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Christianity and the Anthropology of Secular Humanism

by Matthew Engelke

Secular humanists in the United Kingdom regularly think about, talk about, and act in relation to religion, especially Christianity. In this article, I address the relationships between secular humanism and Christianity by drawing on fieldwork with a local humanist group affiliated with the British Humanist Association. In line with many moderns, as indeed with many kinds of Christians, these secular humanists often want to sever ties with the past—in this case, with what they understand to be Christianity's religious elements. At the same time, they want to preserve those aspects of Christianity they understand to be human, not religious. These engagements with and articulations of Christianity can be helpful not only for understanding contemporary secular-humanist formations but also some of the debates that have framed the anthropology of Christianity over the past decade.

What can we learn about Christianity from people who are not Christians? When is Christianity relevant in other social framings, and how? The development of an anthropology of Christianity "for itself," as "a self-conscious, comparative project" (Robbins 2003:191) has been extremely productive over the past decade. What I want to emphasize here, however, is the fact that any such anthropology should also exist beyond itself—after itself, even—as an impetus for other kinds of conceptual and comparative projects. One of these concerns the problem of culture, long central to understandings of religion vis-à-vis modernity and causing well-known predicaments for anthropologists. This paper, then, is not intended as a contribution to the anthropology of Christianity but rather what we might call "not the anthropology of Christianity." What I am addressing here is in fact the anthropology of secular humanism.

That is close to Christianity, though—at least in many cases. An anthropology of secular humanism is often going to have family resemblances with an anthropology of Christianity. That is certainly the case in my focus on secular humanists in England, many of whom come from Christian and Jewish backgrounds and for whom Christianity in particular is an important point of reference. This closeness can make the stakes of difference especially meaningful.

I spent 2011 conducting fieldwork on the British Humanist Association (BHA), the United Kingdom's preeminent "nonreligious" organization (over 12,000 members). The BHA supports people who seek "an ethical and fulfilling nonreligious lifestance involving a naturalistic view of the universe." Prominent members of the BHA include the celebrity scientist Richard Dawkins, journalist and commentator Polly Toynbee, and comedian and actor Stephen Fry. The BHA does a lot of public-facing campaigns, often around the membership's secularist commitments. The BHA wants to remove the right of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords, for instance; members also campaign to stop faith-based schools from receiving state funding (and setting their own admissions criteria). Another major component of the BHA's work is the provision of ceremonies: nonreligious funerals, weddings, and namings. In 2011 the BHA's network of celebrants conducted nearly 9,000 ceremonies, primarily funerals, across England and Wales.[1] The BHA does without God—and pretty much wants everyone else to as well, as we might now observe.

In January 2011 there was a "Risk Management Meeting" for the BHA held at the association's office in central London. As with many organizations, the BHA keeps a risk register as part of its audit activities. It was a productive meeting for the CEO and trustees on the committee, but it was also marked by frustration about the Kafkaesque demands of bureaucracy and audit culture. One way this came out was in relation to a playful yet serious exchange about operational risk no. 19, "premises needing major repairs." The chair of the meeting, a trustee, noted that this risk was primarily about "acts of nature": floods, for example, or earthquakes (not likely in London). "Notice he didn't say 'acts of God'!" one of the

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1. There is a separate humanist society in Scotland, where many more weddings are conducted because they are legally recognized. At the time of my research, humanist weddings in England and Wales were not legal, so they were usually complemented by a trip to the local council registry office.

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other trustees interjected quickly, with a smile on her face. "I change this on contracts all the time," the chair replied; he had a lot of experience in the world of business. "And the lawyers change it back!" he continued. "They say 'act of God' has a legal definition. But it has nothing to do with God!" How is it, in this day and age, the trustees wondered, that professionals can countenance such language? Indeed, for lawyers, legislators, insurers, and other important people in modern Britain, "act of God" is a legitimate, legally recognizable expression even though it means "the operation of uncontrollable natural forces" (Oxford English Dictionary). God has nothing to do with it.

This small exchange tells us something important about humanists. Humanists want to break with the past. They want to break with religion, to expunge the signs of religion from society and its workings, especially where those signs have political and legal weight. So this hybridized term, "act of God," blurring the boundaries of semantic precision in a secular age, using the supernatural to signify the natural, is precisely the kind of thing that bothers them. If humanists have their way, acts of God will become acts of nature. And in the BHA's own risk register, at least, they are. Three weeks after the assessment, the full board of trustees was presented with an updated register at its quarterly meeting. On the basis of the deliberations in January, changes had been made, and Operational Risk no. 19 had become Operational Risk no. 9 (O-9): "acts of nature." Looking over the register, one of the trustees, who was not on the risk management committee, paused at O-9. "I approve of *acts of nature*," he said, emphasizing the phrase. He knew all about this frustrating survival in legalese, too. Everyone smiled and laughed.

Within the United Kingdom, evangelicals and humanists often serve as others to each other: opponents or at least opposites in public debates on everything from reform of the House of Lords to legislation over assisted dying. The Christian in these debates is made to represent the "religious" position, while the humanist offers the "nonreligious" or "secular" position. In the course of such debates, or in chattering class commentaries, it is not uncommon to hear evangelical Christians, or others critical of humanist causes, claim that what humanists want is not so much a break with the past but a repackaging of it. Humanism is regularly cast as another kind of faith: religion in all but name. Particularly staunch and strident humanists, such as Richard Dawkins, are even regularly referred to as "atheist fundamentalists," no different from the Christians and Muslims they mock.

