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# Was George Orwell a Humanist?

*George Orwell (1903-1950), the great apostle of liberty, was far ahead of his time in his condemnation of totalitarian society. As 1984 begins, it is inevitable that we reflect on how close various societies are to the one depicted in Orwell's Nineteen-Eighty-Four. FREE INQUIRY asked Antony Flew, a distinguished British scholar and humanist, to reflect on George Orwell and to what extent he might be considered a humanist.—EDS.*

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## Antony Flew

Some difficulties do confront us if we want to claim George Orwell as, without qualification, a lifelong humanist. Certainly we know from one of his Eton contemporaries that Eric Blair, as Orwell was originally named, “was prominent in bringing into College the solvent represented by Wells, Shaw, and Samuel Butler, and before that, Gibbon and Sterne.” Another confirms that he was a spokesman for “this sceptical rationalist tradition” right from his first year, having presumably read at least some of the key works before entering Eton. But then in the early thirties, after his return from service in the Burma Police and after his penitential period as a “down and out in Paris and London,” while he was teaching at The Hawthorns (a small private school in Hayes, Middlesex), Orwell became a regular churchgoer and started to take the *Church Times*. (This was a High Church weekly, then and for many years thereafter edited by a man who was in politics strongly socialist.) The widow of the curate at the church Orwell attended has since testified to her conviction that Orwell, of whom she and her husband saw a great deal at that time, was not merely a practicing but a believing Christian. Others spoke of this as a period in which he was “rearranging himself.”

Orwell never joined the National Secular Society, wrote for the Rationalist Press Association, or in any other way identified himself with organized humanism. On the contrary, it might be urged, both his marriages were conducted under the auspices of “the church by law established,” and his will ended: “And lastly I direct that my body shall be buried (not

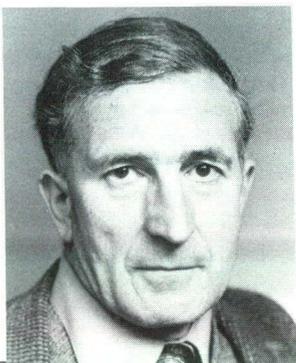
cremated) according to the rites of the Church of England in the nearest convenient cemetery. . . .”

Nevertheless, whatever the truth about the ambivalent period of personal “rearrangement” at The Hawthorns, it is clear that both before and after, and right up to the end, Orwell was by conviction both mortalist and secular. His insistence on a traditional Church of England burial has to be understood as an expression of English patriotism, of commitment to the ordinary and the rural. Cremation he must have seen, however wrong-headedly, as one more of the detested crankinesses of the cosmopolitan and alienated intellectuals—the sort of socialists he had pilloried in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. That there was no deathbed conversion, no final hope of eventual resurrection, is nicely demonstrated by his official biographer’s account of the efforts required to meet Orwell’s request for a religious service, and for burial in a country churchyard.<sup>1</sup> (It took the combined efforts of the future television pundit Malcolm Muggeridge and the press baron David Astor!)

Orwell’s world outlook was in fact as secular as any humanist could wish. Yet he seems never to have offered in print any direct reasons for adopting a world-outlook of this sort rather than a religious and supernaturalistic alternative. He appears, that is, never to have published any deployment of evidencing reasons for believing that the universe is as humanists rather than as theists believe it to be. Taking the truth of secularism and mortalism absolutely for granted, in his later years his interests in religion—such as they were—seem to have been exclusively sociological and psychological. That is, he was curious about how many or how few actually believed what, rather than about any evidencing reasons they might have had, or thought they had, for believing this rather than that. He was also concerned about the possible or actual practical and political effects of the holding of various beliefs and disbeliefs. But there was for Orwell no arguing with and against religious believers about their beliefs. Yet he was ready to recommend, in one of his “As I Please” columns, the Rationalist Press Association book *The Follies and Frauds of Spiritualism*. (His concluding comment was: “Significantly, the people who are never converted to spiritualism are conjurors.”)<sup>2</sup>

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Courtesy of Sport & General Press Agency

Typical of Orwell's sociological and psychopolitical approach is the passing remark in a letter of 1931 about a staunchly anti-Roman Catholic Bible Society shop window: "So long as that spirit is in the land we are safe from the R.C.'s"<sup>3</sup> More seriously, and more substantially, in a review of some of T. S. Eliot's later poems Orwell writes of "the immortality of the soul": "The various 'proofs' of personal immortality which can be advanced by Christian apologists are psychologically of no importance: what matters, psychologically, is that hardly anyone nowadays *feels* himself to be immortal. The next world may be in some sense 'believed in' but it has not anywhere near the same actuality in people's minds as it had a few centuries ago."<sup>4</sup>

