

Humanism

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Edited by Don Evans

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To the members of WASH

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Introduction

By Don Evans

This collection of essays by members of Washington Area Secular Humanists (WASH) had its origin in discussions among the leadership of WASH concerning the need for a kind of introductory volume on humanism that could be used to introduce both new members and others to the history and contemporary relevance of humanism. It was felt that nothing in the current literature was entirely satisfactory for this purpose, although, as the bibliographies to the various papers to follow show, there are many authors who have contributed to the understanding of humanism.

All of the authors are members of WASH. In sponsoring this volume, the WASH Board of Directors recognized that our membership includes a number of writers who are highly qualified to deal with the historical and contemporary dimensions of humanism. Some have already written extensively in their areas of expertise; all have contributed to the vitality of WASH by leading discussions, participating in conferences, and publishing their views in WASH's monthly newsletter, *WASHline*. This volume provides a unique opportunity to bring these contributors together for the benefit of the humanist community at large.

A specific collection of papers for WASH members has two advantages. First, it allows the authors to deal not only with the historic issues of humanism, but to apply humanist principles to problems that were unknown to earlier writers. Much humanist literature, while not entirely out of date, was certainly published long before new technology and social developments posed distinctive new challenges. This applies especially to the issues of bioethics, ably discussed in this volume by Ron Lindsay. A similar situation applies in Mary Ellen Sikes' contribution, which tries to address the specific ethical issues

raised by Americans seeking an ethical framework which secular humanists are too often blamed for destroying.

A second advantage of this volume is that it provides a forum for able writers who represent contemporary humanism at its best. The authors bring a variety of backgrounds and interests to their tasks, and illustrate amply the fact that humanism has many approaches to issues within the framework of a general commitment to reasoned argument and careful consideration of human experience.

Since humanism has a long history, an effort has been made as well to provide some attention to the background of modern humanism. Lois Porter's essay draws attention to the outstanding, and not generally known, contributions of humanist women in the nineteenth century, and is an important corrective to those who imagine that all women in the last century were basically passive and locked into traditional domestic routines. Rob Boston provides an excellent review on historic church-state issues and identifies clearly the often grotesque distortions of that history by religious right advocates. Stuart Jordan brings the perspective of a working scientist to the basic question of "how we know" and how we can decide between competing belief systems. Finally, my own essay attempts to provide a historical and philosophical context for the sometimes congenial, but more often adversarial, relationship between humanism and religion.

Special thanks is due to Stuart Jordan, whose enthusiasm and perseverance in coordinating what was originally called the "White Papers" project provided the major impetus in completing it. I would also like to thank each of our authors for the time and trouble they devoted to make this project a reality. I hope our readers can use this book to gain a clearer picture of what humanism is today and where it came from by exploring the varying perspectives and ideas of an outstanding group of committed humanists.

1. Humanism and Religion

By Don Evans

The Historical Context

The long history of the relationship between what we today call “humanism” and religion can be both confusing and enlightening. It is confusing because both “humanism” and “religion” have many different definitions in the minds of many different people, a circumstance as true in the past as it is in the present.

“Humanism” as used to describe a certain kind of belief system or attitude towards basic philosophical questions is of fairly recent origin. The European Renaissance, which gave birth to the term, understood a humanist as someone who was interested in classical languages and learning, then being earnestly revived after centuries of comparative neglect. These early humanists by and large saw no particular conflict between their philosophical outlook and what they thought of as “true” religion, which they held to be something very different from the debased forms of religion they encountered about them. The connection these early humanists made, however, between criticism of religion and a strong interest in pre-Christian learning served over the subsequent centuries to give the term “humanism” a connotation of being something distinct from a religious outlook. Admiration of pre-Christian philosophies certainly did suggest that a specifically Christian religious outlook was not necessary when dealing with philosophical and moral issues.

It was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that some intellectuals critical of religion began to take the further step of suggesting that not only were certain religious conceptions and practices mistaken, but that the whole substance of religion, in theory as well as practice, was a burden placed on humanity by ignorance or the machinations

of crafty priests. On this analysis, religion was an enemy to the new, scientific, “enlightened” understanding of the world and society. While such ideas were originally confined to small groups of thinkers, by the mid-nineteenth century many philosophers rejected any sort of traditional religious outlook on life, although many still felt that some of the intellectual and social functions provided by traditional religion (now obsolete in their eyes) should be replaced with more modern and respectable substitutes. None of these people described themselves as humanists, although one of the key figures, the French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857) promoted what he called a “Religion of Humanity” which to both his contemporaries and later historians seemed to be a kind of bizarre marriage between atheism and Roman Catholicism.

The first use of the term “humanism” in a way close to its current meaning seems to have occurred in the first years of the twentieth century.¹ The Ethical Union of Britain, apparently expanding on Comte's “Religion of Humanity,” described their movement as “humanist” by the turn of the new century. About 1913, John H. Dietrich, a Unitarian minister, who was aware of the British usage, used the term “humanism” to describe his non-theistic philosophy of religion to his Spokane, Washington congregation. Probably the biggest boost in popular awareness of the term was provided by Walter Lippmann, who in 1929 published the best-selling book *A Preface to Morals*. In this book, in which “humanism” is given prominent place, Lippman says

Insofar as men have now lost their belief in a heavenly king, they have to find some other ground for their moral choices than the revelation of his will. It follows necessarily that they must find the tests of righteousness wholly within human experience. The

¹ Edward L. Ericson, *The Humanist Way* (New York, Continuum, 1988), pp. 60f.

difference between good and evil must be a difference which men themselves recognize and understand. Happiness cannot be the reward of virtue; it must be the intelligible consequence of it. It follows, too, that virtue cannot be commanded; it must be willed out of personal conviction and desire. Such a morality may properly be called humanism, for it is centered not in superhuman but in human nature. When men can no longer be theists, they must, if they are civilized, become humanists.

The modern use of the term “humanism” was cemented by the publication in 1933 of *The Humanist Manifesto*. True to the Renaissance origins of “humanism” and the religious heritage of the many Unitarian ministers who signed it, the *Manifesto* specifically understood humanism as a religious outlook. While identifying humanism as a religion, however, the *Manifesto* made clear that this religion was entirely naturalistic, disavowed any belief in divinities or supernatural powers, and rejected the special revelatory claims of any and all traditional religions.

In a way, humanism from the Renaissance to the twentieth century traced somewhat of a circular route in respect to its attitudes towards religion. From the Renaissance notion of “reforming” religion, but still keeping many or most of its traditional forms and doctrine, many Enlightenment thinkers came to question whether *anything* in traditional religion needed to be salvaged. It seemed to them that ethics, admitted by all as essential to human thriving, could be grounded in reason and experience rather than traditional religious dogma. This Enlightenment attitude is behind what came to be called “free thought” in the nineteenth century²-- a term identified

¹ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Time Reading Program, 1964), p. 128.

² The term “free thought” first arose in the late seventeenth century, but lacked a uniform or consistent usage. See J.M. Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957) pp. 1-5 for a useful discussion.

mainly by a critical approach to all traditional knowledge, especially religious claims. Thinkers in this tradition had little or no use not only for traditional doctrines, they also rejected the outward forms of religion as basically superstition and were not interested in “reforming” religion or otherwise providing a substitute for the esthetic and social functions of religion.

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) is perhaps the first figure of importance in this highly critical approach to religion. Ironically, he did not consider himself as rejecting all religion. He was an avowed deist and enthusiastic supporter of an obscure sect, the Theophilanthropists, which promoted a minimalist, deistic ethical religion. But it was his flamboyant and biting criticisms of traditional religion in his *Age of Reason* (1793) which are remembered today, and this work is still looked upon as a foundational document for those who wish to distance themselves as far as possible from religion. Later writers in this spirit include Robert Ingersoll, Mark Twain and J. M. Robertson.

Against the largely negative freethought tradition were thinkers such as Kant, Comte, New England Transcendentalists and Unitarians who persisted in the original Renaissance ideal of a reformed religion based on reason and who were comfortable with the findings of modern science. It was this tradition which completed the circle in the early twentieth century by investing “humanism” with more of its original Renaissance context of religious reform. Thus the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933, drafted largely by Unitarian ministers and other religious liberals, saw humanism as a reformed religion for the modern age.

As the century progressed, however, it became clear that many humanists wished to distinguish the “religious” humanism advocated by the 1933 *Manifesto* from a humanism which did not define itself in religious terms. A second

Manifesto, drafted by Paul Kurtz, appeared in 1973 and deleted references to humanism as a religion. Kurtz followed this in 1980 with a third “manifesto,” *A Secular Humanist Declaration*, which added the qualifier “secular” to humanism to identify it less with religious reform (and historical Unitarianism) and more with an attitude that religion had ceased to provide an appropriate basis of any kind for modern life.

The outlooks of the two humanist traditions, religious and what is now called secular, come into play in considering the issues of humanism and religion as they stand today. In what follows I will examine the areas in which the dialogue between humanism and religion continues.

Understanding Religion

Contemporary humanists sometimes seem to think that serious criticism of religion did not begin until the Enlightenment. However, criticism of religion is of very great antiquity, and the arguments used then are much the same as those deployed today. The major difference is that ancient critics usually attacked rival religions rather than religion in general, and their critiques were integral to apologies for their own favored sect. Such criticisms, found in Ancient Greece, Rome, Palestine, India and China, attacked religion (or a particular version of it) by arguing that (the opposing) religion was anthropomorphic, irrational, tended to promote immorality, and led people away from the true path of knowledge. While modern humanists using these kinds of argument sometimes use them to contrast religion with a favored ideology of their own (such as Marxism), in many cases alternatives to the religious ideas attacked are not clearly specified. This is not to say that such criticism is only negative, but only that alternatives to religion are left to individuals to discover for themselves.

Humanistic religious criticism in general, including approaches to the question of religious origins, was pioneered by the German and British philosophers and anthropologists of the nineteenth century. As with religious and secular humanism, there seem to be two mind sets in approaching an understanding of religion: (1) religion is an intrinsic part of human nature and can no more be expunged from that nature than sexual desire or the need for society, and (2) religion is an unnatural imposition on human nature which should be dispensed with. Humanists today are far from resolving this conflict of approaches, although it is possible that further developments in psychology and anthropology may shift the balance one way or the other.

Humanists in the first camp, whether religious or secular, are far more tolerant of religious manifestations generally, and are more concerned with preventing excesses and abuses than with achieving total abandonment of religion. Humanists in the second camp, often considerably more vocal, seem to have a perpetual grudge against anything religious and seem to be in a constant state of warfare against any and all signs of religious sentiment. It seems to me that the first position is rather more in ascendancy now,¹ but there will probably always be those who for whatever good or bad reason identify more with the second outlook. It should be noted that the second outlook is held strongly by people who prefer to identify themselves as *atheists* rather than *humanists*. While “atheist” can be defined at its simplest level as “lacking or opposing belief in God,” in American culture the word has taken on highly negative connotations that many humanists wish to avoid.

A key point in these discussions is one of temperament. *Religious* humanists typically find great value in the aesthetic, emotional, psychological, and to some extent even the traditional thought patterns of religion. In fact, this kind of religious humanism fades almost indistinguishably into various

¹ See E.O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998)

shades of religious liberalism. These writers start from the assumption that religion is a necessary and valuable part of human life; the task of humanism is to be sure that its manifestations are productive of human well-being. The Unitarian Universalist Church, the Ethical Culture movement, and some liberal Protestants have been supporters of this type of humanism.¹

Secular humanists start with the premise that the need for religion in human life is at least questionable, and they themselves are comfortable in dispensing with religious models in the formation of their world views and in the conduct of their daily lives. I see these differences between religious and secular humanists as largely a matter of differing human temperaments and tastes. The religious humanists see humanism shorn of religious concepts and forms as arid and inhuman, while secular humanists feel life can be understood and lived in deeply meaningful and satisfying ways without such concepts and forms.

One way of understanding this difference in temperament is to consider whether secular humanism *itself* is a religion, or “quasi-religion.”² Humanists who are comfortable with the “secular” label generally object to identifying their beliefs as “religious.” This is not because they think their beliefs are different in *function* from religion, at least insofar as providing a basic framework or world view, but that the *content* of their beliefs is radically different from what is normally called “religion.” Secular humanism has no supernatural figures, holy books, or sacred places, rituals, histories, revelations or systems of taboo that accompany, in one form or another, any set of beliefs normally understood as “religious.” Secular

¹ Ericson, *The Humanist Way*, discusses the closely related histories of all these groups, while concentrating on Ethical Culture and its founder, Felix Adler (1851-1933).

² See the discussion by John E. Smith and ten other commentators in *Free Inquiry* 16:4, Fall 1996, pp. 4-28.

humanists normally insist that to include their beliefs under the label “religious,” as the Religious Right does, is to further abuse a word that already suffers from a severe lack of precision. Secular humanists should, in my opinion, seek to limit the use of “religion” to belief systems with the elements just mentioned. In so doing they resist the charge that not having a religion is itself a religion that should somehow be separated, as demanded by the Religious Right, from state sponsored education.

