

THEO HOBSON MISTAKES LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY FOR CHRISTIANITY AND THEN CONCLUDES HUMANISM IS PARASITIC ON CHRISTIAN BELIEF

God Created Humanism: The Christian basis of secular values by Theo Hobson

QUOTE: In the introduction to a collection of essays in 2003, he explains that he advocates Darwinism as a scientist only: 'I am a passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs.' A contradiction? No, he insists: There is no inconsistency in favouring Darwinism as an academic scientist while opposing it as a human being . . . For good Darwinian reasons, evolution gave us a brain whose size increased to the point where it became capable of understanding its own provenance, of deploring the moral implications and of fighting against them. The first sentence is unobjectionable: one can affirm Darwinism as the key to biology but also insist that it is no guide to meaning and morality, which have other sources. But then, in the second sentence, he implies something else: that we have evolved to be able to see that defying natural selection is our moral duty. Soon he repeats the claim, telling us that evolution may not have made us the fastest or strongest creatures, but it has given humans the 'biggest gifts of all: the gift of understanding the ruthlessly cruel process that gave us all existence; the gift of revulsion against its implications'.⁴ Here is a strong claim that the moral instinct is a product of evolution. To say that evolution has given us the ability to understand this 'cruel process' claims too much, for in reality evolution has no discernible role in our tendency to judge this process as cruel.

COMMENT: It should be that there is no inconsistency in saying Darwinism is right as a scientist while IGNORING it as a social being. Darwinism allows for this and demands it for the fittest are fitter the more they co-operate. Secular humanism sees evolution in realistic terms. We are not an evolution for we are bad for this world and have ruined it through climate change. Evolution does not mean things are getting better but only that complex things have organised and survived to this point.

QUOTE: In his 2006 book *The God Delusion* he doesn't just charge religion with peddling untruths: he fuses this charge with another, that religion is immoral. This ought to involve discussion of what morality is but he sees no need for careful reflection on where his secular moral assumptions come from; he just gets straight on with portraying religion as scientifically false and therefore morally harmful. The pervasive implication is that morality just comes naturally. Significantly, he does not even acknowledge the conundrum we have just discussed, of amoral natural selection somehow producing morality. Instead he vaguely implies that science is beginning to sort the matter out; it has established that humans have evolved to be altruistic in certain ways, and is working on a fuller explanation. He is gesturing with his scientific expertise in a dishonest way rather than honestly reflecting on what it can and can't tell us. His basic claim, which he does not even deign to state explicitly, is that morality is natural; it is a constant thing, stable throughout history – or would be if religion stopped perverting it. But then he explains that different ages have different ideas of morality, and says that in recent times there has happily been a major advance in our moral conventions. He explains that, whether they're religious or not, people nowadays tend to agree on the basics of morality. 'With notable exceptions such as the Afghan Taliban and the American Christian equivalent, most people pay lip service to the same broad liberal consensus of ethical principles.'

COMMENT: The idea that morality comes from God opens the door to the idea that God has set up nature to produce morality naturally. It can be said that natural selection is only there for without the vicious competition there is no way we can rise above it. Dawkins could be right even if there is a God.

QUOTE: He [Dawkin's] explains that the true basis of morality is the Golden Rule, which 'simply enjoins us to treat others as one would wish to be treated by them'. This sober and rational precept, which one can teach to any child with its innate sense of fairness (and which predates all Jesus's 'beatitudes' and parables), is well within the compass of any atheist and does not require masochism and hysteria, or sadism and hysteria, when it is breached. It is gradually learned, as part of the painfully slow evolution of the species, and once grasped is never forgotten. Ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it. He seems to be saying that morality comes naturally, to all human cultures, religious or not; it is axiomatic, obvious. But this doesn't really square with the claim that religion is 'positively immoral' due to its propagation of false myths and inhumane doctrines. For almost all human cultures have been religious. Is the Golden Rule blotted out by their error? Here again is the atheist muddle about morality and tradition: on the one hand, it is claimed that morality is a natural human instinct and that there is no special moral cause or tradition; on the other, if religion's power to subvert morality is so great, then there is surely intense moral heroism in the tradition that attacks and exposes religion – atheism must be the true saving cause. But the latter narrative is groundless: modern history does not show humanist morality to be based in atheism.

COMMENT: Humanist morality is implicitly and intrinsically atheist even if not explicitly. It does not care what a God wants you to do. If a baby wants help it does not matter what God says or thinks even if he wants you to help. It is not about him at all.

