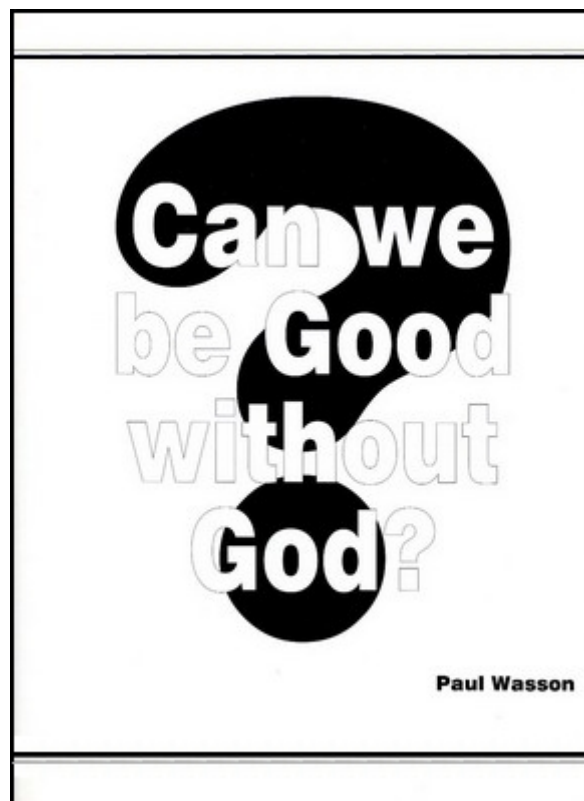


# CAN WE BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD?



The Missing Element in Humanism

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### **Moral Standards—Who Made the Rules?**

Any responsible man or woman would agree that there is a difference between right and wrong, good and evil, vice and virtue, just as there is a difference between truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness. Standards of right and wrong, like standards of aesthetic beauty, may vary from age to age, from culture to culture, but every reasonable person would agree that they exist.

Have we ever wondered however, where moral values come from, this distinction between right and wrong? Who made the rules in the first place? Who decided that some actions are right and commendable, and others are not? To this there are, broadly speaking, two answers; one secular, the other religious. If we were to ask the average man or woman, they would probably answer that they know instinctively that it is right to give to charity and wrong to steal. They were brought up to think that way. They live in a society which has developed laws and conventions to ensure that the law abiding can live in peace while lawbreakers are restrained.

These laws, conventions and moral standards are like cement which holds society together. If they were abandoned, then society would fragment into anarchy. It holds together only if there are generally accepted standards of right conduct, which require all its members to pay their dues and treat their fellows with respect. Most people are guided in this by conscience. They are aware of an obligation to do what is right and feel guilty if they fall short of the standards they live by.

The other possible answer concerning the origin of moral standards is that they are determined by the will of God. It goes without saying that the men who wrote the Bible believed this. They looked up to God not only as the Creator of heaven and earth, but also as the Author of the moral code. All that they needed to know about the right conduct of human life had been revealed by God. They took for granted that His guidance alone gave meaning and direction to human life.

Now, however, perhaps for the first time in history, morality is divorced from religious faith. Even a belief in God is viewed as an optional extra to human life. Just as there is no need to recognise the hand of God in the natural order, so there is no need, it is assumed, to look up to divine authority as the source of moral standards.

There are many people in the modern world who do try to live morally good lives. They devote themselves to serving their fellows. They seek to cultivate all that is good and noble in human life. Acts of benevolence, self-sacrifice and heroism have often been performed by people with no religious faith at all to underpin their actions.

Such people are humanists. They believe in the worth and the dignity of human life and the brotherhood of man. They emphasise the humane values of compassion, tolerance and freedom and take a positive view of human potential and achievements. They reject religious faith with its claim to be based on divine revelation and authority, putting their trust instead in reason and scientific enquiry. To them, such values as love and compassion are purely human values needing no religious support. Some, though not all, are hostile towards religion and see it as an obstacle to freedom and progress. Its hope of an afterlife is a disincentive to strive to improve the present world.

### **The Christian Roots of Morality**

It is worth asking, how much of the Christian faith have humanists really discarded and where have they derived the moral values which are supposed to have replaced it? It might be said that many humanists and good-living atheists are far more dependant than they might care to admit on the Christian tradition which they claim to have rejected. Standards of kindness, justice, honesty, compassion, respect for truth owe much to that tradition, to the teachings of the Bible and to past generations who had some respect for the Bible. Those who have chosen to discard the Christian tradition yet continue to believe in the worth of human life and the brotherhood of man are, to a great extent, simply living on Christian capital.