Religion, Science and Values

Since the Renaissance humanists have been prominent in advancing and promoting scientific methods as the best means of understanding the world and the place of humans in it. However, as argued most persuasively by David Hume (1711-1776)¹, there is a definite intellectual disconnect between *describing* the world, including the attitudes of people in that world, and determining what in that world *should be valued*. I can, for example, describe human ethical beliefs in great detail, but this does not enable me to decide which, if any, of those beliefs is best, unless I *already* have in mind what values I am looking for and how they rank against each other. While science is clearly invaluable in providing answers to factual questions intimately related to value judgments, the ultimate decision on what to value or how to rank values against each other is something which science is not equipped to make.

Religious thinkers have typically looked to supernatural religion to provide the foundation for judgments of value. For humanists, however, such answers are never satisfactory. Both religious and secular humanists seek to ground value and morality in human experience, whether in the nature of ethical

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), Book III, Pt. 1, Section 1, pp.455-470. Hume expresses this disjunction as the "is" versus "ought" distinction.

reasoning itself, human emotional sentiments, core values that function as axioms for all moral reasoning, or some other naturalistic philosophy.

Humanists have also taken a keen interest in the issue of conflict between religion and science. While some writers¹ see the conflict as arising out of a confusion of the descriptive functions of science with the valuational functions of religion and ethics, there are definite issues where this facile approach to this issue fails. While it is certainly easy to define religion and science in such a way that they *by definition* cannot conflict, this can be done only at the expense of robbing religion of all authority to describe the world as it really is.

Many traditional religions teach, for example, that human beings are composed of (at least) two very different components: an immortal soul and a perishable body. While it is true that science cannot *disprove* that something like a “soul” survives bodily death, any more than it can *disprove* that angels exist, it can certainly weigh the evidence on one side and the other and contribute to making an informed decision based on reason and evidence. In the case of mind-body dualism, advances in brain research and philosophical analyses of the nature of consciousness make it progressively harder to maintain traditional notions of the soul. And what kind of question is this anyway, a scientific or religious one? Clearly it has dimensions of both. Am I to believe (as many no doubt do) my “religious” and “scientific” answer at the same time, even if they contradict each other, using whichever answer seems appropriate for the context in which I consider it? I personally find this kind of philosophical dualism, which posits a different set of rules of inquiry depending on the question asked, considerably more problematic and objectionable than mind-body dualism.

¹ Most recently, Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999). Gould argues that the alleged “conflict” between science and religion is basically a misunderstanding.

Humanists, at least until recently, have tended to regard such a “compartmentalized” approach to understanding important questions as inherently irrational and unsatisfactory. Similarly, religious apologists should be (and normally are) appalled to find that they somehow have a license to invent any explanation or story supportive of their view without reference to any empirical findings whatsoever. This problem is especially acute for Christianity, which in its traditional form asserts that human salvation is based on the specific activities of Jesus at a particular time and place in human history. Many Christians feel, for example, that if the descriptions of the life and work of Jesus found in the scriptures are flawed or inaccurate, the whole basis of their faith is undermined. While we may tell them that they need to modify this view, we can hardly at the same time pretend there is no fundamental conflict between science (facts) and religion (values) when we have established that position solely on the basis of robbing religion of all claim to factual content.

Secular and Religious Models in Organized Humanism

The final issue confronting humanism and religion today is finding the appropriate model for organized humanism. Religious humanists typically are most satisfied by participation in organizations which retain much of the traditional forms of religion. These organizations include the Unitarian Universalist Church and the Ethical Culture Society. Secular humanists more typically do without any organized affiliation supporting their beliefs, or they may become part of a local group connected with either the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) or the American Humanist Association (AHA). These local groups vary widely in emphasis, the nature of each group reflecting the interests of their most active members. Should there be one model for all humanists?

My own conviction is that humanism can be expressed by all the options above, and that the search for one model is

counterproductive and futile. As I have stated earlier, a lot of the differences between humanists are differences in temperament that are not going to be resolved by argument one way or the other. The religious humanist groups continue to have an appeal to a minority of people generally, but this does not by any means imply that they are doing something wrong. Purely secular groups such as CSH or AHA groups probably appeal to even fewer people, even if primarily anti-religious groups such as American Atheists and the Freedom from Religion Foundation are added to their numbers.

Recently CSH has tried to promote the idea of local “Centers for Inquiry” that will perform the social functions of local churches in a secular context, including naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. It seems to me highly dubious that such centers will ever attract more than a tiny fraction of the populace, since most secular people clearly see little or no need to belong to any local “group” other than a civic club, recreational organization, or political or social special interest group. Institutional humanism in the form of Unitarianism and Ethical Culture has had very limited appeal, despite its long history, and there is no reason to think the Center for Inquiry movement will fare any better.

One rationale for such centers is that they would be organized voices for secular humanism in the same way that local churches or synagogues present the “Catholic” or “Jewish” perspective to the public. It seems to me, however, that insofar as there is a “secular humanist” perspective on an issue, it is likely shared with many people who do not consider themselves humanists at all. An example is the issue of separation of church and state, ably targeted by organizations like Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which include both religious believers and humanists. I see no point in duplicating or supplementing the work of these groups with additional, more “purist” secular groups with similar agendas. To do so wastes resources and weakens by fragmentation the effectiveness of humanist efforts. We simply

do not need a strictly “secular humanist” version of every worthwhile interest group.

It is my conviction that the biggest advancement of humanist ideas historically (and for the foreseeable future) comes not from these essentially tiny organized groups, but from the increasing pervasiveness of humanistic ideas in the general culture through universities, books, magazines, newspapers and television. While there is certainly a place for local and national groups, and they provide much of value to their members, the future of humanism, in my view, does not lie in groups, but in the general culture. I for one would like to see the ideas of humanism promoted more broadly within that culture without being tied to the varying agendas of organized groups. Organizations like CSH can contribute more to humanism by developing and promoting educational materials than by promoting groups and building programs which follow the outward structure of organized religious movements. My ultimate vision for humanism is not a society where Centers for Inquiry have replaced churches (in comparable numbers), but a society in which humanist values predominate in all areas of human endeavor. While I am doubtful whether such a goal can ever be completely realized, to me it is an ideal worthy of the long heritage of humanism.

Bibliography

Humanists on Religion

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Don Evans is Secretary of WASH. He is a graduate of the evangelical Christian Wheaton College where he majored in philosophy. After obtaining a master's in philosophy from Yale, he spent time in the Army followed by a career in medical diagnostics sales.

2. Science and Secular Humanism

By Stuart Jordan

Introduction

The rise of science to its current prominence is generally regarded as one of the defining characteristics of the modern era. To some, it is the most fundamental feature, and none would deny its importance. Secular humanists value science very highly. In this brief essay on science and secular humanism, I want to explain why.

Specifically, the essay has three goals. The first and primary goal is to *demonstrate that science is a superior way of obtaining reliable knowledge*. The second is to *show where science is relevant to making ethical decisions*, even though it cannot provide our most basic ethical principle(s). The third is to *offer scientific naturalism as a comprehensive worldview*, appropriate to the current era and the foreseeable future. All these demonstrations can be made on many levels of complexity and sophistication. This essay will adopt a “grass roots” approach, carefully defining basic terms and relying on simple arguments that do not require specialized knowledge. A short bibliography at the end offers suggestions for further reading.

Science as a Superior Way of Knowing

The claim of this section is that science is a superior way of knowing to any alternative. Knowing is defined here as being able to assert with confidence the probable truth of a nontrivial proposition, one whose truth is not logically implicit in the proposition itself.

We begin by describing “the way of science” as one way of knowing. To do this, we should make clear what science is. Science is a particular way of knowing that employs something

called “the scientific method.” This is a method of investigation that combines *measurement, critical thinking, and imagination*. It is also important to recognize what science is not. Science is not a body of facts about nature. Such facts are merely scientific knowledge resulting from applying the scientific method. If all scientific knowledge were to disappear, but the method of investigation preserved, people could recreate our present scientific knowledge and eventually surpass it. However, if the knowledge alone were preserved but the method forgotten, science would come to an end.

Let us first explore the three components of the scientific method. *Measurement* is based on observation, but quantifies it. *Critical thinking* uses logic, often expressed mathematically to reach conclusions, but goes beyond formal logic by carefully examining and assessing basic assumptions. Both of these definitions are fundamentally important. The quantification of careful observations can, in principle, remove all ambiguity up to the level of quantum uncertainty. And the astute evaluation of our most basic assumptions removes much of the nonsense generated by magnificent logic applied to nonsensical premises. Finally, there is imagination. *Imagination* permits us to extrapolate from what is known to what might be known, but is currently problematic. There is a crucial point here. We know that our imagination can generate absurd fantasies. Yet, without imagination our concepts remain largely fixed, and we make little further progress in our understanding. It is the unique glory of science that it gives us a way of testing our nontrivial speculations about the world, to see which ones prove reproducibly valid, and which ones are merely fantasies.

We must now inquire into other ways of knowing. Since I am arguing that science is a superior way of knowing, logically we must consider all alternative ways of knowing to justify our position. To do this comprehensively (extensionally) would clearly exceed the capacity of even a huge scholarly tome, for someone could always define a “new” way of knowing that was just a little different from the many we had already

considered. However, there is a simple, logical shortcut that permits us to proceed.

To take this shortcut, I begin by defining only one other way of knowing, which I will call the way of faith. Then I will argue that the way of science and the way of faith lie at opposite ends of a spectrum of ways of knowing, such that all other possible ways lie somewhere in between and partake of some features of both. Following that, I will demonstrate that the way of science is a superior way of knowing to the way of faith. However, to do this, we need to first define the way of faith as a way of knowing.

I define “the way of faith” as a way of knowing that contains at least one of the following elements: (1) *Personal experience* of entities inaccessible to scientific demonstration (at least to date) may be offered as proof that such entities exist. Some claims for the reality of God may take this form. (2) Trust of some *authority* for the truth of a proposition may be offered, without confirming the alleged truth by determining if it has been subjected to scientific tests. Granting that many assessments of important probabilities cannot be established by tests as rigorous as those demanded by science (for example, certain conclusions of scholarly historians), it remains the case that element (2) is often offered by those whose trust is extremely uncritical. However, the important point is this. Without denying the right of a person to claim that a proposition is true based upon either of the above approaches, neither is acceptable to science. It is my further contention that this definition of the way of faith would be acceptable to the vast majority of educated people, including those who pursue the way of faith as a way of knowing. Finally, I acknowledge that all logical systems are axiomatic, and start with certain assumptions. The rationale for science is no exception, and I will return to this point below.

In arguing that the two ways of knowing I have defined lie at opposite ends of a spectrum, I maintain that all ways of knowing that differ from science partake of one or both features of the way of faith, even if science is used to establish

part of the truth claim in question. The way of science requires me to validate claims to truth by the tools of measurement and the processes of critical thinking (*both* are needed). If I introduce purely *personal* experience into my argument, it too must be critically evaluated before it can be accepted. Similarly, while all of us must to some extent depend on authority, the way of science requires us to accept authority only insofar as it is validated by science. The fact that it is an “authority” is never in itself sufficient for its acceptance. If someone rejects these critical requirements of science, even to a small degree, it seems to me they must replace them with at least some element of appeal to personal experience or to external authority.

We are now ready to proceed to the second step, showing that the way of science is superior to the way of faith as a way of knowing. Before doing so, I want to address the point raised above regarding the axiomatic nature of logical systems. Some critics of science argue that scientists rely on faith as much as anyone, by accepting the scientific method as their authority. This is only superficially a valid criticism. Scientists do in fact believe that the scientific method works in elucidating the nature of our world, but they do *not* accept any nontrivial statement about the nature of that world without applying this method, which experience has demonstrated works extremely well in achieving exactly what is claimed for it. This differs dramatically from many statements made in the name of faith. These latter statements often bypass a rigorous method of inquiry altogether, and the claims made are not infrequently extraordinary and often in defiance of non-religious experience and sometimes even common sense.

To demonstrate the superiority of the way of science over the way of faith as a way of knowing, I offer the following three arguments:

- (1) Science provides a universal procedure for testing propositions about the nature of things, a procedure that relies on quantitative measurements and critical thinking for their evaluation. To date, this procedure has never failed to produce

a deeper understanding of the phenomena to which it has been consistently applied.

(2) When the way of science has been applied to *testable* propositions advanced through the way of faith, it has revealed many of these propositions to be wrong. A current example is the way biological evolution has overturned biblical creationism in the minds of all but diehard fundamentalists, even among the religious.

