

A short introduction to Philip Kitcher, professor and honorary doctor  
by Emy Spekschoor, MA  
Dies Natalis, University of Humanistic Studies, 29 January 29, 2019

It's a great honour to stand here today and say a little about Philip Kitcher and his inspirational body of work. I remember him speaking at the Opening Ceremony at our university in 2017 where he spoke about different phases of religion and the need for higher education when a deity is no longer there to anchor its purpose. His positive humanist stance means there is room to talk about religion instead of drawing a hard line as many atheists do.

Just like Philip I was born and raised religious. I used to sing in a church choir, but unfortunately wasn't any good and turned to being an altar server. For years I've basked in this ritualised world before I started to have doubts. As a teenager I learned at high school that there are other religions, not just the one I was raised in. These doubts opened up a world of questions: "Why do we believe? What is left when there is no God telling me how to live? Why am I here? Is there a meaning or a goal in life?"

I decided to no longer believe in a god until I found out all the answers. I promised myself I could always turn back to religion if the answers were good enough. As Philip states in his book *Life After Faith* (2014): "Secular humanism begins in doubt, but doubt should be only the beginning. For anyone who has lived under the sway of religion, the rejection of religious commitment leaves a vacuum demanding to be filled".

And demanding it did. Where I started with doubt, I turned almost anarchistic in my research like Paul Feyerabend where 'anything goes'. I've swayed from one extreme to another, to land after eighteen years where I stand today: a student of humanistics. Still relentless in my search because maybe this vacuum still exists in me, or maybe because the questions sparked a fire in me. A burning curiosity to discover the nature of the world. The earthly, physical and organic world, where humans are a part of.

What I love about Philip Kitcher's work is that it doesn't shy away from other fields of knowledge, too. Primatology, anthropology, neuroscience and biology are some of the fields he works with. It sends a message that knowing what it means to be human isn't discovered staring at our own bellybuttons, but is discovered outside, in the real world, full of sentient beings, organisms, plants and cultures.

And I remember Philip saying in his Opening Ceremony lecture, that there is no mysterious second tier, nothing like a transcendent realm that defies human description. But that it's true that our lives are given meaning by something greater than ourselves. To which I want to add, that this mysterious, transcendent realm is already the one we live in. A world much greater than ourselves: this beautiful earth. Though secular humanism begins with doubt, it opens the possibility to discover what truly makes life meaningful. And it's of considerable value that we have a great thinker like Philip Kitcher in our midst, aiding us on our way.