

# Could a Humanist Ever Frolic In The Sea Of Faith?

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## Part 1: Definitions and Downsides

### Abstract

Despite the widespread disapproval of 'religion' in Humanist circles, if we were to rid the term 'religious' of outdated restrictions then some varieties of Humanism can be shown to be religious dispositions. The grounds for accepting or rejecting religion are better understood once the methods of 'scratching' the religious 'itch' are seen separately from the universal itch itself.

### Introduction

Let me drive a stake firmly in the ground now and return later to defend it. I want to propose that there are at least two kinds of humanism: secular and religious. Much of this paper will be addressed to those who say that 'religious humanism' is a contradiction in terms.

There is much in common between the two forms of humanism. Members of both groups agree that all human activity and institutions are made only by humans. All of our art and culture and all forms of religious expression are human products. We agree that nothing comes in from 'outside' because there is no 'outside' in the sense that Plato or other supernaturalists thought, and think.

Traditional Christianity is dedicated to opposing what it takes to be corrosive of spirituality: materialism, secularism and humanism. But we of the Sea of Faith Network find value in materialist<sup>[1]</sup> explanations of the origins of the cosmos, of life and of consciousness. We take the view that humans emerge **up** from the earth and not **down** from the heavens. In taking the view that **this** life is all that we will ever have, the 'secular' is immensely important and 'the human' is where we locate our priorities and our values. Those of us who retain some affection for a Christian upbringing but who can no longer assent to what we take to be its essential affirmations, call ourselves 'Post-Christian'. We take the view that, while traditional forms of

Christian expression have more-or-less lost the plot, the plot remains important.

All Humanists have in common a moral earnestness. We yearn for a better world, and the more active among us try to bring it about.

Yet we differ, deeply.

Religious Humanists make the claim that the religious **dimension** of a human being is our best part, even while conceding that some forms of religion **expression** have done much harm.

On the other hand, secular Humanists show, in speech and in writing, what can justifiably be called a deep loathing of religion.<sup>[2]</sup>

While secular Humanists call for 'no religion', religious Humanists call for 'better religion'. There is a third position represented by the hybrid "Universism"<sup>[3]</sup> which like secular Humanism, rejects faith as slavish credulity but claims to put religion on a rational footing.

The remainder of this paper and its sequel will discuss the possibility of a coming together, while not denying the canyon that separates secular from religious Humanists.<sup>[4]</sup>

### A Question of Definition

Of all areas of knowledge which deal with human activity, it is in any consideration of 'religion' that there is the greatest muddlement in the lexicon.

In everyday speech, 'faith' and 'belief' often mean 'provisional knowledge' as in "I believe that it will rain tomorrow" while the radical religious humanism of the Sea of Faith treats it as a much more profound matter. It is not merely a matter of believing **that**, but of believing **in** — it is an existential concern. What is it that "holds your conscience captive"<sup>[5]</sup>?

You seek, like a swimmer, to be able to put your feet down and feel solid ground. Would you invest your very selfhood in the matter? 'Faith' and 'belief' in questions are questions of trustworthiness and value.

'Spirituality' is all of the above and additionally (if other people become involved) the practical answer to "who is my neighbour?" and "what then are my obligations?"<sup>[6]</sup>

The word 'religion' names the secular Humanist's biggest scandal. Secular Humanists do not **define** 'religion' as much as **characterise** it and then proceed to denounce it from an assumption that religion is inescapably supernaturalist, corrupt and daft. As Rob Wheeler of the SoF in the UK observed:

"The trouble with most books arguing for [secular] humanism is that they start with a crude critique of religion, focusing in an entirely unbalanced way on the horrors committed by Roman Catholicism in the past and the idiocies of Evangelicals and Fundamentalist in the present. Having shown that religion is mad, bad, dangerous and false they tend to assume that there is nothing else they have to do. Secular humanism naturally follows by default, QED, and requires no justification in its own right. At this point we can all stop thinking. ...<sup>[7]</sup>"

Most dictionaries still define religion in terms of an acknowledgement of a super-natural order of reality and our consequent behaviour towards it<sup>[8]</sup>. A Google search for [Religion "definition of"] will yield in excess of 10 million hits.

**This is my major disagreement with the majority of secular Humanists who have expressed themselves in print.**

Those of us who are 'religious' but do not subscribe to supernaturalism, take the view that those who do are guilty only of mistaking metaphor for metaphysics — of mistaking the map for the territory to which it is said to point. Instead, we should see that religious language ...

