

THE INTOLERANCE OF SECULAR HUMANISM

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The thesis which I propose to develop is that secular humanism, in addition to being the dominant religion of our times, is both contemptuous of and intolerant towards other religious creeds.

I will proceed in two stages. First, I will show that secular humanism has several, although not all, of the characteristics of a religion. Among those characteristics, I shall include dogmatism - by which I mean an attitude which consists in holding that there are statements that are unconditionally true -; and a Gospel - by which I mean a teaching about the way we should carry out our lives. Second, I will emphasize those aspects of secular humanism that render it intolerant towards other creeds by considering the real meaning of tolerance and contrasting it with the politics inherent to secular humanism.

Our first question, then, is: in what sense can one say that secular humanism is a religious creed?

Secular humanists hold that they have freed themselves from every kind of belief. The truth, however, is that they have merely switched from a religious faith to a secular one, from belief in a transcendent God to belief in an immanent one. They view the human person not as a creature - and hence dependent upon his Creator - but as an entirely autonomous self-loving entity. Man somehow becomes his own Creator. It all sounds very modern, but in fact it is an old story, at least as old as the Greek Myth of Prometheus. And its culmination is not a more scientific age, but just the opposite, as

far into the fantastic, even, as the New Age Movement popularized by Shirley Maclaine and others of the same stripe.

That secular humanism is akin to religion is reflected by the fact that it has its own set of dogmas. These include denial of any moral authority greater than the individual human will, the primacy of "personal satisfaction", the denial of objective moral values, etc. - all assertions which are merely taken for granted without ever having been proven.

Of these unjustified assumptions, perhaps the most fundamental is the notion of "the infinite value of the human person". Of course, Christians also subscribe to this notion and, therefore, one might think that this is one secularist assumption that is perhaps not totally unfounded. Yet, one would be gravely mistaken to think that this represents a sort of common ground for Christians and secular humanists because what constitutes the foundation of human dignity in Christianity is perceived by secular humanism as a source of dependence and weakness, i.e., as a denial of dignity. While Christianity holds that man's dignity originates from his having been created "in the image of God", secular humanism believes that it originates from his having no "originator" or, to put it differently, from his being "self-originated". Secular humanism thus asserts that there is no authority above man that may bind him in conscience. Whether he is considered individually, as in liberalism, or collectively, as in marxism and fascism, man becomes the source of all authority. In both cases, there is a divinization of man.

The most interesting aspect of this secularist understanding of human dignity, however, is that it points to what is, in effect, the Gospel of secular humanism. What I

am referring to here is the doctrine of human rights as it has developed over the last two centuries. It is a doctrine which, although in appearance consistent with Christian anthropology, is but a caricature, if not a straight denial, of it.

This becomes clear if we consider briefly how human rights developed as a doctrine. The conventional view is that they originated from the 18th century, i.e., the philosophers of the "Enlightenment". In fact, their origin lies in the work of 16th century Catholic theologians. I.e., men whom the Enlightenment as well as Modernity have generally associated with Medieval obscurantism. Francisco de Vitoria, a Spanish Dominican friar who was an exact contemporary of Luther (1483-1546) taught the doctrine of human rights at Salamanca until he died during the opening session of the Council of Trent. He was followed by other outstanding theologians, such as Domingo de Soto, also a Dominican, and Francisco Suarez and Robert Bellarmine, both of them prominent Jesuits.

The occasion for the elaboration of their doctrine was provided by the need to protect the rights of the Indians in the Portuguese and Spanish colonies, dramatically voiced by another famous Dominican friar, Bartolome de la Casas. The dignity and fundamental equality of all human beings was brought into sharp relief by these Catholic theologians long before the Enlightenment. And it was not a "novelty" or a departure from tradition. The expression "dignity of man" is not an invention of the Renaissance, whatever Allan Bloom might have to say about this in The Closing of the American Mind. (Bloom states that the expression was first used by Pico della Mirandola in the 15th century.) Anyone who has taken the trouble of reading the Fathers of the first five centuries of Christianity, or the works of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, or those

of St. Catherine of Siena in the 14th century, knows that they were quite familiar with it.

But then, might ask the secular humanist, if the doctrine of human rights is so ingrained in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, why did we have to go through the French Revolution - the birth of modern political culture - and its sequels in order to ensure their public recognition? The answer is that no such Revolution was required because those rights, by and large, were relatively well respected long before 1789. They were not set out in official statements. But they were implicitly acknowledged as part and parcel of man's duties on earth. Before there were Declarations, there was the Decalogue.

