit Jews, Catholics, nonconformists and atheists. Not coincidentally, it has no theology department, no chaplain and no chapel – though in a typical piece of liberal tolerant compromise, it does now have an interdenominational 'contemplation room for personal meditation'.

This liberal tolerant tradition is something of which many of us at UCL are proud. Jo Wolff (our chair today and the first Bentham lecturer) has pointed out in a little known but excellent history of philosophy at UCL that in its early days the philosophy department contained as many nonconformist clerics as it did atheists. Nonetheless UCL has strong connections with 19<sup>th</sup> century atheism and rationalism. Jeremy Bentham (who is associated with the foundation of the College despite being 78 years old at the time) himself was an atheist and advocated the separation of church and state. Bentham wrote:

“No power of government ought to be employed in the endeavour to establish any system or article of belief on the subject of religion.  
. . . in no instance has a system in regard to religion been ever established, but for the purpose, as well as with the effect of its being made an instrument of intimidation, corruption, and delusion, for the support of depredation and oppression in the hands of governments.”

These rather negative remarks about religion will be endorsed by many self-described humanists today; so they might as well serve as a text for my lecture.

That there is some connection between atheism and what is today called humanism should be obvious. Being a humanist entails being an atheist. But tonight I'd like to look at the connection in the other direction: does, or should, being an atheist entail (or in some other way imply or involve) being a humanist? I'd like to suggest the connection here is much less obvious, and that it's worth separating these two ideas.

So I'm going to address two questions: first, should atheists be humanists? And second, is the contemporary humanist approach to contemporary moral and political problems the most useful one? I want to say give negative responses to both questions. I want to suggest that there is no obligation or requirement for any atheist to become a humanist; and that moreover, the humanist approach to the problems of the world has serious shortcomings.

### **What is humanism?**

To make good sense of the first question, of course we have to be able to distinguish atheism and humanism. I'm assuming these views must be separate because atheism is simply the view that no god exists, and has no further implications about how we should live. Humanism is supposed to be a claim about how to live (Richard Dawkins calls it 'the moral outlook associated with atheism').

But what exactly is humanism?

Humanists themselves have not been helpful in answering this question. According to the British Humanist Association's (the BHA's) website, there are 17 million humanists in Britain. That's 36 percent of the population. Reading this, I

naturally wondered if I was myself (as a convinced atheist) a humanist too. What I found was odd. The humanist website gives three statements which the 17 million supposedly said yes to, and then summed up by saying that ‘humanism is a non-religious ethical outlook on life and these answers summarise its key beliefs’. The supposed ‘key beliefs’ are these three:

- (1) Scientific & other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe;
- (2) ‘Right and wrong’ can be explained by human nature alone, and do not necessarily require religious teachings
- (3) Judgements of right and wrong should be based on the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world.

Of these, the first I would not accept without qualification, the second seems too vague to know what it really means and the third I think is definitely false. So if these are the key beliefs of humanists, I conclude that I am not a humanist, and I find it surprising that 17 million people are. I mean, I really do find it surprising that 17 million people are consequentialists about ethics. I really doubt whether this actually reports this vast number of people’s beliefs.

In any case, the idea that these are the key beliefs of humanism runs counter to what Richard Norman, in his extremely thoughtful and humane book, *On Humanism*, takes humanism to be:

My definition of humanism is a personal one. There is no humanist creed, no set of beliefs to which every humanist has to subscribe. Humanism is not a dogma or a sect. (Norman p.26)

So he would presumably dispute the three claims above. Unfortunately, despite all the eminently sensible things Richard Norman says in this book, he never actually gives 'his definition' of humanism. So we need a bit more precision in what we mean by humanism if we are to get any further with our first question. Let's start with atheism.

### **Atheism as a world view**

I said earlier that atheism is the denial of god's existence. So it is distinct from agnosticism, of course, the thesis that we are not in a position to decide the question of god's existence either way, so we should withhold belief. I think we are in a position to decide the question, so I reject agnosticism too.

Fortunately, to an audience of philosophers atheism is a familiar idea, and there should be no need to defend myself against the idea that no one has shown with absolute certainty that God does not exist; that we have not ruled out the most bizarre and outlandish hypotheses about the world, that we don't really know unless we can rule them out ... and so on. So for the time being I will assume that atheism is not especially controversial.

