

Ritual For Rationalists

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In a busy west London street called Queensway there used to be what was called the Ethical Church. It was a church for non-believers, for high-minded Edwardian rationalists. It had some of the accoutrements of a conventional church – a pulpit, pews, candlesticks, even an altar made of grey marble and inscribed “... to the Ideal of the True, the Beautiful and the Good”. These values were the Holy Trinity of Ethicalist belief. The atmosphere of reverence was augmented by stained-glass windows, one of which portrayed in somewhat eccentric juxtaposition George Bernard Shaw, Anatole France and Joan of Arc. The last named was there for as an idol of feminism rather than for her faith, the Ethicalists being early toilers in the vineyard of women’s suffrage. “A pity,” you can hear them tut-tutting as they made out the order for the window, “about her mumbo-jumbo talk of angels’ voices but at least she would have been in favour of votes for women.” What St Joan herself, had she been available for consultation, might have thought of finding herself arbitrarily installed in a pantheon with two such outspoken opponents of the beliefs that inspired her, and particularly with her aggressively anti-clerical and atheistic compatriot M. France, can only be imagined.

The Edwardian, and especially the Victorian age, are sometimes seen as an age of faith, with much churchbuilding (not least in Australia) and vast missionary activity, but in reality, among its educated classes, it was an age of scepticism. The *Origin of Species* and German biblical criticism had knocked down the comfortable edifice of religious certainty, yet the new agnostics (the term was coined by T. H. Huxley) were reluctant, if they were at all spiritually inclined rather than reductive materialists, to throw out the baby of moral order with the bathwater of revealed Christianity. They thought it necessary to have a religion of some sort. Their moral seriousness could not do without one. If an external God did not exist, there had to be something else to justify the kind of right behaviour which alone could be the salvation of the human race. They needed something in *human experience* on which to base the virtuous life, otherwise all was chaos. Ethics, embracing daily conduct guided by the True, the Beautiful and the Good was the answer to many a rationalist’s non-prayer. Ethical societies supplied the communal dimension.

Here was the nobility of pure religion unencumbered by the supernatural, a creed for Modern Intelligent Man. The Ethical Church as a place of worship filled the gap left by the abandonment of Christian practice, which had previously filled a considerable part of the days and weeks of the spiritually minded. In its gaslit interior, with horseshoe balconies like a music hall, they could happily attend services, which most had done since infancy, without any irritating doubts of the kind they would have felt in the pews of the Church of England. The Ethical Church had been built as a Methodist chapel and had the advantage of looking ecclesiastical, with Gothic arches – indeed it looks somewhat Venetian, rising above the street as though Queensway were a canal. The West London Ethical Society must have felt some satisfaction in being able to buy the leasehold in 1909 and, in a triumph of light over darkness, banish from within its walls the sentimental delusions of evangelical Christianity.

The society's founder was an American called Stanton Colt (how many odd religions have emerged from America), who was first drawn to Ethical Thought as a disciple of the American philosopher and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, an advocate of the doctrine of transcendentalism, which, optimistically if ingenuously, maintains that all people are fundamentally good. Dr Colt (he had acquired a Ph.D from a university in Berlin) came to London to officiate at the South Place Ethical Society, an early venture in organised rationalism, with which, in unfailing sectarian tradition, he was soon in schism. He stumped off to set up his own society, in doing which he was vastly assisted by the wealth of his wife Adela, the daughter of a German industrialist. She paid for the building in London in which Dr Colt could indulge his taste for liturgy and play church while expounding his beliefs. These he summarised in *What Do We Mean By God?* when he wrote:

The old teaching was that we must worship not truth, beauty and goodness, but their source, and that their source is personal intelligence of infinite power. The new idea is that not their source, but these glories themselves, these absolute values, regardless of the source whence they flow, are worthy of absolute reverence and utter obedience, and are on that account to be worshipped and adored as God.

That “regardless of the source whence they flow” sounds a bit like an each-way bet.

Dr Colt's liturgical enthusiasms, which raised many a more austere rationalist eyebrow and earned him a reputation as a *rara avis* among unbelievers, found fulfilment in the Ethical Church's services, which were called meetings. Apart from Dr Colt's scruples about which source to worship they were conventionally churchy. The congregation sang hymns

from the *Ethical Hymn-Book* (price two guineas), a comprehensive collection which, according to the author of a 1932 guidebook for the touring free-thinker, *London for Heretics*, included “psalms from Browning, Whittier and others; chants from Matthew Arnold [and] a humanistic adaptation of St Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Sun*.” Any alarm the guidebook’s readers might have felt that these would lead them into theistic error was dismissed by the author’s reassurance that “although [Dr Colt] has in his services psalm, hymn and spiritual song, they wing earthward aspirations towards ideal humanity.”

The one hymn I have been able to find is no. 110 by Louise S. Guggenberger, who was no Charles Wesley, or even Mrs Alexander.