The Decalogue does not say that man has a right to life, but it prescribes: "Thou shall not kill". It does not say that old age security is a right, but it prescribes: "Thou shall honor thy father and mother", thus creating an obligation to take care of the elderly. It does not say that property is a right, but It prescribes: "Thou shall not steal". Each commandment, by creating an obligation, also establishes a correlative right. For centuries, Jewish and Christian moral leaders tried to impress upon their flock a sense of moral obligation grounded in these divine commands. In doing so, they could not but emphasize that man is both Intelligent - able to discern between right and wrong - and free - able to ignore God's commands.

Why then the French Revolution and its Declaration of rights? Precisely in order to get rid of the Christian order built on the Decalogue and usher in a new moral order based, not on God's commands, but on Man's self-ascribed rights. Therein lies the real meaning of the French Revolution and of all the Declarations of rights inspired from it.

God ceases to be the measure of man. Man becomes the measure of all things. It was no mere accident that the promulgation of the Declaration of 1789 coincided with the profanation of Notre-Dame de Paris where the Goddess of Reason was installed on the central altar. Nor was the adoption of a new Republican calendar a purely accidental thing. Both events pointed to the metaphysical dimension of the Revolution. Human salvation no longer called for a transcendental God. Man could henceforth take care of himself. He would no longer hold himself accountable to a higher Authority.

What is unique about the Declaration of 1789, therefore, is not that it was the first to proclaim man's dignity but rather that it was the first to assert human rights at the expense of those of God. It was the first official statement where man's dignity was deemed to require no justification from above: Man transcends the rest of nature and is transcended by nothing. That is the central dogma of our contemporary secularist culture.

One might note in passing that the affirmation of this dogma has often been accompanied by bloodshed. Rarely were human rights more blatantly violated, for example, than during the reign of Terror that was instituted shortly after the proclamation of the Declaration of 1789. When God is ignored or declared dead, man soon agonizes.

In our contemporary secular society, this agony is there for anyone to see who can see through the hypocrisy of the so-called sexual liberation. Take the example of the "rights" of women to control their own bodies. What we are really talking about here is a society dominated by the male libido where a woman has the "freedom" to choose either the pill, which allows her to gain weight, develop varicose veins and wonder about breast

cancer, or less effective forms of birth control, which afford her monthly anxiety the likes of which young men have never experienced. Should her birth control fail, she has the power to "choose" to become a mother or to deny herself motherhood. Either way, she must face another choice. If the baby is born, society lets her raise the child alone, or give it up for adoption and wonder all her life about the benevolence of the motives of the adoptive parents. If the baby is aborted, and society pats her reassuringly on the back, she can either succumb to consuming regret or stubbornly bury it each time it resurfaces. Such are the "liberating" choices young women of today are offered. "Liberation" is the new name for sexual aggression.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the secularist creed, however, is its claim to be a nurturer of tolerance. This claim is based on the notion that if one assumes that there is no such thing as objective moral standards, one is necessarily bound to accept an unlimited diversity of views on religious and moral matters. "Anything goes as long as you don't hurt me" says the secular humanist. But is this tolerance? After all, it is only when one is absolutely convinced that what someone else says or does is wrong that one may find it preferable to tolerate it. Where there is no strong belief that some statements are absolutely true or some behaviour inherently good, i.e., where there is no dogmatic attitude, there can be no tolerance because there is nothing to tolerate.

Tolerance does not consist in taking the view that there is no such thing as an absolute truth or an absolute good. On the contrary, it presupposes that one believes in such truth or good while acknowledging that other people who hold a conflicting view about what constitutes such truth or good, or who go as far as denying the very possibility

of such truth or good, should nevertheless be left entirely free to speak their own mind. The concept of tolerance is not meant to apply to ideas but to people. If we say that we tolerate certain ideas, what we really mean is that we find perfectly acceptable that people who hold ideas opposed to our own should not be prevented from expressing them freely. Etienne Gilson, drawing from Aristotle, put it this way: "Tolerance is nothing else than a particular application to the needs of political life of the moral virtue of friendship!"

What is less apparent, however, is that tolerance can only be lived as a virtue, i.e. as an acquired habit that seems almost natural, by a person who is firmly convinced that all human beings are endowed with the light of reason and, therefore, capable of knowing reality as it is objectively, and not merely as it can be perceived subjectively. Without this conviction, there can be no hope that what I understand to be absolutely true or good can be equally and freely understood by others as well.

