

# Religion's Anthropocentric

ATHEISM'S COSMIC MODESTY IS MORE MORAL

## Conceit

Bill Cooke

One of the first books I read upon my arrival in the United States was a fundamentalist tract that had, I was told, sold very well. The book was called *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium*, and not since *Mein Kampf* had I read a more venomous, misanthropic travesty of reality and truth. And nowhere have I seen a clearer example of what I view as “anthropocentric conceit” than in this book. After repeated invocations of the “lies” of humanists, feminists, and liberals (including religious liberals), the inherent evil of homosexuality, the United Nations, and art the authors cannot understand, they had the temerity to picture their reception upon reaching heaven. “Try to imagine the moment,” they wrote, “when this life is over and you stand before the bema and hear from the lips of Jesus Christ, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You have been my lighthouse to the world.’”<sup>1</sup>

Here is the key to the ongoing success of religion. One can spit tacks at the world, make outrageous judgments, besmirch the integrity of anyone one disagrees with, and then expect the creator of the entire, fifteen-billion-year-old,

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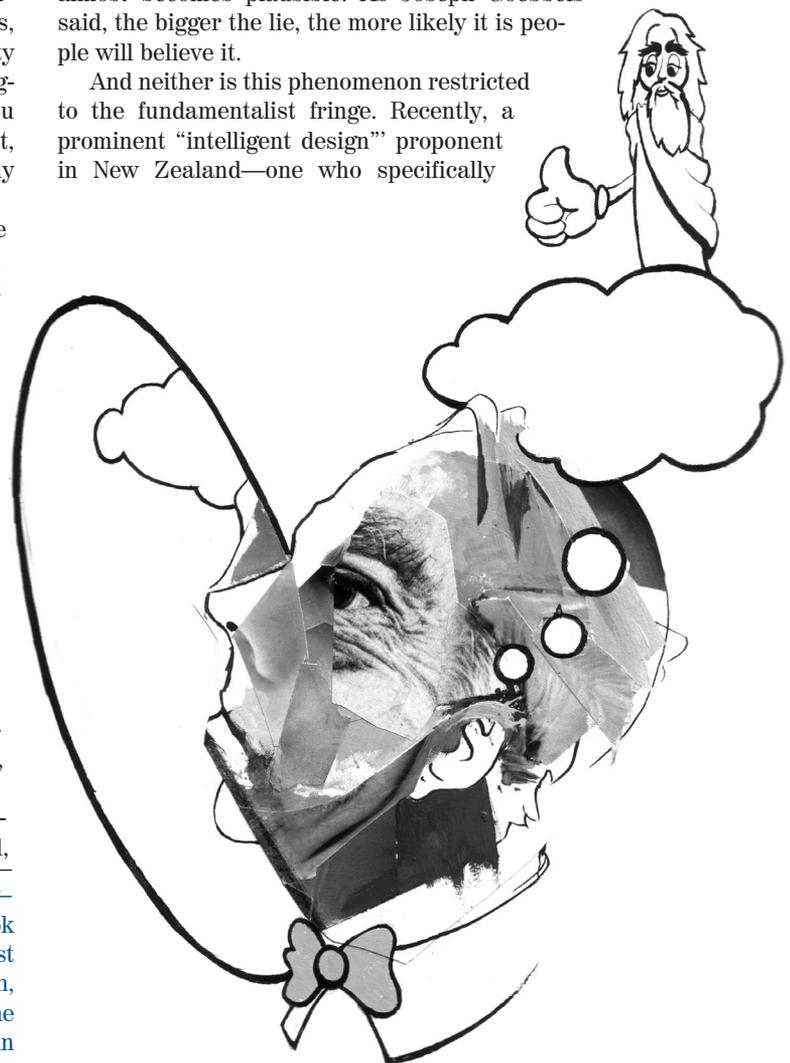
multibillion-star universe to glow with pride at one’s achievements! While actually being hateful, ungracious, and petty, one can bask in the glow of humility.

Even among people more in tune with toleration of difference than *Mind Siege* authors Tim La Haye and David Noebel,

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this anthropocentric conceit is a notable feature. So many accounts of pious converts tell of suffering low self-esteem that was then resolved by being told that they did indeed matter; that despite being one biped among millions on one planet among millions, the creator of this entire universe is interested in their welfare. The success of religious conversions and apologetic arguments consist of religion’s ability to inject people with such quantities of anthropocentric conceit that it almost becomes plausible. As Joseph Goebbels said, the bigger the lie, the more likely it is people will believe it.