This perception of organized humanism and the secular-humanist movement in Britain is not confined to religious critics.[2] Andrew Brown, a journalist and blogger for the *Guardian*—and an atheist, too—has regularly made such suggestions. In relation to a campaign by the National Secular Society, another prominent secular-humanist group, Brown got massively annoyed. "The wonderful thing about the atheist movement in this country is that it shows how all the vices that made religion repulsive can flourish in the complete absence of supernatural belief."[3] As far as he was concerned, the "atheist movement" showed signs not of reason and rationality but vindictiveness and spite (characteristics that some humanists decry as religious).

Committed humanists also often reflect on and sometimes even worry about what religion is. Humanists wonder about whether what they do is really humanistic. For them, the point of comparison is almost always Christianity—especially Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, because these are the faiths they know best, either from personal experience or simply as part of the British milieu. Judaism is also relevant, and sometimes Islam, but these other traditions often get subsumed by Christianity. When humanists think of religion they think about Christianity. And indeed they think—and talk—about religion quite a lot. It is here that we get to the relevance of doing what is not the anthropology of Christianity.

Continuity Thinking, Again

Two prominent discussions within the anthropology of Christianity are particularly relevant to how we should understand the anthropology of secular humanism—that is to say, what is not the anthropology of Christianity. The first has to do with the discourse of discontinuity: the extent to which holding a certain worldview or wanting to be a particular kind of person demands a break with the past.[4] Humanists, as self-styled enlighteners, are, as I have indicated, deeply committed to a break with religious thinking, and it is worth acknowledging that discontinuity is central not only to Christian master narratives but those of secular modernity, too. Discontinuity, or breaking with the past, has in fact often been highlighted as one of the core "consequences of modernity" (Giddens 1990).

The second discussion has to do with continuity thinking—the argument that anthropologists are not very good at documenting social change, that their models of analysis tend to stress the ways in which cultures endure over time. What interests me in particular about this argument, as I will go

2. So far I have been using the terms "humanism," "atheism," and "secularism" as though they are interchangeable. This is not to suggest there are no differences among them, and while most members of the BHA prefer one over the other, as I discuss in more detail later, in the main they see themselves as being all three—or, if not atheist, than agnostic.

3. The National Secular Society's campaign was to stop state funding for hospital chaplains. See Andrew Brown, "The Last Consolation: For Heaven's Sake, Let the Dying Have Their Hospital Chaplains," *Guardian*, April 8, 2009 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/apr/08/religion-atheism, accessed July 12, 2013).

4. Birgit Meyer's (1998, 1999) work has been particularly important in the discussions of Christianity's "break with the past." Two recent full-length monographs that address the question of discontinuity are Liana Chua (2012) and David Mosse (2012). See also Matthew Engelke (2004, 2010), Naomi Haynes (2012), Olivia Harris (2006), Martin Lindhardt (2009), and Joel Robbins (2007). There are many others.

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on to elaborate, is its lopsided development to date. Only certain forms of continuity thinking seem to get critiqued within the anthropology of Christianity, something that becomes especially obvious when one turns from the study of Christianity to the study of secular humanism.

The first of these discussions, then, concerns ethnographic observation: how the natives think (and act). The second concerns conceptual framing: how we think the natives. These emphases—emic and etic, respectively—both pertain to a subset of the problem of culture, namely, "the problem of Christian culture" (Robbins 2007).

The problem of Christian culture in the emic sense has to do with the willingness or ability of anthropologists to recognize that the people they study are meaningfully Christian. This has been more of a problem in some contexts than others. And it is also more relevant to certain traditions of Christianity than others. Pentecostals, evangelicals, and charismatics have often been particularly insistent on breaking with the past, as a result of which certain aspects of "traditional culture" get coded as demonic, devilish, or otherwise un-Christian. Strong forms of rupture have not necessarily been central to mainline traditions, such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, or Lutheranism.[5] And discontinuity seems to be a complete nonstarter among the Eastern churches; these churches are often the "traditional culture" to begin with, and that creates different dynamics in relation to large-scale projects of modernity, such as colonialism and socialism (with which they have also had distinct social and political relationships). So in the past decade, when we have heard that Christianity matters—that it needs to be taken "seriously"—it has often been in relation to certain kinds of Christianity in certain kinds of places: basically, charismatics and evangelicals in postcolonial places. The argument is that Christianity in these contexts is not some appendage to political and economic forces, and it can shape, sometimes radically, the ways in which people think and act in relation to themselves, their families, other people, and the workings of the world. Colonialism and neoliberalism do not exhaust our powers of explanation or comprehension.

What of the West? We know that Christianity is not an appendage in the West even though the classic story of secularization, based on religion's decline with the rise of modernity, is still influential (despite its academic battering). Anthropologists working on Christians in Western contexts have often had to contend with chidings from colleagues about why they choose to study this "repugnant cultural other" (Harding 1991). But this is rarely in a way that questions whether these repugnant others are meaningfully Christian. In fact it is often precisely because they are understood to be "real Christians" that they spark such concern. What stands behind the charge of repugnance is that these Christians have not become secular; they have not become reasonable and modern. These Christians have not broken with the past.

