

# **BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**

## **Aspects of Humanism**

**An eight week course**

### **Sourcebook**

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## **Week one: extract from Bertrand Russell's *The Faith of a Rationalist***

**(appears in Margaret Knight's *Humanist Anthology* pp. 105-7)**

When I try to discover what are the original sources of my opinions, both practical and theoretical, I find that most of them spring ultimately from admiration for two qualities - kindly feeling and veracity. To begin with kindly feeling: most of the social and political evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy, or fear...

Every kind of hostile action or feeling provokes a reaction by which it is increased and so generates a progeny of violence and injustice which has a terrible vitality. This can only be met by cultivating in ourselves and attempting to generate in the young feelings of friendliness rather than hostility, of well-wishing rather than malevolence, and of cooperation rather than competition.

If I am asked "Why do you believe this?" I should not appeal to any supernatural authority, but only to the general wish for happiness. A world full of hate is a world full of sorrow. Each party, where there is mutual hatred, hopes that only the other party will suffer, but this is seldom the case. And even the most successful oppressors are filled with fear - slave owners, for example, have been obsessed with dread of a servile insurrection. From the point of view of worldly wisdom, hostile feeling and limitation of sympathy are folly. Their fruits are war, death, oppression, and torture, not only for their original victims but, in the long run, also for their perpetrators or their descendants. Whereas if we could all learn to love our neighbours the world would quickly become a paradise for us all.

Veracity, which I regard as second only to kindly feeling, consists broadly in believing according to evidence and not because a belief is comfortable or a source of pleasure. In the absence of veracity, kindly feeling will often be defeated by self-deception...

Veracity, or love of truth, is defined by Locke as "not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant." This definition is admirable in regard to all those matters as to which proof may reasonably be demanded. But since proofs need premises, it is impossible to prove anything unless some things are accepted without proof. We must therefore ask ourselves: What sort of thing is it reasonable to believe without proof? I should reply: The facts of sense experience and the principles of mathematics and logic—including the inductive logic employed in science. These are things which we can hardly bring ourselves to doubt and as to which there is a large measure of agreement among mankind. But in matters as to which men disagree, or as to which our own convictions are wavering, we should look for proofs, or, if proofs cannot be found, we should be content to confess ignorance. There are some who hold that veracity should have limitations. Some beliefs, they say, are both comforting and morally beneficial, although it cannot be said that there are valid scientific grounds for supposing them to be true; these beliefs, they say, should not be critically examined. I cannot myself admit any such doctrine. I cannot believe that mankind can be the better for shrinking from the examination of this or that question. No sound morality can need to be based upon evasion, and a happiness derived from beliefs not justified on any ground except their pleasantness is not a kind of happiness that can be unreservedly admired.

These considerations apply especially to religious beliefs. Most of us have been brought up to believe that the universe owes its existence to an all-wise and all-powerful Creator, whose purposes are beneficent even in what to us may seem evil. I do not think it is right to refuse to apply to this belief the kind of tests that we should apply to one that touches our emotions less intimately and profoundly. Is there any evidence of the existence of such a Being? Undoubtedly belief in Him is comforting and sometimes has some good moral effects on character and behaviour. But this is no evidence that the belief is true. For my part, I think the belief lost whatever rationality it once possessed when it was discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe. So long as it was thought that the sun and the planets and the stars revolved about the earth, it was natural to suppose that the universe had a purpose connected with the earth, and, since man was what man most admired on the earth, this purpose was supposed to be embodied in man. But astronomy and

geology have changed all this. The earth is a minor planet of a minor star which is one of many millions of stars in a galaxy which is one of many millions of galaxies. Even within the life of our own planet man is only a brief interlude. Non-human life existed for countless ages before man was evolved. Man, even if he does not commit scientific suicide, will perish ultimately through failure of water or air or warmth. It is difficult to believe that Omnipotence needed so vast a setting for so small and transitory a result...

There is a different and vaguer conception of cosmic Purpose as not omnipotent but slowly working its way through a recalcitrant material. This is a more plausible conception of a God who, though omnipotent and loving, has deliberately produced beings so subject to suffering and cruelty as the majority of mankind. I do not pretend to know that there is no such Purpose; my knowledge of the universe is too limited. But I do say, and I say with confidence, that the knowledge of other human beings is also limited, and that no one can adduce any good evidence that cosmic processes have any purpose whatever. Our very inadequate evidence, so far as it goes, tends in the opposite direction...

Immortality, if we could believe in it, would enable us to shake off this gloom about the physical world. We should say that although our souls, during their sojourn here on earth, are in bondage to matter and physical laws, they pass at death into an eternal world beyond the empire of decay which science seems to reveal in the sensible world. But it is impossible to believe this unless we think that a human being consists of two parts—soul and body—which are separable and can continue independently of each other.

Unfortunately all the evidence is against this. The mind grows like the body; like the body it inherits characteristics from both parents; it is affected by diseases of the body and by drugs; it is intimately connected with the brain. There is no scientific reason to suppose that after death the mind or soul acquires an independence of the brain which it never had in life. I do not pretend that this argument is conclusive, but it is all that we have to go upon except the slender evidence supplied by psychical research.

Many people fear that, without the theoretical beliefs that I find myself compelled to reject, the ethical beliefs which I accept could not survive. They point to the growth of cruel systems opposed to Christianity. But these systems, which grew up in a Christian atmosphere, could never have grown up if either kindly feeling or veracity had been practised; they are evil myths, inspired by hate and without scientific support. Men tend to have the beliefs that suit their passions. Cruel men believe in a cruel God and use their belief to excuse their cruelty. Only kindly men believe in a kindly God, and they would be kindly in any case. The reasons for the ethic that, in common with many whose beliefs are more orthodox, I wish to see prevail are reasons derived from the course of events in this world. We have seen a great system of cruel falsehood, the Nazi system, lead a nation to disaster at immense cost to its opponents. It is not by such systems that happiness is to be achieved; even without the help of revelation it is not difficult to see that human welfare requires a less ferocious ethic. More and more people are becoming unable to accept traditional beliefs. If they think that, apart from these beliefs, there is no reason for kindly behaviour the results may be needlessly unfortunate. That is why it is important to show that no supernatural reasons are needed to make men kind and to prove that only through kindness can the human race achieve happiness.

## **Week two: extract from Joseph Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus***

**(appears in Margaret Knight's *Humanist Anthology* pp. 66-7)**

That Jesus never dreamt of making himself pass for an incarnation of God is a matter about which there can be no doubt. Such an idea was entirely foreign to the Jewish mind; and there is no trace of it in the Synoptical Gospels: we only find it indicated in portions of the Gospel of John, which cannot be accepted as expressing the thoughts of Jesus. Sometimes Jesus even seems to take precautions to put down such a doctrine. The accusation that he made himself God, or the equal of God, is presented even in the Gospel of John, as a calumny of the Jews. In this last Gospel he declares himself less than his Father. Elsewhere he avows that the Father has not revealed everything to him. He believes himself to be more than an ordinary man, but separated from God by an infinite distance. He is Son of God; but all men are, or may become so, in divers degrees. Everyone ought daily to call God his father; all who are raised again will be sons of God. The Divine sonship was attributed in the Old Testament to beings whom it was by no means pretended were equal with God, The word "son" has the widest meanings in the Semitic language, and in that of the New Testament...

The title "Son of God," or simply "Son," thus became for Jesus a title analogous to "Son of man," and, like that, synonymous with the Messiah," with the sole difference that he called himself "Son of man," and does not seem to have made the same use of the phrase "Son of God."...

Jesus appears to have remained a stranger to [the] refinements of theology, which were soon to fill the world with barren disputes. The metaphysical theory of the Word, such as we find it in the writings of his contemporary Philo... had nothing in common with Messianism... It was John the Evangelist, or his school, who afterwards endeavored to prove that Jesus was the Word, and who created, in this sense, quite a new theology, very different from that of the "kingdom of God." The essential character of the Word was that of Creator and of Providence. Now, Jesus never pretended to have created the world, nor to govern it. His office was to judge it, to renovate it. The position of president at the final judgment of humanity was the essential attribute which Jesus attached to himself, and the character which all the first Christians attributed to him. Until the great day he will sit at the right hand of God, as his Metathronos, his first minister, and his future avenger. The superhuman Christ of the Byzantine apses, seated as judge of the world, in the midst of the apostles in the same rank with him, and superior to the angels who only assist and serve, is the exact representation of that conception of the "Son of man" of which we find the first features so strongly indicated in the book of Daniel.

At all events, the strictness of a studied theology by no means existed in such a state of society... we must not look here for either logic or sequence. The need Jesus had of obtaining credence, and the enthusiasm of his disciples, heaped up contradictory notions. To the Messianic believers of the millenarian school, and to the enthusiastic readers of the books of Daniel and of Enoch, he was the Son of man -- to the Jews holding the ordinary faith, and to the readers of Isaiah and Micah, he was the Son of David -- to the disciples he was the Son of God, or simply the Son. Others, without being blamed by the disciples, took him for John the Baptist risen from the dead, for Elias, for Jeremiah, conformable to the popular belief that the ancient prophets were about to reappear, in order to prepare the time of the Messiah.

### **Week three: extract from Margaret Kennedy Knight's *Morals without Religion***

***(appears in Margaret Knight's Humanist Anthology pp. 128-30)***

In a climate of thought that is increasingly unfavourable to (Christian) beliefs, it is a mistake to try to impose them on children, and to make them the basis of moral training. The moral education of children is much too important a matter to be built on such foundations...