But it's important to remember that what's controversial – a bit like what's funny – depends on who you are, where you are, and whom you are talking to. I remember some time in the 1990s Bernard Williams giving UCL's Alan Marre Maccabeans lecture in the humanities in this very room (I think), in which he talked eloquently about Nietzsche and the need to re-evaluate all values. He made these claims against the background of an assumption that we live in a predominantly secular world in which the traditional support of a shared religious value system had disappeared. Looking around the room I realised that many of the attentive and polite audience were orthodox Jews. Not for them the death of God, a disenchanting world

without meaning and the re-evaluation of all values. Williams's pronouncements must have fallen on deaf ears.

Many of you are philosophers so perhaps I can take something for granted about what you know about atheism. Atheism so understood is a boringly negative view. (I'm what Anthony Appiah calls a 'boring atheist'.) It simply says something about what there is not. It isn't materialism, naturalism or physicalism. It is silent about all these doctrines. It's just the denial of God. As an atheist, I am untroubled by the idea that atheism might be a negative doctrine.

Julian Baggini, however, is bothered by this. In his book on atheism, Julian considers the view that atheism is just 'parasitic on religion ... by its very nature negative'. Julian thinks this is a fallacy, based on deriving too much from the etymology of the word 'atheism'; and he wants to propose a positive version of atheism. But I don't see the objection to 'negative' views as such; if I am anti-imprisonment without trial and torture, then in a sense my belief is negative in Julian's sense. It is parasitic on the existence of torture and imprisonment without trial. And even if torture were wiped out, it would be parasitic on the idea of torture. How can this be an objection to my belief?

Julian's attitude is nicely exemplified by some publicity for a recent Institute of Ideas debate on atheism:

*Flogging a dead horse: can we make a positive case for atheism today?*  
From the Renaissance through to the 20th century, intellectuals have challenged religion and religious privilege. The past few years have seen the 'New Atheists', as they have been dubbed, take up the mantle. But why has religion persisted for so long? Are religious believers just wrong, or does religion answer questions that secular society can't? What do today's atheists propose, beyond mere unbelief? Can one make a positive case for atheism?

Of course, it's one thing to say that one can make a positive case for something, and another to say that a specific doctrine is 'positive' in content. The suggestion here is

that atheism is negative because it is ‘mere unbelief’. But of course one could make a positive case for ‘mere unbelief’. The issue is about the content of the doctrine, not the nature of the case one makes for it.

I think the content of atheism is obviously determined by religion, since what it is denying is a central thesis of some religions. In this sense, I suppose, it is ‘parasitic’ on religion. How could it be otherwise? And why should it? Yet some thinkers still *seem* to expect more from atheism, something in addition to its mere denial of God. This is from the blurb to Louise Antony’s new collection of essays, *Philosophers Without Gods*, published this year by Oxford University Press:

Collectively, these essays highlight the richness of atheistic belief--not only as a valid alternative to religion, but as a profoundly fulfilling and moral way of life.

Given the way I understand atheism (which I’m sure you agree is the normal way) this claim is bizarre. How can a life based on the mere denial of something be profoundly fulfilling and moral, as such?

You may think I’m just being perverse and pendentic: what Louise Antony means by this is just the familiar thought that you can have morality without God. There can be moral ways of life which do not accept God. If this is what this means, then of course I agree with it. Of *course* you can have morality without God. The idea is not one which I have to defend to this audience. Of course morality is philosophically problematic – but it’s problematic with or without God. God does not especially help. It’s not as if those philosophers who are Christians can simply put all the problems of moral philosophy to one side. (I’m assuming that a reductive account of moral obligation which simply reduces its force to the obligation to obey god’s

commands is as implausible as a reductive account of morality which reduces it to an evolutionarily adaptive strategy.)

### **Atheism as a kind of religion**

Maybe this is all some mean by a ‘positive atheism’. But others seem to mean more, if their words and actions and rhetoric are to be taken seriously. It is often said that atheists can give the impression that they are looking for was a religion of their own. In fact, the first ‘humanist manifesto’ published in 1933 (one of its co-authors was the philosopher Roy Wood Sellars, the father of Wilfrid Sellars) talked of humanism as a ‘new religion’. Nowhere does this ring more true than at weekend meetings of Ethical Societies in chilly and austere halls which can resemble Methodist chapels or Christian Scientist temples. It’s hard to resist the cheap shot that a lot of what has passed for atheistical humanism has been a kind of non-conformism without the hymns. (See Conway Hall, for instance.)