(3) There is no *reliable* way of testing many of the propositions offered by the way of faith. In particular, if these propositions postulate the existence of a realm that lies beyond the natural world, they are inherently untestable, except by means that would never meet the standards of science.

It is important to note that by claiming that the way of science is a superior way of knowing I am *not* saying that people should never accept anything on faith. While I may believe in skepticism in evaluating nontrivial ideas myself, I recognize numerous arguments defending certain forms of faith under a broad variety of conditions. One would not use public transportation without faith in the operators of the conveyance selected. While some rationality can be brought to bear in deciding what to accept on faith, we could hardly live a normal life if we subjected every decision to rigorous scientific standards of proof. The point here is not to disparage all forms of faith, but to assess the relative merits of the ways of science and faith as ways of knowing.

This leads us to a timely question of current public interest. According to the news media, “spirituality” is once more on the rise in America. This has led some public figures to suggest a convergence between the two ways of knowing considered here. So we pose the question, “Can these two ways of knowing be reconciled?”

I'm convinced they cannot. Any way of knowing that will not submit to the rigorous standards of science cannot be made fully compatible with science, as a way of knowing. Otherwise it would *be* science. Whatever convergence may occur in other areas, these two ways of knowing are irreconcilable.

I would like to conclude this section by moving from a demonstration that I hope has not been too “dense” to one that illustrates the role of imagination in all creative work. The renowned Spanish artist Francisco Goya evolved through a long period of worldly success and rather conventional, if technically superior, painting, to a final stage of universally recognized genius, strongly influenced by the then radical ideas of the Enlightenment, when much of his greatest work was produced. If Mozart and Beethoven were arguably the greatest musicians of the Enlightenment, certainly Goya was its foremost artist.

Before the final stage in his life, Goya experienced what today we would call a nervous breakdown, and largely lost his hearing. During or shortly after this period, he produced a number of memorable sketches. One shows a man sitting at a desk, his head down, buried in his arms. Around him, crouched on the desk or hovering over him in the air, are ominous beings, the images of his nightmare. On the desk in Spanish appears the short title of this famous sketch. In English it reads, “*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.*”

There is a long title as well, which sums up Goya's interpretation of the scene: “*The Sleep of Reason Produces Terrible Monsters. But Reason, Combined with Imagination, is the Mother of the Arts and the Source of Everything Wonderful.*” Recall that reason in science applies critical thinking to careful measurements, but imagination is needed for understanding. The long title summarizes not only the way many scientists and artists think, but also how they feel about life in this natural world.

The Role of Science in Ethics

In providing us with our most reliable knowledge, science -- when it has properly investigated the relevant phenomena -- gives us the best information for assessing alternative courses of action and achieving our goals. Few would dispute this, but what about the relevance of science to determining our goals in

the first place? Because science cannot prove that one principle or set of principles upon which we base our goals is superior to another, many thinkers have concluded that science is good for establishing the “facts,” but is otherwise irrelevant to ethics. To hold otherwise has been described by some philosophers as “the naturalistic fallacy.” This is the erroneous belief that we can demonstrate the truth of a *prescriptive* statement from one or more *descriptive* statements, in short, derive ethics from scientific facts. While the argument supporting this critique is sound, it does not mean that science cannot at least *help* us to establish our most basic ethical principles.

Certainly to the extent that we all share a common genetic human nature which defines us as *homo sapiens*, knowing that nature and how it varies from one person to another is important in determining what we want collectively and, to some degree, individually. Furthermore, knowing more about our physical and cultural environments and how they interact with these genetic factors will clearly sharpen our insight into our real needs and wants. I know of no scientist who would claim we are near to achieving this level of understanding yet, but current progress in the relevant sciences is very rapid. A good example is the field of neurophysiology, which in the next century will undoubtedly give us a far better understanding of how our minds work, and bring us closer to grasping what “mind itself” is.

To the counter-argument that what we want may in some cases be unethical, as when one human group gains “solidarity” by hating another, one can say that this seems unlikely to promote long-term advantage on Darwinian (*i.e.*, scientific) grounds. For a species to survive in the long term, a strong case can be made that any subgroup within the species that persistently attempts to eliminate the remainder is itself likely to be suppressed in the end. Survival of the fittest is a subtle concept. One could hardly argue that twentieth-century Germany was successful during its period of self-proclaimed superiority, which, along with its corresponding aggressions, turned the bulk of mankind against it. A German professor who

is also a colleague of mine once remarked, “Every time Germany begins a new aggressive war, the country becomes smaller!” While admitting that this is not a complete argument, and that the issue requires a treatment well beyond what is possible here, it is hard to imagine that life has reached the stage of human civilization more through malicious aggression than through cooperation in ever larger groups.

To justify our ethics to ourselves requires that we have some sense of who we are in the great scheme of things, and of what makes us valuable to ourselves. Traditionally, one of the many functions of religion has been to tell us who we are in relation to God and, until the clear successes of science, often in relation to nature as well. Given the different teachings among different faiths, only science seems to have the potential to answer the questions of “who” we are in relation to the rest of nature to universal satisfaction. We already know part of the answer. We have large innate capacities for intelligence and for empathy, both of which, humanists contend, confer an intrinsic value and dignity upon us. As for any relation we may bear to a God, that clearly requires belief in such a being and lies outside the realm of science. Secular humanists typically regard theories in the latter area with skepticism.

I conclude this brief section by noting that there will always be “basic principles of ethics” that can only be determined by consensus among reasonable people, or accepted on faith in some cosmic or secular lawgiver. Secular humanists clearly prefer the former approach. However, growing scientific knowledge of ourselves and our interactions with others and our physical environment continues to bring us closer to a reliable understanding of our most basic individual and collective needs and wants. Some of these, like adequate food, are obvious and hardly require extensive research for their recognition. Others are more subtle. Human sexuality is still not well understood scientifically; self-proclaimed “experts” offer a wide variety of often conflicting prescriptions for appropriate behavior. Collective aggression, *i.e.* war, is

another area where better scientific knowledge promises to shed light on a still poorly understood social phenomenon. From this perspective, science is extremely relevant to ethics, and we can expect this relevance to increase with time.

Scientific Naturalism as a Humanistic Worldview

While many scientists are aware of no evidence for anything “beyond” nature, this does not constitute a proof for the nonexistence of a supernatural realm. In compliance with its own methods, science offers no final judgment on the supernatural, other than to note that evidence for it is either lacking or subject to speculative interpretation. Not surprisingly, most scientists remain either skeptical of supernatural claims, or reject them altogether for lack of evidence. Scientists who are secular humanists lean overwhelmingly towards the latter position.

Those who believe that reality, outside of our fantasies, is probably restricted to ordinary nature can be said to subscribe to a naturalistic worldview. Indeed, in a more subtle analysis, our fantasies too can be viewed as natural in origin. There are numerous variants to the naturalistic worldview, and this essay makes no attempt to classify them. It is sufficient to note what they all have in common, which is the conviction stated at the beginning of this paragraph. Nature is everything. As the distinguished humanist Goethe once noted, “Don’t despair of becoming lost. You cannot fall out of nature.” Almost any thoughtful secular humanist could make that statement as well.

A naturalistic worldview was not always as popular among educated people as it is today. While some degree of skepticism is encountered in religious thought through the ages, the “medieval mind” was arguably much more concerned with supernatural phenomena than contemporary philosophers and theologians, not to mention modern scientists. When we ask what has made the big difference, it is almost certainly the rise and success of science.

Secular humanists find a strong humanistic undercurrent flowing at least as far back as the Greeks in the West. Homer filled his epics with gods, but they are engagingly human. Ulysses used reason, not prayer or sacrifice, to outwit the terrible Cyclops. The great explorers and investigators from the Greeks through the Renaissance to the modern era invariably took the study of this world and those who live in it as more important than metaphysical speculation. The effect on the arts as well as the sciences was electric. When uncontrolled speculation was replaced by sound investigation, creative human endeavor prospered.

No one can predict the future, as we are still all, collectively, too ignorant of many things we would need to know to do that with any accuracy. However, judging from the past, and the impact science has already had on our lives, most secular humanists believe the odds are good that life can and should continue to become more fulfilling for a growing fraction of humanity. Without science we could not say that. With science we believe it is true, as did the humanists who went before us.

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3. Women in Secular Humanism: A Historical Perspective

By Lois K. Porter

In the history of humanism women are rarely mentioned. Although the same is true of history in general, modern humanists owe a debt of gratitude to women in the last two hundred years who advanced the humanist ideas of equality, secularism and reason in human affairs. Historian Daniel Boorstin said of the Founding Fathers that they “had the courage to doubt.” How much more courage it took for women, not only to doubt the established structure of society, but to defy social, cultural, legal and religious strictures against them and actually change society. Women today have a humanist history to celebrate.

Throughout history an occasional woman managed to join the “man’s world” of ideas, science, literature, philosophy, politics and commerce, but those who ventured outside the home or the nunnery were often forgotten or ignored by history unless some scandal or horror made for a juicy story. Today, as in the past, men are still those most often in positions of power and influence in government, business and the professions. However, women are at last being heard from, and in future even more of them will be among those “making history.”

It was what historian Alan Bullock calls “the spirit of Enlightenment humanism” that inspired women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to try to claim an equal role in the human community. Bullock calls this spirit “a program of humanity, secularism, cosmopolitanism and freedom, the right to question and criticize, free from the threat of arbitrary interference by either church or state.”¹ The founding documents of the United States were rooted in this spirit of

¹ Allan Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), p.49.

Enlightenment humanism. However, as they were written by human beings, they also reflected the biases of the eighteenth century. Among those biases was the understanding that when Jefferson declared “all men” equal, he was, of course, referring to white men and to no women at all.

The institution of slavery existing under what was the most enlightened form of government the world had ever known, certainly made for uneasy consciences among the more sensitive citizens above and below the Mason-Dixon line. It is interesting to note, however, that these rational and insightful men seem never to have given the situation of women any thought at all. They were simply considered to be “under the protection” of men, and therefore well cared for.

It is ironic that women, a group who had no direct power or influence, no vote or standing, embraced with such enthusiasm the humanist principles of reason, freedom and equality. In so doing, some of them became leaders in the struggle to emancipate the slaves and to empower themselves. These women took the ideas and values of the Enlightenment seriously and eventually helped to force everyone to examine what is meant by such terms as inalienable rights and the dignity of “man.” But it took time. Even when, in 1870, former male slaves were legally enfranchised, women of whatever color or station in life were without the vote for another half century. They were still considered the property of their fathers or husbands, had little opportunity for higher education, and if divorced not only lost their property, but their children as well. Many of these women recognized the church and its influence on the state as their greatest enemy in their struggle for equality. They were in fact, if not in name, secular humanists. For a taste of what these forgotten humanists said and did, we focus on a few American and British women who lived in the eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and who, with the principles of Enlightenment humanism for support, found their voice and their platform. As famous, or infamous, as these women were in their time, until the publication in 1997 of the anthology, *Women Without Superstition: “No Gods - No*

Masters," edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor, no book on the history of humanism, nor anthology of free thinkers, mentioned more than an occasional woman. The brief bibliography below includes this valuable addition to the library of free thinkers.

Let us now praise humanist women.

But which ones? When one really looks, it becomes apparent that there are so many humanist heroines it is difficult to choose a few for special notice. In order to narrow the field, well-known suffragists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony will not be discussed. Rather I present a few quotes and a little background information about a handful of lesser known women. Perhaps these samples will encourage an interest in searching out the histories of other humanist heroines.

Although they were celebrated as outstanding writers, editors, or speakers in their day, all of these women had vehement detractors. To some of their contemporaries they were heretics, fallen women or "common scolds," a punishable offence in early nineteenth century America. All of them have been largely overlooked by history, even humanist history.

Anne Royall

The first of these forgotten women is one who did not care about the vote for women, and was not a leader in the struggle for the emancipation of the slaves. However, she believed fervently in the separation of church and state, the importance of reason rather than religion, and the advancement of science and technology. She was a prolific and forceful writer and probably the first lobbyist in the U. S. Congress. Her name should be known to every school child in America, but it's not. In elementary school every child in the country learns that in 1844 when Samuel Morse sent the first message by telegraph from the U.S. Capitol in Washington to Baltimore, his message was, "What hath God wrought?" But none are taught that the

answer from Baltimore was, “Mr. Rogers’ respects to Mrs. Royall.” Mrs. Royall? Who in the world was Mrs. Royall? And why should Henry Rogers send his respects to her in his very first telegraph message?

The mysterious Mrs. Royall was born Anne Newport in 1769 in Maryland. She spent her childhood on the frontier of western Pennsylvania and in her twenties married the much older Major William Royall of Virginia. Anne probably received a better education than most men of the time from her husband’s extensive library. The Major was a devoted Jeffersonian and his library included all the best works of the Enlightenment *philosophes* as well as Shakespeare and the classics. After her husband’s death, Anne Royall traveled throughout the United States, writing voluminous travelogues, and eventually became one of the most prolific writers of her age. She was a respected journalist, credited with being the first to use quoted interviews, and the first “muckraker” in U.S. history. Among the many important people she interviewed were all the U.S. Presidents from John Q. Adams to Franklin Pierce.

