

THE CASE FOR AN ECSTATIC HUMANISM BEING SKEPTICS WITH NATURALLY RELIGIOUS MINDS "OPEN-MINDED REVERENT" HUMANISTS"

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READING

Some of you will recall that I recently introduced you to a passage by the philosopher Henry Bugbee, a key part of which used the word *ecstasis*. He wrote:

But patience is not postponement, not falling away from on-goingness; it is the readying to step clean forth (ecstasis) , and there ever comes a time when the question sinks home: when, if not now?

This mention of *ecstasis* strongly reminded me of an essay by another philosopher called James W. Woelfel some of whose words were a great help to me in writing the address I gave a few weeks ago called Mr Chips as a vision and incarnation of a wholly immanent and natural God. Woelfel, too, used the word in an essay from 1974 called *Ecstatic Humanism with Christian Hopes* which we will now hear:

From *in Borderland Christianity* by James W. Woelfel (Geoffrey Chapman, 1974, pp. 23-25)

*I would describe the perspective to which I have come (and in which I hope I am always growing and remaining open) as an "ecstatic" or "self-transcending" humanism. The Greek word *ek-stasis* literally means "standing outside of." We are familiar with the ordinary usage of "ecstasy" to describe certain psychological and physical states in which a person seems to be "standing outside" himself, to transcend his ordinary self. Most of us have probably experienced ecstasy in sexual love, or perhaps when totally caught up in listening to certain kinds of music; and we have at least heard about phenomena such as whirling dervishes, trances of various sorts, and mystical states.*

Following the lead of philosophers such as Paul Tillich, however, I am not using the word "ecstatic" in its ordinary sense instead I am applying its etymological suggestions of "transcending" or "going beyond" to something much broader. In my case, "ecstatic" is an apt description of the kind of humanistic outlook I wish to commend. "Ecstatic" humanism is

a humanistic perspective which transcends or goes beyond purely secular forms of humanism. Ecstatic humanism is humanism which, precisely because of its preoccupation with human experience in its fullness, seeks to be sensitively open-minded about the possibility of dimensions of experience and reality beyond our present knowing. Ecstatic humanism tries to remain constantly aware of the limitations of the human situation and human knowledge. Ecstatic humanism makes positive contact with, and learns much from, the religious traditions while remaining reverently agnostic about many of their details. Ecstatic humanism is too filled with wonder over the mysteries surrounding our existence to be content with narrow, reduced accounts of man and his world.

In its attitude of wonder, openness, religiousness, ecstatic humanism also transcends or goes beyond purely secular humanisms in a sense somewhat akin to the ordinary usage of 'ecstatic.' Ecstatic humanism is likely to be personally attuned to those aspects of human experience which singularly take us out of ourselves—religious experience, love, art and beauty, the devoted search for truth—as especially important clues to the self-transcending character of man himself.

Ecstatic humanism seeks, then, to steer a course between explicit religious belief on the one hand and atheistic or reductionistic humanism on the other. It is decidedly a form of humanism in building its outlook upon the best knowledge we have from human reasoning about our experience. But it is a serious and sensitive attention to man in his self-transcending characteristics—religion, values, artistic creativity, knowledge and communication, introspection—which opens ecstatic humanism out onto the religious dimension and forbids it from accepting the truncated outlooks of a purely secular humanism. I am arguing, in other words, that an ecstatic or self-transcending humanism is a more fully adequate humanistic position. It is a humanism which recognizes both the limitations of our human situation and knowledge and the mysterious depths and possibilities glimpsed in our human

experience.

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ADDRESS

The case for an Ecstatic Humanism being ‘skeptics with naturally religious minds’ or ‘open-minded reverent’ humanists”

For me there is always in play the question of how best to describe where, religiously and philosophically speaking, I am. I'm sure it would be always in play whatever it was I did professionally, but it becomes extremely pressing when one has, as I do, a public-facing religious and ministerial role. This is because people are constantly wanting to know what it is I believe and, when they find out I am the minister of this liberal, freethinking church, the first question is often immediately followed with another, namely, “Are you a Christian then?”