If [a child] is brought up in the orthodox way, he will accept what he is told happily enough to begin with. But if he is normally intelligent, he is almost bound to get the impression that there is something odd about religious statements. If he is taken to church, for example, he hears that death is the gateway to eternal life and should be welcomed rather than shunned; yet outside he sees death regarded as the greatest of all evils and everything possible done to postpone it. In church he hears precepts like 'Resist not evil', and 'Take no thought for the morrow'; but he soon realises that these are not really meant to be practised outside. If he asks questions, he gets embarrassed, evasive answers: 'Well dear, you're not quite old enough to understand yet, but some of these things are true in a deeper sense'; and so on. The child soon gets the idea that there are two kinds of truth – the ordinary kind, and another, rather confusing and slightly embarrassing kind, into which it is best not to inquire too closely.

All this is bad intellectual training. It tends to produce a certain intellectual timidity – a distrust of reason – a feeling that it is perhaps rather bad taste to pursue an argument to its logical conclusion, or to refuse to accept a belief on inadequate evidence. And that is not a desirable attitude in the citizens of a free democracy. However, it is the moral rather than the intellectual dangers that I am concerned with here; and they arise when the trustful child becomes a critical adolescent. He may then cast off all his religious beliefs; and, if his moral training has been closely tied up with religion, it is more than possible that the moral beliefs will go too...

Why should I consider others? These ultimate moral questions, like all ultimate questions, can be desperately difficult to answer, as every philosophy student knows. Myself, I think the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one – because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and co-operative than if they are hostile and resentful. But the religious listener may feel that this is simply evading the point. So may I say in conclusion that the answer he would propose is not really any more satisfactory? His answer to the question 'Why should I consider others?' is 'Because it is God's will'. But the sceptic could always answer: 'Why should I do God's will? Why shouldn't I please myself?' – and that, surely, is just as much of a poser as: 'Why should I consider others?'

In fact, it is a good deal more of a poser, in view of some of the things that the believer must suppose God to have willed. But we need not go into all that again, for in any case this question of ultimate sanctions is largely theoretical. I have never yet met the child – and I have met very few adults – to whom it has ever occurred to raise the question: 'Why should I consider others?' Most people are prepared to accept as a completely self-evident moral axiom that we must not be completely selfish, and if we base our moral training on that we shall, I suggest, be building on firm enough foundations...

The essence of Humanism is that it is non-supernatural. It is concerned with man rather than God, and with this life rather than the next. Its morality derives from altruistic principles, reinforced by training, not from divine commands; the moral act, to the Humanist, is the act that is conducive to human well-being, not the act ordained by God.

## Week four: Richard Norman (ed) The Case for Secularism: a Neutral State in an Open Society

Consider the following statement from a Bishop of the Church of England:

British society is based on a Christian vision and Christian values. Its institutions, its laws, its customs, all these arise out of a Christian vision. And this is the best basis to have an open and welcoming society where other people can make their contribution, not some kind of lowest common denominator mish-mash... There are certain basic values to identify in British life which come from a Christian vision. For instance, the dignity of all human beings is clearly drawn from the Biblical idea that human beings are made in God's image. Or it might be the question of equality, or it might be liberty, freedom of expression. All these things are under threat..., not just for individuals but also for vital social institutions... Unless people know what the springs are that feed our values, the whole thing will dry up... We may already be living on past capital, where we have some sense of values but don't know why we have them... If there's a clearer Christian basis to society which is acknowledged, the result will be a better basis for a more inclusive society, a better basis for welcoming people than a kind of secularist lowest common denominator.<sup>1</sup>

As a historical claim this has some truth. The framework of belief which shaped British culture was for many centuries overwhelmingly Christian. Quite what the values were which flowed from this 'Christian vision' is more debatable. Equality, liberty, and freedom of expression? Perhaps, but the Christian vision has also been invoked to justify hierarchy, oppression, and social control. Christianity has been the dominant culture, so it is unsurprising that it has supplied the vocabulary of both sides in most significant moral and social divisions. Those who worked for the abolition of the slave trade argued their case in terms of Christian values – and so did the slave-traders. Many of those who sought to improve the atrocious working conditions in factories and mines invoked Christian values – and so did the factory owners and mine owners. Some at least of those who campaigned for greater equality of opportunity, for the extension of the franchise, or for the emancipation of women, or an end to racial discrimination, invoked Christian values, and so did those who defended what they saw as a divinely ordained and unchangeable hierarchy of status and inequality.

However, our primary purpose here is not with the historical claim, but with what follows from it. The Bishop argues that because Christianity has historically been the dominant culture, our society is essentially, and must remain, a Christian society. That does not follow. He argues that Christianity can and should provide the best basis for an inclusive society. That is the claim we want to contest. We shall argue that an inclusive society is, in the sense to be defined, a *secular* society.

### What is secularism?

Why should a society not base itself on a shared religion, which provides its members with shared values and a shared source of inspiration and common endeavour? In principle that is acceptable, as long as the religion really is shared. That was the form taken by many of the communities of settlers in the New World who were escaping persecution in their country of origin and wanted a place where they could practise their religion together. If people choose to constitute themselves as what we might call a 'theocratic society', in which a shared religion governs the lives of all its members, and is the basis of political authority and a moral code, and if they can do so without being a threat to other societies, then in principle they should be free to do so.

The idea of a theocratic society becomes problematic, however, as soon as the religion is contested. And that is very likely to happen. The original founders of a religious community may all be fully committed to their religion, but in future generations there will probably be individuals who question it. If the community is a small self-contained society and if dissenting individuals are genuinely free to leave, it may continue as a theocratic society. No modern large-scale society, however, will be one in which a single religion is

universally shared and uncontested. Certainly Britain in the twenty-first century is not like that. There has long been a free-thinking tradition in this country which has questioned religious belief, and more recently, with successive waves of immigration, many non-Christian religions have deep roots in our society and often have a dominant role in particular local communities. With universal education, people think for themselves about whether to accept any system of religious belief, rather than inheriting it unquestioningly from their parents and their culture. A large proportion, perhaps even a majority, of the population have no religious belief, and certainly a large majority have no commitment to religious practice or observance. How can such a society elicit the free and willing cooperation of its members, without excluding or marginalising any section of society? The obvious answer is that it should be *neutral* as between different faiths and beliefs. And that is what we mean by a 'secular' society.

To avoid possible misunderstanding it may be more appropriate to talk about a secular *state* rather than a secular 'society'. A secular state is not an atheist state. It does not seek to impose atheist beliefs and institutions. On the contrary, a secular state is one which protects the right of all its citizens to hold their own beliefs, religious or non-religious or anti-religious, and protects the right of believers to practise their religion. A society governed by a secular state is therefore not a society dominated by secular beliefs and values *in contrast to* religious beliefs and values. It is not the 'godless' society which some religious believers imagine and fear. A frequent source of confusion on this whole topic is the variety of meanings attached to the word 'secularism'. The term is sometimes used to refer to a position which is committed to the elimination of all religious institutions and all religious values. That is not how we are using the term and it is not the position we are defending. We are using the word 'secularism' to refer to the view which has traditionally been described as the separation of church and state. Since the word 'church' is normally applied to Christian institutions, that definition needs to be up-dated in contemporary society to refer to the separation of state institutions from all religious practices and institutions. That is what we are talking about.

A society governed by a secular state is therefore a *diverse* society, one in which religious and non-religious views can all find a hearing and in which different individuals and groups can all make their case for their own beliefs. It is what has sometimes been called an *open society*. Precisely in order to protect that openness, a secular state is one which is even-handed between different systems of faith and belief, while resisting the attempts of any group of believers to turn the state into a vehicle for, or to gain undue privileges for, their religion or their beliefs. It is a state in which people's participation in public institutions does not depend on their religious or anti-religious convictions. In a world where people will inevitably continue to disagree on matters of religious belief, and where religious believers will continue to feel strongly about their competing religious allegiances, a secular state in this sense - a *neutral* state - is the only kind of state which can plausibly be seen to be in the common interest and which all can accept without feeling themselves to be the victims of discrimination or exclusion. An initial and provisional definition of what we are advocating, then, is: a *neutral* state in an *open* society.

### **Is neutrality possible?**

But is neutrality possible? How can any society function without shared values?

One possible answer is to distinguish between the *public* space and *private* space, and between the different values which belong in those different spheres. The shared values which govern the public space, it may be said, are those which enable people with different faiths and beliefs and different visions of the good life to live together in harmony. Foremost among these is the value of tolerance, the willingness to accept differences and to allow others to hold their own beliefs and to follow their own ideals. In this public space also belong essentially political values, the values of equal citizenship and liberal-democratic rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, the right to vote and to stand for public office, as well as the values of social justice such as equality of opportunity and the right to a fair share in the common resources of society. In contrast, it may be said, the different and competing conceptions of the good life, which may or may not be rooted in a religious faith, belong in the private sphere. People have different conceptions of how one should live one's life and what constitutes a worthwhile life. They may seek to accumulate material possessions, or to foreswear such things, or to devote themselves to the service of others, or to live for their

god and fill their lives with religious observances. They may have different and irreconcilable views about what to wear, what to eat and drink, and what kinds of sexual relations and activities are permissible or desirable. Within particular voluntary communities such as churches and faith groups, people may accept the guidance of their leaders about how they should lead a good life, but the state, it may be said, should be neutral between these differing values and should not impose on everyone a single conception of the good life.

The public/private distinction has some merit, but it still leaves questions and problems. First, in formulating that distinction haven't we already assumed certain values which others may regard as contentious? The values of tolerance and respect for diversity, of democratic rights and social justice, are, it may be said, specifically *liberal* values. Some religious believers will share them; others almost certainly will not. How, then, can we make a case for a neutral state without begging the question? Why should someone committed to a religion which espouses non-liberal values accept that case?