The situation I have faced studying humanists is the obverse. When I tell academic colleagues about my research, some—and not a few—have sounded like evangelicals and *Guardian* journalists; they have wondered whether humanists are really humanists, whether humanism is rightfully understood as not religious. Usually they conclude that humanists sound like Protestants in all but name. This is the kind of continuity thinking I want to question.

We should expect humanism in Britain to be articulated in relation to Western Judeo-Christian traditions. In many ways humanists embrace these continuities, especially when it comes to the social, historical, and personal legacies of Anglicanism. There are members of the BHA, for instance, such as the well-known author Philip Pullman, who define themselves as "Church of England atheists." Pullman (2011) sees "no sign of God," but he recalls fondly learning prayers from his grandfather and feels the established church "belongs to all of us" (56, 57). Another member of the BHA (and I doubt he is alone) has arranged to be buried in the graveyard of his parish church. Although an atheist and humanist, this man has participated in the life of his village, and that has meant participating in the life of the village church. At the same time, as we see in relation to the concern over "acts of God," there are important ways in which organized humanism wants to shift the terms of reference. That means severing ties. And the desired break with religion can get more emotive than it did in the audit committee. Another humanist told me of how, as a child, she used to go to the girl's washroom at her school, lock herself in a stall, and swear at God, as if to defame him away. I have regularly seen members of the BHA and other committed humanists washed over with discomfort and even disdain when someone else has identified as a Christian, especially as an evangelical or born-again Christian. It provokes a visceral reaction.

As I have turned my attention to the study of lived humanism—not the anthropology of Christianity—it has struck me just how much work needs to be done on the conceptual front when it comes to understanding "the difference Christianity makes" (see Cannell 2006). Part of this means thinking about the difference Christianity does not make—or is made not to make. Anthropologists of Christianity have been good at recognizing ruptures and documenting change in their empirical research. When it comes to the study-based project that parallels this, however—a metatheoretical project tracing the "Christianity of anthropology" (Cannell 2005)—continuity thinking often, well, continues.

It is not only in casual conversations about humanists with colleagues that this particular problem of Christian culture crops up. While not in any self-conscious way, there is a tradition of sorts here—a certain kind of intellectual critique,

5. Chua (2012) has given particularly sustained attention to these differences in her study of a village in Malaysian Borneo, where the Catholic and Anglican households stand in sharp contrast to the small number of evangelical Christian households who diabolize several keys aspects of "traditional culture" (*adat*).

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not unique to anthropology, based on debunking or challenging our supposed secularity and difference. It is in fact extremely common. Consider these arguments, for instance, which have to do with the relation between the social sciences and theology. (*a*) "'Scientific' social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise" (Milbank 1990:3). (*b*) "[Geertz] appears, inadvertently, to be taking up the standpoint of theology" (Asad 1993:43). And (*c*) "Anthropology is a discipline that is not always so 'secular' as it likes to think. Were it to become less ascetic in its understanding of religious experience, it might more often remember its own theological prehistory" (Cannell 2005:352).

Or consider these arguments, which deal with related arguments about politics, the first of which alone has generated a huge secondary literature. (*a*) "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt 2006 [1934]:36). (*b*) "Modern revolutionary movements are a continuation of religion by other means" (Gray 2007:2). And (*c*) "Intellectual complacency, nursed by implicit faith in the inevitability of secularization, has blinded us to the persistence of political theology" (Lilla 2007:2).

I am taking these quotes out of anything like proper contexts. There are several projects, intentions, and agendas represented in these statements. For most of these writers, the point is not apologetic (although it is for Milbank and Schmitt). For the anthropologists quoted, Talal Asad and Fenella Cannell, the point has in fact been to challenge the idea that, as Asad puts it in later work, "secularized concepts retain a *religious essence*" (Asad 2003:189).[6] Nevertheless, in every case one of the larger arguments (or assumptions) is, wittingly or unwittingly, that the transformation promised by a certain reading of the Enlightenment never fully materialized.

Yet what do humanists do in spite of Christianity? What is the difference between an act of God and an act of nature? How does the difference—and its attendant indifferences—get produced and legitimized? When does taking Christianity "seriously" mean doing something that is not the anthropology of Christianity?

The Thames Path (Lived Humanism)

Another important aspect of the BHA's work is to foster and serve local humanist groups. These groups both face up to and raise the problem of Christian culture, and it is on one of them that I want to focus here.

There were over 60 local humanist groups in England and Wales at the time of my research, a few of which predate the BHA or were formed independently. There are, moreover, some humanist and atheist groups not affiliated with the BHA and a few that seem to hold it in very poor regard; it can be very difficult, even for humanists who appreciate voluntary associations, to voluntarily associate. There is, in any case, no requirement for people who attend a local group to join the BHA, and many local group members do not. All the same, for several years a staff member at the BHA has serviced local groups, while the CEO and others regularly give talks at group meetings. The BHA also lists group meetings and events on its website and in e-mail circulars. Attendance at local groups can range from a handful to 50 or 60 people. Meetings are usually once monthly, on a weekday evening, and held in a pub or a community center; a few groups meet in Quaker meeting houses. Many groups charge a nominal fee for membership, although in my experience this was not strictly enforced and a cause of slight embarrassment for group secretaries and treasurers.