If we have a bank account we can draw money out of it only as long as we keep putting money back into it. Otherwise we find ourselves bankrupt. The traditional values on which western civilisation is founded are like this. We can reasonably draw on that tradition only as long as we continue to believe in its validity. Otherwise we will gradually find ourselves in a state of moral bankruptcy. Unfortunately, this seems to be the course which our own society has chosen. Little by little it is discarding those values which it has inherited. Therefore it is only with increasing difficulty that its members can look to traditional morality to find guidance.

Humanists often mistake the influence of that Christian tradition for a basic goodness in human nature. However, what may appear as self-evident differences between right and wrong may not be at all self-evident in a society which does not have that tradition behind it. A totalitarian government, for example, might govern by the principle that the individual exists only for the benefit of the state. It is therefore right to eliminate opposition: to imprison, torture and liquidate those who do not conform. To them this right because they, the government, make the rules and they are subject to no higher authority. A humanist would disagree. He would abhor and condemn the use of torture: simply because his conscience tells him to. A Christian would take a similar view, but on the grounds that there is indeed a higher authority than either governments or individual conscience. It is God who has defined the difference between right and wrong, who condemns cruelty and commands, respect for our fellow men.

### **Who Made the Rules?**

The view of morality as something dependant on the will of God has often been criticised by ancient writers. Why do we need God to tell us that some actions are right and some wrong? — they ask. Do we mean that the difference between right and wrong depends upon His arbitrary decree—an action is good if God commands it and bad if He forbids it? Is He so far above all categories of right and wrong that there is no difference between them until He

makes a decree one way or the other? On this view God could conceivably have created a world in which truthfulness were a vice and dishonesty a virtue, which would be absurd.

Do we mean then, that goodness is somehow independent of God, like the laws of arithmetic and logic, part of the fabric of reality? Actions are inherently either right or wrong, even if no one were to believe it. An atheist would then argue that that is even less reason to invoke God as the source of moral standards. He would say that the ethical section of the Ten Commandments simply codifies what to any reasonable person is already obvious. We hardly need God to tell us that it is right to seek the welfare of our fellows and wrong to seek their injury. To put the question in its simplest form: Is an action good because God has commanded it – which makes Him appear arbitrary? Or has God commanded it because it is good – which makes Him appear superfluous? This dilemma is held to prove the independence of morality from religion.

In fact both horns of the dilemma are false. For a start, God is not subject to a law higher than and separate from Himself. Everything He does and everything He commands His people to do is an expression of His own nature and God cannot do that which is contrary to His own nature. As Creator He cannot be malevolently disposed toward His own creatures. Whatever He does must lead to their ultimate good. Everything that promotes His own purpose and conforms to His will must therefore in itself be good. There is nothing arbitrary about the commands of God. He is not like a tyrant handing down edicts which His subjects must obey without question. He is best compared to a father who offers advice and instruction to his children for their welfare, even though his children might not see it like that at the time.

A code of morality must have an objective scale of reference to measure good and evil and to determine the boundary between them, in the same way that we need a thermometer to measure temperature. Otherwise, terms such as “good” and “evil” are no more than words. By what yardstick do we measure them if we do not believe in God? Public opinion is fickle, individual conscience is subjective, the laws of nature say nothing about moral issues. The only reliable yardstick is found in the Bible which reveals the character and will of God. That provides a reference point which alone is perfect, unchanging, and transcendent. That is the reality by which all other views of reality must be measured.

### **The Ten Commandments**

What then does the Bible say about the morality which comes from God? The first great summary of moral law is recorded in Exodus chapter 20. This is the legislation called the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses. Moses did not invent these commandments, a committee did not compile them; they were engraved on tables of stone by the finger of God.

The first four concern people’s duty to God and the remaining six concern their duty to others and to society at large. In a sense they all concern duty to God simply because respect for parents, prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, false witness and covetousness are God’s laws, to break them is not only an offence against society, they are sins against God the source of all morality.

1. You shall have no other gods before me.

2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honour your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet.

Compared to the law-codes of the other nations in the ancient world, the laws which God gave to Israel were remarkably humanitarian and enlightened. Other nations treated foreigners, slaves and peasants as inferiors. The class-divisions of society were seen as part of the divine order. By contrast, the laws of the Israelites emphasised the humanity which all men have in common. Those laws applied equally to kings, aristocrats and peasants. It was the Word of a moral God who was concerned for social justice, for the plight of the weaker members of society, the orphan, the widow and the immigrant (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). On His behalf the prophets rebuked the rulers who hoarded wealth and oppressed the poor. They denounced hypocrisy, complacency and greed. Many of the higher ideals of the modern world are foreshadowed in the Law of Moses, such as its imperative to look after the less fortunate members of society, its concern for racial minorities and its belief that the individual possesses dignity and worth.

