



Natural History and Religion

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Humanism, as we all know, is a way of life that rejects all forms of superstition, a way of life that rejects all magical, metaphysical, and mystical speculation. Rather, humanism tries to build its philosophy on verifiable public knowledge. We do not build our way of life upon the claims of religious people who maintain that God has given them some mystical and private revelation. We are concerned with this world and this life, and we try to leave it better than we found it.

To the people who are not humanists, to any visitors, I say that you have nothing to fear from us. Humanists have never conducted a religious war or an inquisition, though we have historically been the victims. If anyone wants to spend his or her life in prayer, or in Bible study, or in sincerely believing the profound doctrines of his or her chosen faith, we will not interfere. We only ask that these True-Believers leave us alone. If we appear to you as going to Hell, we go our way peacefully, trying all along the way to be good neighbors and good citizens.

I want to thank Lewis Unnewehr who invited me and Katherine to visit with you. We met each other at the Sarasota conference of the Jesus Seminar, of which we are associate members. The Jesus Seminar is that group of Bible scholars who twice a year study selected passages, write papers, argue, and then vote, dealing with one passage at a time. Do you think Jesus really said this, or did he actually do that? They pass around the voting box, and each scholar puts in a marble, Red for yes Jesus said this, Red is reminiscent of the Red Letter Editions of the New Testament with the words of Jesus printed in red. Pink for maybe Jesus said this. Gray for grave doubts, and Black means No Way, Hose This marble-voting business is their way of determining a scholarly consensus. I regard the Jesus Seminar as good clean fun, and I maintain that humanists make the best Bible scholars. But I digress.

My chosen topic for today is Natural History and Religion. Natural history and religion are two ways of looking at the world and at human life. Natural History could also be called the history of nature, and if you went to an expensive university it would be called cosmology, --the study of the cosmos as an orderly system.

Everybody has some idea of life in general, some vision of The Big Picture. From early childhood we begin to put it all together. We take all that we have seen and learned and experienced, and try to draw some general conclusions. Whether you like it or not, whether you think about it or not, you have a picture of life, you have some opinions about how things are and how they should be.

In our civilization there are two approaches to this enterprise: philosophy and theology. The word philosophy means 'the love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means.' The past heroes of philosophy are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Democritus, Seneca, Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. But philosophers have to have something to philosophize about, so they rely on their senses to tell them about the world and on the verifiable conclusions of science,--on Copernicus, Keppler, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein and that crowd.

The second approach is that of theology, which is the study of God, or divine things, or religious truth. The leaders of theology, in our western civilization, are Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc. But if one looks at theology on a world-wide view, it is apparent that to study religious truth, one has to know, or think one knows, where religious truth is located. Is it to be found in The Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Scriptures, the Glorious Koran, the Hindu Vedas, the Scriptures of Gutama Buddha, the Teachings of Confucius, or the decrees of a series of infallible popes? Believe it or not, this has not been a difficult question to answer, because it is seldom asked. Many people believe that one (and only one) of these sources is the 'Absolute Truth.' You have to believe something, they tell us. Usually their choice of scripture is based on childhood teachings, or peer pressure, or parochial education.^{1[1]} Usually they are persuaded, not by evidence, but by a particular religious leader who asserts, "I believe this with all my heart." When will the public learn that strong belief is not verifiable evidence?

I confess that I am a philosopher rather than a theologian. I really do not appreciate theology. I enjoy studying religious writings, but I reserve the right not to believe them.

In order to better understand the two ways of looking at the world, let us go back in our imagination to that time in the morning of the human species. when members of the family and tribe would sit around the evening campfire, --a time before a written language had been developed. In this primeval age our ancestors found that they and their children could ask questions that had no immediate answer. However, their chief concern was survival; they were chiefly concerned with hunting down food to eat and protecting themselves from the

^{1[1]} Or in America, -- the religious wisdom revealed to the Mormon Thomas Smith, the adventists Ellen G. White or the spiritual scientists Mary Baker Eddy

vicious tribe on the other side of the mountain. I imagine that sometimes stories were told and retold around the camp fires,--stories about things that they learned from their grandparents, about a terrible winter when grandfather was a boy, about an extensive flood long ago, and perhaps a terrifying forest fire. Eventually the story-tellers turned to reciting victories of the hunt and victories of their skirmishes with other tribes. They probably told delightful tales about how their tribe was victorious while other tribes perished.

Of course, all this is speculation on my part, but to me it seems reasonable. What is unreasonable is that today men and women would collect some of the stores, now in written form, and consider them to be the absolute truth.

From the humanist point of view, my recitation of stories told around the camp fire represents a plausible and probable explanation of the origin of religion. It had a human origin. Like the other arts and crafts, religion is a product of the ingenuity of the human spirit.

