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# The Human Grounds of Compassion

Or,

## Is 'Positive Atheism' an Oxymoron?

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# The Human Grounds of Compassion or, Is ‘Positive Atheism’ an Oxymoron?

It was not that long ago that putting the words ‘atheist morality’ together would have generated condescending smiles, sneers, or worse. I once debated a Christian evangelist who thought it fair comment that an atheist ‘can’t find God for the same reason a thief can’t find a policeman.’<sup>1</sup> And another was quite sure he was doing me a spiritual favour when he, very lovingly, assured me I was a force of darkness, lawlessness and uncleanness. And we would be fooling ourselves to believe these attitudes have disappeared. It has been a staple of much theology over the past century that belief in God is the only sure foundation upon which to base an ethical system. But times are changing and the simple fact of so many non-religious people leading ethical lives is getting harder to ignore or explain away. Even so, it is still unusual to hear public discussion about atheist morality. We should remember just how great this achievement is and how precious is the secular nature of our society, which is the backdrop for these hard-won freedoms.

A component prejudice that still lingers in some corners is the notion that compassion is a uniquely religious concept. At the more popular level, one of the stock epithets most quickly resorted to when wanting to put atheists in their place is to ask about the record of atheist compassion. But for anyone willing to wait for an answer, there are surprises in store. Most so-called religious charities operate with substantial assistance from government subsidies, and yet many continue to champion these as exemplars of the special goodness of Christian altruism. And it should now be well known that two of the world’s most generous benefactors, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, make little secret of being irreligious.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of George Soros. And closer to home Fred Hollows, whose foundation brings sight to thousands of people around the world, was a convinced atheist.<sup>3</sup> Further back one can recall Michael Joseph Savage, then a staunch rationalist, who worked tirelessly for the poor of inner city Auckland before becoming an MP.<sup>4</sup> And so on.

## The Story of Gora

But I would like to illustrate my point by telling you about someone who is unknown outside his native country and as good an example of atheist compassion in action as you are likely to come across. This is the story of Gora. Goparaju Ramachandra Rao was born of brahmin stock in 1902 in Chatrapur, in what is now Orissa. ‘Gora,’ as he later styled himself, is an acronym of his full name, but one that drops the caste information embedded in it. Conventionally religious until his middle twenties, Gora wore the sacred thread that revealed to the world his high caste, and carried around a sachet of sacred ash his pious aunt had bequeathed him. But, as he noted, the passage of his life had little to do with the sacred ash or the sacred thread, or any of the other encumbrances of superstition. He also couldn’t help but notice that the devoted piety of his sister did not prevent her from losing three children in a row. In fact, soon after Gora threw his sacred ash away, his fortunes took a turn for the better when he landed a good teaching job at the American Mission College in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

Gora was a natural teacher and soon attracted the attention of the principal, who offered him the chance for further study in the United States, but only on the condition that he embraced

Christianity. This proved to be a turning point for Gora. He could easily have seized the opportunity, announced his prompt conversion, and been swept off to America and a new life. But he turned the offer down, knowing that, for him, such a conversion would not be honest. No longer welcome at the college, he left soon afterwards. His experience there prompted a serious investigation into the phenomenon of religion. Until then his protest had been against the hidebound restrictions and superstitions he had encountered in his Hindu upbringing. But he now came to learn that these were features of religion generally.

Gora took a position at the Agricultural Research Institute in Coimbatore. Here he was joined by his wife. The two had been married, by arrangement of their parents in 1922 when Gora was twenty, and Saraswathi, his bride, was ten. Now 14, Saraswathi was permitted to move in with her new husband. After a year at Coimbatore, Gora and his young bride moved to Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, to teach at Ananda College, an institution run by the Buddhist Theosophical Society, where he taught botany. It was here that Gora and Saraswathi experienced a long-standing superstition. Pregnant women, Hindus believed, should not walk around outside during an eclipse, for fear of the harm done to the unborn child. Yet, they noticed Buddhist, Muslim and Christian women going about their business during just such an event. So, much to the horror of her Hindu associates, the pregnant Saraswathi openly went about her business during the eclipse. And to all her associates' surprise, she gave birth to a normally healthy baby. This episode illustrates two important points about Gora's life. First, the support of Saraswathi, his wife, was crucial to his progress. Recognising this, gender equality has been a staple of Gora's and the Atheist Centre's programme ever since. For almost thirty years after Gora's death, Saraswathi Gora continued his work. And the second point about this episode is that a large part of Gora's atheist work was devoted to exposing pernicious practices. Western atheism, by contrast, has traditionally been more concerned with exposing fallacious *beliefs*, in the assumption that the practice will then change.