Secondly, it may be asked, are liberal values enough? Doesn't a society need common values which go beyond simply tolerance and political rights? If the members of a society are to work together for a common good, don't they need to be inspired by a shared positive vision of a worthwhile human life? The Bishop quoted above is scornful of the idea of basing society on 'some kind of lowest common denominator mish-mash'. A society, he thinks, needs positive and substantial values which can give substance to a shared communal life and which are rooted in a coherent vision – a shared 'faith'. And given the facts of its history, that vision for British society needs to be a Christian vision.

In order to tackle these questions we now want to look more closely at the case for secularism as we have defined it. We shall consider in more detail how far we can make that case to those who do not themselves share our own humanist beliefs and values. Why should religious believers accept that case, and how persuasive can it be? We shall suggest that there is no single knock-down argument for secularism grounded in reasons which all religious believers can accept. Rather, there is a range of arguments, and we shall distinguish three arguments in particular. In our view all of them are good arguments which support the case for secularism, but they differ in the extent to which they are likely to be accepted by religious believers, and to some extent they may have differing implications for what secularism should mean in practice. We shall first outline the arguments, and then look at their implications for problem cases.

### **The argument from autonomy**

We want first to suggest that an argument based on liberal values is not necessarily as limited in its appeal as might be supposed. Most of the main faiths have a liberal wing as well as a less liberal one, but beyond that, even religious opponents of liberalism may give at least some support to the value of *autonomy*. By this we mean the importance of individuals making their own choices about the most important things in their own lives.

Some religions may, at some level, disparage the value of autonomy, equating it with a dangerous 'permissiveness' and advocating a strict adherence to the rules of the religion as laid down by priests or imams or rabbis or sacred texts. But however highly they may esteem commitment to the true religion as the supremely important thing in life, they may well accept that such a commitment loses its value if it is not genuine and sincere. Admittedly not all religious believers take that line; the Inquisition was quite happy to compel the mere outward show of faith by threatening to burn those who did not comply. Nevertheless, someone who values real faith rather than an insincere profession of faith should accept that adherents to the faith need to understand what it is that they are committing themselves to, and that their commitment needs to be free and un-coerced.

This has traditionally been one of the main arguments for religious toleration. Locke, in the seventeenth century, argued that dissenters should be tolerated because belief cannot be coerced. You can coerce people into *saying* that they believe something, but you cannot coerce people into genuinely *believing* it.<sup>ii</sup> Of

course an argument for religious toleration is not yet an argument for a neutral state (nor was it seen as such in the seventeenth century). Toleration of dissenters, and the absence of religious persecution, is logically compatible with the existence of an established church, with institutions of government which give a privileged position to the established religion, and with an education system which is dedicated to bringing up the young in the established faith.

Nevertheless, though such an arrangement may be consistent, a system in which the roles of church and state coalesce is liable to be one in which autonomy is eroded in practice. If people are channelled into a profession of religious faith by the existence of an established church and the dominance of that church in the educational system, they are not exactly being coerced, but at the same time their faith is hardly a genuine commitment. We can see this in a relatively innocuous way in our own society. A large section of the population, when asked for their religious belief, will reply 'C of E' because that is the accepted answer. We cannot think that the Anglican Church should attach much value to their reply.

The appeal to autonomy may, then, cut some ice with people who do not sign up to other liberal values. Autonomy at the level of people's fundamental choices of a way of life or a system of belief is consistent with the freedom for people to choose, if they wish, a life of total submission to God's will. A secular state would protect and nurture individuals' capacity to make autonomous choices of their own way of life. It would not compel them to choose a liberal life-style or to remain autonomous throughout their lives. The case for secularism on grounds of autonomy is therefore one which many religious believers ought to be able to accept.

Likewise the value of free and open discussion may be recognised without having to be part of a complete liberal package. People who want to see their church's line on abortion or voluntary euthanasia or homosexuality reflected in legislation may still see the value of public debate to decide on the legislation and reach a consensus, rather than having it imposed by sheer political power.

Still, we recognise that arguments for a secular state which appeal to liberal values will not be universally persuasive, and that some religious believers will simply deplore any questioning or weakening of the authority of their church or faith. Of course the liberal argument doesn't end there. The case for liberal values itself goes deeper, and can be backed up by further arguments, for example by facts about human nature and the conditions of human flourishing.<sup>iii</sup> This is not the place to pursue the argument, however. We turn instead to other arguments for secularism, to consider how wide their appeal might be.

### **The argument from fairness**

The other two arguments which we shall pursue rest more on facts about the particular character of our own society. It is a pluralist society. It includes adherents of many different religions, largely though not entirely because of the presence of communities whose ethnic and geographical origins link them to religions such as Islam and Hinduism. It is also a society many of whose members have no religious belief. Depending on how you measure religiosity, the proportion of the population which is non-religious may be anything from 16% to 60%.<sup>iv</sup> In a mixed society such as ours, the different groups need to find some way of living together. Ideally that means a way of living together which they can all agree on. And given the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs, what it would be reasonable for them to agree on would be an arrangement in which no one system of belief dominates or has a privileged position in the institutions and practices of the society.

This is an argument in the 'social contract' tradition of political thought. Now a standard problem for any contract theory is that what people will agree on will depend on the starting-point from which they have to make the agreement. If some start from a stronger bargaining position than others, they will be able to secure an agreement which gives greater weight to their own interests. But that is not what we would intuitively think of as a *fair* agreement. Within the social contract tradition the idea of a fair agreement has sometimes been articulated by asking what people could agree on from behind a 'veil of ignorance'. So, in

the present case, we could engage in the following exercise of the imagination. Suppose that people were placed behind such a veil of ignorance so that they didn't know what religious or non-religious beliefs they would turn out to have. What arrangements for the place of religious beliefs in society would it be rational for them to agree on? If they were to opt for giving one particular religion or set of beliefs – perhaps the majority religion – a dominant role in society, they would run the risk that their own beliefs would turn out to be different from those of the dominant religion and would consequently be excluded or marginalised. The rational choice from behind the veil of ignorance would therefore be the choice of a society in which no religion or set of beliefs has a privileged position.<sup>v</sup>

Now of course, in deciding what kind of society we want, we are not actually behind a veil of ignorance. That exercise of the imagination is simply a device with which to formulate the idea of a *fair* agreement. It does not itself provide any additional reason *why* we should want a fair agreement. But the appeal to fairness ought to carry weight. In a society where there are many different religious and non-religious beliefs strongly held by different groups, people can recognise that it is unfair that any one set of beliefs should have a privileged position. That, then, is an important and powerful argument for secularism.

### **The pragmatic argument**

Not everyone, however, will accept the value of fairness in this context. Some people, deeply committed to their own faith, may say 'Why should I be fair to other religions? They are deluded, they have rejected the one true god and the true faith. And as for those who worship no god at all, they do not deserve fairness, they deserve only to reap the consequences of their godless way of life.' Is there any argument for secularism which can be addressed to religious believers of this kind?

There is another version of the contract argument which is relevant here. This is the strand in the social contract tradition which goes back to Hobbes. It emphasises the disastrous consequences of *not* agreeing. As Hobbes put it, a state of affairs in which people cannot agree on shared social arrangements is liable to be a state of war – a war of all against all.<sup>vi</sup>

This has sometimes been literally the case. The history of many modern states has been characterised by intense religious strife. The modern movement towards the separation of church and state grew out of the experience of the religious wars of the seventeenth century between Catholics and Protestants which devastated Europe and brought home the need for some kind of accommodation which would prevent further strife. More recently we have seen decades of conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, war between Catholics and Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Yugoslavia, seemingly unending violence between Jews and Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, and the vicious conflict between different brands of Islam in Iraq – to mention just the most high-profile examples. The lesson to be learned is that if people with different sets of religious and non-religious beliefs cannot learn to live together, the results are appalling for all parties.

Perhaps paradoxically, the pragmatic argument for secularism is strengthened by the fact of the particular intensity with which people are attached to their religious beliefs. Such beliefs matter deeply to people. They are beliefs which people are prepared to die for and to kill for. That might at first seem to offer little prospect for a society in which different religions and beliefs coexist. But if it is accepted that the intensity with which one group is attached to its religion is matched by the equal intensity with which other groups are attached to theirs, all parties may then come to recognise that if their differences degenerate into unresolved conflict, that conflict is likely to be peculiarly vicious and destructive. It is therefore recognisably in the interests of all that the causes of such strife be removed. And to a large extent this can be achieved by a society in which there is tolerance for different religious and non-religious beliefs and in which the state is neutral between all such beliefs.

The argument appeals to common interests, and it is possible that some believers will see their interests differently. We know for instance that some Muslims in British society consider the position of the Church of

England as the Established Church to be the lesser evil, preferable to disestablishment and the prospect of a 'godless' society. We have to accept too that some believers embrace the prospect of religious conflict (of whatever sort, and in some cases even of violent conflict), confident that they will win because God is on their side. The pragmatic argument will therefore not persuade everyone. Nevertheless, some of those who may be unmoved by the argument that a neutral state is fair to everyone may at least come to see that a neutral state is in their interests, because it is preferable to unending and destructive conflict.

We have reviewed three arguments for secularism and a neutral state. We think that they are good arguments and that between them they add up to a powerful case. We have acknowledged that not everyone will be persuaded by them, but they are arguments which do not appeal to any specifically humanist premises or assumptions. They are arguments which can as easily be accepted by religious believers as by atheists, and we hope that they will be. We want to return now to our earlier questions, about how far neutrality is possible and what it should mean in practice. Our three arguments will in some cases support different answers to those questions, and it will be useful to map them out.