Not only this legislation, but everything else in the Bible, has had an enduring influence upon Western culture over the last two thousand years. The Christian faith became woven into the very fabric of that culture, influencing its art, music, philosophy and its moral and ethical values. Our ancestors took for granted that there was a God, that human life was part of a wider spiritual order and that present conduct would have a bearing upon the destiny of the individual when he left this world for the next.

### **Natural Law**

Are we suggesting then, that if God had not made His will known, then humanity would live on the moral level of savages? No, the Bible tells us that, even without God's revelation, human nature retains a capacity at least to recognise the difference between right and wrong. Jesus implied as much when he urged his followers: "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Clearly he expected people to recognise good behaviour when they see it.

The book of Genesis tells us that man was made in the "image and likeness of God". That being so all men must reflect, however dimly, something of the nature of God. Human reason, which is itself a God-given gift, can develop a love for truth, virtue and beauty, for

the humane values which give richness to human life and transform barbarism into civilisation. This is sometimes called 'Natural Law'. In Romans 2:14 we find the clearest statement of 'natural law' in the New Testament:

*"Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares." (Romans 2:14-16).*

What is the Apostle saying? He is describing two kinds of divine law. One which God had made known through Moses and which Israel alone had received. The other a law "written on the hearts", and which all mankind is endowed with. So even the 'Gentiles', that is people who had not heard of the law of Moses, still possessed a knowledge of right and wrong. They had a conscience, they were aware of moral values. This is sometimes called 'general revelation'. The Apostle does not say that the Gentiles lived up to that knowledge, in the previous chapter he describes how far they fell short. But they knew enough, he says, to be held accountable by God for their actions.

Without this knowledge of right and wrong "written on their hearts", there could be no ordered society, no civilisation, no cultural achievements. The Apostle Paul lived in the Roman empire, an empire renowned for its civilisation, its legal system and its achievements. He was doubtless familiar with the ideas of its great philosophers many of whom lived by a moral code outwardly very close to the Christian ethic. There were plenty of contrasts with Christianity, but at its best it rose far above the popular paganism of the ancient world.

People like that can be found within every culture. People who try to live by a high moral standard despite the low standards around them. They know that there is a difference between right and wrong. That much at least seems to be ingrained in human nature. Even among those who do not acknowledge the authority or even the existence of God there can be morality and a love for truth and goodness.

### **"Let everyone submit himself"**

The Apostle Paul tells us that governments, in their task of maintaining law and order in society, are given their authority by God. Those who rule, do so on behalf of God, even if they do not know this:

*"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:1-4).*

The Apostle is referring to the Roman government and by implication, all human governments. Insofar as they restrain evil and uphold social order, the civil authorities of this world are the instruments of God, even those governments which do not acknowledge His authority. Such a role however, is essentially a negative one. There is little that governments can do to instil positive virtue in their subjects. Faced with rising crime figures the answer of politicians is to recruit more police, hand out longer prison sentences and install more CCTV cameras in the streets. It is like a doctor treating the symptoms of an illness instead of its cause.

Every aspect of modern life is governed by laws, from traffic control to drug control, from industrial relations to the protection of property. Countless thousands of laws, by-laws and regulations all designed to protect the law-abiding and restrain the lawbreaker. Yet few would deny that society is less law-abiding than it was a generation ago. There is an obvious link between these two social trends. It is simply because so many conduct themselves in a way that is antisocial or selfish that the government has to bring in more and more legislation in order to restrain the prevailing anarchy and close the loopholes which the unscrupulous are willing to exploit. It is a paradoxical position. The more anarchic a society becomes and the more contemptuous of authority, the more laws have to be handed down to hold the fabric of society together.

### **Limitations of Law**

The maintenance of social order is not the same thing as instilling a high moral tone in its subjects. A government can pass any number of laws, but that does not make its citizens any more pure in heart or compassionate towards their fellows. The highest form of morality is found only when people do the right thing because they want to and because right behaviour is ingrained in their nature.

The main limitation of any legal system is not so much that people will break the law, but that they will simply go through the motions of obedience. They will make their behaviour conform without putting their heart into it. A man who obeys the law only so as to stay out of prison can hardly be said to live by a very high moral standard. It can hardly be called morality at all, it is simply enlightened self-interest.

Even the Ten Commandments have this limitation. They were not the highest form of morality as long as they legislated only on outward behaviour, and as long as they were imposed on subjects who had no real inclination to obey them. For example, the sixth commandment states 'You shall not murder'. A devout Israelite could claim to have obeyed this simply by not murdering anyone, even though he might heartily have wished his enemies dead. Which is not the kind of morality that God wants. He does not want an adjustment of behaviour, but a change of heart. One of the Old Testament prophets Jeremiah, mindful of this problem, looked forward to a future time when the law which came from God would no longer be imposed from above upon reluctant subjects:

*"I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).*

The prophet Jeremiah recognised that the drawback to any legal code is that it is external to ourselves, imposed from above. The law of Moses was mostly concerned with outward behaviour, with visible actions. It had to be, because its original function was to provide

magistrates with a means of assessing guilt. A human magistrate cannot see the state of a man's heart, he can judge only on the basis of outward appearances. Jeremiah predicted a future age when morality will be more than outwardly good behaviour, but something ingrained in people's hearts. How can this be achieved? It is no use offering rewards for obedience or punishments for disobedience, because morality then becomes self-centred; its aim is to gain the reward and avoid the punishment.