"does not convey us truth about the world (thus competing with science ...), but is evocative, expressive, or emotive in character, or is performatory and celebrative in a

social context, or is moral in its imperative function, or it has poetic metaphorical meaning. Thus God talk should be construed primarily as a form of personal and social moral poetry. If this is the case, then religion does not give us knowledge or truth; instead it expresses mood and attitude.<sup>[9]</sup>"

To put it another way, religious ideas are not of a propositional nature which invite debate, evidence, rebuttal and logical proof. Instead they deal with matters of existential importance, of what is so valuable that we would be at all times guided by it and we would commit our lives to it. **The passionate 'anti-religious' Humanist, too, knows this feeling of deep commitment.**

Take this passage from Richard Dawkins, the voluble scourge of all things religious:

"Yet, by the book's [*The Sacred Depths of Nature*] own account, [Ursula] Goodenough does not believe in any sort of supreme being, does not believe in any sort of life after death. By any normal understanding of the English language, she is no more religious than I am. She shares with other atheistic scientists a feeling of awe at the majesty of the universe and the intricate complexity of life. Indeed, the jacket copy for her book — the message that science does not 'point to an existence that is bleak, devoid of meaning, pointless,' but on the contrary 'can be a wellspring of solace and hope' — would have been equally suitable for my book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, or Carl Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot*. If that is religion, then I am a deeply religious man. But it isn't. And I'm not. As far as I can tell, my 'atheistic' views are identical to Ursula's 'religious' ones. One of us is misusing the English language, and I don't think it's me."<sup>[10]</sup>

This paper takes the view that Dawkins ought to re-evaluate his position in the light of developments in the philosophy of religion.

To insist that religious thought and expression confine itself to the supernatural is similar to asking physics to retain phlogiston, for astronomy to stay with Ptolemy, medicine with Galen, and for biologists to agree that crocodiles emerge spontaneously from mud on the banks of the Nile. To imprison religious expression within pre-Enlightenment thought forms, as many Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians still lovingly do, and as Dawkins does for ease of ridicule, is outdated, dishonest or both. All forms of human thought move on, and so does the religious. One of the

most significant scientific re-appraisals occurred in the early 1960s with Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm shift' — the radical re-orientation of the accepted perspective of a particular scientific discipline<sup>[11]</sup>. At the same time the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson published *Honest To God*<sup>[12]</sup>, a comparable religious paradigm shift. Since then there has been an upswelling of scholarly analysis and reflection about Christianity in particular and religion in general. While, as Don Cupitt wrote of the institutional church ...

"doctrine remains unreformed and religious thinking is not yet free. Protestantism has largely decayed into fundamentalism."<sup>[13]</sup>"

... the opposite has occurred amongst scholars. New evidence has emerged about Christian origins. Advances in archeology, of comparative literature — even of depth psychology — now leave us open to talk of 'religion' in terms that do not shackle it to the supernatural.

Radical Christians and post-Christians of the Sea of Faith Network see 'religion' in terms rather like the following.<sup>[14]</sup>

First, we might use the clarification proposed by the Canadian historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith.<sup>[15]</sup> He suggests that when we use the expression "**a religion**" we are talking about an historical cultural phenomenon such as Christianity, Judaism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints — and so on. They each have a history and they change slowly over time, usually in response to other historical phenomena which impinge on them. The traditions are ongoing and cumulative.

But when we talk about '**religion**' — that is without a qualifying "**a**" or "**the**", then we are talking about the personal piety or faith of an individual human being, even without reference to any particular formalised 'path' of faith.

In maintaining this distinction — between 'a religion' and 'religion' — we suggest that the religious impulse is logically prior to any form of its expression<sup>[16]</sup> as when we feel the existential need to find (or make, we cannot readily distinguish) values, by which life is centred and enriched — in people, events, places, and objects. The Canadian academic, novelist and critic Robertson Davies wrote:

"[The word "religious"] comes from a Latin word which means to take care, to pay heed, to give thought to something. That is the word *religere* which is the opposite of *neglegere*, from which our word "neglect" comes

— to ignore, to close one's eyes to things, to live on the surface of life.<sup>[17]</sup>"

This unsought, hardwired 'itch'<sup>[18]</sup> may be 'scratched' in countless different ways, not all of which call on a supernatural schema. What we have identified as 'sacred'<sup>[19]</sup> we commit ourselves to deeply, even totally. This paper submits that under the same rubric fall a range of phenomena as diverse as: the hymn-shouting Pentecostalist; the Theravadin Buddhist who is indifferent to the notion of 'God'; the level-headed Anglican bishop; the mystic of many flavours (Sufi, Hindu, Christian, New Age, spontaneous and passive); as well as the atheist who fulminates against any or all of the preceding.