### **Public and private values**

The doubt about the possibility of neutrality was, we saw, fuelled by the thought that any society needs shared positive values. We've suggested, in the context of our arguments for secularism, that at least some liberal values such as tolerance and respect and the nurturing of people's capacity to make autonomous choices can be sufficiently widely shared to set the tone of an open society. We noted also the question whether liberal values are enough. If the members of a society are to work together for a common good, don't they need to be inspired by a shared positive vision of a worthwhile human life? That may be so, and the shared values are not hard to seek. The values of mutual care and concern and cooperation are not specific to any particular religion or system of belief. Changing the Bishop's mathematical metaphor, we can look not for the lowest common denominator but for the highest common factor, the set of values which is at the core of every religious tradition and secular philosophy. Humanists would say that these values transcend religious differences. They can infuse public life in a secular society which remains neutral between different religious beliefs.

A secular state, then, is not 'neutral' in the sense of being devoid of values, but it is neutral in the sense that it is built on public values which are shared and are not specific to particular systems of religion or belief. Beyond these public values, it will leave individuals free to pursue their own vision of personal well-being, but the fact that individuals are left to make their own choices does not mean that their lives will be shallow and superficial, as some critics of secularism tend to suggest. Again, there is widespread agreement about the sorts of things which can contribute to a fulfilling personal life – intimate relationships, the pursuit of art and beauty, knowledge and self-knowledge, physical exercise, the enjoyment of the natural world, meaningful work and other creative accomplishments. A secular state will enable individuals to pursue their own particular idea of a worthwhile life and also, if they wish, to devote themselves to some distinctively religious set of ideals provided that these do not lead them to inflict harm on others.<sup>vii</sup>

For many religious believers this will still seem to make too sharp a division between the public and the private. They may see their devotion to the public values of mutual care and concern as inseparable from their religious commitment. My faith, they may say, is not just confined to my private life, it motivates me in the public sphere and inspires me to try to help my fellow human beings and to work for a better world. Like the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, they may emphasise the importance of 'religiously inspired public engagement' and maintain that 'society can only flourish if faith is given space to make its contribution and its challenge'.<sup>viii</sup>

Again there need be no problem here. Of course religious believers should be free to make their contribution to public life. If their faith motivates them to work for peace and justice, to struggle against the evils of poverty and oppression and racial discrimination, or to protect the natural environment, then their contribution is to be welcomed. All that a secular society requires is that they be willing to work alongside

others who do not share their faith, and that their own religion should be given no special privileges or special status.

### The terms of public debate

Religiously inspired contributions to public life are all very well, but what about contributions to public debate? Many religious believers will say that it's not enough just to work silently for the public good, they want to be open and explicit about their religious motivation, and they want that motivation to be explicit also in their participation in debates about more contentious moral and social issues – about abortion, or the legalisation of assisted dying, for instance. They think it important to be able to say that *as Christians* or *as Muslims* they take a certain view of those issues, and they want their distinctively religious values and beliefs to carry weight as such in the public deliberation and decision-making. Some advocates of secularism, in contrast, would say that public debate about such matters should be couched in purely secular terms, invoking only shared values and not appealing to ideas specific to a particular religion. Here is a tension which we need to address.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has distinguished between what he calls 'programmatic secularism' and 'procedural secularism'. Programmatic secularism, he says, finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere.<sup>ix</sup>

Williams' response is an example of the view that this makes for too thin a version of the public sphere. It underestimates the role of public reasoning in exploring and negotiating the differences between particular religious and non-religious perspectives.

By defining ideological and religious difference as if they were simply issues about individual preference, almost of private 'style', this discourse effectively denies the seriousness of difference itself.... Because there is no tribunal to adjudicate arguments between basic commitments about God, humanity and the universe, it is assumed that there is therefore no exchange possible between them, no work of understanding and discernment, no mapping of where common commitments start and stop.

In contrast, procedural secularism, which he appears to endorse, proposes

a situation in which – for example – religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as beyond criticism, but one in which they are attended to as representing the considered moral foundation of the choices and priorities of citizens.

The crucially ambiguous phrase here is: '*not necessarily ...privileged or beyond criticism*'. We would say that such religious convictions should be *not at all* privileged or beyond criticism. If a particular church or religious group says, for instance, 'This is our stance on abortion (or euthanasia, or whatever), and because it is based on religious convictions we think that the society has a special responsibility to respect it and to accommodate its legislation to our views', that would be a demand for a privileged status. If on the other hand a religious group's views were to be a genuine contribution to public debate, they would have to be translatable into terms which others could understand and give rational weight to.

An example is the debate about the 'Assisted Dying Bill' which came before the House of Lords in 2006. (This was not long before the Archbishop's lecture and he may have had this case in mind.) The churches and their representatives, including the Archbishop himself, participated very prominently in this debate, and their interventions were often cast in explicitly religious terms. They would invoke, for instance, traditional religious ideas of 'the sanctity of life'. If such interventions are to be genuine contributions to public debate,

then they have to look for common ground between talk of 'the sanctity of life' and other ways in which other sections of society have articulated the profound value of human life, and to explore in a genuine dialogue what such values mean and how they can appropriately be reflected in legislation which can be widely accepted. If that is what 'procedural secularism' amounts to, there need be no great gulf between it and 'programmatic secularism', and it would be something which many of us could accept.

Sometimes religious interventions in the debate on the Assisted Dying Bill took that form. Sometimes they did not. Sometimes they amounted to a concerted campaign of lobbying in the press and other media simply to subvert the bill, with no account taken of the fact that it had clear majority support in the country. And of course, when it came to the actual debate in the House of Lords, religious privilege was all too apparent, since the Anglican Church, with its reserved seats for Bishops in the House, was able to play a disproportionately dominant role in the debate and in the rejection of the legislation. The place of Bishops in the House of Lords is a classic example of an arrangement which, on any version of secularism, is indefensible.<sup>x</sup>

### **Conscientious objection**

Pressure from religious groups for a privileged status was apparent in another recent example of legislation. The government recently enacted legislation making it illegal to discriminate, in employment, or in the provision of goods, facilities and services, against people because of their sexual orientation. The Catholic Church in particular sought exemption from this legislation, arguing that they consider homosexual practices to be an evil and that they should not be forced to condone them by letting rooms to gay couples or helping gay couples to adopt a child. Having to conform to the law would, they said, be a violation of their rights of conscience.

Now of course the Catholic Church like any other group was entitled to take part in the debate about that legislation, and it certainly did so. But once the debate has taken place and the decision has been made, why should the Catholic Church have any special exemption? Suppose that a hypothetical organisation, the Society of Homophobes, were to say 'We want to be exempt from the legislation, because we think that homosexuality is an intolerable evil, and it would therefore be contrary to our values if we had to be bound by the law.' That would be rightly regarded as absurd, since it would destroy the whole point of the legislation, and the rights of homosexuals which it was intended to protect would simply have been overridden. Why then should the demands of the Catholic Church for exemption be regarded any differently, simply because they are based on religious convictions? To do so would be to privilege a particular religion, and would be inconsistent with the argument from fairness.

The pragmatic argument might, however, provide grounds for qualifying that practical conclusion. If part of the case for secularism is the need for people with differing beliefs and values to live side by side without destructive conflict, then, other things being equal, it is better not to force people to do things which offend against their deeply held convictions. That does not mean that anyone has an automatic right to be exempt from legislation with which they do not agree. Whether there should be a right of 'conscientious objection' should depend on the particular case, and the desirability of not requiring people to go against their own strong convictions may well be outweighed by other people's rights and interests. Compare these two cases. We have said that Catholics and other religious believers, even if they strongly disapprove of homosexuality, should not be allowed to discriminate against homosexuals, and it was right that they were not allowed exemption from the recent legislation. The 1967 Abortion Act, however, did include a 'conscience clause' stating that medical professionals with a conscientious objection to abortion should not be required to carry out such treatment. What is the difference between the two cases? If Catholics and other religious groups had been granted exemption from the Sexual Orientation Equality Act, this would have allowed them to violate the rights of homosexuals not to be discriminated against.<sup>xi</sup> In contrast, the conscience clause in the Abortion Act does not restrict women's right to have an abortion, provided they are referred, as they should be, to another doctor. But again everything depends on the particular circumstances. If a large proportion

of doctors wished to be exempt from performing abortions, this might make it seriously difficult for women to obtain an abortion, and the case for 'conscientious objection' would be correspondingly weakened.

It also needs to be stressed that if there are sometimes grounds for allowing conscientious objection, it is not because *religious* views deserve special respect. The case for not forcing people to act against their own deeply held convictions applies regardless of whether the basis of those convictions is religious or non-religious. To require that conscientious objection should be on religious grounds would be to accord unfair privilege to the religious.

### **Religious symbols**

Some similar issues are raised by another recurrent class of controversies. Religious believers often want or need to give public expression to their distinctive faith allegiance. They may want to do so through their code of dress or personal adornment – by wearing a cross, or a turban, a head-scarf or a hijab or burkha. Should they have an unfettered right to this public display of their religion? Similarly, some religions see it as vital that they should worship on a particular day of the week, a Friday or a Saturday or a Sunday, and this may conflict with secular work schedules. The same problem may arise with the observance of important religious festivals at particular times of the year. Traditionally there are public holidays to coincide with the major Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter. If Christianity can shape public life in this way, why can't Eid or Ramadan, Diwali or Hanukkah?

Secularism need not rule out the freedom of religious believers to express their religion through their choice of clothing or jewellery, including in public buildings and institutions. We would not for instance advocate regulations like that in France, banning the wearing of the head-scarf by Muslim girls in state schools, which we think would be unnecessarily restrictive in the cultural context of the UK. Both the argument from autonomy and the argument from fairness would support the right of individuals to choose how to dress in public, provided their choices do not harm anyone else, and would welcome the consequent diversity. The pragmatic argument could point in the same direction – if religious believers are deeply attached to a particular dress code, then, other things being equal, it is better to accommodate them rather than inflame religious antipathies.

