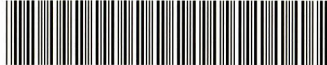


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HUMANISM

By D.B. Knox

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"The Protestant Faith"

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Humanism is a modern name for a much older attitude, which denies the spiritual, the supernatural, the heavenly, and believes that nothing exists except the material things we see around us. In Pilgrims Progress, John Bunyan in the seventeenth century wrote "Heaven is but as a fable to some, and things here are counted the only things substantial" (p. 267 Penguin Ed.). This attitude became a recognisable movement at the time of the French Revolution, when the catch-cry of the National convention was "no God, no master", and a secularist programme for the nation was adopted. During the last century this secularist movement made great inroads into the Christian church by the method of undermining the Bible as God's word. Within the churches it is known as Modernism. It also expressed itself outside the churches in Rationalist associations which now call themselves Humanists.

A recent Penguin paper-back by H.S. Blackham entitled "Humanism" begins by stating the fundamental Humanist assumptions, namely that man is on his own in this world, and that this life is all. This provides the basic Humanist world view - no supernatural; God does not exist; "man is on his own"; and that this life is the only life we have, beginning at birth and terminating at death which finishes all, as far as we are concerned.

The chief objection to this world view of Humanism, that man is on his own and that this life is all, is that it is not true. It does not take into account all the observable facts. It denies the reality of the experience of those who testify of their relation with God. Take for example, the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Humanist has to describe this as so much balderdash, when Jesus taught that He was in close fellowship and communion with God. Indeed, our Lord's teaching goes much further, for He taught that He Himself was the Son of God, and He called men to come to Him and He would give them rest.

The Humanist must dismiss Jesus as a deluded deceiver. So too, he has to dismiss the evidence of His resurrection on which the

Christian Gospel is based, as so much untruth, in spite of the testimony of the honest men who experienced it. The Humanist must further ignore the testimony of Christians that through faith in Jesus they have entered a relationship with God through His Spirit that is real and satisfying and which renovates their whole life and character. This claim of Christians that the Holy Spirit's presence changes their life and brings them into a real and satisfying fellowship with God through forgiveness in Jesus is true and may be verified. But the Humanist has to ignore or deny these facts of experience. He also has to deny the reality of answered prayer and of divine provision which is a daily experience for Christians.

So the chief objection to Humanism is that it is not true and that it can only maintain its position by ignoring important evidence.

Other consequences follow from its being out of conformity with the facts.

The first consequence to note is that Humanism is illogical. It confines the real to what can be observed by the human eye. What the eye doesn't see, cannot exist. And yet, at the same time, the Humanist maintains that the capacity of the human eye is purely accidental - the result of fortuitous development in the evolutionary struggle for existence.

And so by an extraordinary coincidence the capacity of the eye, brought into being in this accidental way, is to be regarded as an authentic yard-stick for finding out what exists and what doesn't and on the basis of this the conclusion is reached that the supernatural, the immaterial and the spiritual, because they are unobservable, are regarded ipso facto as non-existent. This is a completely illogical deduction.

Secondly, Humanism is illogical because it denigrates faith.

Relationships with the supernatural are, of course, based on faith. Humanism, therefore, denies spirituality reality because

it believes that observation and not faith is the way by which we learn about reality.

Yet faith is the basis of all knowledge, whether reflective or observed. Faith is the root of science. For observation itself is based on our faith that our sensory experience corresponds to reality. Without faith giving us certitude in our observation, science would not and could not exist. Therefore, science is primarily based on faith and this is true also if we reflect on the fact that the forming of axioms, which is fundamental to science, is grounded in faith. To prove any of the basic rules of logic involves those rules in the proof. Our certitude with reference to axioms is a product of the faith structure of our minds. Moreover, only in faith does science find its motive. Science seeks the "general Law" but it can only work with a small handful of observed incidents. Science makes universal statements out of a very limited number of instances. There is no logical justification for this universalization of what is true of a few things. It is an act of faith. Faith is the presupposition of all demonstration.

Thirdly, Humanism is illogical because it does not carry to its conclusions its first two premises; that man is alone and that this life is all. For it goes on to add (in the opening sentences of Blackham's book on Humanism) two other assumptions. The assumption of responsibility for man's own life and for the life of mankind. Yet how is it possible to speak of responsibility, especially responsibility for others, when the world view is that the whole of existence is materialistic and therefore purposeless, for to whom is one responsible? and what meaning is there in speaking about responsibility for mankind when there are no standards of judging apart from one's own opinions? Humanism is only possible in the aftermath of strong Christian faith. It is a temporary phenomenon for it is in a position of unstable equilibrium.