We can be a bit less cheap. Some atheists (including Stephen Rose, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins) have campaigned for a national holiday on Darwin’s birthday. Where does the idea of having public holidays on people’s birthdays come from? And why Darwin? Why not Newton, or Einstein, or Aristotle? The cynical answer is that Darwin is the patron saint of the anti-religion movement. Newton couldn’t really be canonised since he was a believer and an alchemist.

I don’t like the idea of having national holidays on people’s birthdays. The exception I guess is Jesus’s birthday, and I don’t have any difficulty with that – it’s been around for a long time, it gives a lot of people a lot of pleasure and it doesn’t do much harm. But let’s leave it there. Darwin was a great man but I feel the same about

holidays on people's birthdays as the Venetians felt about statues of the living: they encourage all the wrong kinds of attitudes to other people. Worship, for one.

Another obsession of some atheists is the peculiar institution of 'Thought for the Day' on BBC Radio 4 every morning, during which some well-meaning religious person gives a short homily on some moral issue of current relevance. I must admit that I haven't listened to this programme for well-over ten years, so my views on it are not really up to date. But it is something which drives some atheists wild, no doubt because of the symbolic importance of giving a 'platform' to religion on the BBC's most 'serious' news programme.

The idea that only the religious have the monopoly on 'Thought' (with a capital T so to speak) is of course ludicrous. But what might an atheist thought for the day actually be? My guess would be that many of the religious speakers share much the same moral outlook as many of the atheists who might want to do this (Anthony Grayling, Julian Baggini, Richard Dawkins, etc.). They will all be against the war in Iraq, for instance; they will be against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, against torture, in favour of civil liberties and freedom of speech... So what would make the atheist thought for the day atheist? Perhaps because it was prefaced by something like, 'you don't have to believe in God to believe what I say'? Or maybe because it explicitly attacked religion? This isn't the way I'd like to start my day, listening to yet another rant about how stupid religious people are.

Anyway, the interesting point about the idea of an atheist thought for the day is that atheists want (explicitly or implicitly) to belong to a 'movement' that in some ways has a standing comparable to a religion. The most extreme example of this is the 'Brights' movement.

The Brights movement was started in 2003 in America by a group of people who disliked the ‘negative’ connotations of words like ‘atheist’ and ‘godless’. There are currently 34,000 Brights in the world, organised into local ‘constituencies’ (it is another cheap shot to call them parishes). So there are about two thousand times more humanists in the UK (according to the BHA) than there are self-declared Brights in the world. The Brights’ logo looks remarkably like the kind of bland and soulless artwork you find in modern church magazines, or the Good News Bible, or this kind of thing.

However, I’m sorry to say that the BHA’s logo isn’t much better. Here it is, and here is a logo from the Gay Christian Radio Network in the US. The BHA’s logo is called the ‘happy human’; and I really have to digress at this point on this whole happiness thing. Why does the world view associated with the denial of God have to be so irrepressibly *happy*? It almost looks like they want to take over everything people like about religion, even the happy clappy bits. Why can’t the denial of God be just a simple fact, something neither to be lamented or rejoiced over?

Richard Dawkins gives us something of an answer in his endorsement of the term ‘bright’ in 2003, comparing it to the introduction of the word ‘Gay’:

‘Gay is succinct, uplifting, positive: an “up” word, where homosexual is a down word, and queer, faggot and poofah are insults. Those of us who subscribe to no religion; those of us whose view of the universe is natural rather than supernatural; those of us who rejoice in the real and scorn the false comfort of the unreal, we need a word of our own, a word like “gay”. ... Like gay, it should be a noun hijacked from an adjective, with its original meaning changed but not too much. Like gay, it should be catchy: a potentially prolific meme. Like gay, it should be positive, warm, cheerful, bright.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘The future looks bright’, *The Guardian*, June 21, 2003.

We need a word of our own because we are cheerfully *rejoicing* in the real. As Dawkins says elsewhere ‘I care passionately about the truth because it’s a beautiful thing and enables us to live a better life’.<sup>2</sup> With all this rejoicing and passionate caring, perhaps there is no wonder he needs a word for it. He wants to shout it from the top of mount improbable.

Even Dawkins’s ally in the latest crusade against God, Christopher Hitchens, thinks this is going a bit far, calling the terminology of the Brights ‘cringe-making’ and ‘conceited’ and I have to agree. (What it reminds me of, more than anything, is the tendency of academically inclined middle-class parents to call their children ‘terribly bright’.)