All three arguments would also support arrangements to enable religious believers to worship on the appropriate days and times wherever possible. Likewise the argument from fairness would support the case for the major festivals of non-Christian religions to be given the same recognition as the Christian festivals – and we doubt whether atheists would object to additional public holidays! To suggest that distinctively religious dress should be banned from public institutions just because it is religious, or that religious holidays should have no recognition in public life, would be to insist on a rigid divide between the public and the private, of a kind which we have agreed to be untenable.

The case is different if the wearing of certain kinds of clothing or jewellery needs to be prohibited for good reasons having nothing to do with religion. Suppose for instance that in some jobs there are sensible 'health and safety' reasons why all employees should be prevented from wearing jewellery. And suppose then that a particular employee wants to wear jewellery in the form of a crucifix on a necklace, because this would be a profession of her Christian faith. If there are good reasons in the first place for prohibiting all jewellery, then there is no good reason for making an exception simply because a certain item of jewellery has a religious significance. To do so would, again, be to give religion a privileged status.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Education**

We have referred to the example of dress code in schools, and the sphere of education is one in which questions about secularism are especially likely to arise and to be contentious. Educational institutions clearly play a central role in establishing the character of a society, but they are also institutions in which competing values are especially likely to come into conflict and where neutrality is difficult.

For example, religious education in most schools in the public system now takes the form not of religious instruction intended to inculcate a particular faith, but of open and broad exposure to the different religious traditions, and increasingly to secular traditions too, helping pupils to assess and decide on their own beliefs. Some religious believers, including parents, object to this; they want their own religion to be presented to their children not as one option among others but as the true system of belief, a living faith taught by those who are committed to it and understand it from within. Conversely, personal autonomy is widely seen as a central value in education; children should be encouraged to develop independence and to think for themselves. The value of autonomy may however be anathema to religious believers who advocate humble submission to the will of God as revealed through his priests or religious teachers. How can a public system of education be neutral between these competing values?

We have suggested above that the value of autonomy may have some purchase with religious believers outside the ranks of thorough-going liberals. Most religious believers, we would have thought, would value religious affiliation as something which ought to be a genuine commitment on the part of the individual, something which he or she has chosen with a full understanding of that and other faiths and beliefs, not something which has been inculcated as the only available option. The value of autonomy ought therefore to be something which can be widely accepted as appropriate at least in the sphere of education. Even those whose religion would support a rigid moral code could accept that their children should be enabled to make their own choice about whether to embrace that religion and that moral code in the first place.

We know, however, that not everyone accepts it. Some Muslims, and some Christians, say quite openly that what they want is for their children to be indoctrinated in the faith.<sup>xiii</sup> What should our response be?

This is where we encounter the vexed question of *faith schools*. It is also where the argument from autonomy and the argument from fairness could, in principle, have differing implications. Clearly neither argument is consistent with the traditional idea (enshrined in the 1944 Education Act) that in a Christian country the public system of education should bring up children to be good Christians, with compulsory Christian assemblies and compulsory Christian religious instruction. The argument from fairness could, however, be seen as requiring that every faith should have its own quota of faith schools within the public sector. If there are to be Christian faith schools and non-religious schools, then, it could be argued, there should also be Muslim schools and Jewish schools and Hindu schools which are all supported by public funding. That would be one version of secularism, insofar as it would give no one faith or system of belief a privileged position. And that is, of course, the way in which government policy has in fact gone in recent years.

The different arguments for secularism could therefore lead to different conclusions about faith schools. The argument from fairness could in principle be used to support the view that every faith should be entitled to its own schools, whereas the argument from autonomy could support the view that there should be no faith schools at all in the public system. We believe that the value of autonomy is in fact central to the case against faith schools. Admittedly, in some faith schools religious education is of a high quality, eschewing indoctrination and cultivating pupils' autonomy. Even if that is so, however, there is always liable to be a tension between the school's respect for autonomy and its 'faith' character, which is typically seen to involve encouraging and promoting a certain 'ethos'. If churches and faiths want to contribute to education for its own sake, there is nothing to stop them doing so, by making financial donations or by encouraging their members to volunteer to help in schools or to train as teachers. But if they insist on having their own schools, it is difficult to see why they should want this unless with the hope that Christian or Muslim schools will encourage pupils to grow up as Christians or Muslims.<sup>xiv</sup>

The argument from fairness might to some extent support the case for every faith to have its own quota of faith schools in the public system, in proportion to its strength in the society at large. There is more to be said, however. There are, first, simple considerations of practicality. If all parents were to have the option of

sending their children to a faith school of their own religion in their own locality, there would have to be an unrealistically vast increase in the number of schools. Note also that if churches and other faith groups are actively encouraged to set up their own schools and given support from public funding, then even if this is done with fairness as between the different religions, it gives religious organisations a privileged position within the educational system, by comparison with the non-religious. In that respect it is incompatible with fairness-based secularism

Our third argument, the pragmatic case for secularism, can also come into play at this point. There are serious concerns about the social effects of faith schools. The pragmatic argument was that in a pluralist society people of all faiths and none have to learn to live together without their differences degenerating into destructive conflict. We believe that faith schools tend to obstruct that goal. They are liable to be divisive, they encourage children to identify with their own separate communities, and are thus liable to perpetuate a climate of suspicion and distrust.

### **Conclusion**

We have reviewed the different arguments for secularism. We have reviewed the different things that secularism might mean in practice. We have suggested that there is no single knock-down argument for secularism. Different arguments depend on different premises, some of which will be more widely accepted than others. We have also suggested that what secularism requires in practice will be open to debate, reflecting both the differing emphases of the core arguments and differing assessments of practical consequences. Nevertheless the broad thrust of our discussion is clear. We believe that the case for secularism is sound, that it can be defended with arguments which are not distinctively humanist but are acceptable to the great majority of religious believers, and that its practical application will make for a healthier and more harmonious society.<sup>xv</sup>

## **Week five: extract from Francois Marie Arouet's (Voltaire) *A Treatise on Toleration* 1763**

***trans. by Joseph McCabe (appears in Margaret Knight's Humanist Anthology pp25-27)***

### *Toleration*

One does not need great art and skilful eloquence to prove that Christians ought to tolerate each other – nay, even to regard all men as brothers. Why, you say, is the Turk, the Chinese, or the Jew my brother? Assuredly; are we not all children of the same father, creatures of the same God?

But these people despise us and treat us as idolaters. Very well; I will tell them they are quite wrong. It seems to me that I might astonish, at least, the stubborn pride of a Mohammedan or a Buddhist priest if I spoke to them somewhat as follows:

This little globe, which is but a point, travels in space like many other globes; we are lost in the immensity. Man, about five feet high, is certainly a small thing in the universe. One of these imperceptible beings says to some of his neighbours, in Arabia or South Africa: 'Listen to me, for the God of all these worlds has enlightened me. There are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole alone is dear to God. All the others are eternally reprobated by him. Mine alone will be happy.'

They would then interrupt me, and ask who was the fool that talked all this nonsense. I should be obliged to tell them it was themselves. I would then try to appease them, which would be difficult.

I would next address myself to the Christians, and would venture to say to, for instance, a Dominican friar – an inquisitor of the faith: 'Brother, you are aware that each province in Italy has its own dialect, and that people do not speak at Venice and Bergamo as they do at Florence. The academy of La Crusca has fixed the language. Its dictionary is a rule that has to be followed, and the grammar of Matei is an infallible guide. But do you think that the consul of the Academy, or Matei in his absence, could in conscience cut out the tongues of all the Venetians and the Bergamese who persisted in speaking their own dialect?'

The inquisitor replies: 'The two cases are very different. In our case it is a question of your eternal salvation. It is for your good that the heads of the Inquisition direct that you shall be seized on the information of any one person, however infamous or criminal; that you shall have no advocate to defend you; that the name of your accuser shall not be made known to you; that the inquisitor shall promise you pardon and then condemn you; and that you shall then be subjected to five kinds of torture, and afterwards either flogged or sent to the galleys or ceremoniously burned. On this Father Ivonet, Doctor Cuchalon, Zanchinus, Campegius, Royas, Felinus, Gomarus, Diabarus and Gemelinus are explicit, and this pious practice admits of no exception.'

I would take the liberty of replying: 'Brother, possibly you are right. I am convinced that you wish to do me good. But could I not be saved without all that?'

It is true that these absurd horrors do not stain the face of the earth every day; but they have often done so, and the record of them would make up a volume much longer than the gospels which condemn them. Not only is it cruel to persecute, in this brief life, those who differ from us, but I am not sure if it is not too bold to declare that they are damned eternally. It seems to me that it is not the place of the atoms of a moment, such as we are, thus to anticipate the decrees of the Creator. Far be it from me to question the principle, 'Out of the Church there is no salvation'. I respect it, and all that it teaches; but do we really know all the ways of God, and the full range of his mercies? May we not hope in him as much as fear him? Is it not enough to be loyal to the Church? Must each individual usurp the rights of the Deity, and decide, before he does, the eternal lot of all men?

When we wear mourning for a king of Sweden, Denmark, England, or Prussia, do we say that we wear mourning for one who burns eternally in hell? There are in Europe forty million people who are not of the Church of Rome. Shall we say to each of them: 'Sir, seeing that you are infallibly damned, I will neither eat, nor deal, nor speak with you'?

What ambassador of France, presented in audience to the Sultan, would say in the depths of his heart: 'His Highness will undoubtedly burn for all eternity because he has been circumcised'? If he really believed that the Sultan is the mortal enemy of God, the object of his vengeance, could he speak to him? Ought he to be sent to him? With whom could we trade? What duty of civil life could we ever fulfil if we were really convinced that we were dealing with damned souls?