**The 'itch' is universal in *homo sapiens* and the range of 'scratches' is so extensive as to include even contradictory points of view<sup>[20]</sup>.**

Paul Tillich<sup>[21]</sup> wrote that religion

"is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary"<sup>[22]</sup>.

This approach, while succinct, is not without difficulties. The most obvious is raised by Richard Dawkins:

"But if the term *religion* is allowed such a flabbily elastic definition, what word is left for conventional religion, religion as the ordinary person in the pew or on the prayer mat understands it today — indeed, as any intellectual would have understood it in previous centuries, when intellectuals were religious like everybody else?"<sup>[23]</sup>

Dawkins wants another noun, but all he really needs is some qualifying adjectives. There is a universal propensity in humans to assign value and then commit one's being to it. Traditional paths of faith are historically and culturally-specific subsets of this general disposition. As noted above, forms of religious expression make up a variegated set, and their advocates do not always agree.

There are two other difficulties. It is possible to count some of the more resolutely **anti-religious** secular Humanists as being **religious**, if only because of the sincerity of the anti-religious feelings. To **value** a life free from supernaturalist superstition and to **commit** oneself to that belief is a matter of deep personal integrity. The particular way in which the skeptic puts integrity into action is to reject the cant,

the double-talk and the hostility to Enlightenment knowledge that for so long has stood for Christian orthodoxy. Anti-Christian? Yes. Religious? Yes.

The other difficulty arises where one's 'ultimate concern' is something commonly held to be deeply bad. Nazism, cannibalism, satanism have all attracted people who have given over their lives unconditionally. One response could be to say that, if it is that bad then its not really 'religion'. But that would be an evasion. We ought to honestly concede that they **are** religious orientations but that they lack the life-affirming focus by which we applaud most forms. Retain the noun, use more adjectives.

We could do worse than to quote Ronald Cavanagh for our definition:

"Religion is the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them."<sup>[24]</sup>

### Bad Things Done in the Name of Religion

David Boulton, a Quaker and a prominent member of the UK Network of Sea of Faith conceded that it is ...

"the baggage which comes with the word 'religious' which is the problem: baggage to do with dogmatism, authoritarianism, holy war, patriarchy, dressing up in silly clothes, vicars' voices, bad reproductions of sentimental paintings of earnest men in robes and langorous women in very little, 'washed in the blood' choruses, misty mysticisms, life after death, gaseous spiritualities and money-spinning new age quackery."<sup>[25]</sup>

And ...

"Today, barely half way through the first decade of the 21st century and the third Christian millennium, we are living through a mighty revival of religion in its crudest, most bigoted, most pernicious forms."<sup>[26]</sup>

In Part 2 I will offer positive account of religious practice but I must first acknowledge that many of the charges levelled against religious expression have merit.

In order to get a balanced view, the reader is urged to maintain Wilfred Cantwell Smith's distinction between 'religion' and 'a religion' so that we place the blame at the appropriate feet.

Three or four decades ago we might have been justified in thinking that religious faith and practice were fading away, at least in the West. Dwindling

church membership, then and now, supported that view. It was widely assumed that, as people became more educated, they would just give up on religion. As I read it, secular Humanists pray for that day. Sort of.

Several major forces have abruptly changed all that. Religion has erupted in the news media. In the positive reportage we read of religious activists promoting peace and justice and of scholarly Christian radical theology. In the negative we see forms of fundamentalism which are anti-intellectual and anti-science as well as both Islam and Christianity subverted to terrorism and militarism.

The document, *A Secular Humanist Declaration*<sup>[27]</sup> sets out objections to what it refers to simply as 'religion': the idea that supernaturalism explains anything; symbols and myths acting as disguises for bad behaviour by 'sophisticated minorities'; the literal readings of scriptures; religions encouraging a morbid view of dying; the dependence on divine assistance.

Most SoF people would (could?) say "amen" to many of these items. But we treasure myths (properly understood<sup>[28]</sup>) as we treasure music — as vehicles for existential truth. Look, as I recently did, into the eyes of a day-old grandchild and give me a 'rational' account, you philistine!

Let us consider two of the major grounds for complaint: politicization mixed with terrorism, and hostility to rationalism.

The interaction between a formalised religion and a political point of view is always a difficult one. Each, according to their precepts, makes claims to be the commanding viewpoint in the life of a subscriber. If 'religion' is to be taken seriously, then surely it sets the agenda for all major decision-making. But 'politics' makes its claims also — of idealism, pragmatism, 'feet-on-the-ground'. As formal adherence to Christianity shrinks, what remains is both theologically and socially more conservative.