### **The Morality which Matters**

One of the aims of Jesus was to solve this problem. Therefore he did not simply provide his followers with a list of do's and don'ts. In fact he was sharply critical of a morality founded on a rule-book mentality, which seeks to modify behaviour according to a written code. He knew that the morality which really mattered was achieved by transforming people's hearts, changing their underlying motives.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the great manifesto of his teaching, (see Matthew chapters 5-7) he deliberately contrasts the legislation of Moses with its emphasis on the outward act with a moral code that emphasised inward purity of motive. This was the theme of his own teaching: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago ..., but I tell you ...". For example, where the old Law legislated against murder (Matthew 5:21), adultery (5:27) and false witness (v.33). Jesus goes further. He forbids the hatred which animates murder, the lust from which all adultery springs and the spirit of deceit which stands behind all false witness. His teaching therefore does not simply add a bit more to the old law: it has a different character from the old, it governs not just behaviour, but the motives behind behaviour.

There is another difference. The old Law had represented strict justice: "You have heard that it was said, Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" (Matthew 5:38). That is natural justice, to give enemies exactly what they deserve. But Jesus replaces justice with a dignified submission to injustice. He urges his followers to meet hostility with kindness. "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right check, turn to him the other also" (verse 39). And so he continues—if someone demands your coat then give him your overcoat as well. Go the second mile with the exploiter: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (verse 44). The purpose behind all these sayings is that the followers of Jesus should take whatever course of action will turn their enemies into their friends and neutralise their animosity. They must never allow the spirit of revenge to motivate their dealings with others.

### **Morality and the Character of God**

But why should the followers of Jesus obey such an exacting standard of morality, a morality which penetrates so deep into their very nature? Why should they go out of their way to turn enemies into friends? The answer of Jesus is simple—because God is like that—His love, compassion and benevolence is extended to friend and foe alike:

*"... that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).*



Jesus urged his disciples to show benevolence to others and to turn their enemies into friends because that is how God deals with people. God comes in at every point in the Sermon on the Mount — His reality, His love for us. His claim upon us. All these things form the basis of Jesus' ethic. A God who is ever present, though unseen, and before whom all of us must one day give account.

Moreover, the message of Jesus was more than words. He himself practised what he preached. It is often said that Jesus led a life that was 'sinless'. So it was. But that is far too negative a description. His was more than an absence of sin, but rather a dynamic, moral goodness, a radiant warmth of character. This flowed out of him spontaneously and continually, filling every aspect of his life, so that those who came in contact with him felt strengthened, cleansed and forgiven.

His compassion for suffering humanity prompted him to identify himself with their hardship and afflictions. When he submitted to the unjust and violent death which his enemies inflicted upon him he demonstrated that his love was stronger than their hatred, and his power to forgive greater than their evil. In all this he provided an example for his followers and a vision for them to live by. That was the extra dimension which Jesus introduced into morality. A new understanding of God's love, with self-giving and self-sacrifice at its very heart:

*"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12, 13).*

In this way Jesus revealed to us what the character of God is like. It could be said that a man's character is shaped by what he worships. If he has a view of God that He is cruel, vengeful and intolerant, then these qualities of character will reveal themselves in his own dealings with his fellows. If he worships a God of love and compassion then he is more likely to be loving and compassionate himself.

### **The Greatest Commandment**

Jesus took the Ten Commandments and made each one a matter of the heart, not of outward behaviour. In fact he went further than this. He reduced the Ten Commandments to two, and did so in answer to the question "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law"? (Matthew 22:36). There were ten to choose from, but Jesus did not pick out one from the ten and elevate it over the other nine. His answer was:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37, quoting Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5).*

In this answer of Jesus we see his remarkable facility for reducing religion to its essence. These two commandments summarise the Ten Commandments: Love God and Love man. We can understand why. If we truly loved God, then it would not occur to us to take His name in vain. If we truly loved our fellow men, then it would not occur to us to steal from them, kill them or bear false witness against them.

How simple his two commandments sound: 'Love God' and 'Love man'—that's all there is to it, everything else will fall into place. Yet how much more difficult to obey. It is far easier to obey a list of do's and don'ts, no matter how long the list. Yet these two commandments to love cannot be imposed upon us from above, they cannot be coerced. We must want to love.