Later, in another "As I Please" column, Orwell returns to this loss of belief. Again his interest is in its psychological and political rather than its logical implications: "If death ends everything, it becomes much harder to believe that you can be in the right even if you are defeated. . . . I do not want the belief in life after death to return, and in any case it is not likely to return. What I do point out is that its disappearance has left a big hole, and we ought to take notice of that fact."<sup>5</sup> Orwell's last word on this subject comes in "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool." That last word is explicitly humanist: ". . . a normal human being does not want the Kingdom of Heaven: he wants life on earth to continue. . . . Ultimately it is the Christian attitude which is self-interested and hedonistic, since the aim is always to get away from the painful struggle of earthly life and to find eternal peace in some kind of Heaven or Nirvana. The humanist attitude is that the struggle must continue and that death is the price of life. 'Men must endure their going hence

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even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all”—which is an un-Christian sentiment.”<sup>6</sup>

So far, so good. But it is not nearly far enough. For, were we to allow that in order to be rated a humanist it is sufficient to affirm human mortality and to maintain some secular and naturalistic viewpoint, then we should become committed to accepting into our company many of the altogether unacceptable and monstrous. There could be no question of disqualifying Lenin or Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot—to say nothing of all those others happy to give from afar their support for the regimes of such men, or even to work to undermine resistance to their further extension.<sup>7</sup>

We have, therefore, to demand the satisfaction of some further conditions as necessary for the award of what ought to be an honorable title. To score as a humanist a person must surely be committed to values that are not only through and through secular, this-worldly, and man-centered but also humane, kindly, realistic, honest, individualistic, and libertarian. It is quite impossible here and in brief adequately to specify what these further necessary conditions must require us to include and to exclude. Perhaps the best way of proceeding—and certainly the most apt—would be to go through all Orwell's

published discussions of human conduct, noting what pleased him most and what it was that most stirred his anger. For anyone seeking a paradigm of humanist values can scarcely do better than to look to Orwell.

Take, for instance, the splendid, swinging editorial written to defend *Polemic* against charges brought by the Muscovite Marxist *Modern Quarterly*. *Polemic* had been faulted by that journal, of all journals, for "persistent attempts to confuse moral issues, to break down the distinction between right and wrong."<sup>8</sup> Yet in their very next paragraph, as Orwell immediately pointed out, those editors asserted, inconsistently, that "the whole basis of ethics needs reexamination." This more characteristic theme was developed later in the same issue by the Jesuit-trained physicist and Stalinist J. D. Bernal. Allowing, generously, that "Many of the basic virtues—truthfulness and good fellowship—. . . need no changing," he went on to urge that "those based on excessive concern with individual rectitude need reorienting in the direction of social responsibility."

Orwell at once transposes all Bernal's Latinate abstractions into plain and concrete English prose, supplying from recent Communist party practices and propaganda what Bernal so prudently eschews, a few necessary illustrations. What it all amounts to, Orwell correctly concludes, is that the claims of any and every ordinary virtue—of truthfulness, of good fellowship, and of common decency—may and must be being forever overridden by the demands of the party and the government.

Orwell continues, touching on various by this stage favorite themes. For instance: "The connection between totalitarian habits of thought and the corruption of language is an important subject which has not been sufficiently studied. Like all writers of his school Professor Bernal has a strong tendency to drop into Latin when something unpleasant has to be said." Whereas the collected works of Bernal can never have stimulated so much as one single solitary smile, Orwell even here gives us a grin: "in F. Aristey's *Vice Versa* 'Drastic measures is Latin for a whopping.'"

Again, Orwell notices that Bernal and his editors prefer "even the bestialities of Fascism" to the "unreal and useless tenets" of what both Marxists and fascists denounce as rotten, bourgeois liberalism. (F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, which Orwell reviewed with notable sympathy in 1944, must have been one main source for his recognition that the totalitarian extremes of centralizing left and so-called right unite in an execration of classical liberalism more intense than their hatred of each other.<sup>9</sup>) Orwell's unsigned editorial concludes: "We think we have said enough to show that our real crime, in the eyes of the *Modern Quarterly*, lies in defending a conception of right and wrong, and of intellectual decency, which has been responsible for all true progress for centuries past, and without which the very continuance of civilized life is by no means certain."