I spent a year attending a group I will call the "Thames Path Humanists," a local group in London. Thames Path was very active in terms of meetings and community involvement. There were also several key members of the group who had strong relationships with the BHA; one committee member, for instance, whom I will discuss in some detail, is a celebrant; another sometime committee member worked for a time as the BHA's education officer. In addition to the monthly meeting in the pub, the Thames Path group also had a monthly coffee morning at a theater café and, on and off, a monthly Sunday roast dinner (at a different pub). Thames Path also had an annual summer garden party and a Christmas party and participated in local community fairs. The "Christmas" party raised eyebrows, but the chairman of the group thought it would be overreacting to call it anything else. (He was not the type of humanist to mind phrases like "act of God" all that much.) Toward the end of 2011 the group began to help run a local soup kitchen in rotation with members of a nearby Unitarian church.

The first meeting of the Thames Path Humanists took place in January 2007. That preceding fall, the membership officer at the BHA noticed a significant swathe of London did not have a local group and sent out an e-mail to BHA members in a certain set of postcodes asking whether anyone wanted to start one. Two of the people who replied to the call were humanists I got to know well, Brian and Sage.[7] Both had joined the BHA because of the ceremonies work. Brian got married in 2001. Neither he nor his wife are religious, and they wanted the wedding to reflect that. He had heard about the BHA and knew they provided nonreligious weddings. "It was fantastic," he told me, with a warm glow. All their friends said it was the best wedding they had ever been to, which Brian put down to the personal touches and focus. Sage turned to the BHA for her mother's funeral. She did not really

6. Some self-identified atheists and other critics take issue with Asad's claim. Bruce Robbins (2013) suggests that in the work of Asad (and a few others) "Christianity always remains purely itself" (255). Such arguments are part of a larger project about the value and valences of "secular critique," which I cannot address, yet I do not think Robbins gets Asad right here (see Asad 2003:181–204). I do, however, share Robbins's general dissatisfaction with the extent to which any significant transformation by "secularization" is really addressed.

7. I use pseudonyms here and throughout.

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know, at first, that she was turning to the BHA. She just knew that neither she nor her mother wanted a church funeral, and a colleague of hers from work, at a small, independent publishing house, put her in touch with a woman from Clapham who conducted funerals; that woman happened to be a humanist celebrant. The celebrant let Sage and her family decide all the details of the service. "And it was amazing," Sage told me. "It was very empowering, and felt very personal."

Neither Brian nor Sage knew much about humanism per se when they used the BHA's ceremonial services.[8] After the ceremonies, they each looked into what the BHA was about. They each went to the website. "And I thought, I ought to put my money where my mouth is," Brian recalled. "This is what I think, and this is what these people are doing, so why don't I support them?" "I liked what I saw. I identified with it," Sage said. She joined, and she enjoyed the newsletters. Then she read some books about humanism. Sage was particularly taken by the work of two philosophers, both prominent supporters of the BHA: A. C. Grayling and Richard Norman. "And I did feel happy, then, to call myself a humanist."

This process of realization is extremely common among BHA members. Humanists recognize humanism as something that does not need to be articulated as such. Many people only recognize themselves as humanists after reading about it or talking to someone else who is. I even met BHA members who said they started calling themselves humanists at the suggestion of a friend or colleague. Audrey, for instance, the Thames Path member who had worked for the BHA as the education officer, was dubbed a humanist by a colleague:

> I was a teacher for 20-odd years, and I used to have interesting discussions with my colleagues, many of whom were Christians, including the head of RE, who used to say, "oh, maybe you're a Buddhist," and give me something about Buddhism. I'd say, "no, not quite right, you know." . . . "Well maybe you're a Quaker," she'd say. I don't believe in God—but that doesn't matter, apparently. But eventually she decided that I was a humanist, so, you know, she put a label on my set of beliefs.

Even the BHA's last CEO told me she never self-identified as a humanist until she applied for her job.

Exactly what "realization" involves may differ. In general it relies on a strong version of reason as the key to thinking about the world, one that is precultural and available to everyone. Realization humanists see themselves as enlightened moderns (even if they do not put it in those terms) who have harnessed the power of their innate rationality and thrown off the shackles of superstition (thinking, that is to say, which is guided by a belief in or commitment to the supernatural or unknown, especially when that commitment contradicts empirical evidence to the contrary). To be sure, this particular framing is not the only one in play. There were, moreover, several members of the BHA and Thames Path group who did not primarily self-identify as humanist; some preferred terms such as "atheist," "agnostic," or "materialist." Some did not like labels at all. Two full-time members of the BHA staff (and there were only 10) refused to refer to themselves as humanists. One, taking a classically liberal perspective, said it was a private matter and frankly no one's business—perhaps especially mine. (I had asked.) In a survey I conducted of the BHA membership, one respondent referred to herself as a "Catholic Zen Buddhist."

For people like Brian and Sage, though, what humanism provides is a positive label for their beliefs—or nonbeliefs, as they might prefer to say. For them, as for many others, it is important to self-identify as a humanist because people need to know what humanism is even if they then go on to refuse that label. The label has a mix of practical, political, and philosophical valences that, at least for the time being, BHA members tend to feel cannot be discarded. Brian calls himself an atheist, too, but he subordinates this to his humanism in that effort to be "positive"—calling yourself an atheist, after all, as many humanists point out, is defining yourself in negative terms. Sage also emphasized the need to be positive. "It's nice to have found a label," she told me. "But a lot of my friends are nonbelievers, and they're not interested in doing what I do, or coming along. They just live their lives as nonbelievers."