In addition to writing, Royall lobbied the U. S. Congress on behalf of many causes. She advocated the strict separation of church from state, the establishment of public schools everywhere, wholly free from religious bias or control, delivery of Sunday mail, and liberal appropriations by Congress for scientific investigation. Royall tramped the halls of the Capitol for seven years, introducing the young inventor Samuel Morse to her many friends in Congress. Finally she was able to get the funds needed for Morse to string wires from Washington to Baltimore to test his telegraph. With his famous words, Morse chose to credit God, but Rogers knew who had done the leg work.

Among Royall’s causes was her strong opposition to what she called the “God spouters” who were trying to establish a “Christian Party in politics.” Dr. Ezra Stone Ely, the Presbyterian leader, was her particular target. The following

excerpt from a speech by Ely on July 4, 1827 gives an idea of what she was objecting to:

God, my hearers, requires a Christian faith, a Christian profession and a Christian practice of all our public men; and we as Christian citizens ought, by the publication of our opinions, to require the same. I propose, fellow citizens, a new union, or if you please, a Christian party in politics which I am exceeding desirous all good men in our country should join.¹

For a taste of Royall's rebuttal, we have from her *Black Book I*:

The missionaries have crept in! Can no part of our fair country escape the gripping fangs of these ferocious marauders? From Maine to Georgia --- from the Atlantic to the Missouri --- they swarm like locusts ... they have laid the whole country under contribution! ... These orthodox have at least half of the booksellers in the United States in their pay, with a view to establishing a national religion.²

In her sixties, Royall became the target of a law suit brought by Ely in Washington, D.C. The preacher was determined to get Royall convicted of something, and finally hit upon the obsolete English crime of "common scold." The punishment for this crime was dunking, and during the trial a model for a dunking machine, which would be built at the Navy Yard on the Potomac, was actually brought into court. However, although Royall was convicted of something or other, the judge

¹Ezra Stiles Ely, *The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers, A Discourse Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1827*, p. 8, as quoted in Alice S. Maxwell and Marion B. Dunlevy, *Virago*, (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 1985), p.64.

², Anne Newport Royall, *Black Book I*, p.66, as quoted in Maxwell and Dunlevy, *Virago*, p.66.

decided on a fine of ten dollars. This was an impossibly large amount of money for Royall, but she need not have worried. Secretary of War John Eaton immediately dispatched an aide to the courthouse with the money, but he was too late. Two of Royall's fellow journalists had already paid the fine.

Fanny Wright

Royall lived to be 85, fighting for free thought, free speech and a free press until the end. A contemporary of Anne Royall was an Englishwoman who was called worse than a "common scold." Fanny Wright was "high priestess of Beelzabub" according to the clergy, and was the subject of salacious gossip because of her close friendship with the Revolutionary hero General Lafayette, who was 38 years her senior. She and her sister were part of the General's entourage during his celebrated visit to the United States in 1824 during which he took the sisters to visit former presidents Jefferson and Madison.

Wright was the first woman in American history to be the main speaker at a Fourth of July celebration (1828). In 1829 she began co-editing with Robert Dale Owen a publication in New York city called *Free Enquirer*. Owen had previously worked with Anne Royall on lobbying Congress on behalf of the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution.

Wright was born in Scotland, orphaned at two, inherited a fortune and was sent to England to be raised by relatives. She first traveled to the United States in 1818 to see a production of a play she had written, but her major literary claim to fame at that time was a book written about her travels in America. Her *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1820) was the first American travelogue, predating those of Alexis de Tocqueville, Frances Trollope, and even Anne Royall. It was this book which so interested General Lafayette that he sought out the author and became her mentor and her friend until the end of his life.

After Lafayette returned to Europe, Wright and her sister remained in the United States. She delivered three lectures against the “Christian Party in politics” at the Cincinnati Court House on three successive Sundays in July, 1828. They were so well received, she repeated them on three Sundays in August. The success of these talks caused her fame to spread throughout the country. In the next few years, she gave lectures from Boston to New Orleans, declaiming against all domination of one human over another “... of priest over parishioners, male over female, master over slave.” She ended her public addresses by urging her listeners, “Turn your churches into halls of science.”

In opinions there are but true and false, those founded upon fact, and those not founded upon fact ... My object has been to find a test for all opinions. I have encouraged my fellow creatures to seek it in the nature of things as present to their senses, and in their own nature as discoverable by observation. Have they, upon examination, found all existing phenomena in contradiction with existing superstitions? -- and are they transformed into infidels because they prefer fact to faith, the living truths of nature to the assertions of men who earn their livelihood by the tale they are telling?¹

Despite strong opposition in the press, hundreds of men and women rallied to her cause. Tall, strikingly handsome, and a thrilling speaker, Wright often was mobbed after her talks by enthusiastic crowds. A sort of network formed of women and men who exchanged newspapers, corresponded, and in general promoted her ideas. Philip Hone, one-time mayor of New York City, called her a female Tom Paine. Walt Whitman thought her, “the noblest Roman of them all ... a most maligned, lied-about character — one of the best in history though also one of the least understood.”

¹Fanny Wright, *Free Enquirer*, August 14, 1830.

Wright became an American citizen, but because of a series of difficult and tragic circumstances, she retired from the public scene. She died at the age of 57 in Cincinnati, the city where she first became famous, an all but forgotten woman

Lucy Stone

It was quite a different story when Lucy Stone died forty-one years later. Her biographer, Andrea Moore Kerr, reports that the *Boston Globe* of October 18, 1893 screamed, “EXTRA! EXTRA! Lucy Stone is dead!” Newspapers around the world — in London, Paris, Brussels, even Constantinople had similar headlines, “A Great Woman Gone!” “Lucy Stone Dead!” *The New York Times* ran a ten-paragraph obituary and *The Washington Post* printed a five-paragraph notice on the front page. Journalists proclaimed that “the women of America will some day honor her with a national statue in the Capitol in Washington.” More than one person predicted history would “hail her as immortal.”¹

What had Stone done to earn such headlines? Why did men and women of every station in life honor this unpretentious farmer’s daughter? Simply put, because she defied tradition, dogma, and the law to insist that each individual, be they black or white, male or female, had equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

One of the things that made Stone such a celebrity was her thrilling speaking voice and general stage appearance and manner. But what she had to say was just as important. It was a talk by Stone that Susan B. Anthony said drew her to the suffrage cause. Stone was determined that women should not be ruled by men. Her views extended to a contract she and her husband drew up before marriage clearly stating they would

¹ The quotes in this paragraph are from Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking out for Equality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 4-5.

not abide by the marriage customs and laws of the day. In addition, Stone was the first woman in history to keep her name after marriage.

As a small child she was determined to learn Greek and Hebrew in order to read the Bible in the original versions. She could not believe that it really advocated that women be ruled by men. By the time she had mastered the ancient languages, it no longer mattered to her. She had long since broken from the Congregational Church because of the church's treatment of women and stand against the emancipation of slaves.

By saving her pennies (literally) earned from teaching school for \$16 dollars a month (men were paid \$30 for the same job) she finally had enough to go to the only college in the country that admitted women and African Americans, Oberlin College in Ohio. After graduation she returned to Massachusetts and began lecturing on emancipation of the slaves. She could never resist including the plight of women in her talks, and finally made separate lectures on the subject of suffrage.

One of Stone's aims in life was to have her own newspaper, and this she accomplished with the establishment of *The Woman's Journal* in 1870. The paper, published weekly in Boston and Chicago, had an unbroken existence of 47 years, continued after Stone's death by her husband and daughter. In addition to its American contributors, the paper had correspondents from England, Europe and more remote spots on the globe.

Stone was an important advocate of the rights of individuals all her life, but too soon forgotten. In 1930, when H.L. Mencken read about her, he asked in bewilderment: "Where is Lucy Stone's monument, reaching upward to the stars?"¹

¹J. L. Mencken, as quoted in Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, p. 6.

Harriet Martineau

A contemporary of Stone who had important things to say about America and Americans, was the Englishwoman Harriet Martineau. Martineau was a prolific writer, famous in both Britain and America. She supported herself, as Royall had, with her nonfiction, writing more than 50 books and 1,600 articles.

In her early life she was a devoutly religious Unitarian. However that changed dramatically over the years and at the end of her life she declared

I hope and believe my old co-religionists understand and admit that I disclaim their theology *in toto* ... there is nothing in common between their theology and my philosophy.¹

Martineau spent two years in America in 1834-36. During her sojourn she spent some time at Montpelier with James and Dolley Madison. Drew R. McCoy opens his book on Madison, *The Last of the Fathers; James Madison & the Republican Legacy* with an account of Martineau's arrival at Montpelier, and throughout the volume quotes her observations at some length. Her visit in February, 1835 was little more than a year before his death and Madison was in extremely frail health, but mentally as alert as ever. The two hit it off, spending long hours in conversation. Martineau was quite deaf, but her ear trumpet seemed not to disquiet, but rather to intrigue her partners in tête-a-tête. The one area in which she and the "Last of the Fathers" could not find agreement was the dilemma of slavery. Madison's conviction was that the only solution was to establish freed slaves in their own country in Africa.

The result of Martineau's American travels was her two-volume, *Society in America*. The book was as highly acclaimed

¹ Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography* (1876), Vol. 1.

as de Tocqueville's according to Annie Laurie Gaylor who calls it "a definitive work on the status of American women, whom she found unhealthily obsessed with religion ..."

In 1848 Martineau wrote *Household Education* hoping to help "the Secularist order of parents ... who could obtain few story-books for their children which were not stuffed with what was in their eyes pernicious superstition."

Martineau's most recent biographer, R. K. Webb, said of her, "for years she had been preaching sociology without the name." In any case, she was an optimist about the progress of human nature and reason:

... [T]he time cannot be far off when, throughout the civilized world, theology must go out before the light of philosophy ... of the extinction of theology by a true science of human nature, I cannot but say that my expectation amounts to absolute assurance; and that I believe that the worst of the conflict is over ... the last of the mythologies is about to vanish before the flood of a brighter light ...¹

The *Autobiography* was written in 1855, but was not published until a year after her death in 1876.

Matilda Joslyn Gage

Another optimist with regard to the future of theology, and a woman whose effectiveness came from her writing, not speeches, was Matilda Joslyn Gage. In her era, Gage's writings were among the strongest and most critical of the Christian church.

Gage was in at the beginning of the suffragist movement. She co-authored the *Declaration of Rights* for women and edited with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony the

¹ Martineau. *Autobiography*, Vol. 1

first three volumes of *The History of Woman Suffrage*. However, late in her life she found both the organization headed by Stanton and Anthony, and the other large national group led by Lucy Stone, were not liberal enough for her anti-religious views.

In 1890 Gage organized the Woman's National Liberal Union (WNLU). Among the Resolutions of the WNLU was the statement:

[Not] alone to aid her own enfranchisement ... but in order to help preserve the very life of the Republic, it is imperative that women should unite upon a platform of opposition to the teaching and aim of that ever most unscrupulous enemy of freedom — the Church.¹

In a lengthy interview with a reporter from *The Washington Critic* of February 22, 1890 she stated:

I regard the Church as the basic principle of immorality in the world, and the most prolific source of pauperism, of crime, and of injustice to women.

Gage's opening speech at the first session of the convention was entitled "The Dangers of the Hour" and included:

... It is the Protestant priesthood now inciting the bills before Congress to make religious teaching obligatory in public schools ... Church aggression is the foremost danger of the day ... The Church ... is based on the one central idea, supreme control over the thought, will, and action of mankind. The National Reform Association is a body of Protestants ... which declares that a

¹ *Woman's National Liberal Union Resolutions*, 1890.

written Constitution ought to contain explicit evidence of the Christian character and purpose of the nation which frames it.¹

Gage was referring to the fact that the National Reform Association sought to change the preamble of the Constitution to read:

We the people of the United States recognizing Almighty God as the source of all power and authority in Civil Government, and our Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler of nations and the Bible as the standard to decide all moral issues in political life, in order to form a Christian Government ...

Gage went on in her opening address:

... The “Christian Party in Politics” is the fifteenth Century living in the nineteenth — its members are the heathen of the world whom civilization has not yet touched.²

In 1893 Gage published her book *Woman, Church and State*. It is a volume of over 500 pages in the reprinted edition of 1992, most of them in sharp criticism of the Christian Church and its influence upon the state to deny free thought and free speech and to keep human beings in bondage. She was particularly firm in her belief that women, so wronged by the church, would lead the way to a world free from the tyranny of either church or state. Her book ends with an amazing prediction:

...Looking forward, I see evidence of a conflict more severe than any yet fought by reformation or science; a conflict that will shake the foundations of religious belief, tear into fragments and scatter to the winds the old dogmas upon which all forms of christianity [sic], are based ... it will be the rebellion of one half of

¹ *Woman's National Liberal Union Resolutions*, 1890.