There have been individual humanists over a long period of time as non conforming individuals in a theistic society, but as a movement it dates from the eighteenth century and is a temporary

lodging place passing into militant atheistic materialism.

In spite of high sounding talk about responsibility, Humanism cannot protect the individual against the state or against his fellow man.

Take for example, the Humanist theory of punishment which treats the offender as a sick person needing remedial treatment. Presumably, the punishment goes on till the remedy is effected in the opinion of the person imposing the punishment, as in communist concentration camps and prisons. In its outcome such a theory of punishment is tyrannous in the extreme. Much more humane is the Christian view that we are only entitled to punish our fellow men in proportion to their deserts.

Hitler regarded himself as responsible for mankind when he eliminated the Jews, the weak, the mentally deficient. The Communist regards himself as responsible for mankind when he eliminates whole classes who may be contrary to the ideals of the Party. This leads to the undisguised tyranny of a dictator governing ruthlessly, ultimately in his own interests. For on Humanistic bases there is no reason why he should not.

If we are on our own and have no judge but ourselves and if this life is all, it follows logically that we should do what we think best for our own lives. It is illogical to limit this by what other people regard as their interests and which we not necessarily allow to be in their own interests, especially if it is not in our interests. Undisguised selfishness, in other words, is the only logical position if we accept the Humanist promise that we are on our own and that this life is all.

Besides being illogical, the second defect which follows from its failure to conform to the truth is that Humanism is unbearably priggish. Thus, Blackham in his chapter on the Humanist himself, begins with the heading "The Person as a Work of Art". The Humanist ideal is to fashion one's life as a work of art.

This sounds attractive, it is however both impossible and repulsive. It is impossible, because over most of the events of our lives we have no control. Things happen to us, accidents and sickness overtake us, and so the work of art may be hopelessly marred. And the ideal is further impossible because of the atrophy of skills. It is not possible to build up one skill upon another, for as we pay attention to some particular aspect, we lose our abilities and skills in another area, and furthermore, the defects of memory are such that we forget lots of things that we have laboriously sought to make our own. And finally, what about old age? How is a person a work of art in old age? A person as a work of art may be an ideal for healthy human specimens living in the upper income bracket of an affluent society; but what message has Humanism got for the undernourished refugee, or a female living in a subsistence village. To make your life a work of art is an impossible ideal, and is repulsive because it is so entirely self-centred. The same may be said of the ideal of balance of which Blackham makes so much. Balance is baloney! For balance is a non-concept. Any way of life we choose we can call balanced because there is always some other way of life on either side which we are not adopting. Nor is there any merit in balance in itself.

Humanism is simplistic, it does not take into account the realities of human life or of human nature. The conditions of our life are not open to our choice in the way the Humanist requires them to be.

Thus, Blackham writes "The Humanist begins his choice of life by choosing to live". On his assumption, he has the option. If the terms seem to him too bad he can reject them. To accept them is to discharge all grudge and grievance and to exchange demand for responsibility. He has then always to remind himself that he is not bound to accept the terms and life owes him nothing. (Blackham. Humanism. Page 67). This is simplistic. Suicide is not such a simple choice as Blackham makes out.

Human nature is other than what Humanism requires for its theories to be workable.

The Humanist ideal of balance is the exact opposite to the Christian ideal and indeed to what humanity has always regarded as noble. The sentiment reflected in our Lord's words "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends", is regarded by Humanists as the ultimate wrong. Yet self-sacrifice has always been regarded as a noble act, not only in the Christian tradition but in the world at large, for example, the mother who gives her life in seeking to save her child from a fire, or a soldier who dies to protect his comrades. To all such self-sacrifice Blackham writes "It is here that the balance has to be struck. If one denies oneself ... radically and in earnest the well is poisoned: it is an ultimate wrong. To treat oneself as a means only to the need of others is to destroy the source of value." (Humanism p.77). Thus, real love, which is always self-sacrificing, is ruled out on Humanist principles. Patronising charity, a gift here, a helping hand there, is alone suitable for the balanced life. Prudence is the basic humanistic virtue. It is not very inspiring as it is so completely self-centred. Blackham writes: "To 'love my neighbour as myself ...' is a stupid requirement." (Humanism p.79).