QUOTE: Grayling's core claim is that 'humanism' names an ancient tradition of rational thought, sceptical of religion, that has a vision of progressive human brotherhood and unity. There is no such tradition. Instead, universal rationality gradually emerged within the Christian thought-world. This was largely due to the Protestant passion for criticizing religious tradition: 'the Enlightenment was deeply shaped by values which stemmed from the Christian tradition'. It opposed aspects of religion, yet: in a choice irony, it inherited its brave campaign against superstition partly from Christianity itself, with its rejection of all false gods and prophets, all idols, fetishes, magical rituals, and powers of darkness, in the name of human flesh and blood.

COMMENT: An orientation then rather than a clear tradition. Every ancient teacher did his or her bit. The idea of God does not stop idol worship for you can hold that God has the power to make a statue his body or something. The ban on idolatry is pure intolerance and God was used as a weapon for destroying other religions through assimilation or violence.

QUOTE: Hitchens's claim that 'our [atheist humanist] principles are not a faith' [?] Are we really to think that such humanism involves 'no trust in men and women's rationality and desire for freedom, no conviction of the evils of tyranny and oppression, no passionate faith that men and women are at their best when not labouring under myth and superstition'? To claim that one's own values are just neutral normality is a failure to understand what values are: 'The liberal principles of freedom and tolerance are dogmas, and are none the worse for that.' In its belief that we must 'shake off a poisonous legacy of myth and superstition', liberal humanism is itself a myth.

COMMENT: If dogma and rules are bad but unavoidable then liberal humanism has dangers. It is doing what it can which entitles it to be called liberal and humanist.

QUOTE: From around 700 bc, Israel began arranging its story, retelling its myths, writing law codes. This rewriting preserved a lot of primitive stuff, including foundation myths adapted from other traditions, and it gave central place to moral and cultic laws, attributed to God. Other ancient peoples ascribed moral commandments to the gods, or sometimes to one supreme god, but something induced the Jews to do so with a new intensity and new sense of narrative drama. Israel's desire to tell the story of its morally ambitious national god gave rise to a new conception of history as meaningful. In the early part of the narrative, God's idea of morality seems rather cavalier. Are we to trust his judgement that Noah and family are the only righteous people on earth, that everyone else merits wipe-out? When he makes a similar judgement in Abraham's hearing, concerning the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham nudges him to rethink, to look harder for signs of righteousness that would justify saving the cities from destruction. Here it seems that morality, or at least mercy, comes more naturally to humans than to God. Maybe it's something that's worked out by God and people together. But the great moral vision is presented as coming from God: he promises to bless Abraham's descendants and through them all of humanity. And in the book of Exodus he takes the entire initiative, directing the liberation from slavery, then giving his people a new identity: they are to embody the justice of which they were deprived in Egypt. They are to obey him through obeying his commandments. This law was not clearly morally superior to the law codes of other ancient peoples (for example it did not abolish slavery), but it differed in being so closely associated with a particular god and in having such a central role in national identity. The retelling of the conquest of the Promised Land preserves stories of God commanding violence, even genocide. To some modern minds, such holy violence utterly discredits the Bible's moral vision: God seems like a mafia boss or dictator who claims to defend the widow and the orphan but only cares about power. But this overlooks the fact that in the Hebrew Bible there is a movement towards a more consistently moral idea of God.

COMMENT: It is a movement to a mixed message for the bad stuff was not repudiated but ignored. Progress is only about showing off when it does that. Real progress rejects nasty writings. A New Nazi faith that uses Mein Kampf and says it is overridden by Mein Kampf - the new vision which is seen as humanitarian and progressive does not deserve respect for why is it so attached to evil writings? Why can't it just be good and de canonise Mein Kampf?

QUOTE: The most famous Stoic is the emperor Marcus Aurelius; his Meditations have found many modern fans. At one point he ponders the idea that, if reason is common to all humans, then humanity is one big family or one big 'city': it is our 'common government'. This sounds admirably humanist, but in fact this noble-sounding notion coexists with the assumption that only superior people are capable of living rationally and that 'the inferior exist for the sake of the better'. Very often he tells himself that moral action is rational and natural - it is as natural to us as greenness is to an emerald. But of course this is protesting too much: in reality it is surely more natural to pursue sensual pleasure, as he seems to admit elsewhere. So his narrative feels rather brittle: there is an elite capable of self-mastery; this elite sees that all humanity is one family. This is not a message of universal humanism in the modern sense, which entails a passionate desire - the Stoics rejected desire - for justice for all.

COMMENT: But religion says prayer to God is essential and nobody can live good or rationally without it! Like Aurelius, Christianity is not about humanity being a family for most do not believe or turn to the Church supposedly set up by God.