In 1928 Gora and his family took an opportunity to return to Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh to teach at PR College, his *alma mater*. He was a popular and radical teacher, going so far as to encourage his students to mix with people of all castes, including dalits. He led by example, venturing into the slums and teaching dalits how to read. By this time Gora and Saraswathi were both atheists. He had ceased to wear Western clothing, preferring instead the *Khadi*, or home-spun woven cloth. And it was at this point that Gora stopped wearing the sacred thread, which identified him as a brahmin. None of these acts were acceptable to PR College so, once again, he found himself out of a job. Like Socrates before him, he was charged with corrupting the minds of the young.<sup>5</sup> The campaign against Gora came to the attention of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), the prominent philosopher and later president of India who at this time worked as vice-chancellor of Andhra University. Though not agreeing with Gora, Radhakrishnan deplored the sacking and recommended he be appointed to teach botany at the Hindu College, Masulipatnam, also in Andhra Pradesh. Gora taught there for five years before resigning in 1940, after another campaign against him.

Unemployed once more, Gora decided there was little point in finding yet another teaching position only, in all likelihood, to lose his job a third time. An earlier attempt at establishing his own school, to be run on democratic principles, foundered when he was offered most of the start-up money needed on condition he resumed wearing the sacred thread. It was time for a change of direction, so with that in mind Gora and his family went to the remote village of Mudunur in Andhra Pradesh to begin a new kind of life. He was taking seriously Gandhi's call to return to the villages.<sup>6</sup> It was a brave decision as they had six children to support and

no obvious means of earning a living. Living in two thatched huts built for them, Gora engaged in adult education in the village, focusing on improved agriculture, sanitation and calling into question harmful superstitions. This was the beginning of the Atheist Centre. He taught people of all castes, who sat together and drank from the same well. We need to bear in mind just how radical this was. And it was at this time that he took to calling himself Gora, so that even his own name would be free of caste association. So successful were his various campaigns that Mudunur came to be known as the godless village. And it shouldn't be thought that the inclusion of atheist thought was incidental to Gora's work, or some eccentricity. As he explained to Gandhi in November 1944, in order to break down the barriers of caste, it was essential that the barriers of religion be broken down first.<sup>7</sup>

Another element of Gora's new life at Mudunur was the more openly political nature of his work. Responding to Gandhi's Quit India Movement, Gora led opposition activities in his region, for which he was imprisoned early in 1943. Saraswathi carried the work on until her own arrest in April 1944. She was imprisoned for six months, despite being heavily pregnant with their seventh child. Imprisonment also impressed on Gora the woeful inadequacy of prisoner rehabilitation, to which he devoted considerable energy for the rest of his life.

It was Gora's work in the backblocks that caught the attention of Gandhi.<sup>8</sup> A young man, Shri D. Ramaswamy, who joined Gora in 1942 had earlier worked at Sevagram, Gandhi's ashram, located near Wardha, in what is now Maharashtra. After hearing from Ramaswamy about Gora's work and the persecution he had suffered, Gandhi invited him to Sevagram in November 1944. Though not especially fruitful, it clearly stimulated Gandhi's interest enough for a second visit to be arranged. In January 1945 Gora returned to Sevagram and stayed there for three months. Towards the end of their principal conversation, Gandhi said:

I can neither say my theism is right or your atheism wrong. We are seekers after truth. We change whenever we find ourselves in the wrong... Then I may go your way or you may come my way or both of us may go a third way. So go ahead with your work. I will help you though your method is against mine.<sup>9</sup>

This was more than simply an agreement to differ. Gandhi was recognising that Hinduism has no explicit bias for a theist or atheist outlook, seeing both as entirely valid means by which truth can be reached. In a later conversation, Gora asked Gandhi why he would say "Raghupathi Raghava" (God Rama) when he should be saying "Satyam, satyam" (truth, truth). Gandhi replied "Do you think I am superstitious? I am Super-Atheist."<sup>10</sup>

Gora's question to Gandhi was in the context of the change Gandhi had made from speaking of 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'. This trajectory away from specific god-talk escalated in the last year of his life, during the religious bloodletting in the months after independence. Shortly before his death, Gandhi noted sadly: 'In the name of God we have indulged in lies, massacres of people, without caring whether they were innocent or guilty, men or women, children or infants... [but] I am not aware if anybody has done these things in the name of Truth.'<sup>11</sup> Days later he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. And Gandhi meant what we said about helping Gora in his work. So much so that he agreed to officiate at the marriage of Gora's eldest daughter with a dalit. Gandhi was murdered before the event took place. Nonetheless, the marriage happened at the Sevagram Ashram on March 13 1948. Gandhi had also arranged for Gora to visit Sevagram once more, when the two men would talk specifically about atheism.<sup>12</sup> One can only regret deeply that that conversation never took

place. Had it done so the history of twentieth century atheism could well have moved along different lines.

