

# Chapter Nine: Planetary Humanism

by Carl Coon

## *Global Governance, Sooner or Later?*

As science advances and our technical skills expand, urgent problems keep bubbling up that cannot be solved on a national basis, like the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, and environmental degradation. Necessarily, the world's nations are already giving up bits and pieces of their sovereignty to a variety of new international institutions. This is the only way most of these problems can be solved, and there seems to be no end to the problems themselves. Already, therefore, many important matters are being governed by an increasingly dense web of transnational institutions and commitments. The trend appears unstoppable, unless some kind of natural or manmade holocaust wipes out most of us and renders most of the planet unable to sustain human life.

Many people cannot see the forest for the trees. They recognize, and often resent, the stresses produced by rapid changes in our lives, but they cannot or will not raise their sights and look at where all these changes are taking us. There is a failure of imagination here, a short-sightedness that keeps them from envisioning a situation in which humanity as a whole has achieved peace with itself and the environment. Antagonists in regional conflicts may prefer to fight on, rather than compromise. National leaders often see their goals in narrow terms, ignoring the larger interests of humanity, while special interests will pursue their own goals at the expense of the common good. The so-called tragedy of the commons is replicated in a thousand ways in a million places.

Each of these forces resisting the current tide will change when it comes to realize that the issue is to adapt or perish. Our species is conservative, but not suicidal, and it is, ultimately, supremely capable of adapting to new challenges. It is reasonable to hope, therefore, that eventually humanity as a whole will learn to cope with relatively new transnational issues like global warming, nuclear weapons proliferation, and international terrorism. The problem is timing: when popular understanding lags too far behind, catastrophe looms.

Humanists everywhere have a special responsibility to inspire others with a vision of a future world at peace, and to encourage constructive steps toward creating a global order that will realize that vision. As I write, in early 2006, nowhere is this task more important, or more urgent, than in the US, currently suffering under the myopic administration of George W. Bush.

### ***The Bush Problem***

The current political leadership in Washington is doing just about everything wrong, in terms of the needs I have just described. It misled the public into supporting an unnecessary and probably illegal war in Iraq that has alienated most of our former friends while gravely weakening our own economic health and moral standards. Its contempt for global environmental concerns shows up in many decisions, most conspicuously its rejection of Kyoto. Its contempt for the United Nations as an institution of world governance also shows up in many ways, notably the appointment of one of the UN's severest critics, John Bolton, as Ambassador to that organization. Its contempt for international efforts to control genocide is expressed by its rejection of jurisdiction by the International Court of Criminal Justice. The list goes on...

The philosophical basis for the administration's behavior comes from the so-called neocons, a small group of ex-Trotskyite radicals whose ideas were conceived in a midwestern university and incubated during the '80's and '90's in rightwing think tanks. Basically, their thinking comes down to the proposition that America is the sole surviving superpower, and might makes right. For example, Richard Perle and David Frum, two leading advocates of the neoconservative philosophy, have disparaged those who disagreed, labeling them "...softliners who...ignore or deny inconvenient facts and...place their trust in institutions and tactics that have consistently failed in the past..." They and their fellow neocons oppose the UN and multilateralism in general, unless it directly serves US interests. They'd rather kick a door down than persuade the person behind it to unlock it.

How did this small band of malcontents achieve power? By offering a convenient rationale for certain wealthy power brokers in the right wing of the Republican Party who saw it as a convenient way to shoulder their way to the top. And where did the votes come from to put them on top? From a large group of Christian fundamentalists in the country's so-called Bible belt, who have been persuaded (gulled might be a better word) to vote for them for reasons that run from the mendacious to the ridiculous. I could go on, but I would stray too far from my central message.

### ***Getting Back on Track, towards Global Governance***

Probably there will be a serious change in the administration's policies and attitudes after the 2008 elections. We cannot count on it, but we can certainly hope there will be a new broom that will strive to recapture America's moral leadership in the world and set a new course toward making that world a better place, rather than simply aggrandizing America's position in it. Even so, the conservative and narrow-minded nationalistic attitudes that

have guided the present administration will continue to be held by many, and we shall have to address them.

