

# **Secularism, Humanism and Idolatry**

**By Mitchell Silver**

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Sherwin Wine is the foremost champion of explicit, self conscious Humanistic Judaism. The existence of multiple institutions testify to his practical leadership; not only was Wine the founder of the first Humanistic Jewish Temple, he also was the main force behind the creation of congregational networks, international organizations, educational establishments, and annual colloquia,--all devoted to sustaining, promulgating, and studying Humanistic Judaism.

But Wine's central place in the Humanistic Jewish movement is due at least as much to his intellectual and ideological role as to his organizational leadership. Indeed, his intellectual leadership endowed him with the credibility to work so effectively as an organizer. The first task of an organizational leader is to articulate a vision that others find worthy of realizing. Wine, as much as anyone, is the visionary of secular Humanistic Judaism. His vision is worth exploring.

Wine's thought is wide ranging, but his central vision can be encapsulated thus: 1) Jewish ethnic identity, besides remaining precious to non-religious Jews, is worth maintaining because it has a contribution to make to the world, and 2) secular humanism is not only a viable "philosophy of life," it is the most appropriate one for contemporary humanity.

In this essay I will not discuss Wine's views on Judaism or Jewish ethnicity. Nor will I discuss, except as it relates to his humanism, his views on secularism. Rather I will focus on Wine's humanism, which I take to be his core conviction. I will not here argue the points, but I believe that Wine's justification for maintaining Jewish institutions is that they can be made compatible with, and even advance humanism. His secularism is motivated largely because he believes theism (at least if it is robust enough to be meaningful) is destructive of humanism. Hence humanism is Wine's core commitment, the commitment by which other commitments are judged and justified.

Humanism is easily conflated with secularism. Friends of one are often friends of the other, and the enemies of each use “secular Humanist” as a single epithet. Indeed, there are natural connections between the two, but they are logically distinct. Secularism, the claim that this world, the phenomenal, natural world revealed by experience and investigated by science and devoid of gods, the claim that this world is the only world we have reason to believe exists, implies nothing about the value or role of humans, nor about the proper way a human ought to live his or her life. A secularist can consistently hold that humans are worthless beings and that one ought to get as much selfish pleasure as one can without a thought about the needs of humanity. Such a doctrine would hardly qualify as a humanism, in spite of the absence of God.

But though there is no *strict logical* link, there is a natural connection between secularism and humanism. If there is no God to ground one’s values, no God to guide one’s life, no God to serve, then “humanity” becomes a plausible candidate to perform those functions. Divine values are replaced by human values, divine commands by human needs, divine service by service to humanity. And therein may lie a rub. Although the religious may rail against secular humanism’s dethroning of God, their objections are equally motivated by the coronation of humanity. And this is an objection a secularist can share; one does not have to value or believe in God to question the wisdom of making human well being one’s supreme or sole value. But if one does object to such “humanism,” while nonetheless maintaining a secular stance, one must answer the theists charge that, although not a strict logical entailment, humanism is the natural, invariable alternative to theism.

Wine, however, does not have to answer this charge because he does not find humanism problematic. If humanism is acceptable, the fact that it is the necessary concomitant of secularism is no objection to secularism. So our first order of business is to consider whether Wine is correct in this, if, in other words, there is nothing in humanism a secularist should find disquieting. But before turning to potential secularist worries about humanism, lets further examine the theists’ indictment of secularism..

For theists, humanism is simple idolatry. Humanism in effect makes humanity the Supreme Being. Granted no sane humanism thinks of humanity as having all the properties associated with the traditional Western God, but by elevating human welfare and human taste to the measuring stick of all value, humanism gives humanity the highest rank in the order of beings. By self consciously embracing this measuring stick, by advocating its adoption, by ritualizing our devotion to it, we in effect worship humanity, worship ourselves.