Followers of a merciful God, if you were cruel at heart; if, in worshipping him whose whole law consisted in loving one's neighbour as oneself, you have burdened this pure and holy law with sophistry and unintelligible disputes ... if you had attached eternal torment to the omission of a few words or ceremonies that other peoples could not know, I should say to you:

'Transport yourselves with me to the day on which all men will be judge, when God will deal with each according to his works. I see the dead of former ages and of our own stand in his presence. Are you sure that our Creator and Father will say to the wise and virtuous Confucius, to the lawgiver Solon, to Pythagoras, to Zaleucus, to Socrates, to Plato, to the divine Antonines, to the good Trajan, to Titus, the delight of the human race, to Epictetus and to so many other model men: "Go, monsters, go and submit to a chastisement infinite in its intensity and duration; your torment shall be as eternal as I. And you, my beloved Jean Chatel, Ravailac, Damiens, Cartouche, etc. (assassins in the cause of the Church), who have died with the prescribed formulae, come and share my empire and felicity for ever.'"

You shrank with horror from such sentiments; and, now that they have passed my lips, I have no more to say to you.

## **Week six: extract from Peter Cave's *Humanism: A Beginner's Guide* (2009)**

### **Heavenly virgins, belief and commitment**

Whether the number be seventy-two and whether they be nubile female virgins or white raisins – there is, I understand, a Qur'an translation question, the outcome of which could lead to grave disappointments – the ends sought, through religiously inspired action, may also raise motivational questions. Why would suicide bombers – seen as martyrs – bomb innocent people? Well, if they have prior belief in God and his rewards and punishments, the calculation may be obvious: loss of earthly life, an earthly life perhaps of much toil and hardship, compared with an immediate eternal afterlife of an especially appealing, sensual ilk. Thrown into the calculation would need to be the likelihood of God's existence and correct interpretation of divine commands. To humanists, good reason would suggest that God, if demanding such destruction, is not to be relied upon; good reason suggests belief in such a God is radically mistaken. Yet, as humanists regretfully conclude, when religion is to the fore, good reason loses much power.

Calculative considerations are most famously associated with Pascal and his wager. Pascal argued that belief in God is prudent. Putting up with Sunday or Sabbath confessions is a small price to pay for the possibility, though only the possibility, of eternal and heavenly bliss. Ignoring uncertainties in the calculation, such as which God to worship, how God would assess our initial motivation, and how else belief in God may affect our lives, we simply cannot believe at will or from choice, or, indeed, because we have been threatened. We may decide to go to the synagogue or mosque, but we cannot just decide to believe something – or so it would seem. An ancient challenge making this point is: believe the number of heavenly stars to be even – or odd. Either way, you cannot simply switch on the belief. Regular beliefs need to be responsive to evidence. To believe that something is so is necessarily to believe that it is true that something is so. To be able to believe at will would be akin to magic – as if we could always make something true just by believing it.

As we have seen, humanists reasonably argue that morality is conceptually separate from God and belief in God. Humanists can also make a good case for the 'belief' part of religious belief being rather different from regular belief. Suppose I yearn for Clarissa – and believe that Clarissa secretly loves me. In seeking loving demonstration, I invite her to the opera, ask her round for a drink and send her earrings. My offers are spurned. My conclusion is that opera is not her cup of tea, that she is a non-drinker, and that she lacks desire for earrings. When, the following week, I see her at the opera, having a drink, some splendid earrings jangling – well ... ? Maybe, I conclude she plays hard to get. Suppose she resists all my subsequent amatory suggestions. Suppose she sends round her husband, threatens a court order – and eventually calls the police. If I still protest that she loves me really, is it time to recognize that I no longer have a belief, but suffer a forlorn hope, desperate obsession or mental state requiring medication.

Let us now look at some religious matters that suggest some similarity between my 'belief' about Clarissa's love and belief in God. The matters are significant in themselves; hence, the direct discussion and conclusion on religious belief are not reached until this chapter's final section, 'The light of the world'.

The first reason for wondering about religious *belief* is the problem of evil and the religious response. Whatever arcane disputes about ultimate grounds for morality, humanists are struck by the existence of evil, a deadly puzzle for believers in God's love. Believers typically maintain that God is all good – but also all powerful, including all knowing – yet evils, in the form of vast suffering, exist. Lest we forget, while you read this book, millions of people are suffering malnutrition, natural disasters, disease or war. Think of particular, more homely cases – of toothaches, pains in childbirth, dying and seeing loved ones dying. Add the sufferings of non-human animals. Are not these sufferings gratuitous? Could not God have created a world without them? John Stuart Mill stressed that, looking round the world, we find considerable evidence to blacken any deity's name, not much evidence for praise.

Humanists use reflections such as those above to point to the non-existence of an all-powerful, all-good God. We could argue that we should have sympathy for the Devil or devils; they are overlooked when there is such evidence for their existence, assuming the world is any evidence at all for the supernatural. If the world is evidence for anything supernatural, we arguably should move to the Zoroastrian position – that there exist both good and evil supernatural beings, roughly equal in power. This would be the most rational religious belief – which perhaps explain why there are so few Zoroastrians.

Refinements are required. What counts as 'all powerful' and 'all good'? Could God move an immovable post? If he is all powerful, he should be able to make such a post; but if all powerful, he should be able to move it. God's omnipotence, though, does not require him to perform the logically impossible. That is no restriction on his power. If told to read this page and not read it at the same time, our inability to obey does not demonstrate poor reading powers. What is logically impossible is, in a sense, nothing at all – so being unable to do the impossible is no failure.

As for being 'all good', some suffering may be good and not gratuitous, for it may be a means towards some consequential benefits, or it may be an unfortunate but inevitable side effect. Suffering the dentist is worth it for the consequent absence of toothache, suffering the hangover for prior pleasurable intoxication. This stance, however, does not readily apply once God is in the frame. A good God apparently holds that certain things are intrinsically bad, and, presumably, prefers goods with no bad side effects than ones with. Perhaps, theists will insist, to reap the rewards of achievements, enduring pains on the way is necessary: achievements require struggle. Maybe the natural laws necessary for human life also necessarily generate disasters such as earthquakes. More generally, perhaps the existence of good logically necessitates that of evils. If this is so, an interesting consequence flows – the Good God paradox. Suppose the presence of goodness necessarily requires some evil. Well, God, we are sometimes told, did not have to create the world. So, now, further suppose that God did not create the world; that is, only God exists. Paradoxically, God could not then be all good – for goodness, it is claimed, requires some evil.

Whatever the power of these considerations, we leave them to one side. Even if some evil is required for the existence of good, that does not account for the vast quantity of worldly suffering, be it the result of human actions that generate moral evils, actions such as murder and torture, or the result of non-human actions, such as floods, earthquakes and famine, which generate natural evils.

A well-known attempt at explaining why moral evils are compatible with God's existence is the free will defence. God created human beings with free will, such beings possessing far greater value than programmed robots; but the existence of such free agents entails the possibility of doing evil – and, as it happens, many evils are done. There are deep puzzles about the nature of free will – puzzles for theists and humanists – but the defence's distinctive puzzle is its reliance on God's creating this particular world of free agents rather than another. Assuming God could choose, and also know what humans would freely choose to do, why did he not create a different world in which humans freely choose to do fewer evils? Further, the defence, of course, lacks credibility in explaining most natural evils, unless – as sometimes claimed – people suffer these natural evils because of their fathers' sins. To humanists this last thought is morally repugnant. What can be morally just about our suffering now because of what great, great, great ... grandfathers did? It merits, I suggest, the quip that, if God exists, it shows his nature in its true light – for he is said to be the ultimate father.

Traditional religious belief is maintained in the face of such evidence against God's goodness. This aids the thought that religious belief is no straightforward belief. It is more like a commitment come what may; more like my belief in Clarissa's love.

A second reason for thinking that religious belief is not just an extremely grand typical belief is brought out in the following.

Consider Sophie and Safia, Sophie brought up Christian and firmly remaining one; Safia brought up Muslim and firmly remaining one. Both recognize that had they been brought up differently – Sophie as Muslim and Safia as Christian – they would have been committed to different religious beliefs. Importantly for this example, these two believers recognize, in a detached way, that evidence for Christianity is of the same strength and character as that for Islam. Knowing that their particular religious belief depends so heavily on their upbringing and culture – and knowing that there is no worldly evidence of tests to show one is right, the other wrong – each would seem to be irrational in holding fast to her belief. Humanists rightly find it utterly irrational that, say, Christians can be so confident in their Christianity when they agree that, had they been brought up a few miles away, across a border, they would be Muslims confident in Islam. All this again should make us wonder quite what is the nature of the belief in religious belief.

It is true that Sophie may describe any experiences she has of God in Christian terms, making reference to the Son and the Holy Spirit, whereas Safia's descriptions may be in different terms, perhaps invoking Mohammed. Yet they both would recognize that, had they grown within the other religion, they would doubtless have been describing their experiences differently. Indeed, personal revelations raise questions of why such experiences or, for that matter, reports of miracles, should be indicative of anything divine at all. We have common ways of checking what people mean by 'mountains', 'money' and 'marmalade' and whether there is a mountain to climb, money to invest or marmalade to spread; but how can it be established whether someone heard the voice of the Holy Spirit or Mohammed – or was merely 'hearing voices'?

The reply may be that such divine experiences are in no worse position than toothaches. No one else experiences this particular toothache of mine – yet it is real and affects my behaviour. The reply to the reply relies on a difference. The ache cannot exist independently of the suffering person, yet the religious experiences are claimed to be of an independent divine being. That makes all the difference – for how can the independence be certified?