² *Woman's National Liberal Union Resolutions*, 1890.

the church against those theological dogmas upon which the very existence of the church is based. In no other country has the conflict between natural and revealed rights been as pronounced as in the United States and in this country where the conflict first began, we shall see its full and final development. During the ages, no rebellion has been of like importance with that of Woman against the tyranny of Church and State; none has had its far reaching effects. We note its beginning; its progress will overthrow every existing form of these institutions; its end will be a regenerated world.¹

The optimism of Martineau and the conviction of Gage fly in the face of what we observe at the close of the twentieth century. They and other women like them in the nineteenth Century were convinced that the age of reason truly was about to dawn and that they were witnessing the waning days of religious belief and dogma. We can appreciate the great progress which has been made in the areas of human rights and scientific advance but we certainly have a long way to go to fulfill the hopes and convictions of these secular humanist heroines.

¹Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State*, (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1992) p. 544-545.

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4. Humanists and the Separation Of Church And State

by Rob Boston

Contrary to the assertions of various television preachers and right-wing pundits, secular humanists did not invent the separation of church and state. Nor are secular humanists responsible for the entire line of U.S. Supreme Court rulings upholding this principle.

Most humanists, however, are strongly supportive of church-state separation. In recent years, some humanists have stepped up their activism to keep the “wall of separation between church and state” high and firm. Many would argue that the times have demanded it. Since the late 1970s, a number of aggressive, well funded Religious Right groups have sought to destroy the protective wall between religion and government. In the face of such unrelenting assaults, many humanists have come to believe that they have no choice but to work harder to defend church-state separation or risk losing the principle entirely.

Why is separation of church and state so important to humanists? At first, the answer seems obvious: As a minority group in an overwhelmingly religious nation, humanists have reaped the benefits of the official distance between religion and government. Separation of church and state establishes a policy of religious neutrality, which in effect puts all religions on an equal footing in the eyes of the government. This prevents any one group from demanding special treatment or government funding. This policy indirectly helps humanists by keeping us from falling under the control of theocracy-minded groups.

Thanks to the separation of church and state, humanists cannot be required to pay taxes to support religions or religious schools that teach things humanists do not believe. Separation keeps humanists’ children free from coercive programs of

religious worship in public schools. It has expelled the pernicious doctrine of “creationism” from public school science classes. Church-state separation means that humanists do not have to swear religious oaths or belong to a religious group to run for public office.

At the same time, church-state separation means that the religious friends and neighbors of humanists are free to pursue their own beliefs without undue state interference, a situation that many humanists are undoubtedly thankful for. Separation has spawned religious diversity, a healthy trend.

But in a very real sense, separation means much more to humanists. It's safe to say that humanism could not exist--or at least could not exist in comfort--without the separation of church and state. That's because under a proper understanding of church-state separation, the government is not permitted to favor religion over secular philosophies. Although as a practical matter this standard is frequently violated--witness “In God We Trust” on the currency and state-paid chaplains in legislature--application of the wider principle gives secular philosophies the same rights and privileges as religious groups. Hence, humanist groups cannot be banned just because some may find their philosophy not to their liking, and humanist organizations qualify for tax exemption. In some states, humanist counselors may perform some of the legal functions of clergy, including conducting legally recognized marriage ceremonies, and funerals. Separation of church and state has helped many religious groups grow and prosper by removing legal obstacles and breaking the chains of restraint. It has done the same for humanism.

But many humanists are not interested in church-state separation simply because it gives them good things. That's a rather selfish view, after all! Rather, many humanists have studied history and know that only separation of church and state can guarantee intellectual and religious liberty for everyone. Religious Right operatives often accuse humanists of being “anti-religious” or opposed to religious freedom. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Humanism stands

firmly on the side of freedom. Humanists believe that every individual must have the right to freely choose or reject any religious belief. Although humanists have rejected organized religion, they would never deny anyone else the right to embrace it. In short, humanists are advocates of real religious freedom, and they recognize that only separation of church and state can guarantee that important concept.

Many humanists are also students of history. World and U.S. history show conclusively that church-state separation helps check religious tyranny. The bloody history of Europe in the Middle Ages, the oppression of Puritan Massachusetts and even the terrors of modern-day Afghanistan remind us of the dangers of mixing religion and government.

Humanists, therefore, are convinced that church-state separation is an essential feature of American life. Unfortunately, large numbers of Americans are not as strongly convinced. In recent years, public opinion polls have shown a disturbing trend: Americans support the separation of church and state in principle but not necessarily in practice. This leaves them open to propaganda from Religious Right groups, which simplistically blame every ill of modern life on church-state separation or on the alleged lack of influence of religion in public life.

One of the reasons such attacks are successful is that, ironically, separation of church and state has worked too well. Many Americans take the concept for granted. They may be ill-informed about U.S. history and not know much about our nation's struggle to end state-established religion. Or they may read about the mandatory church taxes and required church attendance of the colonial period and think, "That could never happen again." The reason it could not happen again, of course, is because of the separation of church and state. Yet many of these same people, while holding these beliefs, might also assert, "What's wrong with a little prayer in schools?" or "Why can't we give a little tax money to parochial schools?"

To answer these types of questions, humanists need to know some of the history behind the separation of church and

state. Familiarity with this history is especially important now, since so many Religious Right activists are making bogus claims about history. While it is by no means comprehensive, the following review may be useful.

Colonial America could be a place of great religious intolerance. Many colonies had established churches and punished various religious “offenses” with fines or prison sentences. In Virginia, for example, where Anglicanism was the established church, clergy of other faiths were not permitted to preach in public, and all residents--Anglican and non--had to pay church taxes. Anyone who spoke “in disrespect” to an Anglican minister could end up behind bars.

After the Revolution, as states began to draw up their own constitutions, religious dissenters and enlightenment thinkers joined forces in some states to agitate for an end to state-established religion. The reason was clear: The old system simply wasn't working. As the colonies became more religiously diverse, church taxes, state preference for certain faiths and restricting public office to the holders of select creedal statements made less and less sense.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison led the struggle for disestablishment in Virginia, beating back an effort by Patrick Henry to pass a “general assessments” bill that would have required tax support for several Christian denominations, as opposed to just one. Not only did Virginia lawmakers end the state-supported church, they went on to pass Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom, which guaranteed all men the right to choose their own religion. Some Virginia lawmakers would have restricted religious freedom to Christians only--that is, residents would be free to choose their own religion, as long as it was a Christian denomination. This was rejected. This is a key development because it showed the scope and effect of enlightenment thinking in America. The idea that religious liberty was for “Christians only,” once a given, was now being rejected. This opened the door to the eventual spread of non-Christian faiths and, after some time, equivalent secular philosophies.

Madison took his experiences from the Virginia battle with him to the federal Constitutional Convention. After ratification, when a Bill of Rights was proposed, Madison helped draft the First Amendment. After much wrangling its religion clauses read, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...."

Years later Madison, reflecting on the amendment, wrote to a friend that it had the effecting of creating "the total separation of the church from the state." In his "Detached Memoranda" essays (undated, probably early 1800s), Madison asserted, "Strongly guarded...is the separation between Religion and Government in the Constitution of the United States."

By "separation" Madison did not mean merely no officially established church. As president, he vetoed a bill to officially incorporate an Episcopal church in the District of Columbia and a bill to give federal land to a Baptist church in Mississippi. Madison believed the measures would violate the First Amendment. He even nixed a proposed census, arguing it would violate the First Amendment if it attempted to count the number of clergy in the country.

Madison is a key figure in the development of the separation of church and state. Yet it is Jefferson's famous "wall of separation between church and state" metaphor that has captured public imagination and inflamed the Religious Right. Jefferson used the phrase in a Jan. 1, 1802, letter to the Danbury, Conn., Baptist Association. The Baptists, who at that time were required to pay church taxes in Connecticut, wrote to Jefferson to congratulate him on his election to the presidency and to gently complain about their status as second-class citizens. The Baptists hoped that Jefferson's election would spread the concept of freedom of religion nationwide and certainly into their own backyard.

Jefferson seized on his reply as an opportunity to make a statement about religious liberty. His reply was not a quickly

dashed off courtesy note. In fact, Jefferson agonized over his answer and showed his draft to his attorney general and other members of his cabinet. Jefferson, in fact, toyed with the idea of using the letter to explain why he did not as president proclaim days of fasting and prayer. His attorney general recommended against it, saying it would only antagonize conservative New England clergy who were already accusing Jefferson of being an atheist. If there's one thing the history of the Danbury letter shows, it's that it was not a hastily dashed off note.

In the letter Jefferson wrote in part, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."

Religious Right activists claim that Jefferson wrote the letter to say that government has no right to interfere with the activities of churches. Since he was responding to a concern over church taxes, that clearly is not the case. Some assert that since Jefferson was in France when the First Amendment was drafted, his views should not be considered important. But Madison, who was Jefferson's protege, helped write the amendment, which clearly shows the influence of Jefferson's religious freedom statute in Virginia. Jefferson was keenly interested in the deliberations over the Bill of Rights and kept in close contact with Madison. Even though he was not in the room, Jefferson clearly influenced the course of the debate.

The First Amendment is not the only section of the Constitution to reference church-state separation. Article VI, which bans religious tests for public office, is often overlooked but of equal importance. This provision, championed by Charles Pickney of South Carolina, is also an important affirmation of church-state separation. Many states had requirements limiting public office to Trinitarian Protestants or religious believers. Article VI made it clear that no such

restrictions would exist for federal office. This was important step forward.

The Constitution is also notable for what it does not say. There is no mention of Christianity or God. Had a “Christian nation” been the intention of the framers, that would be in there. Instead, the exact opposite is found--a no-establishment provision, religious freedom for all and an end to religious tests for public office. There is no getting around the fact that the Constitution is a secular document written for a secular government. (The “godless” nature of the Constitution infuriated conservative pastors of the day, many of whom preached from their pulpits that the fledgling United States would face imminent destruction because it had turned its back on God.)

Naturally the separation principle was not applied flawlessly through all of U.S. history. In the nineteenth century, some laws were passed that clearly transgressed the spirit of the First Amendment. Prior to the Civil War, for example, several states passed laws requiring that churches be owned by their collective members, as opposed to hierarchical officials. These laws were meant to intimidate and harass Roman Catholics, a despised minority at that time. Today such laws would be seen an intolerable government meddling in the private affairs of churches and would quickly be declared unconstitutional. Many nineteenth century courts let them stand. Nineteenth century courts also frequently upheld blasphemy laws and other religiously based regulations, heedless of the commands of the Constitution.

It was not until after the turn of the century that federal and state courts began to strike down patently unconstitutional laws designed to promote religion at state expense. The Supreme Court's application of the Bill of Rights to the states through the fourteenth Amendment (a post-Civil War amendment), a doctrine known as “Incorporation,” brought many church-state disputes into the federal courts for the first time. Incredibly, the high court did not take this definitive action until 1940.

None of this history is likely to make any difference to the Religious Right. Leaders of that movement have a long track record of rewriting history and selectively interpreting data to suit their own purposes. But Americans who are sitting on the fence while the “culture wars” rage on should not be left at the mercy of blatantly misleading propaganda. It requires an answer.

History is persuasive, but in the end humanists realize that separation of church and state must be defended and supported not just because that's what the framers would want but because it's the right thing to do. Separation of church and state is the policy of a mature, diverse and open society. It is also the guarantor of intellectual liberty and personal freedom. No other system of church-state relations is acceptable for this nation.

Some Scandinavian nations retain established churches yet maintain “toleration” for other faiths. Germany requires payment of a church tax, unless an individual appears before a government official and fills a form to opt out. These systems do not foster individual freedom. The United States has consciously rejected European models in favor of a system that works better--a religiously neutral government undergirded by the complete separation of church and state.

But today the separation of church and state stands in jeopardy as never before. William H. Rehnquist, the Chief Justice of the United States, has attacked Jefferson's metaphor, labeling it “useless as a guide to judging.” The “wall” metaphor, Rehnquist says, “should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.” The high court is precariously divided over the church-state issue. Many recent rulings have been 5-4 decisions. If the balance shifts, an activist right-wing court could begin undoing the court's separationist legacy.

At the same time, Religious Right groups press their attack against “the wall,” comparing that bulwark of freedom to the notorious Berlin Wall. TV preacher Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, has called separation of church and state “mythical” and a “Soviet” idea. Robertson's views may

seem offensive and bizarre, but he is taken quite seriously in the political system today and holds great influence in the Republican Party. The Rev. Jerry Falwell, TV preacher D. James Kennedy and other Religious Right leaders have launched similar salvos against church-state separation.