Suppose that our own government tried to introduce a law stating that every individual in society must love his neighbour as himself. Such a law would make most other legislation superfluous. There would be no need to make murder and theft illegal, simply because no one would ever think of committing them. If every member of society placed the common good before his own, then there would be no need for legislation to protect property, no need for laws against burglary or violence against the person. If everyone were honest, there would be no need for surveillance systems and security guards. Of course, no government could hope to make such a law work. The most they can do is to prohibit wrongdoing and punish wrongdoers; which is far different from instilling positive goodness in their citizens.

A man can be compelled by legislation not to harm his fellows, even to act benevolently, but he cannot be compelled to love them. Christ, on the other hand, expects those who follow him to love both him and one another, not because he compels or induces them or because they are afraid of the consequences of disobedience: but because he has demonstrated the depth of his own love for them. This has given him an authority over them that no government has ever had over its subjects.

### **Theory and Practice**

Much that reflects a high moral tone in the secular world is due to the influence of the Christian Gospel. Many people, even those who do not believe in God, have expressed an admiration for the teaching of Jesus about how people should live and deal with one another. There is, however, a limit to how much atheists can borrow from the teaching of Jesus. This is because his ethical teaching was only one element in his Gospel. To take the Sermon on the Mount out of its context and treat it as no more than a set of moral maxims is to misunderstand its meaning. For it is part and parcel of his teaching about God and our position before him. We cannot separate theory and practice. His Gospel also affirms the sovereignty of God, His desire to rescue us from the plight into which our selfishness has led us and our need for His forgiveness and grace to restore us to spiritual health. It affirms that man is made in the image of God and is destined for eternal fellowship with Him.

If we do not accept these truths, then the morality which Jesus taught will not last long as the basis of our conduct. Once we begin to question the truth of one part of his teaching, then it is only a matter of time before we start to question every part. As the generations pass, the Christian element in morality will grow thinner and thinner. What survives will be an empty husk, a pale shadow, having ever less authority or force.

On a superficial level there are some aspects of humanist morality which resembles Christian ethics. For example, the Christian Gospel has always emphasised the control of human appetites and passions. Such things as gluttony, drunkenness and promiscuity were once as signs of bad character, in religious terms as sin, a barrier between an individual and God. In the modern secular society these things are still considered wrong, but only in so far as they are detrimental to health. Sexual promiscuity is considered unacceptable unless it can be practised 'safely'. So called 'safe sex' harms no-one, therefore it is all right. In other words,

personal morality is founded on pragmatism, not on the authority of God. It is the baneful effects of overindulgence upon the body which determine whether an activity is wrong, not their spiritual effects.

The morality of the humanist exists solely on what we might call a 'horizontal' level, that is, it is concerned only with relationships between people or issues which concern human welfare. The Christian Gospel on the other hand, emphasises a 'vertical' dimension. It is concerned firstly with the relationship between man and God, our understanding of His character, will and purpose, our standing before Him. It is our knowledge of these things which inform us in our understanding of right and wrong and guides us in our dealings with our fellow men.

There is a world of difference between a religious ethic founded on the will and authority of God, and a system of right and wrong in which human need and welfare is the sovereign principle.

Humanist morality is incomplete Christianity. It takes seriously what Jesus called the second commandment, to love one's neighbour as oneself, but it ignores the "first and greatest commandment", to love God with all the heart, soul and mind. Jesus taught his followers to address God as 'our Father', and it is only when we acknowledge the reality of one Father in heaven that we can legitimately speak of the 'Brotherhood of man'. That lofty ideal has no real meaning, nor any power to unite men without the conviction that they share the same Father in heaven.

The humanist has too facile a view of the moral depths to which human nature will sink. He is over-optimistic about its capacity for self-improvement. He imagines that people can be improved by education, by legislation or by a better social environment. In matters of personal morality the humanist can look to no higher authority than his own conscience or the shifting sands of public opinion. He lives by a moral code which can offer no hope to those who fall short, except an exhortation to try harder next time. His most lofty ideals and aspirations are powerless to save him from the certainty of death. He has no hope of any life beyond the end of this one.

In contrast the Gospel directs us to a power which lies outside human life—a power that can forgive, transform and raise the dead. That power is God Himself, without whom there can be no true goodness. He promises what the humanist cannot:

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"*  
(Matthew 5:6).

*"So I find this law at work: when I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law but I see another law at work in the members of my body, wages war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death. Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*  
(Romans 7:21-25).

