

From Secular Humanist to Christian Humanism: The Power of History in a Personal Journey

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Perhaps nothing surprises me more when I recount my journey from secular humanist to Christian Humanism than the surprised, raised eyebrows of...Christians. I expect it from secular humanists, particularly those steeped in the rational science paradigm that has dominated Western culture since the 17th century. But it's almost as if Christians doubt the rationality of their faith as much as the humanists that have rejected it.

Although I am surprised, perhaps I shouldn't be. Most of my adult friends who have rediscovered their faith have returned because of a personal crisis or tragedy-the death of a child, their own flirtation with mortality, a divorce, or overcoming addictions. These events have challenged the very core of what they believe it means to be human, and their personal search for meaning led them back to faith.

A Journey of the Intellect

My journey, in contrast, has been almost purely intellectual. I have experienced personal crises, even my own flirtation with death, but they occurred in my early and mid-twenties and never shook my secular humanist convictions. While raised Catholic, I stopped attending church soon after my first confession (and cannot even recall if I was confirmed). I went to a private school dedicated to experiential learning within a rigorous, secular, academic setting. I went to a secular college, and my first job was with a public policy think tank with a secular humanist approach ingrained in its political philosophy. I am professionally trained as a social scientist, and have continued to embrace the value of empirical analysis and research. I also remain committed personally and philosophically to a secular State.

Upon reflection, I can't even say that my embracement of Christianity is a journey back, or a return to my Catholic roots. I "left" the Church well before I had any philosophical understanding of Catholicism or Christian morality or ethics. Thus, my personal journey is really one toward the

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Christian Faith and away from that of the Secular Humanist tradition. It began well after I was married but before I had children.

In fact, the journey began at a time in my professional and personal life that was strikingly devoid of conflict or tension. Looking back, I was driven by a personal need to understand the world, but not to fill a moral, ethical, or personal void. It started with a purely intellectual question.

I even know when it started.

World History as a Spiritual Platform

The first foot stepped on the path in 1993, before my first child was born. I was teaching full time at a public university in Ohio, and a professor was taking a leave for the next academic year. Our department chair asked if I would pick up one of her classes: World Economic History. I jumped at the chance. I've always been passionate about history, and my graduate education in economics included heavy doses of economic history and the history of economic thought.²

An important part of my story is also my pedagogy. Whenever I teach a course, I organize the content around a core question. If the course is urban economics (my specialty), the question is typically: Why do cities grow? If it's research methods, the question might be: What constitutes sound research and analysis? For World Economic History, my organizing question was: Why do some societies prosper and others stagnate (or decline)?

I was fascinated by the rise of Western societies and economies when by standards of intelligence, technical achievement, and scientific innovation they should have never competed effectively with, let alone dominated, Asian and Middle Eastern societies. So, why did Middle Eastern societies falter, and China decline, when they had all the supposed advantages of technical competence and scientific knowledge? There was a lot to this story, and I would use the course prep and teaching for World Economic History to explore this question, and my students came along for the ride.

So, I embarked on my intellectual journey, reading and structuring my notes and lectures around this question. I used the most respected textbook in the field at the time, and I read Nobel Prize winners in economics.³ I revisited classic articles in economic history. Most

² I still read widely in history and economic thought, and I still rely on Henry William Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought* (Duke University Press, 1983) as a "go to" book. Another book on social science methodology, however, may have had a more profound effect on my thinking about the limits of science and empirical research: Bruce Caldwell, *Beyond Positivism: Economic Methodology in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 1994). I read an earlier edition, but Caldwell does a nice job of showing the limits to scientific inquiry in "proving" the existence of relationships in physical as well as social science.

³ For those with more than a passing intellectual interest, the core textbooks were an early version of Rondo Cameron's classic *A Concise Economic History of the World: From Paleolithic Times to the*

importantly, I taught. There is nothing like teaching to demand a thorough understanding of core concepts and principles.

The Roots of Social Progress⁴

I discovered through this inquiry that successful societies inevitably had two principles embedded in their culture and, eventually, their legal system:

- They embraced peace, at least domestically;
- They embraced trade.