Brian's mother was raised in the Church of England. She converted to a liberal Judaism when she married his father. It was "Judaism light" in their household, Brian explained, but important to his family. Growing up, Brian attended synagogue in south London; he also got heavy doses of Anglicanism via his school, an established private school in Surrey. "I was very steeped in mainstream, Church of England Christianity," he said. Brian's mother and sister still attend synagogue. Brian, though, "never really bought it," and he does not recognize himself as Jewish at all. He would not even call himself culturally Jewish or a secular Jew. "And it's partly because as I child I didn't want to be different. It was all downside and no upside. The synagogue services are unutterably tedious. They just go round and round and round in apparently no direction, and there's no decent tunes in them. I was forced to be a member of a club I didn't want to join." As for the Christianity he got at school, "I always knew in terms of underlying belief that, well, you know, it seemed pretty silly to me." Christian theology is "so illogical," he said. All the same, Brian went on, without skipping a beat, he did appreciate the Christianity he got at school. He liked singing Church of England hymns, for example. "I actually appreciate having that very much, that essentially soft Christian background—because that's part of my cultural identity being British. It's important to know all those stories, and about the architecture, and, you know, all of that stuff."

8. And of course not all members of local groups and/or the BHA find out about humanism via the ceremonies work, although a significant proportion of BHA members have attended some kind of humanist ceremony at one time or another: 49.5% ($N = 1,124$) according to a survey I conducted of the BHA's membership.

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Sage, who grew up in Africa, and whose parents did not want her to attend state schools, ended up for some period in a Catholic boarding school run by nuns. (Her father was "very C of E"; her mother "Quaker Unitarian.") The boarding school did not endear her to Catholicism. However, she was confirmed Anglican and "felt quite religious for a little patch" as a teenager, "but I think it was just to belong." Sage's family eventually moved to Australia; she then moved to Britain, her parents following. Sage has two children, and when they were born she had them christened because it was important to her to mark the births in some way (perhaps especially her second child, as we will soon hear). The christening was "the only thing you could do," she said. In between the births of her children, Sage had two quite traumatic miscarriages. "I used to go and sit in the church a bit," she told me. "Just—I think—to be on my own and think. I wasn't praying or anything, but church does provide things at times—or it has done. It's been the default to provide, at times." What turned her away from the church was the arrival in her parish of a very conservative vicar. "He tried to make it very high church; ridiculous. With incense and things. He was awful." The last straw was an article he wrote in the parish newsletter opposing the ordination of women priests. Sage was studying at the time for a BA in women's studies, as a mature student. "It opens your eyes to organized religion. I don't think you can do much academic study and still be religious, really," she told me.

Brian and Sage held their first planning meeting along with three others in Brian's living room. Among them, they told me, it was very important to stress the positive side of humanism. In preparation for the Thames Path launch, Brian and Sage met with other local humanist groups. They were not always impressed. One group in particular struck them as "very antireligious." They did not like that, and indeed in my own experience of getting to know Brian and Sage, they did not embody the more popularly public image of humanists defined by the pugnacious "new atheism" of Dawkins, Grayling, and Christopher Hitchens. At the Thames Path meetings, it was not unusual for one or another of the members or attendees to say something particularly disparaging about religion, though, especially Christianity. This is quite common. While not all humanists endorse a new-atheist critique of religion—not by any means—all the humanists I got to know had something critical to say about religion. (It happened most frequently in relation to Catholicism and evangelicalism.) Throughout the whole of my research on the Thames Path group, the only time I did not hear at least one disparaging remark about religion was at the summer garden party. Whenever things got overly critical in the group, however, especially in the Monday evening sessions, Brian, who usually chaired, tried to redirect the conversation. As I have mentioned, however, Grayling's writings had been important to Sage in terms of coming to humanism—and Grayling (2006) does not pull his punches on the faithful. And I do remember being struck when, in an interview we conducted, Brian termed the ethos of the local group in the following way: "we're antireligious privilege, and antistupid ideas, but we're not antireligious."

Stupidity and Religiosity

The question this begs is, what is the difference between stupidity and religiosity? For Brian and Sage, as indeed, I would argue, the organized humanist movement more generally, this is the difference Christianity makes. What is stupid is "belief." And "belief" here means accepting the truth or value of something without good evidence. Good evidence, in turn, means scientific evidence, evidence that is not subjective. Brian's list of stupid ideas would include all the "illogical" stuff he heard about at school: one God (yet a Trinity?), resurrection, turning water into wine, and so on. What is stupid is not listening to reason or common sense, both of which, for realization humanists, have clear parameters.

Yet it would be a mistake to characterize the humanist ethos by relying too much on what humanists say explicitly, negatively, about religion. If we listen to Brian and Sage's prompted recollections of coming to humanism, much of what we do hear about religion and/or the religious is that they are "silly," "horrible," "ridiculous," "unutterably tedious." Yet within Brian and Sage's accounts, we also find hints of what they recognize as good about religion, or, as I will further explore now, what is good about it in spite of it—what is not Christian about Christianity. For both, obviously, as we have heard, it hinges on claiming ritual—recognizing that rites of passage are an important part of being human, not being "religious." Sage has embraced this commitment in a particularly significant way; she is the Thames Path member I referred to earlier who has gone on to become a BHA celebrant. She conducts funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies more or less full time. The goodness in religion also hinges for Brian and Sage on a sense of belonging and, as Sage's life story in particular highlights, the sense of comfort and space for reflection that religious institutions have historically provided.