## **The Post-Christian Era**

A tree needs roots to nourish and support it. If the roots are damaged or detached then the tree gradually withers and dies. Western society is like this. It has become detached from its roots, disconnected from those traditions, shared values and impulses which gave birth to civilisation and sustained it for centuries. Since the 1960's there has been a change in western society, a cultural revolution. Like all revolutions it began with a questioning of long-standing assumptions, a challenging of authority and a discarding of traditional restraints. This included those shared values which had held society together for centuries but were now to be dismissed as repressive, outmoded and irrelevant. In their place was supposed to emerge a new moral code based on freedom of individual expression, the pursuit of pleasure and a relaxing of the rules governing sexual conduct.

It may have seemed to the liberals who initiated this revolution that less restraint in these areas would lead to greater happiness, freedom and a more fulfilled existence. Now we see the dire effects of this 'liberation', the dark side to the permissive society. The restraints on selfishness, greed and promiscuity have also been removed—things which were once held in check by former generations who drew on the Christian tradition for guidance. Now we are living in what one writer has described as 'the faint afterglow of Christianity'.

The effects of all this can be seen throughout western society, a society which has effectively cut its moorings from the true source of moral goodness. Now it is reaping a harvest of materialism, violence, promiscuity, drugs and a general breakdown of law and order. It is no coincidence that all this has gone hand in hand with a decline in religious belief and practice. The influence of the Christian faith has been weakened, sometimes even by the efforts of theologians and clergymen. They have tried to divest the Gospel of anything supernatural or miraculous and have openly questioned the validity of its central truths. It is no wonder then that churches are empty and that those who would once have gone to church now go to the supermarket on Sunday morning instead.

This is not to suggest that everyone who lives without religion abandons themselves to pleasure and immorality. There are many exceptions in our own society, as there were in the first century—people who have no faith in God, nor any hope of life beyond this one and yet still try to live by high standards and devote themselves to the pursuit of truth, to serving their fellows, to helping refugees and the victims of war, tyranny and famine. There is something both noble and tragic about this. After all, why should truth and compassion be of value if all human endeavour ends in oblivion? Why attach dignity and worth to human life if it is no more than an accident of nature?

The great civilisations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilisations rest. A society which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture (Progress and Religion, Christopher Dawson, p.245).

## **All One in Christ Jesus**

Humanists adhere to ethical values which belong to a tradition which they claim to have discarded. A good example of this is the modern notion that all ethnic groups are 'equal', therefore it is wrong to discriminate against members of racial minorities, to denigrate or abuse them verbally. Most reasonable people would agree with this principle. Even so it is

worth asking exactly on what basis racial discrimination is morally wrong — who laid down this principle? To this, the Bible gives a clear and unambiguous answer. From earliest times God's people were commanded to show compassion for the 'alien' (i.e. the immigrant) who, with the orphan and the widow, was to be protected from exploitation:

*“He (the Lord) defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18, 19).*

God had shown compassion towards His people when they were strangers in another land, therefore they must show the same compassion towards members of other races who lived among them. As always, it is the character of God which determines human conduct. The Bible proclaims a vision of human unity based upon the fact that all nations and races are the creation of a God who has a purpose for mankind:

*“From one man He (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26).*

Therefore, for members of one racial or cultural group to despise members of another group is contrary to the will of God.

The Apostle Paul describes the Christian ideal of a community of men and women sharing a unity in Christ and a status before God in which all distinctions of race and gender are transcended. He writes:

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).*

This is surely the ideal after which humanists are striving, but which they can never attain despite all their talk of equality, freedom and rights. The Apostle Paul does not predict that these ideals can be attained through parliamentary legislation, or social reform. They can be attained only by those who are united under the fatherhood of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It was in part this biblical view that all men have value in the sight of God that inspired the great reformers of the past to abolish slavery and serfdom and improve the conditions in factories and prisons. It inspired them to denounce as immoral anything which violated the dignity which Christianity attributed to mankind. While rejecting this Christian vision, liberal humanism still affirms the wrongness of discrimination, and often pursues the crusade against it with great dogmatism. Yet in the absence of the original Christian ideal, the justification for this goal is no longer clear.

If we are not in fact the creation of a wise and loving God, then we are left with a purely naturalistic explanation for our existence. A Darwinian account of human origins sees life as a struggle, in which we have evolved according to the principle of the survival of the fittest and strongest. The strong must eliminate the weak in order to survive. It was an interpretation of Darwinism which gave us racism in the original sense of the term, i.e. the belief that some races of mankind are further up the evolutionary scale than others, and are therefore have a greater capacity for civilisation. The study of nature does not teach the

equality of the races nor do the laws of nature teach us that conflict and exploitation are immoral. On its own nature is neither good nor evil. Humanism, however, does not always take its own beliefs to their logical conclusion.

As in so many issues, liberal humanism has borrowed certain ideas, principles and phrases from Christianity —human dignity, brotherhood of man. tolerance, freedom, equality — setting them up as though they were basic laws of our being. But detached from the context which once gave them meaning, they appear increasingly arbitrary and lacking any real authority.