The most powerful and prevalent and destructive selfishness of all is collective selfishness. Secular humanism is selfish for though it may try to act loving to all people - except unborn babies! - it is a collective selfishness. The selfishness is expanded from a group to all human kind. Far from being able to slot into Christianity in any way, secular humanism cannot make it a neutral matter. Secular humanism is an implied hostility to Christianity at its core.

QUOTE: We are accustomed to assume that one of the big stories of this era was Science Disproving the Bible – particularly Darwin’s science. But in relation to this issue it’s more complicated: the counter-intuitive reality is that it was the Bible that drove the idea of humanity’s common origin – and science only gradually backed this up. Most science pointed the other way: it put the idea of a common species identity in doubt. The orthodoxy was ‘pluralism’, meaning the belief that each race originated separately, that the myth of common ancestry was bunk. When Charles Darwin began amassing evidence to refute this, he was not setting out to defend the Bible, but nevertheless he was following a moral hunch that there was symbolic truth in the biblical picture.

COMMENT: What race was Adam and Eve? White? Semitic? This surely implies that any race different from theirs is an aberration or mutation? The Book of Mormon says the Indians came from Jews who God cursed with black skin. Hobson is talking utter rubbish here. Common origin does not automatically condemn racism. Racism is caused by the differences we see now and we are not thinking of where any race came from. A black Adam and Eve producing black people and a white pair producing Caucasians would not in itself imply inequality but it would suggest equality more than any alternative would. The notion of single race parents for all people raises that question - are different races aberrations and is the race that matches the first parents the best?

QUOTE ABOUT OUR MORAL IDEALS: A happier world depends on people putting the general good before their own good. But why should they? He seems to fall back on the idea that moral idealism is in our nature. So is selfishness of course, but rational thought will show that our true desire is for the good of all. This is very like Kant’s idea that clear moral thought will perceive the ‘principle of perfection’. He says that many non-believers ‘have that which constitutes the principal worth of all religions whatever, an ideal conception of a Perfect Being, to which they habitually refer as the guide of their conscience’.

COMMENT: No matter what reasons we try to give we don't care. It comes down to us finding good attractive. Surely moral idealism and selfishness being our nature mean that we can go either road and still be in line with nature. Neither is unnatural.

QUOTE: The Principles of Secularism: Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means; measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man . . . [it is] a series of principles intended for the guidance of those who find Theology indefinite, or inadequate, or deem it unreliable.

COMMENT: Good quote.

QUOTE: The weakness of secular humanism at this time: it inherited a vague faith in moral progress but admitted that there were no secure grounds for such faith (in fact this remains our situation).

COMMENT: But that is a problem for all isms. Even if the system were clear the humanists through ignorance or lack of time to study or weakness are not going to line up.

QUOTE: Isaiah Berlin, the famous sage of Oxford, said that the state should defend ‘negative liberty’; it should leave individuals alone to do what they want, to pursue various ends; it should acknowledge the ‘plurality of human values’. He warned against ‘positive liberty’ – a strong vision of human liberation, of the common good; this could lead to a new state oppression.

COMMENT: Christianity claims to be clear on positive liberty. Jesus said he was the way not a way.

QUOTE: Politics alone can’t solve our deepest issues, ‘it doesn’t have the language. Religion does’. But which one? Wrong question. ‘When people get all worked up about which religion is superior, that is not religion, that is individualistic, materialistic, territorial ideology asserted through the language of religion.’

COMMENT: Catholicism says that it does not claim to be more moral than any other religion but that it has the truth and in that sense is superior. He attacks religions which define religion as a system of beliefs and practices by which God asks us to worship him. He even refuses to call it religion! This amounts to saying that vague empty headed spirituality alone is religion!

QUOTE: In 2016 Dominic Erdozain ... in The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx. He

argues that the most influential secularists were motivated by an essentially Christian moral agenda: A visceral sense of right and wrong, rather than a scientific or historical suspicion of supernatural truth claims, has served as the primary solvent of orthodoxy in the West . . . modernity has been characterized by the internalization of religious ideas, not their disintegration. He shows how Spinoza, Pierre Bayle, Voltaire and others were steeped in reformist Protestantism.

COMMENT: More nonsense. Secularists say that right commands itself and this commanding is like a simulated commanding. It only matters that it has enough of the characteristics of the command. The dispute about whether you need a God to command or not is all about how any moral inclination, strict or loose, has a "Thou shalt not in it" even if it is unspoken. You feel or sense that something is commanding you to help that dying baby. We have solved the dispute - a computer "commanding" you will give the rule as much force as a person doing it. It can be said that it is so important to say not murder that it does not matter if the command is something other than the kind of command a person gives. "Command" is as okay as command. God cannot have the right to command just because he creates or has all the power and knowledge. What is wrong with a human being giving us the thou shalt nots?