Separation of church and state is under fire in state legislatures as well, where school prayer laws, measures requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in courthouses and misguided voucher measures continue to proliferate. The situation is no less dire in the U.S. Congress. In the summer of 1998, the House of Representatives actually voted to pass an omnibus constitutional amendment that would have erased church-state separation from the First Amendment. The proposal received a simple majority but failed to garner the necessary two-thirds vote required for passage. The welfare reform bill of 1995 allows hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to flow into the coffers of religious groups under a scheme of dubious constitutionality euphemistically called "charitable choice." Voucher bills continue to surface in Congress as well. Several passed both chambers during the Clinton administration and would be law now had not the president vetoed them.

Perhaps most discouragingly, the American people often do not seem to appreciate the gift the founders gave them. Opinion polls show disturbingly high numbers backing things like official programs of prayer in public schools, the teaching of "creationism," the display of sectarian symbols on government property at Christmas time and diversion of tax dollars to private religious schools. Many Americans, it seems, support the separation of church and state in principle but less so in practice.

Humanists remain the one group that has always understood why our nation must never abandon the separation of church and state. But humanists are a small minority in America, and our efforts alone will not make a difference. Humanists must therefore join forces with like-minded

Americans of all religious and philosophical backgrounds to make certain that the people are educated about the importance of church-state separation and understand why the United States cannot remain a free nation without it.

When Religious Right leaders accuse humanists of inventing the separation of church and state, they are paying us a great compliment. But unfortunately humanists can't take credit for that. But we can, indeed we must, take a leading role today in making sure that Jefferson's wall remains high, firm and strong for the next generation.

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5. Secular Humanist Ethics and the Next Generation

by Mary Ellen Sikes

By an overwhelming majority, both houses of Virginia's 1999 General Assembly approved legislation requiring that "character education" be taught in the Commonwealth's public schools. Meanwhile, in his twenty-second year of broadcasting, James Dobson, family psychologist to the Religious Right, continues to advise thousands of listeners a day on his radio talk show dealing with raising children according to traditional Christian "family values." And in Amherst, New York, the Council for Secular Humanism's Center for Inquiry now conducts regular, structured, moral education sessions -- from a rational, non-religious perspective -- for the children of area freethinkers.

The doom and gloom prophets tell us that America has lost its soul to materialistic greed and self-indulgence; that our culture is awash with nihilistic permissiveness curable only by a collective return to subservient godliness. According to these pundits, morality is a dead topic.

To some of us in the modern secular movement, however, just the opposite appears true. Morality and ethics frequently seem to have seized the day culturally. Issues formerly considered intimately private now dominate open public debate. Death with dignity, abortion, cloning, homosexuality, and other controversial moral questions have become commonplace topics in the media, the public square, and the classroom. Far from being morally apathetic, our society appears to be obsessed with ethics.

The problem is not that we are hopelessly devoid of moral concern, but rather that we seem to be faced with a plethora of seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints. Humanists do acknowledge that our society faces some worrisome social ills, just as it always has. And we don't deny the need to address

significant ethical challenges as our knowledge and experience broadens. But we are quite skeptical of the claim that religion provides the answers.

The prevailing religious concept of human nature as inherently flawed, sinful, and inadequate reinforces to religious believers the need for divine guidance, human submission, and external salvation rather than self-reliance or responsibility. While acknowledging some obligation to self and fellow humans, the religionist is still likely to be primarily committed to the critical obligation of honoring the mystical source of the moral code, a deity.

Secular humanists are skeptical of the existence of divine authority figures who provide simple solutions to complicated human dilemmas. Moreover, humanists doubt that a dogmatic or authoritarian approach to moral issues can bolster individual potential for the development of an active and responsible ethical conscience. Given the reality of our ever-changing civilization with its rapid advances in technological, scientific, biomedical, and social fields, the secular humanist sees no evidence that the moral admonitions of simpler, past realities will be up to the challenges of a more complex future. In fact, humanists can't help but observe with secular humanist leader Paul Kurtz that "[from] the fatherhood of God men have derived contradictory moral principles." Faced with the evidence of worldwide religious conflict and the clearly observed connection between religious dogmatism and oppressive governmental regimes, secular humanists find the religious claim of divinely bestowed moral absolutes to be illusory at best and abusive at worst.

In short, the secular humanist gives both responsibility and credit for human ethical principles to those most in need of them and those most qualified by experience to develop them – human beings.

What is ethics, and why bother if there's no heaven or hell?

Ethics is a system of examining and codifying human behavior in light of cherished values such as respect, honesty, and justice. Without doubt, religion is capable of motivating ethical conduct in some, usually with the promise of an attractive afterlife for those who comply with certain requirements – and the threat of a frightful eternity for those who don't.

But religion has not shown a consistent historical record of promoting moral action; in fact, the human saga is replete with examples of religion's abysmal failure in this regard. Often, an unresolved conflict between competing religious principles may even serve as justification for immoral behavior. Ethnic pogroms, jihads, inquisitions, slavery, the subjugation of women, the torture and murder of "heretics," and countless other atrocities have all been perpetrated in the name of piety throughout the ages. In the contemporary scene, individuals continue to be bilked by unscrupulous televangelists and faith healers; children are abused by clerical pedophiles and fanatic parents; doctors are murdered by anti-abortion zealots. In the words of Blaise Pascal, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."¹

Societies throughout the ages have found it necessary and desirable to arrive at codes of conduct which enable their members to live in relative harmony. We can be sure that it required no divine intervention for early tribes of humans to realize that stealing food from neighboring tribes could reap unpleasant results. Although many civilizations have used religion to control human behavior, the truth is that most of us would decline membership in a completely permissive society, regardless of our world view. Such a civilization

¹ Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, Sect. XIV, No. 894 (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1958).

would be unable to provide basic freedoms to its citizens. Without shared expectations for conduct, individuals would constantly be struggling to protect themselves from the consequences of others' actions. Victims would have no recourse against their oppressors except retaliation. Chaos would reign.

Clearly, the individual reaps substantial benefits when others act ethically toward him. He is freed to pursue his life concerns without constant fear for his personal well-being. Yet the individual also profits from his own ethical conduct towards others. By avoiding behaviors which victimize those around him, he gains his peers' trust and goodwill. Interpersonal and business relationships can thrive and grow; conflicts can be resolved peacefully through negotiation and compromise.

Life is simply much less stressful for all when human beings treat each other well. And for those of us without an afterlife to look forward to, making the most of this, our one and only life, makes perfect sense. We can enjoy our human experience in a state of reasonable contentment without nagging guilt and worry. We can derive joy from the fruits of our own contributions to peace and harmony around us. And, eventually, when we die, it will be without regrets -- in the serene knowledge that others will remember us positively.

What are some basic humanist values?

All human beings have traditionally developed "core values" they wish to promote within their own societies. These "common moral decencies" are remarkably similar across cultures and generally include (but are not limited to) the following fundamental principles:

- Honesty
- Trustworthiness
- Justice
- Respect for personal safety
- Respect for property rights

One can locate these themes in the laws of kings and pharaohs, the Ten Commandments, and the Golden Rule. Not surprisingly, they apply to secular humanism as well. So at its most basic foundation, the humanist life stance encompasses the same prohibitions against murder, rape, theft, and other obvious criminal activity that would be forbidden in almost any religious or legal ethical system. But such a list would be incomplete in its description of humanist ethics. A more comprehensive list of humanist principles would require the addition of the following equally critical concepts:

- Tolerance
- Sexual freedom
- Political freedom
- Freedom of inquiry
- Environmental stewardship

These ideals may represent areas of ambivalence or disagreement among most religious believers and institutions, which is to say that they are not as universally recognized as such principles as honesty and justice. Religious conservatives, for example, apply many restrictions to sexual activity and would deny that sexual self-determination is a virtue; liberal religionists may view sexuality in a much more permissive light.

Among most humanists, these principles are widely supported; yet it would be misleading to suggest that all humanists agree about the applications of these ideals to everyday life situations. For example, although all humanists regard sex as a normal, joyful activity and a private matter of

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conscience, humanists may differ widely on the degree of sexual freedom to be enjoyed by teenagers. Still, there are generalizations which can be made about humanist attitudes towards specific contemporary issues. A survey of some typical moral questions from a humanist perspective might be a useful exercise.

How do humanists feel about.....?

Abortion: Virtually all humanists are pro-choice, especially for women in the early stages of pregnancy. Some disagreement may exist about late-term abortions and abortions for minors. Libertarian humanists may oppose government funding of abortion.

Animal rights: Virtually all humanists oppose animal cruelty. Beyond that there is little consensus among humanists with regard to specifics such as meat consumption, hunting, the fur industry, or the use of animals in entertainment or medical research.

Birth control: Virtually all humanists favor responsible family planning and easy access to birth control for sexually active individuals. Libertarian humanists may oppose government funding of birth control.

Capital punishment: Virtually all humanists oppose cruel methods of punishment in the judicial system. Beyond that, there is no consensus among humanists about the morality of putting incorrigible criminals to death.

Cloning: Virtually all humanists favor biomedical research with the potential to create positive options for humans facing genetic challenges. Humanists favor thoughtful, informed collaboration regarding the uses of biomedical technology with far-reaching consequences, and oppose ideologically-based restrictions on such technology.

Drug use: Virtually all humanists view drug use as a health issue, not a moral dilemma. Many humanists favor individual choice in the use of recreational drugs. Some humanists feel that recreational drugs should be legalized and placed under governmental control in order to minimize drug-related violence.

Euthanasia and suicide: Most humanists favor individual control over the circumstances and timing of death in the event of coma or terminal illness. Many humanists favor legislative changes that would enable individuals suffering from severe pain or indignity to make an informed medical choice to end their own lives.

Homosexuality: Virtually all humanists favor privacy and freedom of sexual expression for consenting adults without regard to sexual orientation. Virtually all humanists oppose any type of discrimination against homosexuals in matters of employment, housing, and custody arrangements. Many humanists favor same-sex marriage and benefits to same-sex partners.

Human rights: Virtually all humanists favor basic human rights for all individuals without regard to ethnicity, gender, creed, sexual orientation, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, or other criteria. Freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, movement, and association are fundamental civil liberties without which humanistic goals can never be realized. Mindful of this reality, the International Academy of Humanism has endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Interracial relationships: Virtually all humanists favor individual choice in the selection of marital or sexual partners without regard to ethnic background.

Premarital sex: Virtually all humanists favor privacy and freedom of sexual expression for consenting adults without regard to marital status. Some disagreement may exist about the age at which a minor becomes capable of making an informed choice regarding sexual activity.

War: Virtually all humanists favor the use of negotiation and compromise in solving political conflicts. Some humanists may accept war as justified under certain circumstances when peaceful methods have failed.

How do humanists make moral decisions?

Without deities, religious leaders, prophets, or sacred commandments to consult in times of moral indecision, humanists must rely on human experience and knowledge to inform their moral consciences. The use of objective knowledge and experience to devise an ethical system is sometimes called “naturalistic ethics.”

“Human experience” might be described as falling into two categories: that which we learn from our own personal life events, and that which we can infer from the study of human history. “Knowledge” is generally intended to imply factual information relevant to a particular moral issue. In many cases, this knowledge is scientific in nature. In both cases, the emphasis is on naturalistic data – that which we collect from the world around us and can evaluate objectively – as opposed to revelation or authority, which is too subjective to be either corroborated or falsified.

Let’s look at a concrete example to clarify the difference. A convicted killer’s sentence must be determined, and we are a diverse panel of judges. The convict has admitted guilt and shows no remorse. Our choices are life in prison without parole, or death by lethal injection. Some of us wish to use rational data exclusively to inform our decision, and others choose to use religious criteria only. What are some of the considerations each group might explore?

Rational

Data on the effectiveness of capital punishment as a crime deterrent

Data on the prisoner's history, life expectancy and mental state

Estimates of the cost of incarcerating the prisoner for life

Data on the likelihood the prisoner will appeal a death sentence

Estimates of the cost of legal defense if the prisoner appeals

Data on the likelihood the prisoner will victimize others when incarcerated

Community sentiment regarding the prisoner and the crime

Personal knowledge of a past situation similar to this one

Religious

Scriptural guidance regarding treatment of capital offenders

Clerical guidance regarding treatment of capital offenders

Prayer for divine guidance regarding the treatment of capital offenders

Sectarian views on the nature of human life

Without actually solving this complicated scenario, we can at least examine the usefulness of each method. An important consideration for a humanist is that rational information is objective and can be examined for reliability. We can check cost estimates, scrutinize personal data about the prisoner, or refer to archives about similar cases in the past.