The big question the whole ‘Brights’ movement raises for me is: why bother? Why do we need a ‘word of our own’? Why do we need a movement at all? I don’t believe in God; I already have a word for what I am. I don’t think the truth is necessarily beautiful – it’s just there – and I don’t *rejoice* in the real, I just simply accept it whenever I can find it. Julian Baggini has commented that atheists ‘tend to find relentless blind cheeriness anathema ... it reflects the cheering self-assuredness of believers who only need to remind themselves of their religious beliefs to feel that little bit better about the world’ (*Atheism* p.10). He’s right of course – but these same smug attitudes can be found as much among the irreligious as among the religious.

## **Secularism**

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<sup>2</sup> *Daily Mail*, November 1996

It's time to stop taking the most extreme versions of views as a model. What I have been questioning is those aspects of 'positive' atheism which rather unfortunately seem to resemble religion. But maybe these are not the best examples.

Now atheism is one thing, secularism another; and we need to put secularism to one side if we are going to get to the heart of what today's humanism is supposed to be all about. By 'secularism', I mean a collection of beliefs about how society should be organised, such as those beliefs of the UK's National Secular Society, which campaigns for the disestablishment of the Church of England; the withdrawal of state subsidies to religious schools; the end of tax exemption for churches; the abolition of the blasphemy law; and an end to the public funding of chaplains in prisons, hospitals and the armed services.

There are lots of things to be said about secularism in this sense, but I'm not going to dwell upon them here. I'm interested first of all in whether humanism can be a world view, not whether certain secularist policies should be pursued in the UK.

### **Humanism as a world view**

Of course, there are many kinds of thing which have fallen under the name of humanism. I can't talk about them all. But I'd like to focus first on one central idea, the idea of the human. One might think that a doctrine called 'humanism' should have *something* to do with the human. In his book on humanism, Richard Norman bases his view on the fact that

We possess distinctively human capacities for rational thought and action, and that we should use them as best we can, along with our equally human capacities for love and care and compassion, to resist the cruelty and the inhumanity which led to the concentration camps. (p.24)

He introduces this idea after discussing an especially powerful passage from Primo Levi's *If this is a Man*, which Norman takes to be 'one of the great documents of humanism'.

The values Norman is appealing to are products of distinctively human capacities. In accordance with one of humanism's key beliefs quoted above (the belief that 'right and wrong can be explained by human nature alone') this idea of the human as the ultimate source of value in the world is a powerful and controversial one, and clearly one worth taking seriously. John Gray pours scorn on those who talk about the value of distinctively human capacities: 'When the claim that humans are radically different from other animals is wrenched from its theological roots it is not just indefensible but virtually incomprehensible' (p.189). But this criticism is very implausible; there are many true and important things one can say about the distinctive nature of human beings which have nothing to do with the theological roots.

But the idea of the human as the source of value still doesn't tell us which values to have. It is a view about the *source* of value, not about value itself. It may tell us not to think that there is any transcendent source of value, but this doesn't help us decide whether we should live life in accordance with the categorical imperative or in accordance with the virtues; it does not tell us what to believe about the moral problems of today etc.

One view that the doctrine that humanity is the source of all value does rule out, incidentally, is the utilitarianism invented by Bentham himself: the doctrine that the foundation of morality is 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. If we understand happiness (as many utilitarians do) in essentially sensory terms (in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain) then the quantity of happiness in the world is not

limited by human happiness; there is plenty of animal pleasure and pain to take into account. And as utilitarians like Peter Singer have argued, if we think of the basis of morality in this way, then it is objectionable prejudice to treat non-human animals (those capable of feeling pain) differently from humans.

This of course was Bentham's view: the question about animals, he famously argued, was not 'can they reason? nor, can they talk? but, can they suffer?'. So it's worth pointing out that many of those thinkers who count themselves as humanists do not hold that humanity is the source of all value. Whether or not humanity is the source of all value is an interesting question and one worth debating; but it doesn't seem to be essential to humanism. Once again, what seems to be essential is the denial that the source of value is God or something transcending the natural world; this is fine, but it's just atheism in its boring negative form. Which is also fine; but boring negative atheism is not a world view.

