

Secular Humanism Revisited

My previous column on “Lamentable abuses of religion” generated numerous responses. Most I received were positive, but two emails and a letter to the editor took strong exception to my characterization of secular humanism. Unfortunately, my column lacked sufficient clarity and elaboration to prevent some readers from concluding, mistakenly, that I regard secular humanists as less capable of being morally decent and humane than religious folks. My experience tells me otherwise.

Nuance can be vital in comprehending life’s most important matters. Consider the following two statements:

One can be good without believing in God.
One can be good without God.

The first statement may be applied to secular humanists, and I quite agree with it. The second is a metaphysical statement, about the ultimate constitution of the world, with which I sincerely disagree. I don’t believe anyone can ultimately be good without God – because I regard God as the ultimate source of goodness, apart from which no good could be accomplished anywhere by anyone. My conviction is that secular humanists may be moral without believing in God, but no one – believer or not – possesses the power or capacity to be good apart from the ultimate source of goodness, a Goodness not our own.

Many secular humanists are doubtless far more decent and humane than the right-wing politicians to whom I alluded in my previous column. My chief concern about secular humanism is not that it is plagued with moral degradation but that it fails to provide adequate intellectual and spiritual resources when confronted with the ultimacies of our existence, especially when the chips are down, when life is pressed to the limits, when ordinary human powers prove obviously insufficient to sustain humanity and goodness.

Most of us pass most of our days in relative comfort, insulated from extreme or desperate circumstances. It is rather easy to discount or ignore the ultimate facts of the human condition, including our mortality, our finitude, and our persistent inability to make the best of ourselves. But how would we manage should great suffering or peril come upon us and our society, if the meanings we have constructed for ourselves be demolished and our temporal forms of solace be taken away? Then, I surmise, neither secular humanism nor those forms of religion that cloak human pride, power, and exploitation will deliver us. An authentic religious faith provides the best prospect for preserving us from self-destruction.

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