And neither is this phenomenon restricted to the fundamentalist fringe. Recently, a prominent “intelligent design” proponent in New Zealand—one who specifically



distanced himself from creationism—got to the nub of the matter when he claimed that “[m]ost astrophysicists are now convinced that the universe is not only created but fine tuned for the express appearance of life on this planet.”<sup>2</sup> Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be so important? One of the many annoying things about presumptuousness of this sort is that atheists, so often accused of presumptuousness themselves, have a long history of warning against it. To take one example from many, Bertrand Russell wrote in 1935: “Is there not something a trifle absurd in the spectacle of human beings holding a mirror before themselves, and thinking what they behold so excellent as to prove that a Cosmic Purpose must have been aiming at it all along?”<sup>3</sup>

In the face of such a metaphysical cornucopia, humanism can offer only thin gruel. But, as most of us realize along our various roads to some sort of maturity and acceptance of ourselves and the world, we can’t always get what we want. And what is more, most of the metaphysical agencies designed to give people what they want are ones we are supposed to outgrow, Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy being examples. To my mind, the outgrowing of all make-believe providers of things we wish for is an essential element of our development to full humanity. Such an approach is more coherent philosophically and scientifically; but, and this is just as important, it is also morally necessary.

A century ago humanists used to say that there is no religion higher than truth. Today, we would rephrase this to say that there is no value higher than truth. And this is where anthropocentric conceit is dangerous. Believing one matters to God is likely to have a positive effect on one’s self-esteem. Its main problem is that it isn’t true. Anthropocentric conceit rests on a fundamental untruth that, in the long run, has to undermine its moral benefits. The basic ethical consequence of scientific naturalism is that we don’t matter to the universe; there is no bearded nice guy, vital spark, first principle, cosmic law, or anything else waiting to usher us in to the dress circle in the sky. This means that our anthropocentric conceit is not a sign of humility but a sign of immaturity and arrogance.

And it’s not as if we haven’t had enough time to prepare ourselves for this realization. The human race has suffered three fundamental challenges to its anthropocentric conceit. The first was when Copernicus showed that Earth was not the center of the universe. Since then, and with ever-increasing clarity, we have come to understand that our planet is but one, not very distinguished, orb surrounding a sun of singularly mediocre aspect, in a nowhere-in-particular solar system in a nowhere-in-particular galaxy, in, for all we know, one universe among many.

But the heliocentric universe as outlined by Copernicus was, of course, only the first of the assaults on our anthropocentric conceit. If the Copernican revolution dethroned us from the center of the universe, Charles Darwin dethroned us from the apex of the Great Chain of Being. He did this by toppling the Great Chain’s entire structure. Since Aristotle, human beings had presumed for themselves the spot second only to the gods in the divine hierarchy. This divine hierarchy proceeded vertically from the gods, through men, then down to women, and on to higher animals, lower animals, plants, and rocks. This view of nature can also be found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Psalm 8: 5–6) and to this day is endorsed by fundamentalists, the most recent examples being the mind

besiegers La Haye and Noebel.<sup>4</sup>

But, of course, the hierarchy known as the Great Chain of Being has no foundation in evolutionary thinking at all, and relies on a self-referential and self-congratulatory set of values. As we all know, Charles Darwin proved that we evolve by means of natural selection, an excruciatingly long, wasteful process that works by a series of ad hoc adaptations from what is available to deal with the issues most pressing upon one’s chances of immediate survival. It has nothing whatever to do

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with preserving or bolstering a vertical chain of command in descending order from gods down to globules. Since Darwin, human beings have had to come to terms with the essential interdependence of all life forms on the planet. The Darwinian axis is a horizontal one of all being members of the same planetary ecosystem, rather than a vertical one of fixed species, the authority for which emanates from a metaphysical entity.