### **Humanism as a pressure group**

Perhaps looking for the 'world view' in humanism is, in any case, on the wrong track. If you were to pick up a recent copy of the *New Humanist* magazine, for example you will not find much by way of the articulation of a world view. (I'm grateful to the editor, Caspar Melville, for sending me a copy in advance of this lecture.) The September/October issue has articles about the danger of partitioning Iraq on religious grounds, on the risk of radical Islamist terrorism in universities, the increase in slave labour in Britain, the rising enthusiasm for virginity among Christians, religion in schools (and inevitably, something about a secular Thought for the Day on Radio 4).

The impression one gets is of a campaigning magazine, like the *Amnesty International* magazine. The tone, appropriate to such a magazine, is thoroughly

negative (except where it reports minor triumphs in the battle against religion). Slagging off religion (especially Christianity and Islam) and its bad effects is the name of the game. The magazine makes a lot of good points. But the fact remains that whatever its good effects might be, slagging off religion and the religious is not a 'profoundly fulfilling and moral way of life'. And again, it's not much of a world view.

Just so things should be completely clear, I'm not saying any of this because I think it is *impolite* or *disrespectful* to slag religion off. I agree with those critics who say that we should not respect the sensibilities of those who think that someone should be killed for writing a novel, or for drawing a cartoon, no matter how much they may be offended by these things. We should not respect these views because they are not worthy of respect. We should, however, tolerate them since we cannot have laws against opinions, only against actions. We do not control people's thoughts.

But we can tolerate without respecting, then. It's simply not true, to borrow a phrase from Jamie Whyte, that everyone is entitled to their opinion. If you think a woman who has sex outside marriage should be stoned, then your opinion is not worthy of respect: it is vicious, cruel and vile. You are not entitled to that opinion, and if you tried to get a law passed in this country trying to enforce it then we would rise up to stop you. I take it we are not in that condition in this country. But if we were, then we would oppose it and we would be grateful for the support of sensible humanists.

We can make more sense of contemporary humanism if we saw it not as a value system but as a pressure group – rather like Amnesty International, whose purpose would be served and the organisation could be retired, if torture and injustice

were eliminated from the world. And the example of Amnesty shows that pressure groups need no common set of essential beliefs, or a world view.

I have no interest here in criticising humanism as a pressure group – I'm sure it has done good things in combating some of the bad effects of religion. The BHA goes further, campaigning 'for an end to religious privilege and to discrimination based on religion or belief, and for a secular state'. I'm not sure myself of the importance or value of campaigning to make this country a secular state; but these are political issues on which I don't have much of interest to say here.

Instead the rest of my lecture will be devoted to an idea which often – though not necessarily, and not always – motivates the humanist pressure group. This is the idea that religion is the source or the cause of *many* (if not the *majority*) of the world's problems. Here things get more speculative and I am certainly not very confident of my own opinions – but I want to introduce a note of scepticism.

### **Religion as the main source of the world's problems**

One thing that is important here is context. Pressure groups should devote their energies to the situations where pressure needs to be made. There's not much role for Amnesty International to campaign against human rights abuses in Sweden, for example. In the words of Comrade Lenin, the concrete analysis of the concrete situation is what we need here.

So if I lived in the United States in the presence of the serious risk that my children might be taught that creationism or intelligent design are serious alternatives to the theory of evolution, *then* I might join the pressure group. But in this country, where more people go to Sainsbury's on Sunday than go to church, creationism is not taught in schools, and I don't think there is a serious risk of it being taught.

There are some areas of the world, then, which are more at risk of the bad effects of religion than others. And also, it should be said that we should not talk about all 'religion' in the same breath here; we are not at risk from Buddhist or Jain or Anglican terrorists, and we are not at risk of having the Shinto world view taught in our schools. There are specific religions, with specific histories and ambitions, which cause specific problems.

Nonetheless, many anti-religious writers insist on seeing the danger from 'religion' as universal, and uniquely poisonous in its effects. The American writer Sam Harris is an example:

A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion' (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* p.12)

Certainly it is true that some of the worst horrors of the world have been performed by the religious in the pursuit of ostensibly religious goals. Not that the religions have been the worst, though. Claims about the damage done by religion should be put in the context of the killings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the largest number were carried out of course by the explicitly anti-religious communist regimes of Stalin (between 15 and 20 million) and Chairman Mao (at least 30 million) as well as in the Nazi holocaust.

Now the fact that Mao and Stalin were anti-religious is not supposed to be a defence of religion; the crimes of the religious are not lessened just because anti-religious people have done worse things. My only point in drawing attention to the crimes of communism is simply to refute those who say that religion has been responsible for the worst evils. On one measure of the worst – the sheer number of people killed, the gratuitous and random murder, torture and terrorisation of the population – the regimes of Stalin, Mao and Hitler are clearly way in the lead.