Brian, Sage, and other realization humanists like them would also want to qualify the emphasis on reason. Audrey, for example, who participated in a "secular choir," and who championed the virtues of poetry and art (which some humanists see as unhumanistic pursuits, driven by passion and emotion instead of reason), wanted to make clear to me that reason is not the sole province of nonbelievers—even if her defence of the religious came out as a backhanded compliment:

> Sometimes the humanist way of putting things implies that we are the only people who are reasonable, and that religious people aren't reasonable. And I think that's completely untrue. They may have this irrational faith, but in the rest of their lives they accept science, they buy medicine, they drive

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> cars and travel in aeroplanes. They believe in gravity and all those things; they're not totally irrational.[9]

Wherever I went in the humanist networks, those who participated in local groups almost invariably said they did so in order to interact with "like-minded people." This phrase, "like-minded people," is ironic because humanists are often emphatic about their independence, individuality, and autonomy. Recall again how for both Brian and Sage, what made the ceremonies they arranged so meaningful was that they arranged them: they were the responsible parties, they were the ones setting the terms of reference, and the terms of reference were indexed to the human, not the numinous or divine. Yet within the irony is a paradox. On the one hand, it is true that humanists often recoil from religion because as "freethinkers" they see one of religion's downsides (as Brian might put it) as conformity to a norm. Religion is groupthink—or even not thinking at all. Religion is a club, and they do not want to join. On the other hand, as I have stressed, there is within this tradition of humanism a conviction that reason lies within and that its dictates are not subject to cultural contingencies or controls. During an informational session on humanism for nurses training in palliative care, the CEO of the BHA once made a remark that captures this point well: "There was never a 'Mr. Human' who founded humanism," he said. Religion, in the realization tradition, has to be seen first and foremost as a cultural construct: something people make up. So the paradox is that the humanist conception of freethinking is dependent on the submission to reason. What resolves the paradox is the character of the submission. For within humanism, it is never the submission to a cultural fabrication. Submission to reason is no submission at all; it is a natural outpouring of common sense. "To thine own self be true," the famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, inscribed above the stage in Conway Hall—one of the birthplaces of the modern humanist and secular movements in Britain—sums up what I am talking about here. It suggests an inward-looking, independent self, and this goes some way toward helping us understand the significance of looking for like-minded people.

One important thing about local groups, though, is that they bring these selves together into community and, for some, at least, a kind of communion. Humanism is embodied; humanism is incorporated. These aspects are often glossed over in public perceptions of humanism because these perceptions are dominated by intellectuals—scientists, philosophers, novelists, and serious journalists—who trade primarily in words and regularly frame their critiques of religion as critiques of stupidity or irrationality. It can often appear as if humanism is all talk.

Talk, Talk, Talk

The main monthly meeting of the Thames Path Humanists drew anywhere between 30 and 50 people, depending on the time of year and the prominence of the topic or speaker. Most of the people are middle aged and older. At Thames Path, as indeed in most local humanist groups (not all), members tend to be in their 50s and 60s and 70s, often retired or semiretired.[10] This was regularly put down to the fact that older people have more free time, especially in the evenings; the one young set of parents active in the group did have the benefit of family nearby who could look after their daughter.

These humanists gathered in the upper-floor function room of their adopted pub. If there were more than 30 people, it could make following a speaker difficult, especially for the very elderly, some of whom were hard of hearing. Most members tolerated this meeting place, though, not least given the welcome of the landlord, who let them have it free and did not even seem to mind that while most people got a pint of beer or a glass of white wine, it was not a hard-drinking, late-night bunch. Meetings began at 8 p.m. and ended promptly at 10 p.m. A handful of people came at 7 p.m. to socialize; the meetings themselves did not allow much of this.

Whether or not space mattered was a point of contention within the Thames Path group. In a survey of the membership that Brian conducted in early 2012, one member commented that

> after 2000 years, the Christian churches have at least one valuable asset—they have their very own premises in the form of church buildings, church halls, meeting houses, etc., as well as others with synagogues, mosques, and so on. Wouldn't it be useful of [*sic*] humanists, atheists, sceptics, and others had more than just the Conway Hall in London!

Not everyone felt this way, and not everyone who did want premises wanted the same kind: some wanted inspiring buildings, some wanted purely functional spaces. During a group interview I conducted with several members, the issues of space and place led to a heated debate. Notably, this debate about space was tied up with a debate about whether or not humanists should ever do more than talk—whether they might get together to sing, for instance, or express themselves in other corporate ways. "All I want is conversation," declared Judy, the young mother active in the group. "The point of this is the people," she said at another point. Benjamin, who was brought up in a self-consciously atheist household, disagreed: "I think many people would be embarrassed, but the idea of having a song to start off humanist meetings with—it would be an excellent idea." John, a semiretired psychologist

9. In 2011 the CEO of the BHA began sponsoring an annual lecture named in honor of Percy Bysshe Shelley and meant to feature poets, biographers, and other more humanistic humanists. The BHA sponsors several annual lectures (their Darwin Day lecture being the most significant) and numerous other speaking events each year, a majority of which feature scientists and philosophers.

10. The local group that met in central London was one of the exceptions; it was particularly large and particularly diverse in terms of background and age, drawing easily on the university student bodies.

