

THE ROOTS OF HUMANISM

Secular humanism is not evil, as charged by the Moral Majority, but is derived from early Christianity, with its concern for learning and human betterment.

ROBERT PRIMACK AND
DAVID ASPY

There has been a love-hate relationship in Christian societies regarding the term *humanism* since its creation during the beginning of the Italian Renaissance in the 14th century. Humanism was originally a rather specific designation for a group of Christian writers and thinkers who were interested in re-viving appreciation of learning and art, especially as exemplified in the civilizations of pagan Greece and Rome. Christianity in its first thousand years or so had actually suppressed or carelessly neglected many of the treasures of these unique and extremely valuable civilizations. What Renaissance humanism did, however, besides resurrecting two dead civilizations, was to revive that aspect of Christianity which emphasized human-to-human relationships and put somewhat less emphasis on the human-to-God relationship. The seemingly innocent term and the movement associated with classical humanism was eventually to revolutionize Christianity and bring in its wake serious ideological conflicts and even wars to the death. It is a term

Robert Primack is Professor of Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville; David Aspy is Professor of Counselor Education, Texas Women's College, Denton.

that can still make the blood boil and hackles rise in some modern-day Christians.

Considered as a kind of symphony, Christianity has three major melodic themes running through it. For simplicity we can label these preacher, teacher, and creature. The *preacher* theme emphasizes such matters as man's relationship to God, his after-life, and the rituals necessary to maintain favor with God. The *teacher* aspect of Christianity emphasizes the search for truth with respect to this world, the understanding of scripture, and natural conditions as they truly exist. The *creature* aspect concentrates on what has come to be known as the "social gospel." It asks how Jesus and his family of followers actually lived and assuming one could find the appropriate answer, what social, political, economic, and psychological implications that would have for current conditions.

The three melodies in the symphony we call Christianity have sometimes been in harmony and sometimes in terrible dissonance. They have been a major source of Christianity's strength and staying power in the competition for religious allegiance, but they have also been the cause of schisms and fratricidal wars all fought in the name of the Prince of Peace.

The revival of interest in classical learning and the humanistic renaissance resulted in one of the more troublesome periods in Christian his-

tory. To begin with, it engendered a much more careful reexamination of the then existing editions of scriptures. The Renaissance humanists were tremendously interested in ancient languages. Their scholarly linguistic analysis of scriptures convinced Christian humanists that the scripture texts of that era were not the simple inerrant documents they had been assumed to be. Aside from the obvious difficulties of interpretations of the more obscure parables and metaphors and comprehension of the higher meanings of the Bible, it seemed to them there were just simple errors, omissions, or additions that occurred in the process of gathering in the material from Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and other sources as well as the simple errors inevitable in handcopying the text over hundreds of years.

For good or ill, the supposedly seamless garment of pre-Renaissance Christianity came permanently undone once the teacher aspect of Christianity came to be emphasized in the humanist renaissance. The Protestant Reformation followed almost inevitably, and from that womb rose other movements such as the Enlightenment, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, Nationalism, and eventually the minuscule movement known as *secular humanism*, which has been equated erroneously with all of humanism.

We cannot here trace this story back in every detail. Suffice it to say that the single most important feature of the new Christianity was the insistence on the need that people be able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. This belief led Christians to emphasize the importance of literacy, which in turn led eventually to one of the major forces for the creation of free public universal education.

The creature aspect of Christianity also exercised influence during this era. The implications of the necessary social relationships that should exist among humans (after all, what could be more revolutionary in social terms than to believe that one should love one's neighbor as oneself?) began to affect the fundamental nature of political power and governance. To emphasize the "creature" aspect of Christianity meant that one had to have social, political, and economic

arrangements which would create a true nonexploited community.

Out of this theme of creature Christianity also came the notion of a pluralistic democratic state, because one of the basic assumptions behind creature Christianity is the belief that even serious differences of theology and ideology should not disrupt the just civil arrangements arrived at through Christian humanistic principles. In other words, as Jefferson and some of the founding fathers suggested, the social ethics of Jesus the man were to take priority *in this world* over the interpretations of Jesus' divinity related to entry into the next.

Out of this philosophic womb, tempered by the terrible religious oppression many of the early colonists experienced in their home countries, came the concept of the pluralistic, democratic, secular, humanist state. This is one of the greatest political inventions of all time, and utterly unique in the history of humankind. In other words (and to simplify tremendously) 14th century Renaissance humanism, which resurrected the teacher-creature aspects of Christianity by reviving classical learning and arts, eventually resulted in the Protestant Reformation, which evolved into the historical period known as the Enlightenment, which in turn was a major influence on all the founding fathers of the American Republic.

Against this historical backdrop we see that humanistic educators assume there is a profound and complex interaction between the human personality and the cognitive, the affective, the psychomotor, and the moral. The whole child walks into the classroom, not just the brain. Furthermore, all aspects of the personality as well as the educative process itself are a source for inquiry under appropriate circumstances, and not an a priori given. Humanist educators assume it is far better that the student arrive at his/her eventual belief and behavior system through a complex process of inquiry rather than simple indoctrination.

In effect, humanist educators ask what profit there is in education that produces the best engineers in the world if they use their talents to build Auschwitz? What sense does it make to produce the best medical doctors in the world, if they use their skills to make human lampshades? What

profit is there to produce gifted politicians who use their ability to commit impeachable offenses?

Most humanistic educators do not consider themselves secular humanists, but they do agree that the goal of education should be to produce citizens who can function effectively in all their roles—as worker, parent, voter, mate—in a democratic pluralistic state which is facing a series of very demanding challenges at present and probably even more demanding challenges in the future.

The Moral Majority,¹ however, sees secular humanists and humanistic educators not as a rational response to the demands of a civilization in crisis, but rather as the cause of the crisis itself.