Here is a very silly example. The silliness is not to ridicule believers, but for the sake of vivacity. Suppose some people speak of hearing the mysterious voice of a giant supernatural talking turnip, yet no such turnip can be seen, touched or heard by most others. The turnip hearers build up rituals concerning turnips, have turnip talks, develop sacred turnip grounds, with the Holy Turnip Basilica. We have here a religious way of life. We see their rituals, but we should resist thinking their experience were really of the Holy Turnip, despite the capital 'H' and 'T'. Yes, this is a silly example; but it shows how utterly irrational it is to live a life solely on the basis of voices unheard by many and untestable. Whatever the 'revelations', what the voices claim needs to be assessed. As for reports of miracles, well, reason should typically lead us to think, as Hume recommended, that the reports are more likely inaccurate than that the miracles occurred.

### **Praise be to God**

A woman finds her child alive and well within the volcanic ashes, surrounded by many other children who are dead, dying or maimed. 'Praise God,' she proclaims. The woman is not blind to the suffering of others – she is keen to help them – she is, though, blind to the absurdity of praising God for her child's safety, but not condemning God for the other's sufferings. For many believers, however badly things go, godly belief is maintained. Some even boast of believing in defiance of the contrary evidence. Again, it looks as if religious belief is very different from beliefs as we usually understand them.

If nothing can possibly count as evidence in the empirical world against God's existence, do we even possess a proper grip on what is meant by 'God exists' and what constitutes belief that God exists? How could we tell we were meeting God, rather than dreaming? Bradlaugh, encountered in Chapter 1, thought the concept of God lacked sense. Sympathy for Bradlaugh increases, when we encounter jumbled tales of the Trinity and transubstantiation. True, there are jumbled and obscure notions in quantum physics, but they form part of theories open to predictive evaluation and revision. Mind you, things are not that straightforward: theories may be clung to, seeming through thick and thin. Imre Lakatos illustrates such clinging with a story of how a

scientific theory may be protected, even though a predicted planet fails to show. Such planetary 'misbehaviour' is explained away by supplementary hypotheses, pleas for new research funding and when all these fail – well, the recalcitrant predications are consigned to dusty volumes, spoken of no more. In reality, scientific theories are not dropped just because of a few instance of counter evidence. None the less, for theories to have substance, they link somewhere along the line to experience, perhaps through related research programmes and other testable theories.

What sense can we make of the hypothesis that God exists? Once, particular events were considered evidence for God's existence. Perhaps the just on earth would prosper while rogues would not; praying for rain – to the right God – would bring forth rain; sacrifices for victory in battle would bring victory. Of course, prayers and sacrifices are not remotely reliable – and always a problem when both battling sides pray for success. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the just do flourish here on earth. A traditional response, based on the unfounded belief that justice must ultimately prevail, is that such earthly injustice provides a reason to believe in the afterlife when all injustices are ironed out. Apart from the argument's oddness, it raises the question of how to achieve an afterlife. It is unfortunate for millions of non-Christian believers if it must be through belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God. Further, what sense can be made of afterlife experiences? As Charles Dunbar Broad, a twentieth-century Cambridge philosopher, once quipped about such matters, all we can do is: wait and see – or, alternatively, not see.

Stress upon the possibility of verification of falsification as a criterion for statements making sense used to be fashionable; it enabled swift dismissal of metaphysical statements concerning God's existence. Swift dismissal itself was dismissed: how could the underlying verification principles themselves be verified or falsified? Could claims about the past be verified or falsified? By whom and when ... ? Although verification-falsification criteria have been resurrected under glossy new labels such as 'anti-realism', there is today a casual readiness to treat the statement 'God exists' as making sense. That is, of course, a far cry from saying that it is true. What could make it true? That is often considered a knock-down question; but it is not. The answer is simple: the existence of God. But further reflection allows us to see that the answer is not simple. This is because God's existence is usually taken to be necessary existence. All the thing around us, it seems, might not have existed. You and I might not have existed. This does not appear to apply to God, as earlier seen when discussion Leibniz's cosmological argument about contingencies. God, it is argued, is a necessary existent.

Necessary existence need not be that surprising. The prime number between eighteen and twenty necessarily exists; but if numbers are objects at all, they are abstract objects, lacking causal powers. The number nineteen does not cause anything; yet God, as traditionally understood, is a necessarily existent creator-designer of the world, capable of intervening. So, God continues to be odd – as are the *a priori* arguments for his existence, the ontological arguments. In one simple format, the argument is that God necessarily exists because the concept of God is the concept of something perfect, with maximal reality; and existence is part of maximal reality. Although Bertrand Russell threw his tobacco pouch into the air with delight, when finally thinking the argument sound, he quickly lost conviction. Humanistic thinkers today tend to laugh such arguments out of court, dreaming up examples of perfect pizzas and, indeed, seemingly perfectly sound arguments for both God's existence and non-existence, to show that if any ontological arguments were sound, then these other items would also necessarily exist.

The original ontological argument, from the twelfth-century St Anselm, ran with the thought that God is that being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Now, suppose that he does not exist, then he would not be the greatest conceivable being, for there could be conceived the greater being, namely a God actually existing. But it is contradictory for there to be something greater than the greatest conceivable; hence, our starting supposition that God does not exist is faulty. God does and must exist. Arguably, behind some versions of the argument, there resides a conflation of the idea of X with X. The idea of water is not wet; but what it is an idea of – water – is wet. If God were to exist, then he would be greater than the idea of God, but

not greater than what the idea is an idea of. Indeed, it has been ironically argued that something truly great would be all the greater for being able to do things without even requiring existence.

Most humanists, and, indeed, many believers judge ontological arguments as mere word play; yet we ought not to be so smug. After all, similar 'word play' has led to fascinating discoveries in mathematics and can lead us to see what cannot exist, for example, a greatest prime number. Perhaps, though, that thought shows a possible mistake in ontological arguments, namely assuming in the first place that we can make sense of the greatest conceivable or most perfect being.

### **A light on the world**

Perhaps our little reflections, on love for Clarissa, on the problem of evil, on Sophie and Safia and on necessary existence, cast religious belief in a new light. Perhaps our reflections suggest religious belief overall is all too much to be typical belief. Rather, religious belief is a way of seeing the world; it too casts things in a different light. To believe that God exists is not to think that there is an item that could be discovered, an item for which there is evidence. To believe that God exists is to treat the world in a certain way.

People who read the world in the light of Christian scriptures see it differently from those who read it in the light of, say, Darwinism and nothing more. Belief in God is part of a web of religious beliefs, the web best understood as expressing commitment to a way of life, be it to help the poor or kill the infidels. On this understanding – and a few religious believers agree – religious claims are expressions of moral intentions, combined with a mixture of exemplary stories, poetry and some empirical claims promoting ways of living. For some Christians, stories of Jesus' death, the events of the Last Supper and the good Samaritan parable, all lead to living agapeistically – that is, in brotherly love. Richard Braithwaite, a twentieth-century empiricist philosopher, gave explicit voice to the above approach and, on that basis, entered the Church of England. Viewed in this way, religious belief may be seen by some, for example, Marx and Freud, as but a projection of the hopes and fears of man; but there is no need to go along with such speculative psychological explanations.

Most believers, of course, take their godly belief to be that there literally exists some supernatural being, that Christ really rose from the dead and that God speaks to them. The proposal that religious beliefs amount only to highly important lifestyle commitments, combined with stories and some regular beliefs, carries with it the thought that traditional theists are mistaken in treating their religious beliefs as involving genuine beliefs about an *existent* necessary being – a little in the way that I am mistaken about my psychological state directed towards Clarissa. A few church and synagogue attenders make no such mistake at all, for they think of themselves as non-believing Christians or Jews, that is, atheists who yet value the tradition, ritual and morality.

The proposal, then, is that religious belief involves certain commitments and attitudes towards the world – reverence, awe – with the promotion of moral behaviour, sustained by fictions and some historical facts. However gently humanists may suggest this to the religious – perhaps emphasizing the great value of fiction and art for encouraging good living – traditional believers insist that god literally exists. I then reply, 'It's just a way, a valuable way, of seeing the world, leading, say, to encouraging brotherly love, and being in awe of the beauty of sunsets.' They respond, 'But God *really* does exist.' Paradoxically, I may agree – for I may take those words to mean that the speakers really do have the commitments mentioned.

This is where the 'really's multiply. 'But, really, really, really God exists.' 'Yes,' I answer, 'Really, really, really you are committed to loving your fellow man and being in awe of sunsets ...'

The resort to understanding certain basic beliefs as more akin to lifestyle commitments is not unknown. Some suggest that 'the future resembles the past' and 'every event has a cause' are best understood as expectations or rules for investigation – though, in contrast to religion, these we cannot live lives without.

Casting things in different lights, expressing different attitudes, need not thereby be arbitrary, without foundation. It may dovetail with believers' talk of insights and added depths. Life is not 'really' a gift from God, but observations about life as divinely given may encourage respect and pious feeling. Christ represented as crucified in Belsen, talk of Christ remaining within the world – these may bring home man's inhumanity and the need to overcome that inhumanity. Odd pictures of the world help us to handle the world. Think of how physicists speak of 'charms', how geneticists lapse into 'selfish' genes, and how chemists picture molecules. It is true that scientific theories lead to tests and experimentation; but the pictures and tales drawn by religions lead to ways of living – some that humanists welcome; some they rightly flee.

Humanists draw pictures. Dawkins pictures human beings as rebelling against genetic tyrants. Liberals picture people breaking free of chains. In Chapter 7, we muse further upon how we find meaning in the world and in our lives by seeing them cast in different lights – often shone by art and literature, by metaphor and music, be it religious or not.