Without doubt, the next major assault on humankind’s anthropocentric conceit is happening as we speak. The great revolution in genetics taking place right now is the next, and potentially most decisive, assault on our inflated notion of our importance as a species. So, not only are we not the center of the universe, or even the star act among the players on this

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planet, it is no longer clear what we mean by words like I. As scientist/philosophers such as Daniel Dennett have shown, we cannot speak of an “I,” which somehow constitutes the essence of what and who we are. There is no Cartesian theater, as Dennett called it, orchestrating what it is to be me or you.<sup>5</sup> This means that there is no mind, soul, or psyche in which resides the blueprint of god, or any other metaphysical entity. And this goes for reason as much as it goes for God. We can no more give reason a capital letter and imbue it with a mystical significance as a process immune from error than we can for God. As Donald Calne puts it, reason is a biological product fashioned for us by the process of evolution to help us survive in an inhospitable and unpredictable physical environment.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever view one takes on the momentous questions of cloning or genetic engineering, few people would dispute Michael Ruse’s point that our biological origins “can and should

be a starting point for philosophy today.”<sup>7</sup> And if biology can and should be a starting point for philosophy today, how much more uncontroversial is the recognition that science is absolutely essential as the principal tool by which we can recognize anthropocentric conceit, see it for what it is, and then eliminate it? Religions around the world have contributed to instilling and preserving a sense of our special value as a species, but science

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and philosophy have been the methods by which we have sought to outgrow such dangerous folly. Extolling the value of science is frequently to risk being accused of scientism or positivism or some such ghastly pejorative. But scientism, as I understand the term, is devoted to putting science on just the same sort of pedestal people have traditionally put religion; as an agency of salvation. Herein lies the difference between science and scientism. In the context of anthropocentric conceit, science is fundamentally averse to pedestals.

The role of science as antidote to anthropocentric conceit

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was articulated well by Stewart Guthrie in his fine book, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. Guthrie argues that anthropomorphism lies at the heart of religious experience. All religions share the feature of “ostensible communication with humanlike, yet non-human beings through some form of symbolic action.”<sup>8</sup> But Guthrie is careful to go on and add that, while anthropomorphism is understandable, it is also, by definition, mistaken.<sup>9</sup> Anthropocentrism is more willful still; it compounds the built-in errors of anthropomorphism with a more selfish and narrow focus. And understanding our natural anthropomorphism and its frequent slide into anthropocentrism becomes a key to understanding the importance of science. For Guthrie, the chief role of science is to “eliminate human features from representations of nature. Science is one of the most systematized forms of knowledge and one of the least anthropomorphic.”<sup>10</sup> This, incidentally, is one of the explanations of the popularity of pseudoscience: it is an attempt to

inveigle anthropomorphism back into naturalistic philosophy.

The role of science as a principal weapon against anthropocentric conceit is one of the chief reasons that humanists value it. Humanists place great value on methodological naturalism—what used to be called the scientific method—because it is our insurance against anthropocentric conceit. This is what Paul Kurtz had in mind when he wrote about the transcendental temptation, which is the temptation many of us feel to create some supernatural realm for ourselves as a means of creating.<sup>11</sup> To me the notion of anthropocentric conceit conveys a greater sense of urgency in the outcome of this particular development we each need to make. The notion of anthropocentric conceit is essentially a moral protest at the presumptuousness required to presume for oneself a central place in the cosmic drama.

There are many forms in which our anthropocentric conceit can be seen, but for me its most alarming manifestation comes in the form of our rampant population growth, with its sanguine presumption that the more homo sapiens there are, the better. Many countries are already finding that the simple weight of numbers is putting such a strain on natural ecosystems and political and social infrastructures that endemic corruption, the return of previously conquered diseases, increasing scarcity of water, and a renewed communal and religious fanaticism are direct corollaries of the central issue of too many people.<sup>12</sup> But rather than a planetwide focus on population control and management, huge resources are being put into opposing the provision of contraceptive information, safe abortion, and the education and liberation of women so that they can decide these issues without fear. And make no mistake, the opposition to these measures comes from those whose worldview remains centered around the vertical hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. The guiding metaphysical motif that informs their actions is anthropocentric conceit. To my mind, this constitutes the most significant, and most dangerous, example of anthropocentric conceit in the world today. For women to have access to reliable contraceptives and the degree of control over their own bodies to be able to decide when they should be used seems to me the number one challenge facing the planet in the twenty-first century. In this way, the best contribution an environmentalist could make would be to work for the worldwide liberation of women. And it should go without saying that any growth in secular liberties is a net increase in the freedom of women around the world.