From the humanist point of view, we look about us today and see the world; but we see no supernatural world. We think there is insufficient evidence for a supernatural order beyond the natural order. No mineshaft has been deep enough to record the screams of tortured souls in Hell. No telescope has been powerful enough to show us the pearly gates of Heaven. Heaven and Hell are like influenza, something we have to get over. We study the planet Earth and the vast universe of galaxies. We study natural history. As human beings we encounter problems, but they are natural, earth-bound problems and they require natural, earth-bound solutions.

Religion is quite different, but whatever I say about religion, I say with a certain amount of uncertainty, because scholars of comparative religions are not sure about the essential essence of religion. Ferm's *Encyclopedia of Religion* makes no attempt to offer a definition of religion, but rather substitutes an essay in its place, "Religion, the problem of definition." If we look at the better universities of America today, we find that there is no Department of Religion, but of Religions (plural).^{2[2]} Universities do not study and teach pure religion, but only the various forms of religion in its parochial manifestations.

Let us think about religion in its more obvious manifestations: two examples We will first consider the largest Protestant denomination in America, the Southern Baptists Convention. In this religious group the conservative elements gained control in 1963 and proceeded to purge their seminaries of moderates, the liberals having long ago evaporated, and to appoint their own members to positions of authority on all committees. In the eighty's they appointed a "Peace Committee" to form a statement that would unite the

^{2[2]} Note that 'mathematics' appears to be plural because it ends in an 's', but it is still takes a singular verb.

Southern Baptists and pour oil on their troubled denominational waters. In 1963, 35 years ago, they had declared that the Bible has "truth without any mixture of error for its matter." In 1985, twenty-two years later, the Peace Committee reached this so-called compromise statement: Southern Baptists believe:

- 1 In the direct creation of mankind and therefore they believe Adam and Eve were real persons. (Humans did not evolve.)
- 2 The named authors did indeed write the Biblical books attributed to them by those books. (Moses wrote the Pentateuch, The KJV is correct.)
- 3 The miracles described in Scripture did indeed occur as supernatural events in history.
- 4 The historical narratives given by Biblical authors are indeed accurate and reliable as given by those authors.^{3[3]}

The largest denomination in America and in the Christian world is the Roman Catholic. From the 2nd and 3rd centuries on, they have claimed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, lived and died a virgin. (Even though Mark 6:3 tells us "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?") In 1854 Pope Pius IX, disregarding this and other verses of scripture, proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Not only was Jesus' mother Mary a virgin all her long life, but she herself was Immaculately Conceived. Or to say the same thing in different words, Mary herself was also born of a virgin. She was immaculately conceived. Thus not only the mother of Jesus but also his grandmother, Elizabeth, were declared to be women who lived as mothers and died as virgins. Then in 1950 Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Assumption of Mary. The mother of Jesus never died, but was taken bodily up to heaven.

I have selected these two examples from contemporary religion, because I think they shed some light upon the way religion is shaped and changed from century to century. Here we have two religious groups, both of which limit their membership to like-minded believers. Heretics are either excommunicated or disfellowshipped. Heretical teachers are fired. Then a sort of Executive Council or Board of Trustees, such as the Pope-and-Vatican or the Southern

^{3[3]} The Fourth R (Westar Jesus *Seminar*) May 91, "Four Shibboleths of Southern Baptist Orthodoxy" by Charles W. Hedrick. P.7-f

Baptist Peace Committee deliberate and announce what God has revealed, -- they tell us what true believers 'have everywhere and always believed.'

A revelation is an interesting ---"thing." Should we call it an idea, an experience, a claim? To the members of the believing group, it is a message from God, and it is Absolute Truth. To outsiders it is a make-believe story, To outsiders it is at most an alleged revelation. Whatever it is, it is a message told by someone presumptuous enough to speak for God. In actual practice a revelation is a command to stop thinking and investigating, and start believing.

Once a large religious organization announces that the first pair of humans were created directly from the hand of God without evolutionary ancestors, then the issue is settled, at least the issue is settled within that organization. Or once a large religious organization announces that Mary never died but ascended bodily to heaven, that issue is decided for that religious group. Divine revelations are supposed to be absolutely true for ever and ever. They are never wrong, and they can never be changed. There is no need for historical and scientific data to verify them. In organized religion complete and unwavering belief in the selected revelations is regarded as a virtue. In the gospel according to John (20:29), the resurrected Jesus finally appears to the disciple Thomas, who up to that time had doubted the resurrection. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" asked Jesus "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And in the ending to the gospel of Mark, a passage added sometime after the original gospel was written, Jesus is again reported as saying (16:16), "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." In other words, the non-believer is condemned to Hell.

These verses indicate the basic religious method of spreading its good news. Beliefs are spread not by reason and verifiable evidence, but by fear brought on by the solemn threat of perpetual eternal torture. If a newcomer has trouble believing certain revelations, he is told that it is because his soul is in the grips of sin and he should pray earnestly and fervently for the grace to believe. But threats of hell do not constitute verifiable evidence.