Those societies that were unable to create (or sustain) peaceful societies domestically or retreated from trade, failed. They failed consistently and sometimes spectacularly. Sometimes the failure was by design -- China's emperor literally burned trading ships anchored in the harbors -- but more often it was through the steady erosion of one of these two features or the embracement of their opposites -- war or autarky.

In addition, a society couldn't prosper with one. I found examples of many peaceful societies that didn't prosper. I found example of societies that only focused on trade. But neither one of them positioned their societies for the spectacular rise we have experienced in the West over the last several centuries, some Latin American countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or in Asia over the last 75 years. Both characteristics had to be in play. In addition, the inverse of these characteristics (violence/war and autarky) worked against prosperity . (In fact, I found imperialism has never been sustainable and any wealth obtained from it short lived. But this subject deserves its own essay.)

Reflecting on these observations shows how they are mutually reinforcing. A peaceful society promotes social interactions and facilitates trade -- first by neighbors helping neighbors and then by gradually adding new layers and complexities to their trading relationship. Humans are fundamentally social beings, and, when given the right kind of community, they will help each other, work with each other, and promote each other. (While the links are a bit complicated, these characteristics result in higher order economic activity, such as manufacturing and finely grained business services, and fosters innovation.) The system works as long as people feel safe and secure, in their personal/family relations as well as their social relations. This observation was so robust I considered it a Universal Truth. It wasn't a relative truth -- I had, afterall, looked at societies and economies of all types throughout recorded history.

Modern Day (Oxford University Press, 1988) and Douglass North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge University Press, 1976). Other readings were also included but these were the most important.

⁴ This summary may actually read a bit flippantly. Nevertheless, the growth of the West and the institutions that nurtured it are well established. A classic on technology and wealth creation, and the institutions that were necessary to support this phenomena can be found in Nathan Rosenberg and LE. Birdzell, *How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World* (Basic Books, 1987). For political institutions, see also F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (University of Chicago Press, 1961).

Spiritual Roots of Social Progress

An astute Christian probably sees where this story is going, but as a thirty-three year old secular humanist I still hadn't figured it out. Nevertheless, I was intellectually curious. Even though I had discovered these "truths," I wasn't satisfied. In order for these social characteristics to be in play, a system of social ethics had to nurture and sustain them. The obvious next question was: What system of thought embraces these core features as principles of social ethics? What cultures embraced peace and trade?

Answering this question was a bit more daunting. It involved much more than a couple of months of prepping for a new course and teaching over a semester. Answering this question sent me on a decade long intellectual journey. The bottom line is that, as a practical matter, social ethics is framed by cultural attitudes toward spirituality and religion. Even though I was still a secular humanist, I had to recognize that a Truth was universal, and spiritual frameworks are the ones that teach universal and objective truth (as opposed to moral or ethical relativism).

So I began examining the tenets of the major religions and spiritual philosophies. I examined Buddhism, Islam, and the teachings of Confucius. I examined Satyagraha. I revisited Judaism. And, of course, I examined Christianity. I explored Protestantism and Catholicism. I spent time ruminating over the Greek and Roman gods (and myths), and the spiritual roots of some Native American tribes. I read about the Aztecs and Incas. While not a theological or religious scholar, my readings and ruminations were still focused on the core question: Why did some societies thrive and progress economically while others stagnated or declined?

A thumbnail summary of my conclusion is this: Christianity was the spiritual system that embraced both these characteristics as foundational principles of social ethics. The West embraced these principles through the adoption of Christianity, and its political institutions, for the most part, evolved over centuries to strengthen them. Once these institutions had evolved to a certain point, their societies literally took off. For England, it was about the mid-eighteenth century.

Here's how it came together for me spiritually.

Christianity is first and foremost a system of social ethics. Most of the teachings in the Gospels (although I am far from a Biblical scholar), at least those popularized to the lay public, involve how we relate to other people (or to God). It's through these relationships to other people that a Christian satisfies God's commands and fulfills God's wishes. This principle is embedded in the Christian's duty to help those who are less fortunate.