The upshot of the polemic against Bernal, and of so many similar onslaughts on so many other spokespersons for totalitarian tyranny, is that Orwell's humanist values embrace all the traditional decencies as well as at least some of the classical liberal political values—rotten, bourgeois, liberal values, as Marxist tyrants and would-be tyrants love to say. ("Decency"

was a favorite Orwellian term, as it remains a favorite English one, for the commending of conduct.) So the question arises: "In what sense, if any, did Orwell remain to the end a socialist?" To answer this we have also to answer the question: What were the intended morals of his two most powerful and most popular works, *Animal Farm* and *1984*?

From at least the time of his return from the Spanish War right up to the end of his life Orwell insisted that he was a socialist, but a democratic socialist. As such he both said he was and in fact was wholeheartedly and without reservation opposed to every form of totalitarianism, and not merely to German National Socialism and those other so-called right-wing totalitarianisms now usually and almost, if not quite, empty labeled "fascist." Thus, in a 1947 letter to Victor Gollancz, Orwell wrote: "I don't, God knows, want a war to break out, but if one were compelled to choose between Russia and America . . . I would always choose America."<sup>10</sup> I should hope so! But there are many who have tried to pass as democratic socialists who would opt in the opposite sense. G. D. H. Cole, for instance, as chairman of the Fabian Society, announced in 1941: "Much better be ruled by Stalin than by the restrictive and monopolistic cliques which dominate Western Capitalism."<sup>11</sup>

About socialism Orwell was equally forthright and unequivocal. On his lips or from his pen the word always referred to—to quote the statement of aims in Clause IV of the Constitution of the British Labour Party—"the public ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange." Occasionally he would suggest that this is not sufficient, mentioning other values that he and others have believed might in fact be realized or realizable only in consequence of such total and wholesale nationalization. But always for him—as for everyone else who has had to have dealings with that Labour Party and with those labor unions that created, sustain, and control it—the implementation of Clause IV was the necessary condition for the imposition of a socialist order.

The confusion and the controversy about the interpretation of *Animal Farm* and *1984* arises, I suggest, because so many of those who are, in this understanding, socialists do not in fact, although they may sometimes wish to pretend otherwise, share Orwell's total opposition to all forms of totalitarianism. As it becomes increasingly obvious, from the ever-accumulating experience of ever more almost completely socialist states, that it is just not practically possible to base a pluralist political life upon a state-monopoly economy, those who remain or become socialists are inclined to see enemies of totalitarianism as, necessarily, enemies of socialism.

There is now a rich and revealing literature on this theme from many Marxist-Leninist sources. I will here quote only from a statement issued in 1971 by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow. With its eyes most immediately upon Chile and France it sketched a program for achieving, through "United Front" or "Broad Left" tactics, irreversible communist domination: "Having once acquired political power, the working class implements the liquidation of the private ownership of the means of production. . . . As a result, under socialism, there remains no ground for the existence of any opposition parties counter-balancing the Communist Party."



George Orwell

Those in Britain who have read recent Labour Party manifestos threatening "irreversible changes," and who have heard the leaders of powerful labor unions calling for a nationalized press, responsible to "the organized workers," will not need to be told that the irremovable party does not have to be called a "communist" party.

Given this close practical connection between socialism and totalitarianism it should be no surprise to see socialists who are by no means anti-totalitarian—who may even choose to pretend that they do not know what that word means—doubting whether Orwell was truly of their company. Indeed, in a very real sense he was not, since, had he ever become persuaded of the impossibility of a liberal and democratic socialism, he would surely have dropped the socialism rather than the opposition to totalitarianism. In his official biography Bernard Crick points to "Raymond Williams in his Fontana Modern Masters study *Orwell*" and to "Isaac Deutscher in his polemic against *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*" as two who "doubt whether he should be on their terraces at all." But, for reasons unstated yet presumably arising from his own continuing Labour Party commitments, Crick prefers not to spell out the reasonableness of this doubt.<sup>13</sup>

To his credit, Orwell himself recognized the enormous practical difficulties of reconciling socialism with liberty and democracy. He was thus one of the few reviewers to accept in 1943 what he called "the negative part of Professor Hayek's thesis" in *The Road to Serfdom*: "It cannot be said too often—

at any rate it is not being said nearly often enough—that collectivism is not inherently democratic, but, on the contrary, gives to a tyrannical minority such powers as the Spanish Inquisitors never dreamed of.”<sup>14</sup> His hope was, a hope perhaps against hope, that we English, with our rather special and peculiar traditions, could bring off what could not but be an excessively difficult feat. But in 1949, in the explanatory press release designed to remove misconceptions about the meaning of *1984*, there is a sinister warning: “If there is a failure . . . tougher types than the present Labour leaders will inevitably take over, drawn probably from the ranks of the Left, but not