Marion Maddox, a senior lecturer in religious studies at Victoria University in Wellington, notes that the term 'faith' has ...

"become shorthand for a particular, **socially** conservative and **economically** liberal variety of Christianity, associated with the outer reaches of fundamentalist and Pentecostal Protestantism, and the currently ascendant conservative end of Catholicism<sup>[29]</sup>."

William Chavanne has chronicled the process by which the religious right came to public notice<sup>[30]</sup>. He listed the societal changes that fueled it.<sup>[31]</sup> and how the political right co-opted the religious right as voting fodder.<sup>[32]</sup>

Islam too has a built-in capacity for politicization. As Don Cupitt explained:

"Islam ... has never reconciled itself to critical thinking, or to the idea that the individual thinker may be right against the world. It cannot accept the idea that religion needs continual self-criticism and reform in order to develop aright."<sup>[33]</sup>

Westerners raised in a democratic tradition generally find Islamic shari'ah law unpalatable, because of its incontestability. This is not the place to attempt to defend it but only to suggest that attempts to understand it will reward the researcher. There is a possibility that the West may, in time, help Islam to soften its insistence in shari'ah law<sup>[34]</sup>.

Most promoters of religion will defend its a-rational nature on the grounds that religion is subjective rather than objective, inviting us to undertake non-scientific activities such as assigning value, of loving, of being compassionate. But we may not defend incursions into the domain<sup>[35]</sup> of science if the scientific method is violated. Much of the 'Intelligent Design' attracts such accusations. On the other hand, classical Christianity has made life difficult for itself by preserving pre-scientific knowledge in dogma, like spiders in amber, long after it has been superseded.

Lloyd Geering speaks as strongly as any Humanist (even atheist) against theism and argues passionately for a "Christianity Without Theism". These are some of the characteristics of theism — the belief in a real, supra-personal God — that he dislikes:

"it added to purely human words a dimension of absolute authority which they did not deserve" ... "the patriarchal and male-oriented character of the culture to which it lead" ... "For centuries the Western world has encouraged us to believe that our future is in the hands of a benevolent and all-powerful God and that we have been placed here on earth to prepare for an eternal destiny elsewhere."<sup>[36]</sup>

### Who or What is to Blame?

There can be no doubt that atrocities of many kinds have been conducted in the name of religious faith. A catalogue would exceed the size of this paper. But it is too simple just to say that it follows

that an improvement would be made by banning religious faith. Indeed the suggestion is so ludicrous in its Canute-like naivety that it ranks alongside any suggestion to ban sex, automobiles, alcohol and chocolate.

The way forward is to follow the suggestion of Cantwell Smith. In separating the 'itch' from the 'scratch'<sup>[37]</sup> we allow for the possibility that the 'bad' might lie in one court but not the other, as it does in the often-quoted parallel case of sexuality.

So, this paper takes the view that the 'itch', which takes on many names: religion, faith, belief, integrity .... is natural to the human condition. It is as ubiquitous as language and as problematic as sexuality.

And, like sexuality<sup>[38]</sup>, the uses to which the religious disposition may be put are widespread. We deplore some of those uses without demanding an end to the capability.

In the concluding article I will attempt to give a positive account of religious faith and practice.

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## References

- 1.the term as used here does not mean 'acquisitiveness'.
- 2.The *Humanist Manifesto I* of 1933 was quite happy with 'religious Humanist' and said that "Religion consists of actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant". By the time of *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973 the atmosphere had chilled to where religion was seen as series of obstacles to self-realisation. The website associated with *The Open Society* <http://www.nzarh.org.nz/> has a feature called "The Fundy Post" of which they say "[It] is published under the banner of 'We read this crap so you don't have to.' Now, if you really must read it, you can. The Fundy Post Newswire provides links to all the best stories about religion, from New Zealand and around the world." Some of the idiotic things done in the name of a religious path of faith are written up in what are called 'best stories'. My reader is invited to look for any intellectual merit at all in this approach.
3. see [www.universist.org](http://www.universist.org)
- 4.An article written by Naomi Sherer, found at [fire.benton.wa.us/philosophy/insidious.html](http://fire.benton.wa.us/philosophy/insidious.html) is mostly an ill-informed rant against all things religious, but its title "Religious Humanism as Oxymoron" sums up a widely-held opinion.
- 5.from the recent movie *Luther*
- 6.that spirituality is rooted in relationship is the theme of Buber 1937 and this is even more clearly articulated in Geering 1983.
- 7.Wheeler 2006.
- 8.As early as 1978 Cavanagh (qv) could