*“Humanism as a doctrine tends to be somewhat vague, powerless and lacking in the power to stir the imagination. Like streams which flow into the desert and disappear in the sand, it tends to ebb away and leave a religious vacuum.”* (Lloyd Geering, Faith’s New Age, p.165).

### **Accident of Nature or Divine Creation?**

Our answer to such questions as—Where have we come from?—and—What is the purpose of our existence?—will inevitably influence the way we conduct ourselves. If we believe that the world was created by a wise and loving God, who desires our eternal welfare, then we will tend to conduct ourself in a way that is consistent with that interpretation of human life. If we believe that our existence is no more than an accident of nature, then we will tend towards attitudes and behaviour quite different. It is a bit like children who inevitably develop in different ways depending on whether or not they were brought up by parents who love and trust them.

However, there are many voices in the modern world who assure us that God has no part at all in our origin or in our ultimate destiny. He makes no moral demands upon us. He does not even exist. We are nothing more than an accidental offshoot of the processes of nature, an intelligent species of animal which, by a caprice of the evolutionary process has developed a larger brain than the other.

If such an atheistic explanation for our origins is true however, then we are no longer potential children of our heavenly Father, made for eternal fellowship with Him. Therefore we have no destiny. The individual will die and that is the end of him forever. Eventually the whole human race will become extinct. Human life is a “tale told by an idiot”. Much of modern culture, its art, films and literature reflects this moral and spiritual emptiness—reflects it and influences it: life without the hope and the vision which faith in God once provided.

*“That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of the accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labour of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of*

*unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built" (Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, p.47).*

### **"Not by Bread alone ..."**

Modern society has many benefits, technology has provided the means to travel, to communicate, to cure disease. As a result people enjoy better health, they live longer, they have more money and time, they can fill their houses with electronic gadgets. At the same time many feel that there is something profoundly wrong at the very heart of modern society and that for all the technical progress around us, we have lost something and that our humanity is debased when we live without that spiritual dimension.

"Man shall not live by bread alone", said Jesus, "but by every word which comes from God" (Matthew 4:4). He meant that people cannot live only on a material level. They need a spiritual dimension also. It is surely this need which has inspired a reaction against what many see as the dehumanising influence of science and its purely materialistic explanation for human life. Many have turned to alternative forms of spirituality offered by a proliferation of cults and pseudo-religions: astrology, the worship of Gaia, New Age philosophy, the occult, witchcraft. All these are surely expressions of a deep-rooted desire to believe in something. They are a reminder also that human nature needs a hope, a vision to live by. G. K. Chesterton is reported to have remarked: "When men cease to believe in God they do not then believe in nothing, they believe in anything". It could be said that there is a 'god-shaped hole' in the human heart. If traditional forms of religion are seen as inadequate and the Biblical God is denied, then people will find a new object of worship, a new vision and a new hope.

*"If redemption is to come, it has to come from outside the things that science and contemporary politics have to offer. It has to come from outside us altogether, from a recognition that our efforts on their own are not enough. We have to see ourselves as part of a larger process, whose end is not just that human beings should breed and swarm, but that is addressed to higher ends. We exist neither to serve nature's blind reproductive ends, nor to manipulate nature for our own purposes." (After Progress - Finding the Old Way Forward, Anthony O'Hear, p.248).*

### **Failed Utopias**

There have been many attempts to bring about a new social order by revolution, by legislation, by economic means. They have all failed simply because it is impossible to impose the high ideals of humanism on a population by force or legislation. The ideals of Marxism were not evil. A society where each individual works for the common good was a noble ideal. But how can people be persuaded to treat their neighbours as brothers, to seek the interests of others before their own, to make selfless contributions to the common good? It simply does not work. Every attempt to impose moral improvement on people by government decree has failed, because government decrees are external to human nature.

Throughout the twentieth century the optimism about human capacity for self-improvement was repeatedly exposed as hollow. When the thin veneer of civilisation was removed and darker forces came to the surface, then the world was shown the barbarism of which human nature is still capable. War against civilians, tyranny, genocide and ethnic cleansing have

repeatedly given the lie to the prophecies of unending progress so common at the turn of the 20th century.

The reason why man cannot achieve a perfect society is that the root cause of wars, injustice and tyranny are due to dark forces deep within the human psyche. Tanks and guns do not cause wars, secret police and prison camps do not erect tyrannies. Greed, pride, mistrust, folly, lust for power do. If the earth is polluted by the effluent of civilisation it is because the heart of man is polluted by greed. And the solution is not ideology, legislation or technology but a radical change of heart.

*“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you” (James 4:1).*

The words of James describe the root cause of all conflict, whether it be on a personal level or between nations.