The subjective, religious information, on the other hand, seems to leave us helpless. A Quaker wants us to respect the “spark of the divine” in every human being, including this

prisoner, and to reject the death penalty. A fundamentalist Christian has spoken to her minister and read her Bible and wishes to exact Old Testament reparation from the murderer – death. A Jew claims that during intense prayer, it has been revealed to him that God supports justice tempered with mercy: prison, but not death. How do we seek more information to clarify, support, or criticize any of these claims? Is there a test for a “divine spark?” Can we verify messages imparted during prayer? We seem to have no way to sort out this collection of conflicting input. Each person is equally convinced his or her view is correct, but no one can offer any supporting evidence; further, no one can disprove the others’ claims.

Note that we are not asserting that all objective data necessarily agree, or that the rational approach to ethics is a perfect method yielding completely unambiguous results and simple, obvious solutions. It is quite possible to gather contradictory objective data, or to have trouble making a decision even after weighing the relevant information carefully. What humanists do claim is that objective data provides a more reliable framework for weighing moral consequences than revelation or religious authority. Objective data has some chance of verification – and if it’s false, we have a chance of learning that too.

Nor do we claim that the objective, rational method of viewing moral issues is, or should be, completely devoid of all emotion. Humanists do recognize the emotional sphere as a critical element of the human experience. In fact, it could be argued that without a strong emotional attachment to the rest of the human race, a humanistic approach to ethics would be impossible. We must first care about our fellow human beings and have a sense of ultimate concern about our collective welfare if we intend to judge the best ways to live, work, and play together.

How do humanists cultivate an ethical imperative in their children?

From the exquisite moment when a baby leaves the secure protection of his biological mother's body, he begins to define his position in the larger family of humanity. It will be years before he fully realizes his participation in the process; yet, despite his innocence, what happens during those first years of life will impact his future to an extent unmatched by any other stage of his development. It is in the dawn of a young child's life that his awareness of the world and its other inhabitants starts to emerge.

Through his involvement with his ever-widening immediate universe, the toddler unwittingly presents his parents – his primary caregivers, biological or otherwise – with the need and opportunity for providing moral guidance. Consciously or not, they begin to make choices about the focus and foundation of the moral education he will receive. Simplistic at first, it will focus on his interactions with his first community, consisting of a limited repertoire of family, friends, and caregivers: “Be gentle with the new baby, please.”

As his world expands to include play group and preschool, he will require the more complicated skills of negotiating with others, anticipating consequences, and developing empathy. Widening his scope still beyond to school, community organizations, and a more diverse collection of friends and acquaintances, by the end of adolescence he may well have had opportunities to explore, at some level, the possibilities of many of the moral circumstances he will encounter in the adult world. He stands in the doorway of adulthood, one foot out and one still in, testing his readiness for more complicated life situations.

Without a doubt, a child's success in navigating this ongoing, lifelong process will be greatly colored by the fundamental choices made by his parents in his developing

years. To the secular humanist parent in particular, confronting the issue of a child's ethical development may pose both challenges and opportunities. Without the ready structure of religion or church, the question of approach falls to the parent or caregiver. There are no commandments, sacred texts, or clergy to support the effort, but there is freedom – the freedom to tailor the process to the needs and inclinations of individual family members and to explore any and all issues that come up without fear of overstepping externally imposed boundaries.

For the young child in a religious home, moral education may adopt a religious framework through formal or informal instruction focusing on sectarian moral codes like the Ten Commandments or Biblical prescriptions. The emphasis generally leans towards obedience to absolutes, overcoming temptation, pleasing temporal authority figures like parents and supernatural authorities like God, and securing a favored place in the afterlife. While religious children may to some extent feel free to analyze the best ways to apply their religious ethics to everyday life, they are generally not at liberty to question the standards themselves, doubt the source of the standards, or deviate far from the perceived expectations of behavior. And although religious overtones may not be pervasively obvious in every moral situation, the underlying framework of obedience to divine will is a given.

Although many secular humanist values mirror those of religious believers – honesty, justice, and integrity, for example -- for the secularist these principles have human rather than divine origins. Individual obligations are viewed within the context of the natural world. The secular humanist parent's ultimate goal for her child is not obedience or submission, but rather the development of an educated moral intelligence motivated by regard for one's fellow human beings and an eye to improving the human experience in the here and now. To meet the demands of responsible, independent adulthood, children require guidance in developing an informed consciousness of ethical concern that rises above obedience. To

build and maintain respect for the benefits of moral conduct to self and society, children need to be gradually freed of external motivators such as reward and punishment, and allowed to develop a strong internal commitment to responsible behavior.

Free inquiry and open discussion within the family regarding ethical principles and their applications, using everyday experiences and the acquisition of knowledge to inform each family member's continuing ethical development, are treasured secular humanist practices. When one cherished principle seems to be at odds with another – honesty versus loyalty, for example -- the secular humanist parent not only allows but encourages the child to question, disagree, explore, and struggle. The process of understanding may be more valuable to the child's development than the actual outcome.

The secular humanist family is committed to modeling not only ethical behavior within situational contexts, but also the development of personal strategies helpful to the realization of thoughtful ethics. The benefit and utility of common moral decencies – qualities like integrity, self-discipline, compassion, and justice – are more effectively validated from personal experience. When the secular humanist's child observes a playground fight over a popular toy, the skilled adult might help him explore the merits of cooperation by fostering objective discussion of the incident. By encouraging the child to brainstorm alternative strategies for resolving conflict, she allows him to evaluate for himself the consequences of self-centered behavior and to explore possibilities which make life more pleasant for all.

As discussed earlier, the defining element of the secular humanist outlook is its insistence on reason over faith in forming an approach to everyday life. Children raised in secular humanist homes are guided to sharpen their skills of observation, data-gathering, critical thinking, and informed decision-making as they develop an increasingly complex ethical imperative. Ideally they are encouraged in age-appropriate contexts to explore the human roots of moral codes

throughout history and to recognize the role of scientific advances and new acquisitions of knowledge in altering human perceptions of right and wrong. Opportunities for exploring how science, history, technology, philosophy, and the arts have impacted societal and personal values abound in our culture and can be maximized for their instructive value. Because the secular humanist world view requires observation and knowledge as prerequisites for any informed opinion, the ethics of secular humanism is formed by realistic analysis rather than by faith in an unproved supernatural realm.

Conclusion

Religionists sometimes claim that situation ethics based on the application of human experience and judgment to moral situations is lacking in foundation and leads to amorality. This view would seem to argue against the rational, secular humanist approach of fostering ethical awareness within individuals and families.

To a secular humanist, however, the constant influx of new knowledge and understanding is an inescapable, beneficial contributor to the human moral perspective. The reasoned approach to ethics requires the individual to make a knowledgeable judgment how best to apply a cherished principle in a particular situation. Even young children realize that very few important moral questions involve simplistic choices between good and evil; often humans find themselves having to select between the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. Life in the real world requires the ability to reflect, gather and weigh conflicting data, take risks, evaluate outcomes, and tolerate some amount of ambiguity.

The absolutist approach to morality, with its emphasis on the perceived flaws of human nature and constant reliance throughout life upon divine will and religious authority figures, provides the individual with little opportunity to practice the skills needed to deal with complicated moral issues. Instead of a mature ethical conscience, the result is much more likely to

reflect dependency, need, and an expectation of simplistic solutions with guaranteed outcomes.

Secular parents strive to offer their children the guidance and support necessary to prepare them for mature, independent, and confident moral decision-making in an increasingly complex world. Because the humanist has no expectation of a life after this one, making the most of this one brief opportunity in the material world becomes paramount. Humanist ethics is grounded in compassion and reason, the necessary and sufficient foundation for a life of meaning and fulfillment. Our concern for our fellow human beings and the future we must create for generations to come gives us the impetus to promote the common human decencies of honesty, trustworthiness, justice, and respect, to name just a few cherished principles.

But do secular ethics work? Although this very legitimate question has yet to be answered with real evidence, informal observation does suggest that humanists are successfully incorporating ethical principles into their secular lives. Humanist group rosters are noticeably lacking in members with prison addresses. Tales of abuse among humanist leaders are virtually non-existent. Children raised in secular homes always seem to be positive in their assessment of their own moral upbringing.

Religion has had its day and the moral excellence it claims to foster has largely failed to materialize. Do we care enough about the future of humanity to try something different?

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Secular Humanist Ethics and the Next Generation

I am grateful to Stuart Jordan and Ken Marsalek for helping me develop some of the ideas in this paper. The following sources are recommended to those interested in further reading on the topic of humanism and ethics, especially in regard to current issues.

The Council for Secular Humanism's magazine, *Free Inquiry*, is an excellent source for discussions of humanism and ethics. The following issues are especially recommended:

Free Inquiry, Summer 1994. Theme: "Do Children Need Religion?" Secular humanists examine the question of religious vs. moral education for children.

Free Inquiry, Spring 1996. Theme: "Do We Need God to Be Moral?" Articles by leading humanists on secular ethics and religion in public schools with a point-counterpoint debate between Paul Kurtz and a fundamentalist theologian on the relevance of God to a moral life.

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Mary Ellen Sikes founded Central Virginia Secular Humanists, the Charlottesville chapter of WASH, in 1995. Raised in the Roman Catholic Church, she became suspicious of God’s existence during sixth grade religion class and later became the stealth heretic of Bishop Denis J. O’Connell High School in Arlington, Virginia. She and her husband, Lloyd, have raised their two teenagers in a secular home. She works as a media and technology assistant in her neighborhood public elementary school.

6. Secular Humanism and Bioethics

By Ronald A. Lindsay

Introduction

Secular humanists have much to contribute to the controversies within that family of actual and potential moral problems characterized as “bioethics.” Interestingly, it is perhaps with respect to this set of problems that one finds the most diversity of opinion among secular humanists. However, this (current) diversity of opinion demonstrates the strength of secular humanism, not its weakness. There is a diversity of opinion on these issues because many of the issues encountered are novel. Secular humanism approaches novel issues with few preconceived ideas and without deference to an authoritative set of holy scriptures or holy persons. Accordingly, there is bound to be a wide range of opinions and contentions at the outset when any new problem is addressed, whether it be assisted suicide, genetic enhancement, cloning or xenotransplantation. But through rational analysis, vigorous debate, and careful development of the interplay between moral theory and moral experience, secular humanists are able to achieve progress in resolution of these problems.

The contrast between the secular approach to bioethics and the approach of the religious dogmatist will become clearer as specific problems are discussed below.

What is Bioethics?

Bioethics is that branch of applied ethics that deals with ethical problems arising out of the pursuit and applications of biomedical research as well as the practice of medicine. It is also often thought to encompass problems of distributive justice as they relate to health care and biomedical research -- for example, what if any rights, should persons have to

affordable and accessible health care? Should “health care” be broadly defined to include such matters as growth hormones or fertility-enhancing drugs?

Dramatic advances in biomedical research in the past few decades, as well as significant changes in health care, have presented us with many ethical quandaries, including some controversies that were previously found exclusively in science fiction. Interest in this area of ethics is fueled not only by an awareness that some of the new technologies that are or may be available to us have enormous implications for human individuals and human communities, but also by the vocal and adamant resistance to some of these new technologies by many, including religious dogmatists and “New Age” dogmatists, such as author (and professional Luddite) Jeremy Rifkin.

Method in Secular Bioethics

The one, indispensable component of secular bioethics, as it is for secular ethics in general or secular analysis of any sort, is free inquiry. Secular humanists do not approach bioethical problems with a set of ten, twenty or thirty commandments which limit in advance the type of result that might be found acceptable. Similarly, secular humanists believe decisions should be based on reason, not impulse or an unreflective commitment to traditional norms.

By emphasizing the importance of reason, I am not suggesting that bioethics can be done simply by deducing conclusions from a set of given first principles. Secular dogma is no improvement over religious dogma. Instead, secular bioethics proceeds by a continual and reciprocal adjustment of our theory by our practice and of our practice by our theory.

We may start with a tentative considered judgment regarding, for example, assisted suicide and then adjust it by placing it in the context of a moral theory. Initially, we may regard suicide as a form of killing, and as killing is regarded as

wrong, we may consider either suicide or assisted suicide to be morally impermissible. However, when we are asked to explain why suicide is presumptively wrong, we may have difficulty in doing so. Upon reflection, we may recognize that killing someone against her will is presumptively wrong because we are harming that person's interest in continuing to live. But (assuming there are no third parties significantly and adversely affected by the suicide) whose interest is harmed by a voluntary suicide? In trying to place the prohibition against killing in the context of a moral theory, we may come to adjust our initial judgment. We might then hold, as a result of our moral theorizing, that a person should, all other things being equal, be allowed to pursue her own interest as she sees fit. Therefore, everyone should be allowed to do with their bodies what they want, including seeking assistance in dying.