- contrast two quotes: from Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*: "Religion is a belief in an invisible superhuman power ...." and from the *American College Dictionary*: "Religion is the quest for the values of the ideal life, and for the means of achieving them, and includes a world view that relates this quest to the surrounding universe."
- 9.Paul Kurtz, "Should Skeptical Inquiry Be Applied to Religion?" *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine July/August 1999:
  - 10.Dawkins 1999
  - 11.*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)
  - 12.see Robinson 1963. To students of religion the material in his book was not especially new or shocking but that a Bishop of the Church of England should write "... a more radical recasting ... is demanded ... in process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology — of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself — must go into the melting" caused an uproar which has not yet ended..
  - 13.Cupitt 2001
  - 14.I don't want to appear to be talking ex *cathedra*: SoF has no *cathedra*. Nor do I want to say that I speak for "the membership". But I hope that my views would be widely agreed with amongst SoF people.
  - 15.In *The Meaning and End of Religion* Mentor Books New York 1962/1064
  16. It is quite consistent to suggest that cause-and-effect runs the other way — that the participation in a religious milieu induces religious feelings. While conceding a degree of reciprocity, we see the evidence as favouring the priority of 'religion' over 'religions'.
  - 17.Davies 1997 pages 349-350 *passim*
  - 18."Man ... is an animal born to believe." Disraeli 25 November 1864.
  - 19.in the general or secular sense of setting them apart or above other items as being worthy of veneration. "My mother's memory is sacred to me". This often leads to expressing 'worship', the word that gave us 'worship'.
  - 20."... a secular society is not hostile to religion, but provides a kind of neutral environment in which different faiths are free to pursue their ways and works." Hutchison 1981 p522
  - 21.Paul Tillich 1886-1965, German-born U.S. theologian and philosopher whose discussions of God and faith illuminated and bound together the realms of traditional Christianity and modern culture. Some of his books, notably *The Courage to Be* (1952) and *Dynamics of Faith* (1957), reached a large public audience not usually concerned with religious matters.
  - 22.Tillich 1964 p3
  - 23.Dawkins 1999 But the person in the pew or on the prayer mat may not be a philosopher of religion.
  - 24.Cavanagh 1978 p19
  - 25.Boulton 2001
  - 26.Notes from his address at the SoF (NZ) annual Conference, 2004
  - 27.*A Secular Humanist Declaration* Issued In 1980 by The Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (now the Council for Secular Humanism)
  - 28.not as "fallacy" but in the use of "pictorial language to express truths which cannot be expressed so readily or so forcefully in any other way." G. B. Caird, St Luke, Penguin Books 1963 p79 If the reader can handle poetry then she can handle myth.
  - 29."The Rise of Faith-Based Politics", Dr

Marion Maddox, Senior Lecturer, Religious Studies Department Victoria University Wellington at a one-day Conference of the Auckland group of SoF 21 May 2005. Emphases added.

- 30.William Martin Chavanne is Professor of Religion and Public Policy, Department of Sociology, Rice University. The quoted is from the transcription of a presentation made to the 1997 Annual Forum of The Center for Progressive Christianity. Information and resources from the Center for Progressive Christianity are available at [www.tpcp.org](http://www.tpcp.org) For more information about *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, see <http://wmartin.com/withgod>
- 31.*op cit*
- 32.*op cit*
- 33.Don Cupitt, "Comparative Religions" *Guardian*, Saturday October 27, 2001
- 34."Much of the attention is focused on reformulating the sharia, the centuries-old body of Islamic law deeply embedded in a medieval psychology." "Can Islam change?" By Ziauddin Sardar *New Statesman* 2004
- 35.Stephen Jay Gould in his book *Rock of Ages*, (Jonathan Cape 2001) proposed "Non Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA)" which he explained as "the magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. NOMA has met with some, though not universal acceptance.
- 36.Geering 2002 especially pp137-144 but elsewhere *passim*
- 37.my words, not his.
- 38.the connections between sexuality and religious practice (especially monastic and mystical) has a long history. Phenomena such as St Anthony's *succubi*, mass sexual hysteria as in Huxley's *The Devils of Loudon*, and the current revelations of paedophilia by celibate priests are all likely to be explained by reference to psychological dynamics.
- 39.The name comes from a phrase in Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*: "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore, / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd. / But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world." The phrase was used in 1984 as the title of a BBC television documentary series and book by the English theologian Don Cupitt who has become the founding figure of SoF which has independent but co-operating networks in NZ, UK and Australia. The book and the television series trace pivotal changes in western science, philosophy and religion over the past 350 years which together call for a radical re-thinking of our faith traditions.

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