Lastly, humanism is defective because it impoverishes life. We have seen that it excludes real self-sacrificing love on the principle that to give your life for friends cannot be commended, for it is not possible to make a work of art of that which ceases to exist. Actions must always be self-regarding, otherwise balance is sacrificed. But, of course, true love is never self-regarding. Not only is real love excluded on Humanist principles, there is no place either for thanksgiving, which is one of the most humanising of virtues.

Life is full of joys and blessings, and we should respond with a thankful spirit, but this is meaningless if we are on our own and there is no God who is the source of these blessings to whom we can direct our thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving cannot find any place on Humanistic principles and this impoverishes life, and indeed impoverishes enjoyment which is the Humanists' objective of life, for it is a matter of experience that heartfelt thanksgiving increases the enjoyment of

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the things for which you are giving thanks while you are experiencing them, whether it is sex or surfing or only sitting in the sun.

Prudent self-management is a key phrase in Blackham's book; comfort and enjoyment are the objectives. But the Christian ideal is the exact opposite. Saul, the Pharisee, well off, well educated, well connected, abandoned the life of comfort and esteem in order to serve others by being their teacher of truths which he believed to be of transcendental value. In this he was following the example of his master, the Lord Jesus, who summed up his own life by saying that he did not come to be served by others, but to serve and minister to them, and chiefly by giving his life for their salvation.

The Humanist cannot experience the soul-restoring salve of forgiveness, for when he sins against himself or against humanity or his fellow man, there is ultimately no-one who can forgive him and restore him to a sense of harmony with himself and the world.

God forgives those who turn to Him; this is the experience which ought not to be denied by the Humanist as false and self-deceptive, for it is a real experience and immensely health-giving. But it is only true if there is a God who hears our prayers and can communicate Himself to us through His Spirit. But humanism can give no place for prayer, though prayer has always been characteristic of humanity.

Finally, Humanism denies the most human of all activities, that is, it denies the reality of hope. Yet all human life is motivated by hope, that is, it is geared to what lies ahead, unless we are mentally deranged. We are purposeful in our way of life, we think about the future and plan the present accordingly. Yet Humanism, as all Godless materialism, denies that the individual life is ultimately purposeful or that there is any future for us. Things are what they are by accident, and although some of us are personally placed to pluck a few enjoyments and comforts from life as it passes, ultimately nothing lies ahead for any of us. That life is all, is its fundamental premise. The Humanist's hope, such as it is, is completely centred on the body and the enjoyment that can be had through the body - whether emotional or

physical. Yet the body is subject to decay; and memory, which for the Humanist is presumably the only source of comfort in old age, is very shallow in its pleasure-producing potential, being hopelessly shot through by forgetfulness. The Humanist has no hope, because as St. Paul put it, he is without God in the world.

The Christians live with hope. Our hope is in our God whom we know, who has already done great things for us, not only in creation but in redemption. We have put our hope in the coming judgement when we will be vindicated, for God will judge the world by the One whom He has appointed, for which He has already given proof in raising Him from the dead.

The Christian agrees with the Humanist that this life is enjoyable but he differs in denying that enjoyment is the object of this life. Relationship and fellowship are the real ends and provide the truest joys; fellowship can only be achieved by forgetting ourselves in favour of others and will transcend death. God has created our bodies through which we experience this world, and we have the hope that the creator of the body will resurrect our bodies, that is, we will continue to be real persons truly related with God's creation and with one another and with God Himself when we will see Him face to face. This is the Christian hope. Human life is based on hope, but the Humanist has no hope.

The Humanist position is transitional. In its militant attack on all that reflects Christianity in our social institutions the Humanists may achieve the breaking down of these elements which humanise society and keep it together. But Humanism will not be strong enough to hold back the flood-gate of the primordial passions of selfishness and greed and cruelty which, as a consequence, will flood over society, and destroy it as a society, giving place to tyranny, once a belief in God is removed as the basis of our social institutions. Humanism, of course, is of the opinion that this will not be so, but its view of human nature is simplistic. It believes in the innate perfectability of human nature but this belief is not based on any examination of the facts. History shows that human nature has a radical fault from which selfishness, cruelty, tyranny springs.

Once Humanism has done its work of removing a theistic basis of society the tyranny of the dictator and the selfishness of the individual and the group will dominate the scene. Reason shows that this will be so and the history of human societies confirms that this is what we must expect from atheism.

Christians have the antidote to humanism. The Gospel is the antidote. We must not keep it to ourselves.

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