*With faith not pent within a book,
Or buried in a creed
But growing with th’expanding thought
And deepening in the need;*

*A faith whose sacred strength is sure,
And needs no priest to tell;
Its law: – “Be kind, be pure, be just”;
Its promise: - “Thence be well”.*

*For joy shall one with feeling be,
And feeling planet-wide,
Where many men have done their best,
And, doing it, have died.*

It might have needed no priest to tell but it had Dr Colt, whose sermon or lecture was the liturgical highlight of Ethical Church gatherings until, having done *his* best, he departed into the Unknown in 1944.

Membership of the Ethical Church was open to all who could demonstrate “a rudiment of goodness which is called moral faith,” though how they were to demonstrate this is not recorded. The church existed, according to Dr Colt, to “strengthen its members in their self-dedication, their love of the Good, their grasp of what is good” as well as to give them the “power to choose the better way in every situation”. A philosophical purist might ask what precisely was understood by “the Good” but Dr Colt’s audience evidently had no doubts.

Ethicalists continued to worship and adore the Absolute Values in Queensway until 1953, when as with so many sects, their numbers had declined and the church was no longer sustainable. The building was put up for sale, and the triumph of light over darkness reversed when it was bought by that very embodiment of what its congregation would have considered obscurantist superstition, the Roman Catholic Church. It is now called Our Lady Queen of Heaven. *Mon Dieu inesistant!* as Monsieur France might have exclaimed, how far from rigorous rationalism can you get?

The fate of the stained-glass window is not known. The West London Ethical Society gradually evolved into Humanists UK, an assemblage of the non-believing élite of the United Kingdom, or of those of them who are not in the rival National Secular Society with its shrill spiel, “help us end religious privilege by becoming a member today.” Religious *privilege*? Militant secularists always seem to assume they’re living in an age of prince-bishops rather than one with only a few remnants of practising Christians. Don’t they realise they’ve already won?

If there’s one thing more tedious than harping on religion it’s harping on no religion. If you don’t believe why not just forget the whole subject and get on with enjoying life in your own way? These people can’t let religion go, just like Dr Colt, whose inability to do without ritual lives on among the rationalists of our day, even here in Australia.

The Ethical Church came to mind when I heard about a “naming” for the child of some progressivist parents who clearly scorned the notion of baptism. It was to be conducted by a secularist celebrant, supplied by an association called Humanists Australia. I had dimly supposed humanists to be a kind of secular Plymouth Brethren, puritanical with no sense of humour, the males retired secondary-school science teachers with bald heads and batwing open collars like the late Julius Sumner Miller, the female version with grey cropped hair and their glasses dangling from chains. Such people, I imagined, would occasionally convene to talk about Nietzsche and to complain about prayers in parliament, and I knew they looked with lofty pity on those of their fellow citizens who were so weak-minded as to require the comforts of religion. The student-seducing Sydney University philosophy professor John Anderson, an arch-humanist subsequently elevated by his academic groupies to the status of an Australian Kant, said that churchgoers were “childish”, “not really adults”. But my image of humanists, if ever it was accurate, is certainly not so in an age of PR and websites. Humanists Australia has a website which is very corporate and, in the breezy tone characteristic of this means of

communication, brightly informative about who Humanists are, what they do and what they believe, or in their case, not believe.

It is also – and here the inability to restrain the liturgical impulse reasserts itself, as in the Ethical Church – replete with information under the heading of “Ceremonies!” (the purpose of the exclamation mark is not immediately apparent). “Celebration of life events is a very human thing,” the website concedes. “Humanist celebrants have been conducting ceremonies and celebrating with people for many years, worldwide. Here in Australia we have many fine experienced humanist celebrants.” I don’t know about fine, but we certainly have many, ever since the Whitlam revolution when Gough’s secularist government decided that a good way to shaft the churches was to break the near monopoly they had in those days on weddings. People wanted a bit of ceremony on their big day and the only place they could get it then was a church, even if they weren’t themselves regular churchgoers. The alternative was to thread your way among the filing cabinets and get married in the registrar’s office. On the Soviet palace of marriages principle, the Whitlam regime invented civil celebrants and the opportunity to have a marriage ceremony with flowers and organza in a vineyard or on the beach. You could even write your own vows, which continues to yield some pretty excruciating efforts, as anyone who has attended secular weddings will know. The monopoly was broken and church weddings are now well under a quarter of the national total.

The Humanists’ website offers “Marriages and Commitment Ceremonies”. This is illustrated by a picture of two women in bridal attire, which seems to suggest that Humanists consider the same-sex wedding as typical, which it probably is these days, when fewer people enter into what feminists have long told us is the tyranny of the marriage bond, but which nuptially disposed gays and lesbians have decided to regard as an emblem of their liberation.

In the blurb on “Baby Namings”, mentioned above, we are told that “The birth of a child is a a wonder filled (*sic*) event” (the many humanists who are enthusiasts for abortion would be unlikely to endorse this sentiment). The next statement – “Parents usually give much thought to the names the child will bear throughout life” – I should have thought verges on the transphobic, but it’s true all the same. All those bizarre names they laboriously contrive, sometimes by taking a conventional name and playing around with the spelling: Kasee, Mathiu, Trentt, Antwohnette, Wiatt; sometimes by bestowing on the unfortunate child a hitherto non-nominal appellation: Jazz, Solstice, Vanilla, Sincere, Brick; sometimes as a result of

lifelong exposure to television or popular entertainment: Courteney, Brady, Brody, Opie, Sheldon, Daenerys. According to the website *GoodtoKnow*, a fount of advice on “food, family, entertainment” and “wellbeing”, “[u]nique baby names are growing in popularity and are usually driven by a focus on individuality, with naming conventions pretty much thrown out of the window.” They can say that again. Names it lists include Veltete, Panda, Anomaly, Tigger, Windy, Prtecise and Pluto. When people had their children christened in church the names were much more sensible.