However, this interim conclusion is also subject to adjustment when we consider how our theory might actually work in practice. In other words, we refine this interim conclusion by examining the context in which judgments about assisted suicide take place. Recognizing that some who request assistance in dying may do so out of uncertainty, fear, or depression, and that in other situations we are willing to limit autonomy when there is a significant risk of harm, we may modify our interim conclusion by deciding that assisted suicide is permissible only in limited circumstances (such as when the person requesting assistance is terminally ill or severely disabled) and only when subject to strict regulation.

This process of testing and revising our moral beliefs is ongoing. Although secular humanists strive for consensus, we reject dogma, and therefore we never regard any problem as definitively resolved. Any moral view is always subject to challenge and must continually be tested for adequacy by its practical implications. Secular method in bioethics is analogous to the scientific method, by which hypotheses are continually tested and then modified or rejected through experience.

Cloning: A Contrast Between the Secular Approach and the Approach of the Religious Dogmatist

The recent controversy over cloning provides a sharp and illuminating contrast between bioethics done the secular humanist way and bioethics done the “old-fashioned” way, that is, by appeal to some religious authority's interpretation of God's will.

Most religious authorities in the Western world have condemned cloning. For example, Reverend Albert Moraczewski of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has stated that cloning is “intrinsically morally wrong” as it is an attempt to “play God” and “exceed the limits of the delegated dominion given to the human race.” Similarly, Gilbert Meilander, a Protestant scholar at Valparaiso University in Indiana, has claimed that cloning is wrong because the point of the clone's existence “would be grounded in our will and desires” and cloning severs “the tie that unites procreation with the sexual relations of a man and woman.”

This is what we have come to expect from religious authorities: dogmatic pronouncements without any support external to a particular religious tradition and metaphor masquerading as reasoned analysis. Of course, it is difficult to offer reasoned analysis when one insists that morality is based on revelation from a deity -- especially when the revelation was set down in writing centuries or millennia ago under circumstances that bear little resemblance to the contemporary world. Because the writers of the Bible or the Koran had no occasion to address some of the problems that confront us, such as in vitro fertilization, genetic engineering or cloning, contemporary religious authorities have to pretend to be able to extrapolate from these dated writings meaningful moral insights. This pretense has a greater chance of being accepted the more forceful and the less detailed the ethical directive. As the Wizard of Oz realized, bluster and the demand for absolute obedience will enable you to command respect from many -- at least for a while.

The inflexible confines within which theologically based ethics must operate also helps explain why, for the religious dogmatist, the default stance for any new development in biomedical technology is: "Don't do it." The ability to make distinctions and to accept some but not all of the potential uses of a new technology requires a careful balancing of the advantages and disadvantages that is simply beyond the capacity of most religious ethicists. The call by many of the religious for an absolute ban on cloning experiments is a tacit admission that their theological principles are not sufficiently powerful and adaptable to offer us any real guidance. Indeed, some of the "arguments" offered against cloning are just variations of the "arguments" that the religious have offered against previous developments in technology. Thus, we can group the religious objections under two broad headings:

Cloning is playing God. This is the most common religious objection, and its appearance in the cloning debate was preceded by its appearance in the debate over birth control, the debate over organ transplants, the debate over assisted dying, etc. Any attempt by human beings to control and shape their lives in ways not countenanced by some religious tradition will encounter the objection that we are "playing God." To say that the objection is uninformative is to be charitable. The objection tells us nothing and obscures much. It cannot distinguish between interferences with biological process that are commonly regarded as permissible (for example, use of analgesics or antibiotics) and those that remain controversial. Why is cloning an impermissible usurpation of God's authority, but not the use of tetracycline?

Cloning is unnatural. In the cloning context, the "unnatural" objection is usually translated as saying that cloning is wrong because it separates reproduction from human sexual activity. This is the flip side of the familiar religious objection to birth control. Birth control is immoral because it severs sex from reproduction. Cloning is immoral

because it severs reproduction from sex. One would think that allowing reproduction to occur without all that nasty, sweaty carnal activity might appeal to some religious authorities, but apparently not. In any event, the “unnatural” argument is no less question-begging in the context of reproduction without sex than it is in the context of sex without reproduction. “Natural” most often functions as an approbative and indefinable adjective; it is a superficially impressive way of saying, “This is good, I approve.” Without some argument as to why something is “natural” and “good” or “unnatural” and “bad,” all we have is noise.

In pointing out the inadequacies of the approach of the religious dogmatist, I am not suggesting that cloning does not present serious problems, nor am I suggesting that cloning will always be a good thing. Quite to the contrary, I believe cloning presents serious problems, but this does not entail that all forms of cloning are wrong or that we should have an absolute ban on cloning.

In analyzing the cloning problem, we must initially distinguish intrinsic facts about clones from extrinsic facts. Some have argued that cloning is bad because it could lead to a far-reaching biological manipulation program in which “they” try to enhance or degrade the human race. In other words, this argument assumes that if we become proficient in cloning and if we also master techniques for manipulating DNA, then the consequences are bound to be horrible. For example, if we are able to modify a human being's genetic composition to achieve a predetermined end and can then create clones from the modified genetic structure, we could, theoretically, create a human-like order of animals that would be more intelligent than other animals but less intelligent and more docile than (other?) human beings. Sort of ready-made slaves.

Others, with less exaggerated fears, have argued that cloning will lead to a harmful misallocation of resources. The very rich will spend millions of dollars to clone themselves -- or perhaps their pets -- and this money could be used much more productively elsewhere.

The problem with both of these objections is that to the extent they are persuasive they depend on how cloning takes place, not on the impropriety of cloning itself. This is what I meant above when I stated we have to distinguish extrinsic facts about cloning from intrinsic facts. Cloning, like any other technology, can be misused. However, we usually regard the answer to potential misuse of technology to be regulation of the technology, not its complete banning. How strict the regulation should be obviously depends, to some extent, on an evaluation of the potential harms and benefits of the technology. Cloning, arguably, should be subject to strict regulation, but that is quite different from arguing that it should be banned.

Is there anything intrinsically wrong about cloning? Can cloning be analogized to murder? To inflicting pain gratuitously? To harming someone through deceit? This seems doubtful. If “normal” reproduction is not intrinsically wrong, then it is difficult to see why cloning should be considered intrinsically wrong, as both essentially involve the creation of another human being through use of human genetic material.

One argument that some have given is that cloning somehow eliminates the autonomy of the clone, and this serves to distinguish cloning from other forms of human reproduction. The idea is that the clone will have a lot more information about himself/herself than the typical person and may feel predestined to live a certain life, that is a life resembling the original person. (I say “original person” because it is unclear whether we should call the person from whom the clone received his/her genetic material to be a parent or a sibling.) But will this prove true? First of all, this objection overlooks the critical importance of environment in shaping a person's character. Second, even if the clone has a lot of information about his/her genetic composition and how another person with the identical genetic composition lived, this still does not entail that the clone is not free to decide how to live his or her life -- or, at least, is as free to decide as a non-

clone. Information about one's limitations and capabilities may result in more prudent choices, but it will not eliminate choice. For purposes of this article, this will end our analysis of cloning. Obviously, I have not listed all the factors that would have to be considered in evaluating the moral implications of cloning. I have not even tried to list all the factors that would have to be considered in assessing the many other ways -- some of them now unimaginable -- in which cloning technology might be applied. However, what has been said so far should be sufficient to show how the secular humanist approaches the issue of cloning and similar issues in bioethics. The point of our extended consideration of cloning was not to resolve this dispute, but to indicate that we have a capacity to address this problem, and similar moral problems as they arise, in a rational and deliberate manner if we rely on secular ethical principles.

Conclusion

Bioethics is a challenging area of moral inquiry. Because bioethics confronts us with issues that we have not previously encountered, there is a real danger that we will make mistakes in moral judgment. But religious precepts are neither necessary nor sufficient for avoiding this danger. What we require is a secular morality based on our needs and interests and the needs and interests of other sentient beings, and a method of resolving moral problems that relies on reason, dispassionate analysis and a continuing dialogue among all concerned. If we rely on dogma or instinctive reactions to guide us in this new, challenging terrain, we will be lost.

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Ronald A. Lindsay is by training both a lawyer and a philosopher, with a law degree from the University of Virginia and a Ph.D. from Georgetown University. In addition to being engaged in the private practice of law, he teaches courses in philosophy as an adjunct professor at universities in the Washington, D.C. area. His work in philosophy focuses on bioethics.

7. WASH: A Look Back at the Early Years

By Pete Lins

Free Inquiry Magazine

An article by Bob Wisne in the winter 1985/86 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine titled “On Being a Pedestrian” helped set the tone for later articles in the magazine encouraging the formation of local secular humanist groups. Wisne's article chided the editors of the Catholic Encyclopedia for calling Thomas Paine's 1795 book *The Age of Reason* a work of “pedestrian scriptural criticism.” Pedestrian or not, Paine's criticisms of the Bible in his book were sensible and devastating. Wisne, with tongue in cheek, called on all humanists who considered themselves pedestrians, in the sense that Paine was one, to unite. While Wisne's article was not a serious proposal exploring options open to “pedestrians” it got people thinking.

The fall 1986 issue of *Free Inquiry* planted the seeds for the formation of Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc., (WASH). In that issue, two of the editors, Paul Kurtz and Vern Bullough, challenged *Free Inquiry* readers to form secular humanist “friendship centers” in cities throughout North America. Their articles suggested a bricks and mortar approach to bring humanists together, with each center having recreational facilities, an auditorium for lectures and plays, classrooms for moral/ethical instruction of children and study groups for adults, and special-purpose rooms for weddings and other ceremonies. Other friendship center articles by Tom Flynn and Robert Basil followed in the two subsequent issues of *Free Inquiry*.

The Capital Secular Humanist Friendship Center

In September 1987, *Free Inquiry* sponsored a conference at American University, in Washington, D.C., titled “Roman Catholicism Confronts the Contemporary World” which included workshops for people interested in starting local friendship centers. Groups of people from several geographic areas were able to meet briefly. The Washington, D.C., group decided to hold an organizational meeting in early October 1987 at which it picked a name and elected a newsletter editor. The short-lived Capital Secular Humanist Friendship Center produced but a single two-page newsletter, dated October 15, 1987, before fading into the ether. Although the Washington group fizzled out, the winter 1987/88 *Free Inquiry* listed twelve friendship centers throughout the United States.

Free Inquiry made another important contribution to the formation of WASH in the spring of 1988 when it surveyed its local Washington, D.C., area readers to determine who had an interest in starting a local secular humanist group. In the summer of 1988, the International Humanist and Ethical Union and *Free Inquiry* magazine cosponsored the Humanist World Congress in Buffalo, New York. At this conference, five people wishing to rebuild the momentum that was lost with the failed startup of the Capital Secular Humanist Friendship Center met with Tim Madigan, then the managing editor of *Free Inquiry* and the National Coordinator of Secular Humanist Societies and resolved to reorganize. Meeting with Madigan were: Howard Caulk of Silver Spring, Md.; Pete Lins of Baltimore, Md.; Ken Marsalek of Baltimore, Md.; and George and Lois Porter of Washington, D.C.

WASH Arrives

The five reorganizers next met in January 1989 to pick a name for the organization and plan an organizational meeting for people who had responded to the *Free Inquiry* survey. The name, we agreed, would have to include the word “secular”

even though we considered it redundant when modifying the word “humanism There were, and are, folks who call themselves religious humanists, after all, and we were interested in promoting an uncompromisingly nonreligious worldview. The other naming requirement we had for an organization which would be serving the big government town of Washington, D.C., was an easily pronounceable acronym. After a short discussion, Washington Area Secular Humanists, or WASH, was born (but not yet incorporated) and had the five reorganizers as its interim board of directors. There were seventeen other secular humanist groups around the country at that time.

The organizational meeting, held in February 1989, was a great success and yielded additional volunteers for the interim board of directors. The interim board wrote bylaws, completed all of the paperwork required for incorporation, produced a newsletter, and planned programs. The first issue of *WASHline*, WASH's newsletter, was published in April 1989 to announce the May 1989 program, WASH's first, featuring Paul Kurtz. In June 1989, WASH incorporated and the interim board became the first official board of directors. Regular monthly issues of *WASHline* began with the second issue, published in August 1989, and by September 1989, WASH had 44 dues-paying members.

There were eleven general meetings in the first full fiscal and program year for WASH which began in July 1989. Most of these meetings were held at American University. There were also six special interest group (SIG) meetings that took place that year as well. In January 1992, the Baltimore Area SIG became WASH's first chapter, and others soon followed.

WASH Today

Now in its tenth year of operation, WASH has six chapters throughout Maryland and Virginia, has more than 350 members, and sponsors 80-plus meetings per year. The six chapters of WASH are in good company, with over 60 other

local secular humanist groups existing throughout the United States.

Pete Lins is a founding member of both WASH and the National Capital Area Skeptics (NCAS). He became a secular humanist after reading the Bible from cover to cover.