

The Enlightenment as a Secular Project

Notes on the lecture to the Existentialist Society, 4 August 2009., by John Perkins

Roland Boer's previous lecture on this subject

A lecture with this title was scheduled to be given to the Existentialist Society by Roland Boer. However Dr Boer was unable to attend, and I was called upon and agreed to give a lecture in his place. Dr Boer previously gave a lecture to the Humanist Society of Victoria, on 26 August 2008, with an almost identical title. Having attended that lecture, and having access to the Humanist Society's Newsletter, which provided an excellent report of that lecture, I was happy substitute for Dr Boer, with some confidence that I could give some outline of what Dr Boer would have himself said.

I also could provide some comment on his lecture, the nature of which I delivered to Dr Boer on the occasion of the conclusion of his Humanist Society lecture. Following this I could offer some of my own comments on the nature of secularism, particularly as a representative of the Secular Party of Australia, for which the subject has some relevance. What follows are some brief notes used as a basis for the lecture.

Dr Boer gave a definition of the word secularism which was based on what he said was its Latin derivation from *saeculum*, being "an age, a generation, or a spirit of an age". Quoting from the HSV Newsletter, "Dr Boer proposed that secularism be defined as 'a way of living, and thinking and acting that takes its terms from this world and this age, not some future age or world above'". This definition is somewhat at odds with what is commonly meant by the term, to say the least, and is odd in that it conflates the future and supernaturalism as being antithetical to secularism.

Dr Boer provided a summary of the history of secularism in the UK, France and the USA. He then referred to the International Humanist and Ethical Union and to the America Humanist Association for definitions of Humanism. He surmised that humanism was interested in trying to make the world a better place in the future. All of this was uncontroversial.

Dr Boer then proceeded to his conclusion. This was that because humanism was forward looking, and this conflicted with his, in my view, somewhat peculiar definition of secularism, that humanism was somewhat anti-secular. The humanists present, myself included, found this conclusion, and the contrived reasoning behind it, rather bizarre, I think.

The definition of comprehensive secularism

Following this I proceeded to discuss my own conception of the meaning and purpose of secularism. I provided a definition of "comprehensive secularism" as specified by the IHEU. Briefly, comprehensive secularism is the separation of religion from state institutions, impartiality between religions and the protection of human rights from violation on the basis of religious doctrine. A resolution, passed at the IHEU Congress and General Assembly in July 2005 stated:

The International Humanist and Ethical Union, taking into account the currently emerging situation world-wide, resolves that the humanist movement must make renewed efforts to support comprehensive secularism in all countries, in the sense of separation of religion from state institutions, complete impartiality on the part of the State in its attitude

and actions towards different religions and belief systems, and the right and the responsibility of the State to intervene to protect human rights from gross violation, even if based on religious doctrine or enshrined in religiously based civil law. The State must protect the individual's right to leave his or her community without the fear of violence or severe reprisal.

The need for secularism

After centuries of religious warfare in Europe, modern civilisation was built on the concept of secularism - the separation of religion from the public sphere. With the problem of terrorism, and the even greater problems caused by the "war on terror", many of the pillars on which our civilisation was built are eroding. Our liberties are being curtailed by draconian legislation. Internationally, the rule of law is being disregarded. Rational thought is no longer considered paramount. Secularism has been eroded and replaced by tacit endorsement of all forms of religion, especially in education. Religious intolerance is increasing, as is social disharmony.

It is one of the aims of the Secular Party to reverse these trends and reassert the ideal of establishing truth through reason and observation. We aim to re-establish the ideal that represents the only real alternative to sectarian strife - the ideal of secularism, based on the universal values of honesty, compassion, freedom and justice. In view of the many problems that humanity faces in the 21st century, this is a critical task.

Some of the policies we promote are:

- Education – no funding to faith schools
- No chaplains in schools
- No faith based social services outsourcing
- No tax breaks for non-charity religious activities
- Support for secularism internationally

We are opposed to:

- The principle of theocratic states – Christian, Judaic or Islamic
- The concept of “defamation of religion” as promoted by Islamic states in the United Nations

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