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sharing the Liberal aspirations of those now in power. Members of the present British government . . . will *never* willingly sell the pass to the enemy . . . but the younger generation is suspect, and the seeds of totalitarian thought are probably widespread among them.”<sup>15</sup>

Given our present understanding of Orwell’s commitments, the problems of interpreting *Animal Farm* and *1984* simply dissolve. To pretend that either or both of these books are *really* nothing but belated reactions against unhappy schooldays is itself nothing but pseudo-profound psychoanalytic silliness. For *Animal Farm* quite obviously is an allegory of the Bolshevik October coup and its aftermath while, equally obviously, *1984* is a nightmare vision of totalitarianism in its Soviet form. Crick’s comparison with *Leviathan* is very much to the point. For, just as Hobbes delineated an idealized version of the contemporary French despotism, so Orwell based his own anti-utopia on a Soviet model.

Of course both it and Orwell are against every form of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, all the particular resemblances are to Soviet models and not to any earlier periods in Italy or Germany. The machinery for the systematic falsification of the past, for instance, was, under the German National Socialist and Italian Fascist regimes, comparatively embryonic. There had in any case been far fewer drastic changes of the party line, and fewer and far less extensive purges of personnel. So there was, in a word, less work for Minitrue to do.

Again, it is worth recalling my own astonishments when, with memories of my many visits to Germany in the thirties, I first entered a country subject to a Leninist collective despotism. All the differences made Czechoslovakia in 1962 more like *1984* than like Germany under National Socialism. The most immediately striking and the most depressing, though not by the same token the most important differences, lay in the pervasive and overwhelming taintness of Czechoslovakia and in the tighter restrictions on information: Where the display cases for *Volkischer Beobachter* had always been smart and freshly painted, those for *Rude Pravo* were everywhere worn, chipped, and rusty; and whereas you could at main railway stations in Germany under Hitler buy foreign non- and anti-Nazi newspapers, save for particular banned issues, nowhere in

Czechoslovakia in that year could you so much as see a copy of any noncommunist journal.

Of course, too, *1984* is set in England under Ingsoc, or English Socialism, not in any part of the Russian Empire. And of course the lone dissident was given the same given name as the then Leader of His Majesty’s Opposition, Sir Winston Churchill. But that does not make the book an attack on the administration of Clement Attlee, which Orwell supported; as, I may add, I did myself. Nor, however, does it make it any the less a nightmare warning based on the current and continuing realities of a vast and still continually growing totalitarian and socialist world.

To return, finally and briefly, to the connections or lack of connections between Orwell’s humanist values and his secular beliefs: Christopher Hollis, an Eton contemporary, a Roman Catholic, and a Conservative Member of Parliament, suggested rather than argued that these values were “logically a product of a Christian faith which Orwell rejected.”<sup>16</sup> Thus in his essay “A Hanging” Orwell insists on the “unspeakable wrongness” of capital punishment, that it is wrong in itself irrespective of its consequences. Hollis comments that this “is clearly a position that is only tenable on the basis of a theology. Since man is destined to die anyway, nothing could well be less self-evident than the proposition that the preservation of life for a few more years is of enormous importance.”<sup>17</sup> Second, Hollis sees Orwell as asking “What sanction could one provide that would induce the bad to behave decently?” and realizing that “If you can believe that villainy, when it escapes punishment in this world, will nevertheless meet its deserts in the next and that virtue will be similarly rewarded, you have very satisfactorily provided a motive for good conduct.”<sup>18</sup> Third, he comments on the dialogues between Smith and O’Brien in *1984*: “The trouble is that, if the materialist premises which Winston Smith and O’Brien share are true, if death is inevitable and the end of all things, if, whatever Winston Smith says or does, no one will ever hear of him or his protest again, then O’Brien is right. Smith is mad. There is no purpose in his integrity.”<sup>19</sup> And so, apparently, “the logical conclusion of *1984* is that it is only by the appeal to God that O’Brien can be defeated.”<sup>20</sup>

Now it is clear that in these three passages Hollis is saying very different things, things that certainly do not stand or fall together. First, it just is not inconsistent to hold *both* that death is final *and* that capital punishment is “unspeakably wrong” in itself. Presumably Hollis is misled to think that it is inconsistent because he himself holds the further value position—which Orwell surely did not share—that nothing really matters except what goes on forever. Now if you do hold this, and also hold that men are ephemeral, then indeed it is inconsistent for you to hold at the same time that anything human really matters. But if you don’t, and Orwell didn’t, then it isn’t.