Perversely, Sam Harris refuses to accept this point and argues that the communists were religious underneath:

Even when such crimes have been secular, they have required the egregious credulity of entire societies to be brought off. Consider the millions of people who were killed by Stalin and Mao: although these tyrants paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion. ... Even though their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they were both cultic and irrational. (Harris p.79)

The trouble with this argument is that it removes from the account of religion the metaphysical belief in the transcendent, which was part of what they were out to attack in the first place. What becomes essential to religion now is simply dogmatism, and invulnerability to evidence.

Lying behind a lot of the recent anti-religious literature is the idea that its fundamental error is one of irrationality. This is what Harris says about North Korea, in defence of the implausible idea that even communism is a kind of religion:

While our differences with North Korea, for instance, are not explicitly religious, they are a direct consequence of the North Koreans' having grown utterly deranged by their political ideology, their abject worship of their leaders ... the problem of North Korea is, first and foremost, a problem of the unjustified (and unjustifiable) beliefs of North Koreans. (p.232)

What is supposed to be wrong with religion and with the communist regimes, then, is that they are irrational. I would conjecture that this is why Dan Dennett thinks that we should explain religion as a cognitive *pathology*, brought about evolution; rather than simply an episode in the history of human culture.

But both Dawkins and Harris want to link this irrationality with the wickedness that religion can bring about:

Whenever a man imagines that he need only believe the truth of a proposition, without evidence – that unbelievers will go to hell, that Jews drink the blood of infants – he comes capable of anything. (Harris 85)

This gloomy view presumably has an optimistic flip side: that the more rational one is, the better a person one will be. And so, yes, we find Dawkins saying in *The God Delusion* that atheists are more likely to be morally better people than the religious.<sup>3</sup>

I find all this very dubious. I don't myself know whether many religious beliefs are irrational; I know a lot of them are not true, but that's not the same thing. But even so, the idea that there might be this kind of straightforward connection between people's capacity for evil and the irrationality of their beliefs strikes me as utterly incredible. Reasonable, rational people can be wicked and vicious; ignorant, irrational people can be good and kind. These are the obvious truths upon which we should start building our account of these things, rather than the utopian fantasies of Harris and Dawkins.

To be cynical for a moment, we can see that it might appeal to academics and intellectuals to identify first, the problems of the world as deriving from religion, and second, the problems of religion as deriving from cosmological belief. They can therefore help in solving the problems of the world by pointing out the errors in these cosmological beliefs and thus help with the problems of the world by a process of rational belief change: something they are supposed to be particularly expert at.

Two things seem to me to be wrong with this approach: (1) a lot of these problems have a lot less to do with cosmological belief than many 'new atheists' seem to think; and (2) even if belief were the source of the problems, it is not obvious

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<sup>3</sup> Another idea which is common here is that it is irrational for people to put them in situations where they risk their own deaths. But even if this is irrational, it is still very human; in fact, as John Gray has pointed out, 'Nothing is more human than the readiness to kill and die in order to secure a meaning in life' (p.186).

that the right way to deal with this is to try and change people's beliefs. It is surprisingly difficult – much more difficult than many philosophers think – to change people's beliefs. If there is one thing which should be obvious here, it is that the way to do it is (generally) not to tell them that they are stupid, irrational or hopelessly ignorant.

In the final minutes of my lecture I'd like to reflect a bit on these two points: the irrelevance of belief, and the unimportance of change of belief.

### **The irrelevance of belief**

Is it really facts about what people believe that causes them to do what they do? Are doctrinal differences the differences which make those religious people slaughter one another? Sam Harris thinks so. He says that India and Pakistan 'are now poised to exterminate one another with nuclear weapons simply because they disagree about "facts" that are every bit as fanciful as the names of Santa's reindeer ... The only difference between these groups consists in what they believe about God' (Harris, p.27). The idea is that they are poised to exterminate each other simply because of differences in religious doctrine.

I am not a historian and I have no specialised knowledge, so anything I say here is very speculative. (However, Harris is not a historian either: I'm sorry to say that he studied philosophy at Stanford. So we are equals here.) But in any case, it seems to me very hard to believe that (a) the only relevant difference between Indians and Pakistanis – that is, the only difference relevant to their conflict – is 'what they believe about God'; and also that (b) these religious doctrinal differences are really the elements which form the best explanation of the conflict.