And so it goes on. “Coming of Age” informs the inquirer that “The transition from childhood to adulthood is an important time in a persons [*sic*] life that is celebrated in many cultural traditions. This celebration is often accompanied by the teaching of life skills”. Who does the teaching is not stated but there’s a picture of a kid in a wheelchair who seems to be getting a lesson in photography from a non-disabled child, so perhaps the latter is a junior celebrant of this rite of passage, which is presumably a substitute for Christian confirmation. When we get to “End of Life” – and why not just say death? You’d think Humanists would be matter of fact about these things instead of employing genteelisms – there is an embarrassment of choice in the manner that Humanists will wish you goodbye. “Humanist celebrants help the community of friends and family celebrate” (that sounds like a tautology but I suppose is not quite) “the life of” – stand back for a massive genteelism – “a departed loved one in many ways, including with” (elegant prose is not a Humanist speciality) “funerals, memorial services, and simply by scattering ashes.” What a busy life Humanist celebrants lead. And if the idea appeals, you can “get in touch” and “find out more about becoming an accredited Humanist Australia celebrant.” That would be the secular equivalent of ecclesiastical vocation discernment.

Before you get humanistically despatched, you might like to try an “Other Life Event” (nothing to do with beyond the grave). “Our lives are rich and varied,” burbles the website. “Often there are simple reasons to celebrate: house warmings, boat namings” (why not name your car or mobile phone while you’re at it?) “pet ceremonies, anniversaries, birthdays, and” – wait for it – “even divorces can be celebrated with a Humanist celebrant!” (exclamation mark again). Stop thinking of marriage break-up as a tragedy. Drown your recriminations at a Humanist party instead (if, after the financial settlement, you can afford it).

Of course, Humanism is not all joyful celebrations. There’s serious work to be done. “We envisage,” the website declares, “a future where every Australian knows what Humanism is and can join a supportive, inclusive

Humanist community.” That sounds like old-fashioned proselytising. Missionary activity is listed under “Campaigns” and, much as you’d expect from this sort of source, pushes euthanasia and climate doom, exhorts us to reject “harmful religious freedom laws” and claims that Humanists are “supporting global action on human rights”, whatever that means. And, just like the churches, Humanists are a bit stuck in the past. I couldn’t find any mention of those otherwise ubiquitous topics *du jour*, black lives and Aboriginal entitlement, and the page about the “Dennis Balson Essay Prize” – last year’s winner was a snappy little piece entitled “Russellian Panpsychism and Brain-Independent Consciousness” – shows two hands on a *typewriter*. I suppose it’s rather charming in a way.

Disbelief is a rich landscape, and I have not even touched on several other rationalistic “denominations” spreading the word of scepticism. But I cannot omit the Atheist Foundation of Australia, the charismatics of our secularist community. By comparison with their zeal, the Humanists are like the lukewarm Laodiceans in the New Testament, neither cold nor hot. The Atheists are so – *committed*, proclaiming with dogmatic certainty that God does not exist. They throw themselves into their disbelief with the same zeal as the born again on fire with the spirit. One of their committee members founded a campaign against schools chaplaincies. One, an immigrant, became an atheism crusader when he found himself “shocked by the overt use of religion in public life, politics and the workplace” in Australia, though this is perhaps not as apparent to the rest of us as it was to him. One, who is also a wit, “was an optometrist who helped people see in the literal sense, but more recently has sought to help people see in the religious sense” and believes that the Bible and Koran “are based on fiction” (he should watch out about saying that too loudly). Another, as a labour of love, is reading *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. Presumably he’s a student atheist in training.

All churches have their saints. The National Secular Lobby of Australia – which with regard to the Humanists is rather a case of which twin has the Toni – has several favourite names from the thriving field of self-publicity as its “ambassadors”. There’s veteran windbag Phillip Adams and perpetually virtuous barrister Julian Burnside. All-purpose expert and erstwhile senatorial aspirant (we certainly dodged a bullet there) Jane Caro, whose career, like Phillip’s, has been in the deceitful trade of advertising but whose true vocation, if life had been fairer, must surely have been playing landladies in Ealing films, is a female ambassador, a function she shares with the Victorian MP Fiona Patten, foundress of the Australian Sex Party, which has somehow transubstantiated into the

Reason Party – a chill name that echoes the Terror in the French Revolution – and who in a heartening instance of secular ecumenism is also Ambassador for the Humanists. Her previous means of employment suggests that she be nominated the Mary Magdalene of the Australian secularist faith. Perhaps a plutocratic non-believer could commission her image in a stained-glass window.

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