



Daltín Ó Ceallaigh

Secular Humanism is the alternative to religious belief. As regards such belief, there is of course quite a range of creeds throughout the world. However, let us here consider Secular Humanism and Christian Religion, because the latter is the predominant manifestation of religious belief in Ireland.

In doing this, we henceforth refer simply to Christianity and Humanism, in the second case because the term is now usually just taken to describe the secular rather than any religious variety.

There has been a certain amount of discussion and debate in recent years about the extent to which Humanism and Christianity may overlap or be somewhat compatible.

All philosophies of life, both secular and religious, need to be assessed according to three main considerations - ethical code, human nature, and ultimate explanations. The last refers to ideas such as whether or not there is a god or a natural infinity, of which more below.

ETHICAL CODE

In respect of ethical code, there are particular acceptances across the whole of humanity, such as 'thou shalt not kill'. (Of course there are then qualifications as to what may be a just war, and so on, but those are for another day's examination.) Outside of the basic absolutes and universals, ethical codes can differ quite markedly. In Ireland, we know all about this in relation to issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

An ecumenical approach to Humanism and Christianity is to seek out the congruent in a spirit of amicability rather than just identify the different with a concern about conflictuality. That can also lead to cooperative action in society in order to deal with various kinds of injustice and impoverishment. Philosophically, the original Christian emphases such as 'love thy neighbour' and enunciating the equality of human beings were distinctive historical developments, although quickly abandoned by

Christian Establishments. Generally speaking, one should acknowledge all the positive ethical attributes of Christianity where they overlap with Humanism, which of course does not require acquiescing in its fantastical assertions about a supernatural.

While there may be areas of agreement between Christians and Humanists, there are other areas where we will never concur. Although these may be dissimilar according to whether one is dealing with fundamentalist Calvinists and tridentine Catholics, on the one hand, or liberal Anglicans and Vatican II Catholics, on the other, there will remain major discrepancies between all Christians and all Humanists.

Even the most flexible Christians will not have the same approaches as Humanists towards questions such as foetal status and homosexual behaviour. Their thinking on these and other matters is based on a specific conception of natural law. Where Humanists come into direct confrontation with Christians is when the latter attempt to have their views enshrined as State policy. For example, this was pointedly evident in the referenda concerning divorce and abortion.

More widely, injunctions such as 'love your enemies' and 'turn the other cheek' (of doubtful adherence by Christians themselves) may have suited Caesar in dealing with recalcitrant Jews, but have understandably not exactly recommended themselves to people generally throughout history, particularly those struggling against oppression and injustice.

HUMAN NATURE

In the matter of human nature, Humanists and Christians diverge into very distinct camps. Christians believe in original sin and an ongoing predisposition towards sinfulness, and thus instil a feeling of guilt throughout life, thereby requiring atonement and salvation. Humanists assess such beliefs about humans being inherently deviant and base as not only false and wrong-headed, but also harmful insofar as they can, along with preachings about

hellfire and damnation, inflict psychological damage. (Limbo - modified hell for unbaptised babies - was, eventually, not abolished, but effectively de-commissioned, by Catholics anyway, due to a humanitarian outcry.) Accordingly, these perspectives of misery need to be firmly countered. In particular, Christians are notably imbued with an obsessional negativity about sexual matters and, instead of adopting a regime of responsible activity, induce unnatural repression and pathological inhibition.

All in all, the true object of humanity is not repentance, but fulfilment. Humanity does not need redemption from wickedness, but rather liberation from delusions. It need not feel shame about existence, but instead exult proudly in life.

ULTIMATE EXPLANATIONS

Turning to ultimate explanations, Christians are definite that there is a personal god, which is basically not a matter of knowledge but of faith. Humanists reject this idea as an anthropomorphic fantasy. At present, we cannot be sure what lies beyond the observable universe or what explains the 'Big Bang' or what sparked the first cells of life. But science is still gathering data and forming hypotheses on those subjects.

One hypothesis is that we live in a spatial and temporal infinity, whereby cyclically there has always been a universe of some kind and always will be. An extended proposition from this is a cosmos comprised of several universes, which themselves cyclically come into and go out of existence. Without so extending, it has been speculated that, in the unobserved parts of our own universe, there are different domains with different properties. In any of these scenarios, there is no creation, no boundary, no teleology and no last day. As for the argument that the 'fine tuning' of all the elements in our universe, which occurred to produce life, could not be accidental, in fact it is more than feasible that it was so in the context of a vast cosmic expanse in space and time, thus allowing for chance to eventuate.