Let's take a smaller example of a supposed religious conflict – the Serb-Croat conflict in the early 1990s – to see how differences in doctrine might have had something to do with it. The Yugoslav wars left about 140,000 dead and 1 million people homeless. Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and many others have called the Yugoslav wars religious wars, presumably on the grounds that Serbs tend to be Orthodox Christians, the Croats Catholics and many Bosnians Muslims. But what actually are the differences between these different religions?

Let's concentrate on the difference between the Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats. The Orthodox or Eastern Church split from the Roman Church in 1054, the moment of the Great Schism. Previous to this they were in communion with one another and the Eastern Church accepted the authority of the Pope in Rome. Many complicated issues led to this schism, some of them theological. One of the theological issues was the debate over the so-called *filioque* clause. This was a debate about the relative hierarchy of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ. The traditional view dating from the Council of Nicea in 325 and expressed in the so-called Nicene creed, was that the Holy Spirit 'proceeded' from the Father alone. But a later tradition developed which said that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and the Son* ('*filioque*'). This was eventually adopted by the Pope as the revised version of the creed; but it was rejected by the Eastern patriarchs and led to the split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of the East, of which the Serbian Orthodox Church is one.

It would be frivolous to suggest that the *filioque* clause is one of the factors influencing the war between the Serbs and the Croats in the 1990s. And yet, if we are to look at the theological origins of the separation of the Roman and the Orthodox churches, this would have to be mentioned (among many other details). So if we

going to give an account of the war in terms of ‘what they believe about God’ (Harris’s words) we would have to mention this. Yet plainly it has nothing more to do with the war than the fact that the Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet and the Croats use the Latin alphabet.

What are looking for when we look for causal factors? We are looking for those things such that, if they were modified, things would turn out differently from the way they actually do – holding various other background conditions constant. We are looking for ‘difference makers’. My conjecture is that had the Serbian creed contained the filioque clause, it would have had no impact on the wars of the 1990s.

My reason for saying this is that there is an alternative story, based on the known historical facts. Yugoslavia was a country invented after the first world war, made up of a number of different states with different degrees of dominance and independence. Croatia was a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire, whereas Serbia had been an independent kingdom since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The collapse of the country after Tito’s death led to battle for territory and very different conceptions of what belonged to whom; in addition to these ‘ancient hatreds’ and territorial battles, we should also not ignore (as Tony Judt has persuasively argued) the role of a number of ambitious and ruthless individuals. When explaining the beginning of the Serb Croat conflict, ancient hatreds might play some role; the need for regional dominance plays a role; individual politicians play a role; but what does not play a role is the content of any of the religious doctrines which differ between catholics and orthodox.

The religious differences between Serbs and Croats are about as relevant as the fact that they write in different alphabets. These are effects of their identifications

with groups, not causes of them. I think this example shows that we should be very careful about attributing supposed religious conflicts to ‘beliefs about God’.

### **The unimportance of change of belief**

In any case, even if belief were the cause, it still doesn’t seem the right strategy to try and change people’s factual or moral beliefs. Here again I find myself deeply opposed to Sam Harris, when he says:

The appropriate response to the bin Ladens of the world is to correct everyone’s reading of [the Koran] by making the same evidentiary demands in religious matters that we make in all others. (Harris p.35)

This is pure fantasy. The appropriate response to the bin Ladens of the world is (a) to find them; and (b) try them in a court of law, according to our laws, and (c) lock them up if found guilty. An uphill task, to be sure: but at least it’s not the impossible one of making them apply the logic of confirmation to the Koran.

I have two reasons for thinking that *even if religious belief were the cause of all the problems*, we should not embark on the project of trying to change people’s beliefs. The first is the one I’ve already mentioned: it’s ineffectual. As John Gray nicely puts it, ‘only a very credulous philosopher could believe that showing religion is an illusion will make it disappear’ (p.189).

The second reason is that I think what matters to the peace of society is regulating people’s actions, not their beliefs. The fundamental problems which religion (these days, especially fundamentalist Christianity and Islam) arise not from people’s false beliefs, but how they act on those beliefs.

I’d like to illustrate this with an analogy. It is sometimes said that racist views rest upon certain empirical beliefs, and in particular on the belief that human beings

divide into 'races', biologically real distinct kinds of organism. Visible distinctions in physiognomy and skin colour were the basis for distinguishing between Caucasians, negroes, mongoloid and other supposed races. It was assumed by many that these differences were underpinned by differences in some real underlying genetic or organic traits.