In short, an attitude of tolerance presupposes the recognition of an objective order of reality and the power of reason to comprehend it. Failing such a recognition, what we have is not tolerance but indifference. No one who is not convinced that there is such a thing as objective truth, especially in moral matters, can ever expect to see men coming to a common agreement based strictly on reason. They may believe in a consensus based on a commonality of interest, or on a common will, but not on rational principles.

This brings me to the second part of my thesis, which is that by denying the objectivity of moral norms, secular humanism denies the very possibility of tolerance as a political virtue. This is clear enough in the works of the Fathers of secular humanism.

Rousseau is a case in point. In the chapter of The Social Contract devoted to "civil religion", he argues others, that "tolerance should be given to all religions that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of citizenship". In other words, it is for the sovereign state to determine what religious beliefs are acceptable and which are not. Similar examples can be found in the works of Voltaire and of other Fathers of secular humanism.

My contention is that Rousseau's use of the word tolerance perverts its true meaning. For what Rousseau and his followers are saying is that our moral life should be separated into two different compartments, one public and the other private, and that there should be no link whatsoever between the two. This is tantamount to imposing a regime of moral and religious Apartheid on those who do not subscribe to the secularist creed. Religion may exist so long as it is never seen or heard outside the confines of private life. The Church may exist, but only as a private voluntary organization. It should not be allowed to impinge on public affairs.

The secular humanist justifies this position by saying: "I have great respect for religion but I cannot accept that the creed of a few should become the law of the land". This is the argument that is constantly thrown at those who, for example, oppose abortion, euthanasia and the deliberate starvation of Down's syndrome babies. They are accused of being intolerant towards those who do not share their views.

The accusation is unwarranted and only serves to hide the intolerance of the accusers. It is one thing to argue, as proliferators do, that there are such things as religious norms or objective moral standards which should be reflected in our legal system; it is

quite another to argue that such norms or standards should be enforced against the will of the majority. In the first case, there is no presumption as to whether the view expounded accords or not with that of the majority. The view is merely expressed in order to build or consolidate a majority. If the response of the secularist to this view were of the kind: "I beg to disagree for the following reasons...", then it might be considered fair. But the response of the secularist is of a completely different kind. It is tantamount to saying: "You are out of order. You may not express a view based strictly on religious or moral considerations because they are not pertinent to public issues". This is intolerance. What is being argued here is that anyone who believes in the existence of objective moral standards is not allowed to speak his own mind. He may hold to his views but he may not express them freely.

The strategy of secular humanism, therefore, is to silence the opposition by accusing it of fanaticism or intolerance everytime that appeal is made to religious or moral considerations. The success of this strategy can be measured by the immense gap between faith and culture that has developed over the past few centuries. The Second Vatican Council identified this gap as one of the biggest problems of our time. After noting that it would be a serious mistake for the Christian to shirk his earthly responsibilities, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World states:

But it is no less mistaken to think that we may immerse ourselves on earthly activities as if these latter were utterly foreign to religion, and religion were nothing more than the fulfilment of acts of worship and the observance of a few moral obligations. One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives. As far back as the Old Testament the prophets vehemently denounced this scandal, and in the New Testament Christ himself with greater force threatened it with severe punishment. Let there, then, be no

such pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other.

The need for unity of life which secular humanism so vehemently denies is not a Christian invention. It has been recognized by most of the world's great religions. Five hundred years before the birth of Christianity, Confucius wrote:

If there is harmony in the heart, there will be harmony in the family. If there is harmony in the family, there will be harmony in the nation. If there is harmony in the nation, there will be harmony in the world.

It is precisely this notion of unity of life which secular humanism sees as anathema. Such unity, it argues, leads to a sort of monism whereby the values and beliefs of some are imposed on the whole of society. The answer, of course, is that there is no specific Christian or religious solution to temporal issues. Nor is there such a thing as a specifically Christian State or a specifically Christian economy. However, there is an objective human nature and one of its constitutive parts is moral conscience. Solutions to temporal issues cannot be truly human if they do not conform to human nature.

In short, we cannot have two masters. There can be no compromise between secular humanism, on the one hand, and any system of belief that admits of objective moral standards, on the other. At a personal level, mixing them together is an affront to human intelligence. At a social level, they may co-exist for some time, although not without striking sparks.

NOTES

1. See Ramon Hernandez, Human Rights in the Work of Francisco de Vitoria, Salamanca, 1984.
2. Gilson, Etienne, Dogmatism and Tolerance, Rutgers Univ. Press, New Jersey, 1952, p. 9.