Today religious doctrines are based on sacred scripture. Every word is supposed to be true. In the past this used to work rather well. But when Constantinople was captured in 1204, copies of the ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts spread over Europe. The university professors, who had been reading only the Bible devotionally and seeing philosophy only as a servant of theology, found a new and exciting literature; a re-awakening, spread even faster by the invention of the printing press. The priests and teachers found that these Ancient Greeks and Romans knew how to live, and they were not burdened with sin and guilt. It was as if the intellectual leaders of the late Middle Ages had

found a new platform from which to observe their Church-controlled society and a different approach to living the good life. In the Renaissance the first Humanists were these classical scholars, writers and artists. Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo all read the ancient Greek and Roman works of astronomy and helped to bring on a re-awakening of knowledge, science, and intellectual progress.

During the Middle Ages the earthly life of men and women was seen merely as a short dress rehearsal for the eternity to follow. Their primary concern was the eternal welfare of their immortal souls. All activities, such as the study of nature that did not contribute to one's salvation, were of little concern. But, from the Renaissance on, there developed a new interest in nature, and in the enjoyment of this earthly life. The humanity of the classics was discovered. The scientific method was improved from the simple observations and anecdotal reports of Aristotle to the careful observations, controlled experiments and mathematical formulas of the new astronomers. The essence of the scientific method became prediction and verification. Anyone who doubted the results of an experiment could duplicate it himself or herself. Science became the domain of secure public knowledge and developed a method that was self correcting.

But while scientists were searching for truth, religion had already found it. The stories told around campfires, were now written and re-written, and arranged in proper order.

There was in the beginning, so runs the Christian story, a great celestial King, wise and good, surrounded by a court of winged musicians and messengers. The King had existed from all eternity, but had always intended, when the right moment should come, to create temporal beings, imperfect copies of himself. So, some six thousand years ago, in obedience to the word of God, light, earth, plants, Sun, Moon, stars, fish, fowl and land animals came into existence. The first man was made out of clay, by a special act of God, and the first woman was fashioned from one of the man's ribs. The first couple were placed in a beautiful garden where they could often see God, the Great King and owner, walking in the cool of the evening. He allowed them to range at will and to eat of all the fruits, except one. But the couple, incited by an evil serpent, transgressed that simple prohibition, and were banished from that paradise with a curse on their heads. They had destroyed their original innocence, and henceforth passed on to their offspring their sinful nature.

At the same time God, lest the work of his hands should wholly perish, promised to redeem in his good season some of Adam's children, and restore them to the life for which they were originally intended. But this ultimate redemption was first to be prefigured by many partial and special redemptions. Thus, Noah was to be saved from the deluge, Lot from Sodom, Isaac from the sacrificial knife of Abraham, Moses from Egypt, the captive Jews from Babylon, and all faithful souls from heathen forgetfulness and idolatry.

On this Earth, continuing to the present day, there were two spirits, two parties, or, as Saint Augustine called them, two cities. The City of Satan, whatever its artifices in art, war, or philosophy, was essentially corrupt and profane. Its joy was but a comic mask and its beauty the whitening of a sepulchre. It stood condemned before God for its vanity, cruelty, and its ignorance of the will of God. However in this great and wicked Babylon, there existed the City of God, a city whose citizens, however humble and inconspicuous they seemed on Earth, were predestined for salvation. To this City of God belonged the patriarchs and prophets of old, the magi who followed the star, the blessed Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, the faithful apostles and the holy church which they established. For salvation had indeed come in the fullness of time through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the Word made flesh.

All history was henceforth essentially nothing but the conflict between these two cities; two moralities, one natural and the other supernatural; two philosophies, one rational and the other revealed; two institutions, one the world, the other the Church. Their conflict was to fill the ages until, when wheat and weeds had long existed together and had exhausted between them the earth for whose substance they struggled, then the thorough and final harvest should come. There would be a terrible day of reckoning, when those who did not believe divine revelations should see in dismay the Lord coming down through the clouds, the angels blowing their trumpets, and the dead rising from their graves, the blessed ones to enter heaven with their great God and the wicked to enter everlasting torment with the devil whom they served.^{4[4]}

Let those who are so inclined fill out this outline with a myriad of details, remembering the endless mysteries, arguments, martyrdoms, and consecrations that carried out the vital theme and enhanced the beauty of the whole. We pause before this epic, more poetry than prose. Is it really necessary to marshal arguments against it? Would we argue against the story of Cronos, the father of Zeus, devouring his own children. Rather we study religion to help us understand our European-American civilization and the unexamined assumptions of the modern mind. The study of religion, like the study of insects, is part of our natural history.

3 George Santayana "The Christian Epic" from *Reason in Religion*.