Secularists, of course, don't mind that God is not worshipped. But might we still mind that humanity *is* worshipped? Perhaps worshipping as an activity is objectionable, regardless of the object of worship. Why might this be so? In their survey of Jewish conceptions of idolatry, Moshe Halberthal and Avishai Margalit catalogue the various ideas and actions that have been labeled idolatrous.<sup>1</sup> The master notion that seems to unify the sundry ideas, is that idolatry consists of worshipping that which is unworthy of worship. Now, what if nothing is worthy of worship? In that case, any act of worship is bound to amount to idolatry, regardless of the reality, goodness, power, or relative metaphysical ranking of the object of worship. The best, the most valuable of beings, might still not merit worship--and so any worshipping is bound to turn us into idolaters.

Another objection to worship doesn't depend on the absence of a worthy object, but rather on harmful effects inherent in the activity of worship, in particular the diminishment of the worshipper. The claim is that even a being worthy of worship, if such there be, ought not be worshipped because the activity of worship harms the worshipper without compensating benefits to the worshippee or any third parties.

We deal with this later objection first. To it the humanist can reply that the worship of humanity has not the harmful consequences of God worship; if we worship ourselves there is no self abnegation, no self debasement. We do not project our own qualities onto some external being, thereby impoverishing our self esteem to enhance some fantasy figure. Nor must our self worship involve deceptive self aggrandizement. We can hold ourselves the supreme being without believing ourselves perfect or attributing to ourselves powers or wisdom we don't actually possess. Saying we are the best does not require that we think of ourselves as very good: only that we think there is nothing better. (Wine is particularly fastidious about recognizing humanity's many limitations in his humanism.) Moreover, worship of humanity may have positive effects, such as helping us to recognize our powers and responsibilities, the better to shoulder them, and filling us with joyful pride that comes not at the expense of anyone else's sense of self worth.

To the first objection, the charge of idolatry, there are two possible humanist replies: the first simply denies that humanism entails worshipping humanity, the second argues that humanity is indeed worthy of worship, so there is nothing idolatrous about worshipping it.

Does humanism worship humanity? In so far as humanism is made into an organized sect that has ritual celebrations of the value of humanity, makes communal declarations of devotion to human welfare, and proclaims the highest aim in life is the achievement of a human good, it is hard to see how we can deny that humanism worships humanity (unless we stipulate that, by definition, only a supernatural God can be worshipped.) So, to escape the charge of idolatry, an organized humanism, one that engaged in such ritual activities, would need to argue that humanity, or some essentially human attribute, is truly worthy of worship. What does humanism find to worship in humanity?

Up to this point in the discussion I have been a little vague about the nature of humanism. This is because not all humanisms are the same. For Wine, the most valuable aspect of human being is its capacity for dignity.<sup>ii</sup> He recognizes that other things are valuable, such as happiness or pleasure. But ultimately human dignity, which Wine equates with individual human autonomy, is the supreme value, the value to which other values ought to give way. Dignity has a host of implications for Wine--courage, democracy, mutuality, sensitivity, to name a few.<sup>iii</sup> But these are not separately justified values. They are goods derived from dignity. In Wine's humanism, human dignity, understood as human self sovereignty, human autonomy, is the summum bonum. In this humanism, human freedom is the object of worship.

Wine could not have picked a value that has more appeal to secularists, this writer included. If I had to decide on *the* best, most valuable, most precious form of being, human freedom would get the nod. But should I make such a choice? Should I settle on a good that trumps other goods in all situations. Might there not be times that a little less human freedom is worth a lot more human pleasure? Might there not be sound judgments that include some curtailment of human dignity as a price that should be paid to reduce the suffering of non human animals? Might there not even be value in non sentient being whose realization may justify some sacrifice of human freedom. If a small addition of human freedom could be had by the destruction of vast distant galaxies, however devoid of consciousness, is that destruction justified?

