

Hope and joy found in the here and now

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As a humanist, I have sometimes been asked by my Christian friends, “What gives you hope?” After a few moments of conversation, it becomes clear that my friends are asking about hope for an afterlife, that is, hope for eternal bliss and heavenly contentment after one’s death.

My Christian friends hope they will be united with God and with their earthly friends who have predeceased them. For many of them, it is hard to imagine anything in their life that could be better and more important than a heavenly afterlife.

I, too, have my hopes for happiness. For me, it is happiness in the here and now that brings me joy.

I treasure loving and being loved by those who are closest to me. I cherish the friendships that are built up by my daily contact with those whom I trust and can depend upon.

The religious values of honesty, charity, and caring are also my secular ethical values. I cherish these values because they are the things that improve this world we live in from day to day. They are practical values that pay off in the here and now. They are worthwhile in their own right regardless of whether or not there is an eternal life beyond.

As a humanist, I too believe in the golden rule of treating others as we would wish to be treated. This is a valuable concept that is stated in some form in all major religions of the world. It is also stated by many of the world’s secular philosophical thinkers in similar language.

In Immanuel Kant’s terms, he believed we ought to act in moral matters so that the maxim of our actions can be universalized. In simpler terms, act each day in a

manner that we would want others to act if they found themselves faced with the decisions we now encounter.

In our everyday lives as rational adults, we realize there are differences between knowing and believing, and in having faith and in having facts. While religion brings hope to its believers, it still depends on trust and wishing something is so, but not knowing it is so.

Even when religious faith is extremely strong, believers are still not assured of their place in heaven. "Many are called, but few are chosen," the Bible says in Matthew 22:14.

In religion, there is of necessity, strong elements of uncertainty. Thus the language of religion contains ethereal words like faith, commitment, mystery, trusting, praying, worshipping and miracles backed up by rewards, or sometimes by threats of punishment.

In my United Church days, during funerals our clergyman used to say of the deceased, they "had the sure and certain hope of the resurrection". This was a colourful poetic statement he used without much thought that there was logical inconsistency in his words.

I do not mean that this approach is a bad one. It is probably necessary just as rewards and punishment are necessary in the secular world. When either our religious or secular moral values break down, we turn to law and order, to police forces, to courts of law, and sometimes to armies.

One of the main aspects of secular morality is that we are called upon to consider many issues and problems that humans need to address their attention to solving here and now. In religious circles, God is the centre of value systems; in secular systems, the problems around us we encounter daily become our central ethical issues.

Climate change is now regarded by scientists, and by Pope Francis, as related to the actions or inactions of human beings. Similarly, starvation, poverty, pollution of our air and water, depletion of topsoil crucial to plant growth and food

production, and the over-use of growth hormones in animal and plant production are ethical problems arising from present day human activities.

Even devout religious believers can hardly expect God to miraculously offer salvation from these human-made ethical problems.

My happiness and hope comes from humans using their best intelligence to analyze and study solutions for the ethical problems we create. Hopefully, with renewed efforts from humans, both secular and religious, and caring about our fellow humans, we can work together to find good ethical solutions to the problems we face here and now.