## **Week seven: extract from Peter Medawar's *The Limits of Science* 1986**

**(appears in Margaret Kinght's *Humanist Anthology* pp. 133-134)**

### *Views of a Rationalist Scientist*

To abdicate from the rule of reason and substitute it for an authentication of belief by the intentness and degree of conviction with which we hold it can be perilous and destructive. Religious belief gives a spurious spiritual dimension to tribal enmities, as we see them in the Low Countries, Ceylon, Northern Ireland and parts of Africa; nor has any religious belief been held with greater passion or degree of conviction than the metaphysics of blood and soil which did so much to animate Hitler's Germany. Was that not also a consequence of just such a deep, passionate conviction as that which has been thought to authenticate religious belief?

The problem of pain has not been solved, though it has been almost hidden from view by a cloud of theological humbug and the still greater exertions of doublethink that conceal from view or pretend the nonexistence of the most unwelcome truth of all. It goes with the passionate intensity and deep conviction of the truth of a religious belief, and of course of the importance of the superstitious observances that go with it, that we should want others to share it – and the only certain way to cause a religious belief to be held by everyone is to liquidate nonbelievers. The price in blood and tears that mankind generally has had to pay for the comfort and spiritual refreshment that religion has brought to a few has been too great to justify our entrusting moral accountancy to religious belief. By 'moral accountancy' I mean the judgement that such and such an action is right or wrong, or such a man good and such another evil.

I am a rationalist – something of a period piece nowadays, I admit – but I am usually reluctant to declare myself to be so because of the widespread misunderstanding or neglect of the distinction that must always be drawn in philosophic discussion between the *sufficient* and the *necessary*. I do not believe – indeed, I deem it a comic blunder to believe – that the exercise of reason is *sufficient* to explain our condition and where necessary to remedy it, but I do believe that the world can be made a better place to live in – in spite of shortcomings which I do not conceal, natural science has played an important part, of which my fellow scientists and I are immensely proud. I fear that we may never be able to answer those questions about first and last things that have been the subject of this short essay – questions to do with origin, purpose and destiny of man; we know, however, that whether as individuals or as political people, we do have some say in what comes next, so what could our destiny be except what we make it?

To people of sanguine temperament, the thought that this is so is a source of strength and the energizing force of a just and honourable ambition.

The dismay that may be aroused by our inability to answer questions about first and last things is something for which ordinary people have long since worked out for themselves Voltaire's remedy: 'We must cultivate our garden.'

## **Week eight: extract from Adam Smith's *Letter to William Strahan***

**(appears in *Margaret Knight's Humanist Anthology* pp. 37-8)**

Dear Sir,

It is with a real, though a very melancholy pleasure, that I sit down to give some account of the behavior of our late excellent friend, Mr. Hume, during his last illness...

Upon his return to Edinburgh, though he found himself much weaker, yet his cheerfulness never abated, and he continued to divert himself, as usual, with correcting his own works for a new edition, with reading books of amusement, with the conversation of his friends; and, sometimes in the evening, with a party at his favorite game of whist. His cheerfulness was so great, and his conversation and amusements run so much in their usual strain, that, notwithstanding all bad symptoms, many people could not believe he was dying. 'I shall tell your friend, Colonel Edmondstone,' said Doctor Dundas to him one day, 'that I left you much better, and in a fair way of recovery.' 'Doctor,' said he, 'as I believe you would not choose to tell any thing but the truth, you had better tell him, that I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire...'

I told him, that though I was sensible how very much he was weakened, and that, appearances were in many respects very bad, yet his cheerfulness was still so great, the spirit of life seemed still to be so very strong in him, that I could not help entertaining some faint hopes. He answered, 'Your hopes are groundless... When I lie down in the evening, I feel myself weaker than when I rose in the morning; and when I rise in the morning, weaker than when I lay down in the evening. I am sensible, besides, that some of my vital parts are affected, so that I must soon die.' 'Well,' said I, 'if it must be so, you have at least the satisfaction of leaving all your friends, your brother's family in particular, in great prosperity.' He said that he felt that satisfaction so sensibly, that when he was reading, a few days before, Lucian's Dialogues of the Dead, among all the excuses which are alleged to Charon for not entering readily into his boat, he could not find one that fitted him; he had no house to finish, he had no daughter to provide for, he had no enemies upon whom he wished to revenge himself. 'I could not well imagine,' said he, 'what excuse I could make to Charon in order to obtain a little delay...' He then diverted himself with inventing several jocular excuses, which he supposed he might make to Charon, and with imagining the very surly answers which it might suit the character of Charon to return to them. 'Upon further consideration,' said he, 'I thought I might say to him, Good Charon, I have been correcting my works for a new edition. Allow me a little time, that I may see how the public receives the alterations.' But Charon would answer, 'When you have seen the effect of these, you will be for making other alterations. There will be no end of such excuses; so, honest friend, please step into the boat.' But I might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon; I have been endeavoring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition.' But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. 'You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue.'

But, though Mr. Hume always talked of his approaching dissolution with great cheerfulness, he never affected to make any parade of his magnanimity. He never mentioned the subject but when the conversation naturally led to it, and never dwelt longer upon it than the course of the conversation happened to require...

[Adam Smith then relates how he heard the news of Hume's death]

Thus died our most excellent and never to be forgotten friend; concerning whose philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously... but concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion... The extreme gentleness of his nature never weakened either the firmness of his mind or he steadiness of his resolutions. His constant pleasantry was the genuine effusion of good nature and

good humour, tempered with delicacy and modesty, and without even the slightest tincture of malignity, so frequently the disagreeable source of what is called wit in other men...And that gaiety of temper, so agreeable in society, but which is so often accompanied with frivolous and superficial qualities, was in him certainly attended with the most severe application, the most extensive learning, the greatest depth of thought... Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.

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<sup>i</sup> Bishop Michael Nazir Ali, interviewed on the Today programme on Radio 4 on 6 November 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Locke thought that such toleration should not be extended to atheists, because 'promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist'. In saying this, he was failing to apply his own argument consistently. If belief in the Anglican creed rather than Catholicism, or in Christianity rather than Islam, cannot be coerced, then belief in religion rather than atheism cannot be coerced either. And if atheists cannot be trusted, they do not become any more trustworthy by being compelled to profess a faith which they do not genuinely accept. See John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689).

<sup>iii</sup> The most well-known defence of liberal values by appeal to facts about human nature is in John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* (1859). Mill says, in chapter III of that work: 'Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.' Facts about human nature are not, however, the only possible basis for liberal values. Other kinds of justification may be invoked, and this is not the place to adjudicate between them.

<sup>iv</sup> 16% in the 2001 census, 63% in an ICM poll in December 2006.

<sup>v</sup> The philosopher who has given the idea of the 'veil of ignorance' its prominent position in modern versions of social contract theory is John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (New York and Oxford, 1971).

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651). The famous description of the state of nature as 'a war... of every man against every man' comes in Part I, chapter 13, 'Of the Natural Condition of Mankind'. Hobbes adds that 'war consists not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known'. So a situation of conflict which is constantly in danger of erupting into violence would count as a state of war.

<sup>vii</sup> The proviso about 'harm to others' is important. Practices such as forced marriages, or female genital mutilation, or 'honour killings' of family members held guilty of some sexual transgression, will not be permitted by a secular state, even if they are held to be endorsed by a religious tradition. In prohibiting them, the secular state is not exhibiting a prejudice against a religion, it is impartially protecting the rights of its citizens.

<sup>viii</sup> In their foreword to Nick Spencer, *Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square* (Theos, London, 2006)

<sup>ix</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Secularism, Faith and Freedom', a lecture given at the pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2006. ([http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/061123a.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/061123a.htm))

<sup>x</sup> For more on the issue of Bishops in the House of Lords, see 'BHA Briefing 2006/3: Lords Reform', which can be found in the 'Campaigns' section of the BHA web site [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)

<sup>xi</sup> The law does in fact allow some exemptions. It permits organisations which exist to practise, advance or teach religion or belief to restrict participation in their own internal activities on grounds of sexual orientation. (So churches are not forced by law to have gay priests, for instance.) But the regulations prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services to the public, and do not allow exemption from this on grounds of 'conscience'.

<sup>xii</sup> A recent case which raised these issues was that of the UK teenager whose insistence on wearing a silver ring signifying her intention to remain a virgin until married brought her into conflict with her school's regulations about uniform. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6900512.stm>

<sup>xiii</sup> A classic example was a statement by the head of the (private) Nottingham Islamia School, Ibrahim Lawson, in an interview with Ernie Rea on 'Beyond Belief' (Radio 4, 10 March 2003):

ER: Ibrahim Lawson, how would you define the purpose of your Islamia school?

IL: Well, the essential purpose of the Islamia school as with all Islamic schools is to inculcate profound religious belief in the children.

ER: You use the word 'inculcate': does that mean you are in the business of indoctrination?

IL: I would say so, yes; I mean we are quite unashamed about that really. The reason that parents send their children to our school is that they want them to grow up to be very good Muslims.

ER: Does that mean that Islam is a given and is never challenged?

IL: That's right...

From a Christian perspective Terence Copley, in his *Indoctrination, Education and God: The Struggle for the Mind* (London, 2005), accuses secularism of being itself a form of indoctrination insofar as it treats religious belief as merely an optional personal allegiance. He urges a more confessional approach to religious education, aiming to 'nurture children in the heritage religion of their culture' while 'allowing them the freedom to discuss and question' (p.113).

<sup>xiv</sup> See our Humanist Philosophers' Group pamphlet *Religious Schools: the Case Against*, published by the British Humanist Association (London, 2001).

<sup>xv</sup> For more on the practical applications of secularism, see Andrew Copson and David Pollock, 'Religion and the state in an open society' on [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)