After Gandhi's death, Gora withdrew from organised political activity because of his disgust at the widespread ignoring of Gandhi's call to simplicity and avoidance of pomp and short-term manoeuvring for party advantage. He spent the rest of his life advocating democracy without political parties. In 1960 Gora led a march from Vijayawada to the state capital of Hyderabad to publicise his call for partyless democracy. And the following year, he led another march, this time all the way to New Delhi, taking 99 days, where Gora spoke with Nehru about his concerns. In a way that anticipates our current concerns about politicians' so-called sense of entitlement, Gora campaigned over many years for elected representatives to use third class carriages while travelling on trains, and for public buildings to grow vegetables rather than ornamental flowers. His last imprisonment was over this. In all of these campaigns the influence of Gandhi was strong.<sup>13</sup>

Gora could have gone on to enjoy a major career in Indian politics had he been willing to be less vocal about his atheism. And he did stand in Andhra Pradesh a couple of times, but his open espousal of atheism and 'partyless democracy' pretty well guaranteed he would be unsuccessful. His future settled, Gora went back to the Atheist Centre and devoted the rest of his life to helping the poor and downtrodden. In 1947 he moved the Centre from Mudunur to the larger city of Vijayawada, where it remains to this day.

### **Gora's Positive Atheism**

The most important single influence Gandhi had on Gora's atheism was to encourage it along the lines of being expressed practically and positively. Gora's first written work on atheism, published in Telugu in 1941, was a relatively conventional account of why he disbelieved in gods. But over the next three decades, he came more and more to articulate his own brand of what came to be called positive atheism which was concerned less with denying the existence of supernatural entities than with achieving intellectual liberation.<sup>14</sup> During their first conversation Gandhi asked Gora what the difference was between being an atheist and being godless. Gora said: "Godlessness is a negative. It merely denies the existence of God. Atheism is positive. It asserts the condition that results from the denial of God."<sup>15</sup> And even more important was Gora's insistence that positive atheism be more than something articulated on paper: it must also be illustrated by action. This has been the mission of the Atheist Centre and central to its work has been the promotion of inter-caste marriages, criminal rehabilitation, education and assistance to dalits and joginis. So, rather than examining Gora's published writing on atheism, let us survey briefly the fruits of his labour. The work of the Atheist Centre is divided up amongst subsidiary organisations. The first of them is the Arthik Samata Mandal, or Association for Economic Equality, which was founded in 1951. The Arthik Samata Mandal operates in 150 villages around Andhra Pradesh in the fields of health, education, sanitation and poor relief. One of its tasks is the performance of cataract operations. This is a relatively simple procedure, performed in a specially-outfitted mobile clinic, but the effect is dramatic. In restoring people's sight, their ability to work and care for their families is greatly enhanced. For this purpose the Atheist Centre established the Swetcha Gora Eye Bank in September 1995. In October 2005 the Arthik Samata Mandal organised flood relief in Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh, working with Oxfam in eight villages (1295 families) and with Plan International in eleven other villages with 1764 families. ASM oversaw the replanting of over 2000 mangrove trees destroyed by the flood.<sup>16</sup>

Then there is the Vasaya Mahila Mandali, founded in 1969, and which focuses more on the needs of women and children. It runs a small hospital and operates in 50 villages, providing sanitation and hygiene advice, particularly for the benefit of women. Its advice on abortion and contraception is the type of advice that most religious aid organisations steer clear of. More recently it has turned its attention to AIDS awareness activities. It also runs crèches and has taken on work with street children. In 2007, the Vasaya Mahila Mandali opened an emergency refuge centre for 160 homeless children.<sup>17</sup>

The most recent of the Atheist Centre subsidiary organisations is Samskar, founded by Lavanam, Gora's eldest son, and his wife, Hemalata (1932-2008) and is devoted to the rehabilitation of ex-convicts and people from what are known as the denotified tribes. Another toxic effect of the caste system is the relegation of whole tribes to convict status. These tribes become outcasts in the way gypsies used to be in Europe, with similar effects. Samskar is devoted to helping ease these outcasts into mainstream society. Another job taken up by Samskar is providing help and shelter to a class of dalit girl known as the joginis. Joginis are often press-ganged into a role tantamount to that of a temple prostitute. And once their short career there is over they are turned out into the street and left to fend for themselves. Now unmarried, they nearly all end up as prostitutes. Samskar, alone among the local aid organisations, takes jogini girls in, and offers them some simple vocational training, usually either as a nurse aid, biscuit-maker, or as a seamstress.<sup>18</sup> Empowered in this way, the jogini is now a more serious marriage prospect, or at least has some chance of building a future for herself without resorting to prostitution. Most religious aid organisations are wary of taking the joginis on, for fear of alienating local opinion. Not so the Atheist Centre.