Those of you who know me well know that I often reply by saying that I am a “Christian atheist” because I think it is precisely the truth-seeking drive found in Christianity that, over two millennia, has inexorably and inevitably led to the development of a certain species of atheism, an atheism that is, however, still clearly a product of the liberal Christian tradition. As some of you will know, [Don Cupitt, the Dean Emeritus from over the road at Emmanuel College](#) calls this species of atheism [“secular Christianity.”](#)

[Another way of putting this is that, when looked at in a certain way, the natural outcome of Christian thinking is atheism and this was why the German philosopher [Ernst Bloch](#) could provocatively say: Only a good Christian can be a good atheist; only an atheist can be a good Christian.]

Just to clarify, being this kind of atheist does not preclude continuing to use the word God because God is now understood in wholly immanent, this worldly terms. Woelfel reminds us that, in the poetic, mythological language of the Christian atheist, God has died completely to his transcendent status and identifies himself entirely with humankind and our world and the only revelation of God is [now found in] the faces of us unlikely human beings, his only worship our compassionate devotion to one another and to the needs of our earth.” I would argue that this is exactly what Jesus was doing in his own teaching in which everything is dissolved into the call to justice and charity to one’s neighbour.

However, although the appellation Christian atheist has the benefit of being both true (for me anyway) and creatively and usefully shocking to those who cannot see that under certain circumstances anyway the words Christian and atheist go together like love and marriage and a horse and carriage, I realise it is a term which can often sound overly negative to many people. This has meant I’m always on the lookout for other ways I might describe where I am at and, thanks to James W. Woelfel, I hold in quiet reserve just such an alternative term, ‘ecstatic humanism,’ a description of which you heard in our readings (pp.23-25).

I bring it before you today for consideration because I think it might speak well, not only to many members of this local community, but also to many people in an around this city who might be interested in joining a community such as this. Anyway, I thought it might be helpful for you to have up your sleeve such a term for those moments when you are called upon to describe in general terms what kind this church is actively offering the world.

It seems likely to me that most people who attend, or who might be interested in attending, this church would be happy to be described [after the interesting British

philosopher Ronald Hepburn

as “skeptics with naturally religious minds” or what Woelfel calls “open-minded reverent humanists.” Woelfel adds that he also thinks of himself as “kind of ultra-liberal Christian heretic” (p. 14) and, although I quite like this latter term, I realise this will resonate with far fewer people.

Woelfel’s

mention of Christianity here is very important – not because he thinks Christianity is in some fashion absolutely superior to other religious traditions, he does not – but because of the straightforwardly contingent truth that it is the religion which has decisively shaped and permeated our Western culture and dominates the world of religion by its sheer numbers and influence. “It’s also important because, as he observes, it is the religion whose origins, history, and ideas the American or European religious thinker is ordinarily the most well-versed.” Because of this Woelfel thinks it is, therefore, the religion with which most religiously perplexed people must come to grips with in a special way, since it has both created our problems and will probably offer the most natural resources for our groping solutions” (pp. 16-17).

Again, it seems to me that the special, yet modest, role that is played by this church is that it provides a supportive yet critically inquiring community where a certain kind of “religiously perplexed people” can come to grips in meaningful and healthy ways with the implications of being born into a culture which has been so decisively shaped and permeated by Christianity. Importantly, despite this very close relationship with Christianity, this community has never been desirous of producing Christians per se (even ultra-liberal Christian heretics like Woelfel and, perhaps, me) but, instead, genuinely inquiring religious humanists, the very kind of free-spirits and archeologists of morning that my own work has long concentrated upon.