I ask these not as rhetorical questions. I am genuinely puzzled about the right answers. On the one hand, when values conflict, how can we make rational ethical decisions if there is no highest value --to serve either as a common denominator to which we can convert other values for the purpose of comparing value quantities, or, to serve as the value with the highest rank and therefore highest priority in cases of value conflict?<sup>iv</sup> It seems that a thoroughgoing rational ethics demands a supreme value. On the other hand, our experience and intuitions rebel at having to always defer to a single goal. Ethical life is experienced as more complex, involving many *fundamental* values which are incommensurable, i.e. a genuine pluralism of values. Wine praises

pluralism, but not of this kind. He wants to see many value systems flourish, he wants us to be tolerant of many of those different philosophies of life. He wants a marketplace of ideologies.<sup>v</sup> But in *his* philosophy of life, his humanism, a single value reigns supreme, is indeed, the object of worship.

The problem a secularist can have with such a humanism is that it too readily decides the value puzzle. It worships an answer. It makes a difficult and profound question a dogma. Not, to be sure, in a censorious, illiberal way. Humanists are always ready to hear you out. Wine even rebukes “unyielding loyalty to a humanistic tradition,”<sup>vi</sup> But Secular Humanists come to the discussion with their fundamental convictions and commitments settled. Settled enough *to ritually celebrate them, to teach their children to worship them*. It is all well and good for Secular Humanists to deny any dogmatic attitude toward these convictions. But if one is a Secular Humanist, to reject these values, one must become an apostate. Secularism should be more intellectually unencumbered.

Does that mean that a secularist should have no strong commitments and convictions, no values that they are willing to protect and defend, perhaps at times to the death? No. But it does mean, that even when defending things to the death, we secularists should be aware of human fallibility, should have whispering in the back of our minds Oliver Cromwell’s voice “beseeching” us “in the bowels of Christ, that Ye might be wrong.” But it is hard to be genuinely open to the possibility that your answer is wrong if you have been worshipping that answer. Ironically, it is intellectual humility that should make us hesitate apotheosizing human dignity.

But what are a secularists’ alternatives to humanism? (Recall that the theist claimed there were none.) Nihilism is an obvious, but not very appealing possibility. The theist would be happy to allow that atheists must choose between having idolatrous values and none at all. A better alternative is to refuse to put anything in God’s former role. If there is no worship, there is no idolatry, but there can be still be strongly held values that guide one’s life. Indeed a single value can become for a time, perhaps a lifetime, or many lifetimes, the central value. But so long as no value gets enshrined, no value is made immune to change, no value is *worshipped*, secularism can escape the idolatry endemic to religion.

In fairness it must be said that in the articulation of his humanistic creed Wine frequently recognizes and endorses the evolving nature of human values and holds no brief for dogmatism of any kind.. But in his eagerness to respond to some of the needs religion has traditionally met,

and to put a positive, confident spin on atheism, he elevates his core beliefs and values to a status that I think should give secularism pause.<sup>vii</sup> Nothing about these humane values and reasoned beliefs is offensive, and Wine's eloquence on their behalf is a major service to fleshing out a value system for secularist thought. But let it not be *the* value system, let us have secularism with humanistic (among other) values, without having Secular Humanism.

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<sup>i</sup> Moshe Halbertal and Avashai Margalit, Idolatry, translated by Naomi Goldblum. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

<sup>ii</sup> Sherwin Wine, Judaism Beyond God, Ktav Publishing, Milan Press, 1995. p.42. Wine's assessment of human autonomy as the pinnacle of human moral evolution echoes Erich Fromm's views. (Ye Shall Be As Gods, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1966). Wine doesn't agree with Fromm that this struggle for autonomy has been the underlying true agenda of all religious life--Wine takes a less generous (but more clear eyed) view of religious history. But I think he would agree with Fromm's thesis that humanism isn't idolatry because in it Humankind is finally discovering the appropriate object of veneration.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.* p.44-45

<sup>iv</sup> Some philosophers say sometimes there is no way to make rational ethical decisions--that is what a tragic situation is. e.g. Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

<sup>v</sup> Judaism Beyond God, *op.cit.*p.133

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.*, p.131

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.*227