While this for me is the main issue facing our errant species, there are many other pressing that capable people are devoting their lives to solving. The inestimable value of the philosophy of humanism is that it provides a framework under which many people can work, in many different fields, for the betterment of humankind. Those driven to work for the environment, those who find themselves working for social or political causes, for charities, for the skeptics’ battle against nonsense and misinformation—every one of these activities is a legitimate example of humanist eupraxsophy. And for humanists to be engaging in any of these struggles is to do so for the simple sake of doing good, and in full knowledge that we can expect no reward from beyond the grave. Any of these activities constitutes an effective antidote to anthropocentric conceit. Paul Kurtz noted this in *Forbidden Fruit*. Fear of punishment or hope of reward, he wrote, “is hardly an ethical reason to follow God’s commandments. It masks a basic

self-interest: one is moral out of prudential considerations. Indeed, in one sense, the theists' argument is immoral, for it abandons the moral conscience for an authoritarian ground, and thus sidesteps the content of the moral imperative itself."<sup>13</sup>

Okay, so where does this leave us? Is the price of recognizing the dangers of anthropocentric conceit that we should

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succumb to a grim sort of scientific Calvinism posing a secular version of original sin? The answer to this, thankfully, will vary from individual to individual. Optimists will tend to see the glass as half full, pessimists as half empty. I would have to say that I am more of a pessimist at the moment. It seems to so many people that there is no viable alternative between the various anthropocentric conceits of the past, most of which are veiled in the language of religion, and the mindless narcissism of contemporary commercialism. The current paralysis of the West is exacerbated by postmodernism, which

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does nothing more than throw its arms in the air and declare any constructive attempt at a solution as little more than the arbitrary grasping of a discredited modernism. But there is an alternative to the stifling certainties of the religions and the intolerable dreariness of commercialism and postmodernism. Humanism is a comprehensive worldview that, because it takes science seriously, is better equipped to rid itself of the anthropocentric conceits that so disfigure religions. And, unlike postmodernism, humanism offers a vision of how the world could be made better and what this would require of each individual. This has been done most recently in the Humanist Manifesto 2000.

Whatever field of humanist work in which one chooses to involve oneself, it would be understandable to be overwhelmed occasionally by the scale of the problem and soldier on with something of the Calvinist grimness mentioned above, bereft of hope that one could effect any real change. But soldier on we must, and, if that sounds Calvinistic, then so be it. It's really a case of damned either way. Either one's humanism is mor-

ally serious, in which case it's derided as gloomy, or it's not, in which case it's written off as superficial and unable to grapple with the major issues facing humankind. It depends on which of these misconceptions of humanism one is most inclined to react against. Each humanist will work out ways to reconcile himself or herself to the truth of their cosmic irrelevance. For me, I find relief in the British tradition of absurdist humor. It really is important not to take life, or oneself, too seriously. I have a poster in my office that proclaims that “seriousness is stupidity with a degree.”

So if we are to shed once and for all our tendency to anthropocentric conceit, then we are going to need to recognize just how closely allied atheism is to the naturalist worldview. Atheism matters, not just because atheism happens to be the most accurate view of the cosmos, and not just because of its philosophical and scientific coherence. Important though these elements obviously are, it is just as necessary to take atheism seriously for moral reasons. Contrary to the foolish fear-mongering of religious apologists, atheism is the surest guarantee of cosmic modesty, and few things are more immediately required of our species than a good dose of cosmic modesty. Having played such a foundational role, both intellectually and morally, atheism can then retire from the field and allow interest to turn to the understanding and appreciation of the naturalist view of the world. But it is difficult to do one without the other. As Bertrand Russell said, “It is not by delusion, however exalted, that mankind can prosper, but only by unswerving courage in the pursuit of truth.”<sup>14</sup> 

#### Notes

1. Tim La Haye and David Noebel, *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium* (Nashville: World Publishing, 2000), p. 286.

2. Ian Wishart, “Intelligent Design Creationism: A Defence,” *The Open Society* 76 no. 2 (Winter 2003).

3. Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961 [1935]), p. 221. See also H. James Birx, *Interpreting Evolution* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 17.

4. La Haye and Noebel, p. 247.

5. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin 1993 [1991]), especially chapters 5 and 7.

6. Donald B. Calne, *Within Reason: Rationality and Human Nature* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 12.

7. Michael Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. xiii.

8. Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 197.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

11. Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991 [1986]), p. 449. Also, see Victor Stenger, who recommended we take a cosmic perspective as a tonic against anthropocentric conceit. See Victor Stenger, *Not By Design: The Origin of the Universe* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 182.

12. I recommend readers consult the Web site of the World Population Foundation for further information on these facts: [www2.tribute.nl/wpf/uk/main.html](http://www2.tribute.nl/wpf/uk/main.html).

13. Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books), pp. 149–50.

14. Bertrand Russell, “The Pursuit of Truth,” in *Fact and Fiction* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 46.