Second, we may well agree with Hollis, and Orwell, that belief in a future life offering rewards and punishments can provide motives for doing what will be rewarded and avoiding what will be punished. Indeed, such beliefs can provide such a convenient supplement or counterweight to the deficiencies of earthly systems of reward and punishment that many of the wisest of the ancients were misled to think that they had been first introduced deliberately for that very purpose.

Third, it is entirely wrong to infer, as Hollis does, from the fact that an action would have no consequences, and hence that it could not be a means to be a consequential end, that it would be irrational to perform that action. If Smith holds integrity to be a thing good in itself, precisely what this means is that he holds it good in itself, and quite apart from any consequences it might or might not produce for him or other people. Hollis's attack on Smith's position can only be decisive on the assumption: *either* that it is irrational to do what you hold right when it is unpleasant to do so, unless you can hope for reward or fear punishment; *or* that it is irrational to hold something good or bad in itself and quite apart from its consequences. Surely he would not wish to make either of these alarming assumptions: the former because it is to say that all disinterested self-sacrifice is irrational; the latter because to say that anything is good as a means implies that something else is taken as good in itself.

So even if it is true (which perhaps it is, though this is another story) that the methods of Ingsoc could in fact only be resisted successfully by religious believers, Hollis has not made out his case that it is inconsistent for Orwell to uphold his values while rejecting all religion, and Roman Catholicism in particular.

We can go further than this. Hollis rightly insisted that those Conservatives who took *Animal Farm* as a satire only on Stalinism "interpreted it too narrowly and too much to suit their own convenience. Orwell's whole record from Spanish days onwards shows his impartial hatred of all tyrannies and of all totalitarian claims."<sup>21</sup> Surely that protest, coming from a man who could complain that the radio version of *Animal Farm* cast "a sop to those stinking Catholics,"<sup>22</sup> may be taken as extending against theological tyrannies too. It is not merely perverse to think also, when Orwell presents Smith as finally brainwashed into loving Big Brother, of those who contrive to see as a Great Father a Being whom they claim keeps many of his creatures in eternal torment. "He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless, misunderstanding! O stubborn self-willed exile from the loving breast! . . . But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother."

## Notes

1. Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 580. Crick, having several times noticed the resemblance between *Leviathan* and 1984, here comments that "the atheist Thomas Hobbes had needed the power of a territorial magnate, of a Duke of Devonshire, to get him buried in sacred ground."

2. *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) vol. 3, p. 320.

3. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 73.

4. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 277.

5. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 126-27.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 344.

7. Among these others, so rightly and so constantly excoriated by Orwell himself, we have, I fear, to number Orwell's official biographer. For Crick, ignoring all that his subject had to say about the Sartres of this world—"a bag of wind and I am going to give him a good boot" (p. 546)—

misses no chance of emphasizing both his own commitment to socialism no matter what and his own supercilious anti-anti-Communism: Crick is, we may be glad to know, not of "the camp of the Cold War, *Encounter* magazine and the CIA" (p. 408).

8. Quoted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, p. 185. All later references are to the same editorial, pp. 185-92.

9. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 142-44; *The Road to Serfdom* is here incongruously associated with a book by that archetypical Communist party fellow-traveler Konni Zilliacus.

10. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 355.

11. Significantly, and outrageously, Crick lists Cole along with Shaw and the Webbs as "non-Marxist or liberal Marxist democratic Socialist theorists" despite the statement quoted above, despite Stalin, and despite the fact that the Webbs went overboard in their support for *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization*.

12. *George Orwell: A Life*, p. 18.

13. Deutscher as a Trotskyist objected only to the manning rather than the institutions of the Soviet state. About Williams, I have had my say in *Sociology, Equality and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 28.

14. *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, p. 143.

15. Quoted in *George Orwell: A Life*, p. 566. Everyone who follows British politics will know that those seeds have now grown big, and that the resulting plants show no signs of withering. My unfriendly comments on Crick respond to his continuing activity in and support for that party.

16. Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1956), dust jacket.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

22. *Ibid.*, quoted on p. 150.

## James Madison's Home To Be National Landmark

When FREE INQUIRY announced the formation of the James Madison Memorial Committee in March of this year (see FI, Spring 1983) one of the Committee's principal aims was to seek to have Montpelier, Madison's Virginia home, declared a National Historic Landmark. We are now pleased to report that this is closer to becoming a reality.

Professor Robert Alley, chairman of the Committee, has been informed that the recent death of Mrs. DuPont Scott brought to light her gift of this historic estate to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and her provision of a fund for its preservation and maintenance.

The Committee will in the future focus upon appropriate commemorations of the exceptional influences Madison had upon the United States government, the Constitution, and religious liberty.