The other point is the Christian moral agenda is summed up in Jesus' two big commandments to be all for God and then to be for your neighbour as yourself. How can you be all for God and also for your neighbour? You help the neighbour because it is God's will and you see God in the neighbour so it is still all about God. Hobson is divorcing the neighbour stuff from God to make his deceitful argument.

He would say that selfishness is against both commandments. Christians say, "It is selfish to serve the neighbour and leave God out of it for God deserves all our love for without him there would be no neighbour so to fail to respect the thing that sustains the neighbour God means to fail to respect the neighbour truly and deeply." If there is no God then that is selfish for we should just love our neighbour and its not about loving a God at all.

Human nature can help others superficially or to feel good or in the fear that nobody will help them unless they set an example.

Hobson cannot say that virtue such as love and compassion and piety belong to Christianity so that if we want to be loving and compassionate and pious we are in some way being Christian. That is stupid! Christianity gives mixed messages on this subject for the fact remains that Jesus himself impiously worshipped an evil version of God who had women stoned to death and for each loving command you have ten of hate. Its an insult to morality to honour Christianity by saying what Hobson says.

QUOTE: Authentic humanism is positive and absolute; its desire for human flourishing is unlimited. Secular humanism lacks a mechanism that fixes it to absoluteness (though the Marxist belief in revolutionary transformation is a stab at this). It is parasitic on the absolutism that it comes from and scorns. Am I saying that Christians desire the good more completely than secular humanists? Well, that's a hard thing to measure, but it is surely the case that they see 'the good' in more intense, absolute terms: as a call to moral perfection – an impossible demand that one cannot fulfil but must struggle to; as a demand that exposes one's inadequacy, one's inner division between obedience and sin (to slip into religious speech). Christians can face up to the absoluteness of this moral ideal because they have a story that makes sense of our failure to live up to it. The secular humanist, by contrast, thinks in more realistic terms – of being morally good enough by affirming the rights of others. 'Of course no one is perfect,' she says, 'so let's put aside the unhelpful notion of moral perfection and instead uphold realistic rules of conduct, a moral law – it is enough to be among the morally civilized people, who affirm equality.' But this is a brittle, somewhat dishonest position, for all humanism, religious or not, is half-hypocritical. All are equal, we say, but we'd rather hang out with an interesting attractive person than a poor, uneducated, smelly one. In other words, morality entails a tension between idealism and our selfishness, and secular humanism lacks a language for pondering this and so evades it. We all have a duty to be moral, it says, and it assumes that this civilized moral way is straightforwardly possible.

COMMENT: Humanism never says it is easy!

QUOTE: In this chapter I have tried to anticipate a basic objection to my argument. Even if humanist morality came from Christianity, this does not oblige us to believe in Christian teaching. It might encourage agnostics to respect this religion but it does not show them how it is inhabitable. So I've tried to sketch my understanding of faith as something that is half-inhabitable: as an endless internal argument between acceptance of this mythological and ritual tradition, and rational scepticism. Faith entails honesty about the fact that this tradition is not neatly inhabitable; that part of one's mind will put up resistance or sulk in the corner. Again, to call this 'doubt' is not quite right, for that implies that full belief is possible. It isn't: belief takes the form of participation in ritual speech-forms, and one can't stay in that odd water all the time. I'm trying to get away from the assumption that belief is a stable and abstract thing. Instead it is tied to the language of prayer and praise – a language that is in tension with more prosaic parts of one's mind. Let's not overstate the instability of this. It's not as if one is a Christian on some days and an atheist on others, because rational scepticism is in the ascendant. It is a stable instability. Despite the inner tension, it is a stable form of belief and identity. One does believe, despite one's partial

unbelief. Of course, the atheist will be amazed at the open goal I seem to have offered up. 'Why not just admit that you don't really believe any of it?' he will ask. Aren't I admitting that faith is 'trying to make yourself believe what you know ain't so' (to cite Mark Twain)? Well, it can feel a bit like that – and yet the believer stubbornly sees authority in the cultic language of faith. He sees this language, and this myth, as the engine of life's meaning.

COMMENT: There is a difference between respecting the Christian creed, the specifically religious beliefs, and respecting what moral insights it has.

CONCLUSION: This book and this writer is reading too much liberal theology. Liberal theology is marked by narcissistic doctrines and playing with words. The book is a waste of paper and calculated to get promoted by Christian sellers and ideologues who want to look down their noses at humanism. That sales tactic sadly worked. A leaflet would have done saying, "Humanists and secularists believe in doing good therefore they are inspired by Christians for good works are by definition Christian."