Every now and then the Atheist Centre becomes involved with countering a new wave of superstition. These often take the form of witchcraft panics, where people are attacked, even killed, in mass alarm after some unexpected turn of events. People identified as sorcerers sometimes have their teeth forcibly removed, in the belief that they will no longer be able to chant their evil spells. Some are even buried alive. The Centre has developed a good working relationship with the Andhra Pradesh state government and police and not infrequently becomes involved at their invitation. And in 2008 the Centre organised a symposium on the same superstition about pregnant women and eclipses that Saraswathi Gora had stood up against eight decades previously.<sup>19</sup> The Atheist Centre has a long record now of working with local authorities to quell the panic, encourage calm and shelter the victims. We in the West often like to parade our postmodern sophistication by placing words like superstition in scare quotes, as if to signal our being tolerant. But in India, they know better. Indians know that superstition is a constant danger to the health and well-being of people, sometimes even their lives, and is not something to be dismissed with a casual witticism.

### **The theory of atheist morality**

Having looked at the life of an atheist whose life revolved around compassion, I would like to conclude with a very brief summary of the theoretical foundations of atheist compassion. With no all-seeing, utterly perfect god to look over one's shoulder, atheists find themselves part of a living, changing world that each must respond to in their own way. But once they adjust their sight to the new conditions, they see a wealth of resources there to help and inform them. The most significant of these resources is science. Work in genetics,

evolutionary psychology and related areas are opening up whole new fields of knowledge. So significant are these developments that people like Michael Ruse are able to say that our biological origins ‘can and should be a starting-point for philosophy today.’<sup>20</sup> Principal among these insights, for our purposes, is the existence within us all of hard-wired moral imperatives, which can be grouped into four families. Contempt, anger and disgust are *other-condemning* imperatives while gratitude and elevation are *other-praising*. Shame, embarrassment and guilt are *self-conscious* imperatives and compassion stands alone as the only *other-suffering* imperative we all share.<sup>21</sup> Now, how we manifest these imperatives, and the relative weight we accord each of them differs radically among cultures, but we nonetheless share them all. Compassion, then, is not a quality bequeathed intact from a supernatural entity. Nor is it some mystical essence that can be uncovered only after painful austerities. It is a quality we have evolved with, one formed in response to specific social needs on the ground. Religions, like all other systems of thought, have noted the importance of these imperatives and have developed theories, creeds and rules dealing with them, but have mis-classified them in a way that has set us on a wild goose chase lasting millennia. And along the way, religions have given all-too full expression to the other-condemning imperatives of contempt, anger and disgust.

With no supernatural prescriptions to adhere to, the atheist is well positioned to accord the imperative of compassion its rightful place. The Bulgarian philosopher, Tzvetan Todorov did this when he spoke of humanist ethics in terms of the autonomy of the I, the finality of the you, and the universality of the they.<sup>22</sup> The ‘you’, for the atheist, is the end-point, not the means to an end. One is good to one’s neighbour not because some list of rules prescribes it, or because one will secure a more desirable posthumous reward, but because it is the right thing to do.<sup>23</sup> It is the surest means to ensure we can all rub along together. This is the core of what is known as reciprocal altruism, which in later moral language has been refashioned as the golden rule.<sup>24</sup> The absence of external reward for behaving altruistically is what elevates atheist compassion to a high moral plane. This is what Erik Wielenberg calls naturalistic humility; our recognition that blind luck has played a significant role in our fate and that those of us fortunate enough to have thrown a six have an obligation to assist those throw was less lucky.<sup>25</sup> The Indian humanist thinker V P Varma was groping toward a similar quality when he spoke of *Abhayam*, or the state of fearlessness; a transcendence of fear of the other and not so much contempt as having little interest in the vanity of worldly pleasures.<sup>26</sup> Gora, I would argue, possessed this quality, and his atheism was an essential component of it. His progressive passage from the autonomous I, to the finality of the you and the universality of the they reveals the trajectory of atheist compassion. We are not speaking about some dreary abstraction but of a life lived fully and well.