It is true that many new experiments in global approaches to global problems have failed to live up to expectations. But citing past failures as an excuse to abandon all such approaches, as Perle and Frum have, is a recipe for disaster. And it is not even justified by the facts. The evidence is not all negative; when one looks, there is plenty that is positive to be found and built on. Solutions are being found constantly by individuals and governments that are chipping away at pieces of world disorder, operating pragmatically in new and bewildering environments. The UN is actually keeping the peace in a number of regional conflicts around the world. The Europeans are slowly uniting, regional trade groupings exist almost everywhere, global environmental threats are being addressed, and genocide is increasingly accepted as a crime against all humanity. It's a genuine evolutionary process, and humanists can take hope from the fact that it works on a ratchet. That is, measures that fail are soon forgotten, while the ones that work best become accepted and used wherever they can be applied. It is this ratchet effect that makes the process unstoppable, and guarantees that eventually the UN will either evolve into or be replaced by some form of global governance that is strong enough to bring our vision of a world at peace into reality. As I said, the question is not whether, but when, and how. The naysayers can slow the process down, but they cannot stop it.

I cannot predict how long this change will take. It might take as much as a couple of hundred years, or perhaps less. Nor can I predict how centralized the new governing authority will be, or how democratic, or very much else about it. I think it likely that many of the present nation states will continue to exist, but will slowly be relegated to a subordinate status, like the individual states in the USA today. I also have no clear idea about the historic process that will get our descendants from here to there, whether it

will proceed in a reasonably amicable fashion through negotiation between the most important current and emerging power centers, or whether its trajectory will be punctuated by repeated wars, or, most likely, through some combination of both. But the evidence is overwhelming that a tide is running, and sweeping us inexorably in this direction.

### ***Erosion of the Old Religions***

At present there's a contest in the US, between science-based rationalism and Christian fundamentalism. There are similar ideological schisms elsewhere in the world, especially in regions dominated by the Islamic faith. Fundamentalism seems on the upswing in many regions. However, I am reasonably confident that over the next couple of hundred years, the onward march of scientific knowledge will effectively deprive the world's major religions of most of their strength. They may continue as social organizations supporting community solidarity and providing a level of comfort to individuals, but they will lose their power to explain the universe, and much of their authority as a source of ethical guidance.

I see this dim future for the old religions as an integral part of the tide that is sweeping nation-based political structures into global superstructures. The old religions are by nature parochial rather than global. Some religious denominations have mellowed, but the truest of the true believers still hew to doctrines and practices that strengthen the "us versus them" sense, the notion that "we" are better than all those other people out there who have lost the truth, or never knew it at all. There's a lot of talk about ecumenism in the air, and a lot of dialogue between leaders of different faiths, but when you come right down to it, these religious groups have always been and remain rivals, competitors. Otherwise why would there be so much proselytizing in many parts of the world? And if this is so, why should our

struggling species continue to look to these parochial sources for ethical guidance when what we urgently need are ethical principles that everyone on the planet shares?

### ***The Need for a Global Ethic***

Any society has to be able to command a minimum degree of cooperation from the individuals who comprise it if it is to survive. This applies equally to democracies, dictatorships, and old-fashioned authoritarian countries like monarchies and empires. There are two ways of achieving this minimum level of cooperation. The first is voluntary acceptance by most individuals of learned rules of behavior that lead people to cooperate because “it’s the right thing to do.” The second is involuntary cooperation, based on fear, and induced by institutionalized instruments of coercion. Societies that rely mainly on voluntary cooperation are happier and more stable over the long run than those that rely heavily on top-down measures of coercion. But in times of rapid change and social stress, any society is likely to increase its reliance on instruments of coercion. We see this happening today in America, as the Bush administration continues to exploit the shock of 9/11 by chipping away at our constitutional freedoms in the name of countering the terrorist threat.

I take it as given that there is an ethical component to this balance, in that voluntary cooperation is better than the enforced variety. It follows that democracy is better than dictatorship because the glue that holds a democratic society together starts with the individual’s sense of right and wrong, while a more authoritarian society’s cohesiveness relies on fear and top-down coercion. Of course, even in the most democratic societies, the ethical guidelines learned in early youth have to be backed up with more specific guidelines and some elements of coercion. The law of the land is the answer to the problem that ethical guidelines are imprecise, and as society evolves, issues arise that require more specific

rules. Police forces and jails back up the law to supply the minimum level of coercion that may be needed to deter or isolate lawbreakers.

