

experience, while intellectual ideas have played an important role in the libertarian movement (but much less so in more recent lobbying and the Tea Party), the key popular influences have been Mises, Ayn Rand and to a degree Murray Rothbard. Snippets of ideas from public choice made their way into the wider political vocabulary. But Buchanan's work would have little appeal here either in its character or in its political thrust. Brian Doherty's excellent *Radicals for Capitalism* (2008) mentions that Buchanan once spoke to the strongly libertarian Freedom School, and that he participated in some Volker Fund conferences; but that is it.

MacLean, however, not only gives Buchanan what seems to me a false role in relation to recent political developments, but also tries to smear him through associations with racism and unsavoury aspects of Virginian State politics. She refers to a range of documents, but as Buchanan's papers are not currently open to scholars (her access seems to have been a matter of chance), her work on these can't be evaluated. It will be important that her story is examined carefully, because—as a number of well-informed bloggers and commentators have pointed out—what she makes of published sources leaves a lot to be desired.

All told, this book—and its reception—is symptomatic of the current dire state of politics in America. MacLean does not seem able to take seriously the idea that people with whom she is in political disagreement have ideals which differ from hers and which are just as genuinely held. In addition, she does not seem to understand that well-intentioned actions may have problematic consequences. She tends, rather, to simply assume that her values are right, that the academics with whom she agrees (and the financial sources that support their work) are right about everything, and that anyone who disagrees is mistaken or motivated by sinister interests. What has been perhaps most striking is that in the face of a lot of detailed criticism of her argument, she has reacted not by showing that her critics are wrong, but by arguing that there is a conspiracy against her conducted by people who enjoy financial support from the Kochs. (See also, since this was initially written, her question-and-answer reply to critics but note the discussion which follows.<sup>7</sup>) What is needed instead is serious and respectful engagement

in which all participants assume that they may have something to learn from those with whom they disagree.



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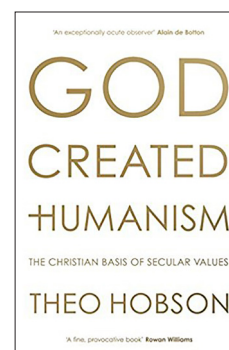
### Endnotes

- 1 [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/history/2017/06/james\\_mcgill\\_buchanan\\_s\\_terrorizing\\_vision\\_of\\_society\\_is\\_the\\_intellectual.htm](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/history/2017/06/james_mcgill_buchanan_s_terrorizing_vision_of_society_is_the_intellectual.htm)
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/19/despot-disguise-democracy-james-mcgill-buchanan-totalitarian-capitalism>
- 3 *Independent Review* (forthcoming, Winter 2018), <http://www.independent.org/issues/article.asp?id=9115>
- 4 <http://reason.com/archives/2017/07/20/what-nancy-maclean-gets-wrong-about-jame>
- 5 <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/14/15967788/democracy-shackles-james-buchanan-intellectual-history-maclean>
- 6 <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/geoffrey-brennan-james-buchanan-an-assessment-march-2013>
- 7 'Nancy MacLean Responds to her Critics', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (19 July 2017), <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Nancy-MacLean-Responds-to-Her/240699>

### God Created Humanism: The Christian Basis of Secular Values

By Theo Hobson  
SPCK, 2017, 198 pages  
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Reviewed by  
**Robert Forsyth**



This deceptively simple book raises one of the most profound questions of today; what is the moral ideal that underlies the West and how can it robustly stand in a world where it is so contested and challenged. Theo Hobson is aware that part of the problem is that we are not even sufficiently conscious of the moral vision at the heart of our politics and culture. 'We in the

West believe in something; something more than shopping and pleasuring ourselves. Really we do.’, he writes on the opening page. That moral vision, so often inchoate and taken for granted, is what Hobson calls ‘secular humanism’. He defines this as ‘the belief that all human lives matter and should flourish, and that part of this flourishing is the freedom to express one’s core beliefs; it of course entails “human rights” (p.1).

Hobson is insistent that the phrase ‘secular’ must not mislead us. The burden of *God Created Humanism* is, as Hobson summarises in his ‘preliminary conclusion’, the claim that ‘secular humanism cannot be understood in purely secular terms. It is not cleanly post-religious. If we are to affirm this moral tradition, celebrate it, be proud of it, we must acknowledge that our public creed is not simply secular humanism, but *Christian-based secular humanism*’ (p.167 italics original).

While he is not the first to notice the grounding of Western liberalism in the history of Christianity (see, for example, the impressive *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* by Larry Siedentop) Hobson is quite creative in the conclusion he draws from this. He does not want to collapse secular humanism back into its religious roots. ‘Politics needs a universalism that is secular, not religious.’ But neither does he see secular humanism as completely autonomous. ‘We must admit that the instability of this creed is that it is secular, yet religion-rooted. A smooth synthesis of these elements is not possible’ (p.167).

This means that Hobson, himself a self-described theologian, journalist and teacher, has something to say both to his fellow Christians, who are typically hostile to secular humanism, as well as to the atheistic and anti-religious secular humanists who complacently assume that secular humanism is simply natural human morality. Hobson urges the Christians not to ‘dismiss secular humanism as superficial, incoherent, an illegitimate adaption or corruption of Christianity, and to assert authentic Christian culture against it’—as has been the tendency of recent theology—but rather to take up the true and subtly different task ‘simultaneously to criticise secular humanism as derivative from Christianity and incoherent when it tries to stand alone, *and* to affirm it as the right public ideology’

(p.160 italics original). To the wider audience of the less religiously inclined Hobson seeks to promote a ‘more confident, robust and self-aware secular humanism’ which means ‘becoming proud of the story of this ideology: the story of Christian universalism learning to reject theocracy and express itself in inclusive, even post religious terms. This story is difficult, paradoxical. . . . But without this story we do not quite know who we are’ (p.168).