This last point is critical. Helping others and interacting with your community is not optional for a Christian. It's fundamental to the entire system of social ethics. Moreover, the more successful

someone is, the greater their obligation to help. So, economic prosperity becomes a virtuous circle that lifts the community up by promoting respect and charity toward individuals. This system of social ethics distinguishes it from, say Buddhism, which is largely internally focused rather than externally focused.

Forgiveness and Social Progress

But, for me, this mandate to respect the personal dignity of others in my community wasn't the critical distinguishing feature. Another principle of Christianity makes it fundamental to understanding economic and social prosperity (and by extension the rise of the West). And it's not particularly intuitive. It's the principle of forgiveness.

Within the Christian system of thinking, all people are sinners. In fact, we are born into sin. We are also self actualizing human beings that use our (God-given) Free Will to make ethically responsible decisions about our individual behavior and how we relate to others in our community. But Christians are also expected to forgive "trespasses" against us. We are expected to "turn the other cheek."

Another way of putting this is that forgiveness allows us to embrace our weaknesses and failures. Since we are all sinners, we recognize that we all make mistakes. At some point, we will all fall from grace. And that's okay (with important caveats). Failure in and of itself is not permanently crippling. In fact, within Christian social ethics, failure reinforces humility and our limits as humans. We are not God. The key is to ensure that we build on our personal failures and disappointments so that they serve as a foundation for continued personal growth and improvement. Failure makes us stronger as long as we are on a positive spiritual path ("doing God's Will").

Under-estimating the importance of this principle to the growth of economies is difficult because this approach to social ethics fosters trade and rewards wealth creation. Essentially, forgiveness allows us to move beyond our inevitable shortcomings and start new. We can be redeemed. As a Christian, part of following the Faith is to build that principle of humility and forgiveness into every relationship. A contract is not a piece of paper, but a symbol of a personal commitment and a relationship. We lay out promises and expectations, and we trust that the person signing the contract with us shares the same values. We assume, culturally and spiritually, that the person signing the contract will do unto us as we would do unto them.

And it works. Spectacularly.

Forgiveness, Trade, and Progress

Why? Because the concept of embracing your fellow man (or woman), and the capacity to forgive them when they fall short, facilitates trade in a very important and fundamental sense.

The principle of forgiveness does not justify sin, or deceit, or lying, or other forms of insincerity or dishonesty. It says that if someone falls, either morally or ethically or in commerce, we have a moral duty to give them another chance as long as that failure was not malicious or intentionally deceitful or intentionally harmful.

The notion of trade (commerce) gives rise to the concept of the contract, but the principle of forgiveness allows us to fail in good faith without sacrificing our social relationships. In fact, the humility that comes with failure strengthens these social relationships while the "other directed" nature of Christian social ethics ensures that community is maintained even while recognizing the dignity and validity of individuals and free will.

I couldn't find a similar system of thought in any other major spiritual framework. So, after this journey, the leap from secular humanist to Christianity wasn't that big, although it still requires embracing Faith. I cannot prove that this is true, but the evidence to me is overwhelming and the logic compelling.

Now, I'm not suggesting that these principles only exist in Christianity. Rather, my reading of history and social progress found that Christianity encompasses these principles in a particularly important way, and this became a necessary condition for the rise of economic prosperity.

Concluding Thoughts

In embracing the universal truths of peace and forgiveness, I found social progress through an economic system based on voluntary exchange. This system of voluntary exchange transformed the world. Christianity also embraced humans as self-actualizing individuals, and this unleashed an unprecedented level of innovation and wealth creation once our political institutions evolved to nurture and protect them. It has lifted, and continues to lift, hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

So, after about ten years of searching, I fully embraced Christianity. In my heart, I believe Jesus and his teachings about a universal God are the root cause of our world's prosperity. They also provide the framework for improving the world by supporting our fellow humans, nurturing their creativity, and improving the environment in which we live.

It's up to us to make sure our human failures don't undermine the good they have allowed us to create. This is a heavy burden, but not one that is greater than the one Jesus carried on his shoulders to the top of Calvary. That keeps it within the grasp of mere mortals, and the result is sustained peace and prosperity.