

The Meaning of Life and Belief in God

Marvin Kohl

The general public considers Bertrand Russell the great patron of twentieth-century rationalism and nonreligious humanism. It therefore came as no small surprise when his only daughter described her religious conversion, claiming that it added to all he had taught her. Thus Lady Katharine writes:

For me, the belief in forgiveness and grace was like sunshine after long days of rain. No matter what I did, no matter how low I fell, God would be there to forgive, to pick me up and set me on my feet again. Though I could not earn his love, neither could I lose it. It was absolute, not conditional. My earthly father loved me only when I was good (or so I believed). I was not good; therefore he did not love me. But God did and does and always will. . . .

I realized that there were weaknesses in the Christian argument, I acknowledged that it was difficult to reconcile omnipotence with suffering and with free will; but they were equally difficult to reconcile with Science. Perhaps Christianity was not a logically elegant and watertight demonstration of irrefutable reality, but what choice did I have? It saved my sanity, if not my life.

All that my father said about the absurdity of Christianity and the wickedness of the church remained true. I could not deny it. But it was only a part of the whole. He seized on the follies, which are many, and labeled them official religion, while claiming that Christians have never taken seriously the good parts of Christ's teaching. But he never dealt with it seriously either. When he wanted to attack religion, he sought out its most egregious errors and held them up to ridicule, while avoiding serious discussion of the basic message I found so liberating. . . .

As I went deeper and deeper into religion . . . I found it ever more satisfying. I wished I could convince my father that it *added* to all I had learned from him and took very little away. I did not find it a denial of life, a brier patch of restrictions, but a joyful affirmation. [Katharine Tait, *My Father, Bertrand Russell* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 188-189.]

I do not wish to exaggerate the importance of Lady Katharine's rejection of Russell's agnosticism. Nor do I wish in any way to suggest that her statement provides the cognitive grounds for a defense of traditional forms of theism. Yet there is an important argument here; and it is one neglected by humanists, who often seem mesmerized by the problem of what can and cannot be known about the nature of God. It is an implicit argument, not about the truth of religious belief but about its utility. The argument in brief is that, because of certain basic human needs, there is a need for most ordinary men

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and women to believe in God; that without a belief in God, especially the belief in a loving Providence, life would have no, or very little, meaning.

A humane humanism cannot casually dismiss this argument. It cannot say, as some appear to do, that this "attitude has all the earmarks of pathology," that it is "infantile and immature," that "it exacerbates all illusion in order to soothe the aching heart," or that it "expresses a basic lack of courage to persist in the face of adversity." For to do so, without a serious appreciation of the utility of religious belief, is to be indifferent to the problems that actually torment millions of human beings. To do so is to neglect the present welfare of existing human beings and clandestinely substitute a new species of alleged ideal humans who do not have the same troublesome psychic needs that most existing humans have.

Whatever may be the source of this oversight, it is not consistent with the humanism I cherish. For me humanism is a system of thought and action that makes human welfare the measure and end of all moral and political endeavors. Welfare is the measure and end; knowledge and love (or its like) are the major means. It is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to define welfare successfully. But we can, in a rough and preliminary way, say that by welfare is meant the minimal satisfaction and protection of the means of satisfying basic individual needs and correlate interests as well as perhaps the other fundamental interests a society would want to protect if it were inspired by love and were fully rational. By love is meant the kind of relationship between persons or things where the object of this emotion is generally a delight to contemplate and where, if the object is a living being, there is a strong disposition to protect or promote the welfare of that individual. Although love may be best, kindness is often more than sufficient. By knowledge is meant two things. It first refers to any person's correct belief that such and such is true (or false) plus his having adequate evidence that what he believes is what he claims it to be. The humanist often uses the term knowledge also as an elliptical way of referring to and applauding reverence for knowledge and intellectual integrity. This includes the willingness to do battle, when and where necessary, to protect free inquiry as well as the willingness to defend the belief that intellectual integrity demands that we should doubt what is doubtful almost as imperatively as it does that we should disbelieve what is false.

Now it is chiefly because of these overriding beliefs that the humanist, after inquiry, concludes that belief in beneficent Providence is untrue. It is untrue because there is no evidence to warrant the claim that there is a benevolent force behind nature. Not only does the secular humanist deny that we have

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least inadvertently, promotes gullibility; because many of those who have become accustomed to the warmth of this illusion suffer far more from the blasts of life's adversities than do those who have hardened themselves from the first; and because, when this belief is developed along theistic lines, it more often than not encourages the neglect of worldly welfare. For history abundantly shows us that belief in beneficent Providence is typically coupled with an adoration of perfect happiness in a world to come, with an oftentimes almost perverse admiration for suffering in this world, and therefore with a proportionate general neglect of the welfare of human beings. Yet with all this said we should not forget the many positive contributions theistic religions have made. They have mothered some of the earliest forms of altruism. Nor should we forget the many acts of religious charity that in moments of darkness have helped improve human conditions, not only by encouraging acts of good-Samaritanism but by establishing foundling homes, hospitals, and other philanthropic institutions. But even if we neglect, or decide to take issue with, these claims, the facts also indicate that many, like Lady Katharine, are given insight about the meaning of life, about the chief end of human living, when they believe God makes a disclosure about His own nature and purpose and gently embraces them in His absolute love. In short, it appears to be true that belief in God has had and still has the power to give comfort and consolation to millions of devout believers. Largely because of this, two important claims cannot be easily, if at all, dismissed. They are: (1) that in addition to other basic human needs, there is a need for psychological security, which includes the need to believe in God, or at least believe that the cosmos is guided by a loving purpose; and (2) that this need is often successfully met if a man genuinely recognizes that his goal for living is in, and given to him by, God.

Since these are empirical claims, the humanist cannot dismiss them out of hand without also placing respect for truth in similar jeopardy. And, since it may prove to be the case not only that man has a general need to believe but also that belief in God (or some essentially similar belief) produces at least as great a proportion of good over evil as does any available known alternative, to arrogantly crusade against religious beliefs — without distinguishing between beneficent and nonbeneficent varieties — may very well diminish important elements of human welfare. •

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knowledge about a Friend Behind the Universe; he also denies that we have knowledge about divine or cosmic purpose. The argument in its essential form is simple and, I believe, decisive. Purposes can only be correctly assigned to sentient beings; and since man does not have knowledge that God or other sentient beings govern the universe, he cannot on a cognitive level maintain that the universe has any purpose.

The belief in beneficent Providence also has harmful dimensions. It is harmful because it often encourages the confusion of illusion with true belief and therefore, at