Religion generally, and no less Christianity, has further always depended principally on the God of the Gaps idea whereby that which is not understood is attributed to a god or gods. However, the alternative is the Science of the Gaps outlook whereby, given its track record in eliminating multitudinous lacunae of incomprehensibility, the reasonable expectation is that science will fill the remaining ones in due course. The religious also often pose the question of what is the meaning or purpose of the universe or cosmos. However, one might as well ask what is the purpose or meaning

of the Atlantic Ocean. All just are and the question about meaning is meaningless.

In other words, in respect of the universe in which we find ourselves today, we could adopt Parmenides' outlook of "what is, is" and just get on with living our lives, while continuing to indulge our natural inquisitiveness about the ultimate questions.

SPINOFF

But there is a distinctive spinoff for Christians from the notion of a divine ultimate. Their god sends a son to earth in order to redeem us from sin and perform miracles in the course of this, such as casting out spirits and changing water into wine. (The latter, while appealing, unfortunately is not actually realisable.) This avatar is also not only born of a virgin, but resurrects and ascends into a heaven.

In Christianity, one thus moves from overstretched credulity about a tripolar celestial potentate to a seemingly boundless fancifulness regarding its earthly manifestation. And we haven't even reflected on the oft-forgotten and neglected imaginary of the Holy Spirit (in earlier times, a 'Ghost').

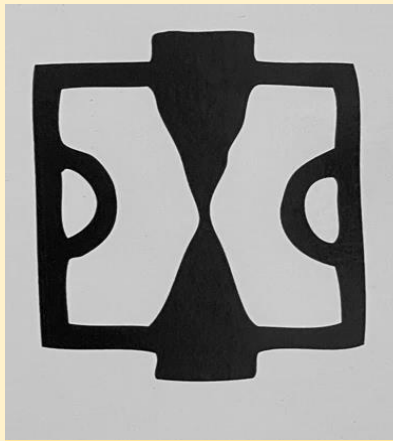
Moreover, there is the thought that if a god is the reason for humanity, it took a somewhat long time and a quite involved procedure, entailing almost 13.8 billion years from the 'Big Bang' alone, for said supernatural person to get around to creating us. And, as for the redeemer, he only arrived about 298,000 years after homo sapiens is thought (according to cautious estimate) to have emerged on this earthly scene.

An additionally distinctive feature of the Christian mind is that it views humans as the only life form on the planet that has a 'soul' which is immortal. Other creatures are born, live and die, but we uniquely are supposed to go on forever after conception, in some form or another. Why is it thought that this is so? It is simply because evolution has rendered us cerebrally the only species which is fully self-aware to the extent that we know that we are mortal, while thus being presented with the challenge of reconciling to the final normality. In other words, we are time-conscious. As one psychologist observing religion has put it, the resistance to death arises from "the lust for life".

COMPATIBILITY & CONTRAST

So where does all that leave us? Humanists should respect Christians as far as they positively go in respect of ethical code, and make common purpose with them in society, where that is possible, in seeking to make general progress and advance targeted improvements.

But there is no point in sweeping crucial



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philosophical disparities under the carpet or ignoring that we are committed to quite contrasting and conflicting overall positions. Most important of all, it comes down to the consideration of basic truth, which we all search for. Humanists and Christians are fundamentally divided in their judgements as to what is underpinningly true and what is not. Is there a supernatural with a god at its centre, whence derives us and morality, or are there no such dimensions and we have to build our lives on an alternative foundation? Do we draw conclusions on what we would like to be the case or on what we are increasingly discovering to be the reality? Is truth what we wish for or what we have to accept, however reluctantly in some instances?

And, to be quite blunt about it, many Humanists welcome the decline of Christianity (as is happening in Western Europe anyway) and the prospect of it disappearing as an organ of anti-human doctrines and dogmatic superstitions, thereby eliminating its deleterious and diversionary effects on people.

Nothing sums up more the perverse side of

Christianity than the statement by one of the early Christian fathers, Irenaeus, that “man” had to “overcome the enemy” that was “man.” And we are supposed to do this by, among other things, worshipping the offspring of an obscure Galilean carpenter two thousand years ago, namely a peripatetic and probably illiterate preacher, possibly deranged in thinking he was a god or a son thereof, or otherwise classified as divine by starry eyed disciples. While we should nonetheless selectively listen to the Jesus of the gospels as a proclaimer of ethics and character formation (although not entirely original in several of his pronouncements), we must decline the invitation to affirm his apotheosis.

HUMANISM OR CHRISTIANITY?

Humanist outlook and Christian religiosity are, in the main, the basic choices facing Irish people today and, fortunately, it seems that the former, if only effectively rather than always explicitly, is the one increasingly being chosen.

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