Let me be clear that I am not saying that the atheist alone can be truly moral. Neither am I saying that atheist morality is necessarily superior or that rival systems are without value. The time for tribal tub-thumping of this sort is past. What I am claiming is that atheist morality has sound intellectual foundations and a noble record of practice, and deserves to be treated as a valid participant in public discourse about morality, as is happening here, rather than as some rather tasteless oxymoron, as has so often been the case. The atheist has coherent reasons and motivations why our other-condemning imperatives need be held in check and why, from a standpoint of humility, we look to ameliorate the sufferings of others.

And finally we need to ask the question, does any of this matter? If the time for partisan trumpery is indeed past, why should I then devote this time to espousing the virtues of one particular approach? Here we need to take note of the difference between claiming exclusive

competence, which I have already rejected, and claiming equal validity. And with almost 1.3 million New Zealanders in the last census identifying themselves as having no religion, the time surely has arrived when this huge group of people should be taken into account. We can no longer ignore the elephant in the room. Related to this is the urgent task to free morality from the false perception that it is inextricably linked with religion.<sup>27</sup> In making this mistake we risk hindering the development of the next George Soros, the next Fred Hollows, Michael Joseph Savage or the next Gora. We need to wake up and not just smell the coffee of diversity, but enjoy its enriching secular taste, and the St Andrews Trust is to be congratulated on its contribution towards that end.

## Notes

1. Comfort, Ray, *God Doesn't Believe in Atheists*, Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications, 1990, p 19.
2. See Andy Beckett, 'The new philanthropy', *Guardian Weekly*, 30.07.10, pp 23-25, for an account of their recent activities.
3. Cooke, Bill, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006, p 246.
4. Carlyon, Jenny & Morrow, Diana, *Urban Village: The Story of Ponsonby, Freemans Bay and St Mary's Bay*, Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 200, p 179.
5. Lavanam, 'Introduction to English Edition', *Atheism: There is no god*, Vijayawada: Atheist Centre, 2007 [1941], p 8.
6. Shet, Sunanda, *Gora: His Life and Work*, Podanur, Tamilnadu: CSICOP India, n.d [c. 2000], p 36.
7. Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 2003 [1951], p 34.
8. Unlike other rebels like Dr Ambedkar or M N Roy, Gora was proud to call himself a Gandhian. Though clearly not sharing all of Gandhi's opinions, Gora was much more inclined to see his essential greatness. As a younger man Gandhi had known and respected the famous British atheist Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), without accepting his atheism.
9. Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, op.cit., p 44.
10. Ibid, p 48. This conversation took place in Madras (now Chennai) in February 1946.
11. Lavanam, *Of Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism*, Vijayawada: Atheist Centre, 2003, p 29. It's also worth noting that Gandhi made a strong declaration for secularism in August 1947, adding that no denominational educational institution should receive state. See Hingorani, Anand, *The New India of My Dreams*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1993, p 70.
12. Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, op.cit., p 55.
13. Though clearly influenced by Gandhi here, Gora specifically rejected the mahatma's other beliefs about personal austerity.
14. Gora's version of positive atheism—not to be confused with the positive atheism as articulated by Antony Flew or Michael Martin—combines an active profession of atheism with a life of moral seriousness. It has a lot in common with Paul Kurtz's notion of eupraxsophy, which is an attempt to encapsulate an active humanism in *eu* (good), *praxis* (practice) and *sophia* (wisdom). It's all very well being good and it's all very well being wise. But what's needed, surely, is goodness and wisdom manifested in deeds.
15. Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, op.cit., pp 32-3.
16. *Atheist*, Vol. 31, No. 11, November 2005, p 11.
17. 'Saraswathi Gora Youth Centre in Vijayawada', *Atheist*, Vol. 32, No. 8, August 2007, pp 6-8. The centre was funded by the American-based Abbott Fund.
18. This was a particularly important component of the Atheist Centre's work for Hemalata Lavanam, for which she earned national recognition at her death in 2008. See *The Hindu*, March 21, 2008, reprinted in *Atheist*, Vol. 33, No. 4, April 2008, p 8.
19. 'Atheist Centre organised scientific programme to dispel the myth of eclipse on the pregnant women', *Atheist*, Vol. 33, No. 8, August 2008, p 2.
20. Ruse, Michael, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p xiii.
21. Hauser, Marc D, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, London: Abacus, 2006, p 59.
22. Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, p 30.
23. This argument is covered well in Wielenberg, Erik, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, especially p 79.
24. Several entries in my *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism*, op.cit., deal with this.
25. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, op.cit., pp 115-6.



26. Varma, V P, *Philosophical Humanism and Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p 9.
27. This important point was made by Richard Robinson in *An Atheist's Values*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, p 137.

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