It is clear that what is going on

here is humanist”in its aims because, to quote some more words of Woelfel, we have long dedicated ourselves to the growth of humane and scientific knowledge and its application to the rational solution of human problems, the alleviation of human oppression and suffering, the enlargement of individual human rights and freedoms, the widening of educational, social, cultural and economic opportunities in general, to the enhancement of human life.”

We are a humanist” community because we try to base our lives and our decisions upon the best knowledge we have of humankind and the world especially through the sciences, and to seek thoughtful, reasoned solutions to human problems.”We are a humanist”community because we also look to human criteria in our thinking and living, because we believe that this is all we have to go on in any solid and public way”(pp. 19-20).

But we are also a religious”community because doctrinally atheistic or reductionistic humanisms always feel to us like truncated humanisms.” Woelfel reminds us that such truncated humanisms do not seem to us to be

. . . *fully humanistic because they are not open to all that man and his encompassing universe possibly are. They are not sufficiently sensitive either to the range of and depth of the human spirit or to the limitations of our situation or knowledge. They tend arbitrarily to draw boundaries around human experience and the world and presumptuously to declare that the matter is closed, the reality completely described and circumscribed* (p.21).

As Woelfel notes, this kind of approach simply reveals an insensitivity to data, to the facts,’ and [an] overconfident reasoning both of which are aberrations of the humanist approach to knowledge”(p. 21).

In other words, most of us here are likely to be happy to be called ‘religious humanists’ because, like Woelfel, we are people who have found the extremes of either a ‘religious certitude’ or a purely secular humanism unacceptable’ (p. 14).

Consequently, for Woelfel and, indeed, for me:

A truly whole and adequate humanism is one which, precisely in its absorbing preoccupation with [hu]man[ity], is sensitively open to the possibility that man himself may be more than we think at any given time – that he may, for example, be a creature involved with dimensions of reality of which our knowledge either is ignorant or has only scratched the surface (p. 22).

After my eighteen years as the minister here, a ministry which draws heavily, and rests gratefully, upon the twenty-four years of Frank’s ministry, as well as those of the four previous ministers and one significant lay leader in the person of the founder of this community, [Professor F. J. M Stratton \(Professor of Astrophysics at the University of Cambridge from 1928 to 1947\)](#), what Woelfel is describing [seems to me to be in general terms pretty much what this community has been offering people in Cambridge for the last one-hundred and four years.](#) namely, an ‘ecstatic’ or ‘self-transcending’ humanism that takes the Christian tradition seriously but without ever allowing itself to be restricted or oppressed in any way by its previous forms, metaphysical beliefs and dogmatic conclusions.

So, to conclude my remarks this morning, let me very briefly return to the reading you heard earlier in which Woelfel outlines this ecstatic humanism (pp. 23-25).

It’s important to be clear that he is using the

word “ecstatic” in its straightforward etymological sense of “transcending” or “going beyond.” He uses the word because it’s a position which is simply seeking to be sensitively open-minded about the possibility of dimensions of experience and reality beyond our present knowing and of remaining constantly aware of the limitations of the human situation and human knowledge.”

In a way this is, as many of you will be aware, a restatement of the poet John Keats’ important and influential idea of “negative capability” that, at times, we have no choice but to live in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”

Both Keats and Woelfel in their different ways and times want to convey to us the idea that, although humanity’s potential is clearly, in huge part, importantly defined by the scientific knowledge it possesses, humanity is defined as much by what it does not possess. This is because to be **fully** human we have no choice, as Woelfel realises, but to find ways to behold with wonder and awe “the mysteries surrounding our existence”—mysteries which include, of course, “religious experience, love, art and beauty, the devoted search for truth.”

Of course, as “skeptics with naturally religious minds” and “open-minded reverent humanists,” we will remain at least as critical and inquiring of our religious responses to the mysteries surrounding our existence as we are about our current scientific understanding, but my point today is that in a place like this we are affirming that a truly whole and adequate humanism requires both aspects to be in play in our lives and I continue to recommend it to you.