In the more successful democracies, the law has co-evolved with a social contract consisting of generally accepted ethical principles. This is the prevailing condition in the USA and most of the other so-called Western democracies. Most Americans assume that this kind of co-evolved balance is the natural human condition, from which some countries have strayed, and to which they will return if given the opportunity. But it isn't; as any historian should know, democracy as we know it is something that has evolved painfully and slowly out of earlier top-down authoritarian structures. This failure to understand where we are coming from explains the widespread misconception that we have some mission to spread democracy in the Middle East, and that the nations out there will become just like us, or at least more like us, once their leaders are replaced. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

If there is no social understanding to begin with, and a code of legal do's and don'ts is imposed on a society in which the individuals share no common sense of social responsibility, the result is usually either a failed state or a dictatorship. Some African nations, assembled by the colonial powers without reference to existing tribal configurations, fall into one or the other of these categories. More commonly, present authoritarian states preside over two or more distinct societies separated by language or ethnicity or religion, like present-day Iraq. Our whole postwar policy there has been predicated on being able to find enough Iraqis whose first loyalty was to the state and not to one of the three main communities. We are failing because there are not enough of them. Where loyalty to the smaller unit trumps loyalty to the larger entity, the larger one has only dim prospects of surviving, unless it relies for its cohesion almost entirely on coercion.

All of this is a rather roundabout way of laying a basis for the observation that the present tide toward eventual global governance is suffering from lack of an ethical component. That is, it is based more on fear of the consequences of not cooperating than on a shared ethical sense that the world is basically a single community, and cooperation is the right way to go. The people who are forging the new links are international lawyers and statesmen concerned with practical consequences of failure to act. Philosophers and ethicists are relatively silent. The spokesmen for the great world religions speak for the most part against what they see as immoral consequences of modernization; they are protesting the existence of the new tide toward togetherness, and ignoring their responsibility to contribute to its outcome. There are exceptions: the philosopher Peter Singer has addressed the ethical issues of globalization, and the Dalai Lama has spoken to universal human values that transcend the precepts of individual faiths. But such voices are too few, and have had little impact on the general discourse.

There is a vacancy here, a role waiting to be filled, and as I look around it seems to me that it is up to the international humanist movement to step up to the plate and fill it. Like the old religions, humanism is a kind of faith, but it is a faith in all humanity, not a faith based on doctrines that divide. The world urgently needs to take the next step beyond recognizing that global cooperation is necessary, and internalize the ethical principle that all human life is important, and that the rules of behavior we apply to insiders (sometimes known as the Golden Rule) need to be applied to everyone, everywhere.

### ***The Humanist Role***

The fate of our descendants may well be determined by the issue of whether a humanist ethic can be introduced to help guide and fashion the general movement toward global

integration. I said at the beginning of this essay that I really didn't know whether the world authority that holds sway a couple of hundred years from now would be authoritarian or democratic. If the statesmen and international lawyers are inspired by a humanist perspective as they fashion the new ties that will bind all nations, the prospects of a democratic outcome will be much greater than if the world's leaders are inspired only by considerations of realpolitik and the bottom line.

For the immediate future, I don't much fancy the prospect that existing humanist organizations can persuade the whole community of nations, all by themselves, to internalize new ethical standards of international behavior. But that's no reason for humanists to stay apart from the fray, contenting themselves with reassuring each other that they are the only sane voices in a crazy world. We have a particular point of view which is well positioned to inject both reason and compassion into the contentious and confused arguments raging around us, arguments that concern issues like regional conflicts and global environmental threats that have implications for the future development of the world community. We should seize every opportunity to inject our own perspectives wherever and whenever we can. Humanists can have at least as much influence on the future of humanity by engaging in this area as they can by intervening in more familiar battle areas, like the separation of church and state within the US.

### ***What's To Be Done***

We might start by reviewing how we describe the kind of world that humanism seeks. Paul Kurtz's "Humanist Manifesto 2000, a Call for a New Planetary Humanism," speaks for the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) and has been endorsed by a distinguished list of scientists, philosophers, and others. Most of the latter half of its 64 pages deal with the evolving international scene in one way

or another. It is quite detailed for a document of this scope, and not all humanists will agree with every part of it, but it stakes out high ground and sets the agenda for what can and should become a major sector of humanist thought and activity.

The CSH is not the only humanist organization in the US that is concerned with the global importance of developing humanism as the guiding world view for the future. The American Humanist Association is currently working on a new “mission statement” that will emphasize humanism’s future importance in guiding nations and their leaders to a world governed by reason, compassion, and tolerance.