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who was working on a book about "atheist spirituality" and training to become a celebrant, agreed with Benjamin. "There's the Unitarians, who are virtually atheists—now they have gone for architecture, and for songs, and for those bits of religion that they think are worthwhile. And I think what they do is interesting." "If you had all that, it would definitely put me off," Judy replied. "Me too," said Nigel, a relatively new member, and someone who often identified as an environmentalist. "I don't want songbooks and I don't want beautiful buildings, because that immediately to me introduces an influence which has nothing to do with the rational but has everything to do with the emotional, which is for me not what humanism is about."

Here we have a further sense of what "like-minded people" share—not always everything. But the disagreements were thrashed out with bonhomie, and the discussion wound down by everyone agreeing these differences of opinion would never split the group. "That's exactly it, isn't it?" said Mark, Judy's husband. "We can have this [debate], and it doesn't matter—that's kind of the *key* thing. You would have schisms in religion, you would; they would split. That won't ever happen here." It would not ever happen, Mark was saying, because these were reasonable people having reasonable disagreements.

There is a lot of conversation at humanist meetings; Judy got what she wanted. The meetings at Thames Path were organized around a presentation by a member or a guest speaker. These were sometimes complemented by small group exercises. The discussions were often quite academic and peppered with references to great minds of the past: Diderot, Aristotle, Maimonides, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell. Thames Path addressed a range of issues over the course of 2011: medical ethics, homeopathy, faith schools and the structure of state primary and secondary education, conceptions of the afterlife. The range is typical for local groups. Humanists talk about science, religion, ethics, and social issues. One notable thing here, however, is that a lot of what humanists talk about is the body: its care, its regulation (by the state and by oneself), its fate. So despite the ways in which humanism is often portrayed as all about talk, the talk is often driven by the mundane, by material concerns, concerns of life and death: medical ethics, assisted dying, stem cell research, reproductive rights.

Conclusion

I spent 2011 studying a voluntary association. Its members got together, in the main, once a month for a couple of hours to talk about ethical and social issues. They were primarily in their 50s or older. Sometimes their conversations concerned very personal issues, such as death and the afterlife, and sometimes they addressed broad social concerns, such as faith-based schooling and health-care provision. These meetings were complemented by other kinds of gatherings. They had coffee mornings, for instance, and helped run a soup kitchen. They had a Christmas party.

These were people of conviction. They had ideas about the world and the way it should be—some firmer than others, to be sure, and some more fully worked out, but by and large of a piece. They were committed to spreading their views; as far as they were concerned, their vision of the world is the right one—the true one. Questions of belief and belonging were commonly posed. Many thought of the group as a source of comfort and community. Some, in addition, did choir out of a particularly strong commitment to community; others found singing slightly embarrassing. The group also provided important resources for marking the cycles of life: trained specialists who could help people through the process of mourning or in celebrating the marriage of a couple or the birth of a child.

Any student of religion in Britain might well assume that what I am talking about here is the stereotypical Church of England congregation. And indeed it could be; but it is not. This is an anthropology of secular humanism, not an anthropology of Christianity.

Humanism is not Christianity. Humanism is not "a religion." "One problem with [such a] position is that it takes as unproblematic the entire business of defining religion" (Asad 2003:189). It suggests that religion has an essence; it is to say that "religion" is a thing whose characteristics can be repackaged but not remade. Humanism, in spite of Christianity—and indeed often out of spite for Christianity—is different. Part of what we see in light of this ethnographic exploration is how the difference gets perceived and produced. At a local, grassroots level, there are a growing number of people throughout Britain who come together as humanists and whose activities and perspectives as such play a role in defining religion today. Every time these people come together; every time they discuss medical ethics or the afterlife; every time they sing; every time they argue over whether they should sing; every time they take jibes at Christians; every time they take offense at such jibes; every time they organize, attend, or facilitate a "nonreligious" or humanist wedding or funeral—these are all acts, articulations, and assertions of what it means to be religious and not in contemporary Britain.

At the center of this humanist vision of religion is belief. To be religious is to be a believer, and to be a believer is to be a certain kind of person who brackets off as separate a set of truths not explicable in scientific or naturalistic terms.[11]

11. There is not space here to address the matter of "belief" for humanists; I am certainly not arguing that humanists have cracked the faith/knowledge problem and operate only in the realm of the latter. Neither, though, is it enough to rest with the kind of position of, say, Stathis Gourgouris (2013), for whom this kind of "Christian-derived" atheism "reiterates and preserves, albeit by denying it, the semantics of belief as a prosthetic dependency" (44). I would not want to back this normative claim about what counts as really real difference. In any case, to make sense of "belief" in any given context, it would be necessary to trace a range of relations, actions, and dispositions—again, not something there is space here to address.

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Contemporary humanism thus reinforces a certain post-Enlightenment conception of religion that locates it in a set of propositional assents—and "irrational" (or stupid, or delusional, or illogical) ones at that. The Victorian social anthropologist E. B. Tylor once famously defined religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" (1871:383). Contemporary humanism enacts this definition; humanists take what Tylor said out of the scholar's study and into the high street pub, into daily life. They take it from theory to praxis, and this in itself is, I think, a valuable contribution to the ethnographic record. We have numerous genealogical and intellectual-historical accounts of how religion became belief after the Enlightenment but surprisingly few case studies of how enlightenment gets lived beyond its imagining. As some of the remarks by Audrey and John (the semiretired psychologist) also suggest, this understanding of religion is based on its compartmentalization—another Enlightenment and specifically liberal conceit that religion is a private matter, something that can be bracketed off. There are some "bits of religion," as John put it, that might be worth saving.