Hobson seeks to achieve these goals by a two-step strategy. In the first chapter (‘The Ideology in the Room’) he disabuses the complacent view that secular humanism is simply the natural and true morality of humans, especially once the rueful effect of religion is removed. For a start, he argues that it is not universal but a particular tradition of the West. Secondly, it does not come naturally but is ‘something to be nurtured, kept in shape, celebrated’ (p.13). Hobson is at his most entertaining (and convincing) when he exposes the vapid arguments of recent prominent new atheists about human morality. For example, Richard Dawkins’ position that Darwinism is the total explanation of everything, including morality—even as Dawkins claims that Darwin’s essential discovery, natural selection, merits moral censure provokes the comment ‘If this is not a contradiction I’m not sure what is’ (p.18). A.C. Grayling’s core claim that ‘humanism’ names an ancient tradition of rational thought, sceptical of religion, that has a vision of progressive human brotherhood and unity is rebuffed by Hobson. He writes ‘There is no such tradition. Putting aside religious dogma and “thinking clearly” does not lead people to the truth of secular humanism. The ideal of equality cannot be rationally deduced’ (p.24). It becomes clear in this chapter that Hobson’s method in the book fundamentally will consist of historical rather than philosophical, or even theological, reasoning.

Having cleared the ground Hobson develops the second step of his strategy by giving a potted history of the development of what became secular humanism in the history of the West. Chapter two (‘Sowing the Seeds’) takes us from ancient Israel around 700 BC to the 16th century French renaissance thinker Michael de Montaigne. Hobson, following Siedentop, charts the impact of Christianity’s ‘dynamic energetic universalism (p.37)

on the history of Europe, especially in the long slow reform movement that began in the 1200s leading up to the Renaissance and Reformation. Chapter three ('Mutations of Protestantism') takes the story into unorthodox variations of Protestant Christianity and beyond up to the emergence of secular humanism in the Enlightenment era. This was made possible by two 'mutations' in Protestantism: rational universalism and the necessity of the separation of church and state (p.76).

Chapter four ('Struggling to be Born') deals with the development of secular humanism's post-religious character in the 19th century. It is something of a whirlwind tour of John Wesley, G.W.F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, George Elliot and others. John Stuart Mill gets special mention as 'at one level he was the key inventor of secular humanism as we know it' (p.88) and because, unlike today's atheists who assume that moral universalism just comes naturally, at least thinks objective moral truth, once discovered by Christianity, needs to be intentionally nurtured. Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, is important because he presented a truly alternative ethos. Hobson summarises his teaching 'Because there is no Truth, natural strength is the truth. It is shockingly simple.' This creates the stark alternative. 'Either one celebrates the honest violence of early ancient Greece as one's ideal, or one belongs to Christian culture, whether explicitly or, like secularists, implicitly' (p.104).

Chapter five ('The Secular Century') and six ('In our Time') takes the story into the troubled times of the 20th century up to today by tracing how the major reaction against secular humanism in the first half of the century like communism and fascism was followed by its triumph in the focus on human rights in the post-war world. Hobson presents Martin Luther King as 'the most focused and forceful articulator of the Christian-based secular humanist vision' (p.129). However, the core of Western liberalism remained vague and uncertain. In the United States, Christian fundamentalism rejected secular humanism, which in turn became anti-religious. Things were less antagonistic in the UK where secular humanism was simply taken for granted.

Hobson slows his analysis down as he approaches contemporary events. He has some interesting thoughts

on the impact of Islam. He writes that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 'ought to have clarified thinking about the basic creed of the West. They carried an accusation: the godless West believes in nothing beyond its own power which it uses to destabilise the Muslim world' (p.139 italics original). But the rush of asserting our values against this violent opposition gave no time for self-reflection. One form of reaction was the rise of anti-religious secularism, which saw religion as 'a threat to liberal values. Though they had mainly Islam in mind, they preferred to be more general, arguing against all forms or religions with socio-political power' (p.146). The rise of Islamic State up to a point 'clarified Western minds: that is exactly what we are not. But this negative self-knowledge was hardly enough' (p.149). The European migrant crisis has opened up the hidden absolutism and perfectionism of an impossible moral duty that lurks beneath the surface of 'what is regarded as just the normal default position of enlightened people who have not been prejudiced by religion or greed' (pp.152-3).

*God Created Humanism* is not without its weakness. Most disappointingly, Hobson's otherwise insightful and wide-ranging discussion is marred by consistent negative stereotyping of liberal economics (which sadly for some reason is not uncommon in other theologians, bishops and even the occasional Pope.) And although it is still engaging, not all will be convinced by Hobson's last words in chapter seven: 'So what? How is Christianity credible?'

However, Hobson's basic and provocative thesis that the West cannot ignore the Christian foundations of its basic secular creed is well-founded. If so, then non-believers should be less hostile to the Christian roots of this creed because it is arguably these roots that will help to sustain our liberal institutions and a shared vision of the common good in the long run. And believers should be less dismissive of secular humanism. The West can ill afford a culture war between atheist and Christian hardliners at a time when the West itself is under increasing challenge.

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