Meanwhile there is much to be done. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed agenda of issues and arguments humanists ought to be using in discussions of world affairs. But there is a basic principle that can serve as general guidance: if we really believe in universal human rights, if we are really convinced that people all over the world should have a crack at the good things of life, then we should be prepared to apply the golden rule across the board, in international affairs. It’s time to enlarge the scope of the sense of altruism that we all are born with. We need to learn to feel it as equally applicable to everyone, not just to those within our own family, community, and nation.

Genocide or ethnic cleansing is commonly viewed as a crime against humanity. Humanists should strongly support this view, and follow through by supporting measures such as the International Court of Criminal Justice which are aimed at ending such antihuman situations.

Humanists could be more outspoken in taking an ethical stand against certain other bad habits that many modern states (including the US) sometimes take against other nations in pursuit of national objectives. I have in mind such measures as torture, targeted political assassinations, black propaganda, bribery, and other forms of covert funding. In principle, they equate with murder, lying, stealing and similar forms of antisocial behavior. If we really believe in

the community of all humankind, we should be as troubled when this kind of behavior occurs between states as we are when it occurs within our own community.

#### Humanism and the UN

There is a natural affinity between the philosophy of humanism and the world view of the international civil servants who staff the UN Secretariat and its affiliated organizations. And why not? The UN has a global responsibility and a global reach. It cannot do its job if it is the agent of a single power or a single religion. This is why Kofi Annan's speech accepting the Nobel Prize sounded so much like a humanist manifesto. A senior UN official once remarked to me: "Of course, we are all humanists here!"

This affinity constitutes an opportunity waiting to be exploited. Let me give an example, based entirely on wishful thinking to be sure, but illustrating my point: A billionaire philanthropist produces a check for a hundred million dollars to establish an International Humanist Center in Manhattan, across the street from UN headquarters, and persuades Kofi Annan to lead it when his term at the UN expires. This center rapidly attracts leading humanist thinkers from many countries and grows into a major nodal point collecting information from everywhere on developments of interest to humanists. This information is collected and sifted and passed back as perceived knowledge to humanist centers everywhere.

Meanwhile the staff at the center develops close personal relations with the officials in the UN Secretariat, from the top down. Gradually the center becomes a new channel through which peoples can bypass their governments in communicating with the UN, while the UN can use it to bypass national governments in getting its thoughts and interests across to the world community. Control of information and access to authority beget power and additional resources pour in. The process accelerates as the UN itself moves to a more dominant position on the world stage. As this trend continues, the international humanist

community comes to be seen as an important interest group with rapidly growing clout; humanism finally emerges as a major actor on the world scene. Operating as a facilitator and a source of ideas in the gray area between national governments and an evolving UN organization, such a humanist center could enable the humanist movement as a whole decisively to shape the course of history in the direction of a humane and democratic world.

### ***Pie in the Sky?***

Yes, I hear you saying, pie in the sky, it'll only happen when pigs can fly. Well, I respect your cynicism, and I have to agree that it's pretty unlikely that my scenario will take place starting next year when Kofi Annan's term ends. But as I said, my little pipedream was only for purposes of illustration.

Something like this will eventually happen. We may never see an international humanist center in New York, but we shall eventually see humanism triumph over the old religions and the old myths of national supremacy. We shall eventually see some form of humanist ethic providing the philosophical and ethical basis for a new world at peace with itself and its environment. It will happen.

It will happen because circumstances will force the hands of the naysayers. We shall do the right things because we have to, not because we want to. And we shall do them reluctantly and grudgingly and, usually, almost too late. But we shall do them.

It will probably not happen in our time. I cannot foretell the future any better than anyone else, but as I said earlier, I wouldn't be surprised if the transition from our present turmoil to that future promised land actually took another couple of centuries.

Two hundred years seems a long time to us, but if you look at the whole span of human evolution, going back to a hundred and fifty thousand years ago, when our first

anatomically human ancestors appeared, a couple of centuries isn't all that much. It took a hundred thousand years before people started to think as we do, using verbal symbols not just for tangible things but for mental constructs. It took another forty thousand years, until only about ten thousand years ago, for people to develop agriculture. Then another five thousand, before we started building cities and monuments and began to create what we know as history. Of course I'm rounding off here, these transitions didn't just occur like switching on a light. They took place over millennia for the most part. What we're witnessing in the here and now is another change in the human condition that is at least as profound as any of the transitions I've just cited.. Seen from that perspective, two hundred years is not a very long time.

The way scientific knowledge is accelerating these days, I find it entirely plausible that sometime in the 23rd century, some biotechnician with a sense of humor will actually go ahead and create a pig that will fly!

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