### **A New Heart**

For much of his life H.G. Wells proclaimed a Gospel of progress by technology and optimism. In time man could transform the world and inaugurate a new order based upon rational principles. By the end of his life, however, and during the Second World War, he wrote his final book, appropriately entitled *Mind at the End of its Tether*, in which he acknowledges that technical progress had not led to greater wisdom or maturity:

*“The writer sees the world as a jaded world devoid of recuperative power. In the past he has liked to think that Man will pull out of his entanglements and start a new creative phase of human living. In the face of our universal inadequacy, that optimism has given place to a stoical cynicism. The old men behave for the most part meanly and disgustingly, and the young are spasmodic, foolish and all too easily misled. Man must go steeply up or down and the odds seem to be all in favour of his going down and out. If he goes up, then so great is the adaptation demanded of him that that he must cease to be a man. Ordinary man is at the end of his tether” (H.G. Wells, *Mind at the End of its Tether* p.30).*

So writes one of the prophets of humanism. It is significant that Wells blames the nature of man for his inability to make progress, and that such progress can come only if man makes an adaptation to his basic nature. It is precisely this need for a change to man’s basic nature that the Christian Gospel demands of those who accept it.

The Gospel of Jesus is radically different from all the Utopian dreams which have been promoted as offering the salvation of the world. His followers did not hear from him the political slogans of the freedom fighter nor the high ideals of the social reformer. A programme to put the world right or to strive for a more just society does not enter into his teaching nor did he urge his followers to undertake such a programme. Instead, he began the work of transformation where it was most needed—in the hearts of responsive individuals. His Gospel was given to remove from their hearts those things which stand as a barrier between them and God.

He looked forward to a future transformation of the whole world, urging his disciples to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done in earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).



Significantly, he never described the economic, political or social arrangements of this future new order. He described only the qualities of character that must be shown by those who hoped to enter it. The citizens of God's Kingdom he taught, were "the poor in spirit", "the meek", "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"—"Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it" (Mark 10:15).

He taught that one day he will return in glory to judge the world and gather his disciples to himself. With this in mind, he urged his followers to view this world as a temporary sojourn; its wealth and pleasures, its loyalties and power struggles are not worth the allegiance or affection of those who have embarked upon this pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God. Neither their security nor their true wealth are rooted in this passing life.

How then do we qualify for a place in that Kingdom? Jesus gave the answer: "Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). To be "born again" means to be baptised, to be immersed in water. This symbolism of going into water and coming out again is a very important part of the Christian life. It means symbolically to die with Christ, that is, to put to death the selfish side of our nature, so that we can rise with him to newness of life (read Romans 6:1-19). In this way we turn from the darkness of this life with all its selfishness and futility and set ourselves instead to face the light of a new life derived from him.

### **A Transforming Influence**

The Apostle Paul provides a good example of this transformation. He began his career as an implacable enemy of the Christian Gospel, persecuting it as subversive of everything which he believed. Yet he was not wicked or irreligious. On the contrary, he strained every nerve to obey the law of Moses, to eradicate the badness within his heart. Despite this, he found that his efforts to obey the law were unsuccessful. This was because his own lower nature, what he called his 'flesh' prevented him from achieving the moral perfection which the law demanded. (See Romans 7:7-25). But when he discovered that Jesus had returned from the dead then Paul found a new way to achieve moral goodness:

*"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).*

Notice in these words how closely the Apostle Paul identifies himself with the life of Christ. All that Paul had once been, the proud, self-righteous Pharisee, the intolerant persecutor had died in the waters of baptism. In another sense he lived on, yet not him, but Christ in him, as an influence and a power which came from beyond himself.

To return then to the question with which we began—can we be good without God? The answer is Yes, we can—but only up to a point. We can obey the law, pay our dues and live in peace with our fellow men. Nevertheless, we cannot achieve the standard of perfection which alone is pleasing to God. Only in Christ can we, like the Apostle Paul, find a new influence, a new power whose source lies outside ourselves and which can transform us in our innermost being and strengthen us to do what is right. In this way Christ's victory over sin can be a reality and a transforming influence in our lives. What Christ transforms us into is not something contrary to our nature, but what God intended all along that we should be. When we put His will before our own, then we find our true selves.

This is not to suggest that when we are joined to Christ we can expect to attain moral perfection within this life, or that all trace of sin and self-will is eradicated. That would be quite unrealistic. One who has been baptised is still very much subject to the weaknesses of human nature and to the temptations common to all men. Only on the other side of the resurrection of the dead will we attain perfection. But until then, we have the assurance that when we fail God will forgive us, strengthen us against temptation and enable us to move forward.

Jesus was the perfect man and only by his influence can we grow into that maturity for which God made us and fulfil the purpose and goal of our creation.

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25).

PAUL WASSON

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