To save these "bits," humanists strive to make them not religious. Organized humanism is a project of clarification of the insisted on difference between what is cultural (religious belief) and natural (certain modes of sociality). The humanists do not want belief, but they do want belonging; they do want the sense of community and even in some cases comfort that, as Sage said, the church has provided as a "default." Some of the humanists also want to sing, some want places of their own, and some even want those places to be inspiring and special. Local action is an important way in which these elements of sociality and religiosity get asserted and made.

Humanism cannot countenance "acts of God," then, precisely because such acts depend on what they see as belief rather than knowledge. To call something an act of God is a misstatement and a misperception of what is, for these humanists, really real: it confuses the forces of nature for agentive action. Floods happen as a result of certain contingencies, not purposeful design—not the will of "spiritual beings." As I have aimed to show, the only meaningful stories in humanist understandings of history can be those attributed to human action, human projects built up over time, slowly sifting out the residues of belief to uncover "the unshakable foundation of universally valid knowledge about nature and society" (Asad 2003:193). Sometimes the best way to take Christianity seriously is not to take it too seriously.

At the emic level, humanism produces what more and more anthropologists and others in the human sciences bridle against: the very idea that religion has to mean "belief." Yet if humanists are unanthropological in this way, reinforcing a rather narrow definition, they are very anthropological in others. Or perhaps it would be better to say anthropologists are often secularly humanistic, too. Anthropology might not be "so secular" as the master narratives of modernity demand, but it is still, I would argue, somewhat so. There is a Christianity of anthropology, to be sure, but it is not thus Christian. Whether we want to say the anthropology of Christianity is secular, we must at least acknowledge its secularizing sensibilities. Chief among these is the way it—like Thames Path humanism—makes Christianity "cultural."

This raises an issue for the anthropology of Christianity, for the "seriousness" with which Christianity is taken is, by most theological and lay measures alike, categorically not the seriousness with which Christians take it. One important aspect of the difference in the seriousness is that for Christians, Christianity is never cultural. This is the difference the "secular reason" (Milbank 1990) of social theory makes. Secular reason is conditioned by culture, not Christ. It makes culture axial.

Christians are often uneasy with "culture." Among the African apostolics I studied in Zimbabwe (Engelke 2007), for instance, culture was cause for concern. Christianity and culture were juxtaposed with one another, and much of the apostolics' thought and action was devoted to ridding themselves and society of those aspects of tradition—"African culture" is the term they used—that prevented the realization of authentic Christianity. Of course this does not mean that they understood themselves to live without culture or that certain aspects of what they did as Christianity was not cultural, even "African." At core, though, Christianity itself—the truth of the gospel message, the power of the Holy Spirit—had nothing cultural in its elementary makeup. The truth of Christianity is universal, and this puts it beyond any bounds of culture. More broadly in the ethnographic record, we have numerous cases of how culture becomes a problem in this sense and how Christian moderns (Keane 2007), especially in the colonial and postcolonial world, attempt to resolve it.[12]

Among the evangelicals I studied in England (Engelke 2013), culture was likewise an oppositional term. But for these Christians culture did not mean "English traditions," as if in parallel with the Zimbabwe case. In the English context—as indeed more widely in the West—culture meant "secular society," the society writ large, for which Christianity was understood to be an irrelevance. The evangelicals often spoke and acted as if they were not part of "the culture." They were part of "the Church." (Not that they were always happy with the Church.) The opposite of culture was "the Church." And much of what they did was geared toward "connecting with the culture," getting "the culture" to understand the relevance and ultimate, universal truth of Christianity. Here, too, in the ethnographic record, we have numerous examples of how "culture" becomes the index of a secular modernity against which Christians define themselves.[13]

One way the literary and cultural critic Bruce Robbins (2011) describes the history of secularization is as "the tran-

12. Many of the studies cited in n. 4 do just this.

13. Good examples include James Bielo (2011), Omri Elisha (2011), Mathew Guest (2007), Susan Harding (2009), and Anna Strhan (2012), all of whom trace the ways in which this language of church/culture shapes Christian projects of social engagement, in these cases in the United States and United Kingdom.

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sition from God to God-terms" (91). For the secular humanists I got to know, as we have seen, any such transition is not enough. The God-terms themselves have to go. They have to be replaced with nature-terms, with a world not open to the gotcha arguments of a Carl Schmitt or John Milbank. Robbins (2011) goes on to say that many cultural critics "have never been very good at facing . . . whether these God-terms are or are not God-equivalents" (91). I think anthropologists have to face up to this suggestion more readily and raise the question of the continuity thinking thus engendered. Another problem of Christian culture, then, is how to acknowledge and address culture's secularity and what that might mean for doing not only the anthropology of Christianity but what is not the anthropology of Christianity.

To say that humanism is not Christianity is not to accept or reproduce the worldview of humanists themselves. This is not the surrender of critical distance. It is, rather, to "take seriously" not only the difference Christianity makes but also the difference something called secularity makes, in both broad outline and in social and historical detail. In the case of these humanists in England, that difference hinges on some quite distinct notions of agency, of historicity, and of humanity, of what is involved in backing not God but nature in the organization and understanding of the world.

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