As we now know, this is entirely false. There is no basis in any area of biological research for the old distinction between races. It has no basis in genetics or evolutionary biology, and those who think otherwise are completely deluded. Race is not a biological concept. Of course, it is consistent with this that racial categories might be social constructions, even if they have no biological basis, and the study of such categories is something worth doing, as Anthony Appiah has eloquently argued. But for the moment I am interested in the significance of the biological claim.

Those who think that the essence of racism rests on the false belief that race is a real biological category might think that the way to eliminate racism is to eliminate this belief. Once you have shown that there are no races, then what could racist people possibly be racist *about*? Racism could be eliminated by science.

This line of thought – which I have found is quite common among philosophers – is an example of the kind of utopianism which we saw exhibited by Harris and Dawkins earlier on. It seems to me quite mistaken. For one thing, it assumes a kind of link between theoretical and practical attitudes which is quite absent in most people. It says nothing against the racist who listens patiently to the scientific explanation and responds: 'I take your point about the science, but I still believe that there are black people and white people and its *these* people who are inferior'. Such a belief need not rest on any view about the biological essence of race.

In any case, even if there were races, this ought to have no impact on how people are treated. Our beliefs that people count for one, that everyone is worthy of respect, that all are in some way worthy of equal treatment – these beliefs do not rest upon any scientific view about the differences between people. And they shouldn't do. The analogy with religion here might be controversial; but I hope it is clear. What matters is what people do, not what they believe.

### **Is it better for people to believe the truth?**

I agree with John Gray when he says, 'the most necessary task of the present time is to accept the irreducible reality of religion' (p.207). We are not going to eliminate religion, and especially not through rational argument. The problems we are facing are practical political and moral ones, and the resources – the values and attitudes – we need to address them are independent of the truth of any religion. Again Gray puts it particularly well:

It is time the diversity of religion was accepted and the attempt to build a secular monolith abandoned... A central task of government is to work out and enforce a framework whereby [religions] can live together. A framework of this kind cannot be the same for every society, or fixed for ever. *It embodies a type of toleration whose goal is not truth but peace.* When the goal of toleration is truth it is a strategy that aims for harmony. It would be better to accept that harmony can never be reached. (p.208; my emphasis)

I'm not saying that I have any idea of how to achieve the kind of society Gray talks about. But we should start by having confidence in our own institutions and intellectual traditions, including the liberal tradition of tolerance. (For example, forbidding the wearing of veils, crucifixes, skullcaps is not a step in this direction.) I'd like to distinguish this liberal tradition from a secular tradition. England can hardly claim to be an entirely secular country, what with the monarch being the head of the church and all those bishops in the house of lords. But it is a country with a

tradition of tolerance and I think it is this tradition, rather than the shrill and intolerant atheism of Dawkins and Harris, which atheists should develop.

The liberal tradition on which UCL was founded was characterized by this tolerance of different ideas and genuinely different visions of the world. The founders of UCL did not say: 'we only accept those who sign up to the  $n$  articles of atheism'. UCL has been called the 'godless institution of Gower street' or even the 'synagogue of Satan' – and of course some of us at UCL are secretly quite proud of these names. But neither name is accurate. UCL is only godless in the sense that it does not mention God much: it does not have a theology department, but it does not stop muslims from praying in the 'interdenominational meditation room'. UCL let in atheists: being godless was not a requirement. On the other side, UCL is not a synagogue, it is not committed to Satan; the point is that it let in Jews and Catholics, it did not make being Jewish or Catholic a requirement.

Humanists often say they are not anti-religion. If this is their view then they could take a leaf out of UCL's book. I am anti-religion in the sense that I am an atheist, but otherwise I tolerate them so long as they obey the rule of law.

What seems to me to be of value in the humanism I have looked at here is its role as a pressure group in certain contexts. I think humanists should follow Richard Norman's advice and avoid having a humanist 'creed' (including a 'secularist' creed). I also think they should avoid the blanket attack on religion as such, when what you really need to attack are specific actions by specific religious groups. I think it's as implausible that religion is a single pathology of the understanding, as it is that atheism can be a fulfilling and profoundly moral way of life. In fact, the only general truth that seems to be extractable here is how little appreciating the truth of atheism tells you about how to live.