Erik Erikson refers to the prongness of in-groups to blame an out-group for their troubles. Throughout history human beings have created living scapegoats which presumably embodied all the forces of evil. Thus, when one of the Pope's armies had forced a city to surrender and his commanders asked what should be done with the inhabitants, his response was reported to have been, "Put them all to the sword; God will take care of his own."

This view of human history played out many a sad chapter. If American Indians refused to swear allegiance to Jesus, they were frequently slaughtered without mercy. It meant the destruction of many of the great works of art, artifacts, and libraries of magnificent pagan cultures because in the judgment of Christian zealots these things represented a force for evil. It led to the Great Inquisition in which millions of innocent people were burned to death for the good of their souls and to keep evil from Christian shores. It meant the persecution, exile, and killing of millions of innocent Jews and other non-Christian monotheists. It also meant the deadly schismatic struggle among Christians themselves as one side or the other accused their Christian brethren of being in the pay of Satan.

The historical record is very clear. When things go wrong in a society, there is a tendency for people to blame some group. Of course, there are plenty of things going wrong in our present society. We have the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. We have the constant threat of

totalitarian regimes extending their power and influence on the world scene and diminishing our own, even if we avoid nuclear war. We have the constant threat of worldwide pollution, inflation, depression, unemployment, and more.

Given this dangerous world, it is not surprising that people invent some strange scapegoats. One of the strangest on the American scene these days is the belief that undifferentiated humanism is a significant force for evil. When communists were the boogymen in the 1950s and 60s, at least there was a certain simple rationale: No matter how insignificant their numbers here at home, communists had the support of a major superpower abroad. But the attack on humanists by the Moral Majority and others has a certain fantasy quality.

Surveys indicate that 95 percent of Americans profess to believe in some sort of supreme deity. This means that at best only 5 percent of the population is available for consideration as card-carrying secular humanists. However, most of that 5 percent are not secular humanists. Many are members of nondeistic religions; many are just indifferent; and many are agnostics and atheists who are also hostile to the notion of secular humanism. Those who are really committed to secular humanism have not only rejected the more conventional religious modes of expression, but have also substituted a sophisticated, carefully thought-out philosophical position with some very stiff ethical standards. So just in terms of numbers, some 300,000 people at the very most in America could legitimately be labeled secular humanists. If the Moral Majority and their supporters are correct, less than half of 1 percent of the population are able to significantly manipulate the Congress, the state legislatures, teachers, schools, the media, courts, and other American institutions for their own nefarious purposes.

Secular humanists believe very simply that the human creature aspect of Christianity should be divorced from its religious beginnings and considered a major aspect of personal and social-political relationships. They suggest that making decisions on the basis of some supernatural force may lead to destructive irrationality. They believe the scientific method should not only be applied to technology but

to the very nature of human relationships. They are strongly committed to the democratic, pluralistic/humanistic, secular society in the tradition of Jefferson. Many are pacifists who, like Jesus, are prepared to turn the other cheek and to eschew all forms of violence. They also believe with Einstein that genuine religiosity does not involve blind faith, fear of life and fear of death, but a search for rational knowledge.

In 1933 secular humanists issued what has come to be known as Humanist Manifesto I. It attempted to summarize and clarify many of the basic tenets of secular humanism. In 1973 an updated version signed by hundreds of leading philosophers, scientists, and educators was issued. It deals with the humanist view of religion, ethics, the role of reasoning, the need for individual dignity, commitment to a democratic society, a fair system of economics, the need for universal education, the need to transcend parochial nationalism and form some kind of world order, and many other topics. As the Humanist Manifesto II said, "These affirmations are not a found credo or dogma but an expression of a living and growing faith."

The Manifesto may well be wrong or unwise in part or in whole. In a free society, we have the choice to accept, amend, or reject any of its specific prescriptions. But to any fair-minded person, it is not the Manifesto of moral monsters as Moral Majority would like to paint them. Most humanists assume they may be wrong on any issue they profess and are prepared to change their views when given credible evidence. They do not marry their egos to their belief system. Many of the Moral Majority, on the other hand, tend to view their beliefs as undeniably true.

Even if all secular humanists were paid agents of Beelzebub himself, there is no credible evidence that they exercise an overwhelming malevolent influence on the schools or the other major institutions of this nation. Crime, divorce, abortion, drugs, sexual immorality, child abuse, and homosexuality have all been laid at the door of secular humanists, but if every secular humanist vanished this coming Sunday morning, all these conditions would probably continue to exist to the same degree. One further very significant point should

be made. If God decided to strike every secular humanist dead, He would pass over almost the entire population of public school educators. Every serious survey we have done of strong beliefs held indicates that the people associated with education—school board members, administrators, teachers—are all quite conservative in most matters and particularly religious matters. Secular humanists have a miniscule membership among public school personnel. The philosopher Sydney Hook shrewdly pointed out many years ago that one could have quite dissimilar philosophies and yet advocate similar educational positions. Though humanists in education may share some or none of the assumptions associated with the philosophy of secular humanism, they may on occasion take similar views on the correct educational posture in some situations. Humanist educators believe in the need for educating the whole child, for making the schools more democratic and less authoritarian, for making the schools more rewarding and less punitive, for community and parental involvement, for teaching for meaning and general relationships rather than on concentrating on simply accumulation of disparate fact. Humanist educators can believe all this and more without accepting a single one of the tenets of secular humanism. In other words, secular humanism as philosophy and humanism in education cannot be legitimately equated. The Moral Majority by attempting to equate the two are doing both education and the country a major disservice.

The Moral Majority could best exercise their morality by recognizing that to a large extent most of our ills are the inevitable consequence of modernity and no tilting at scapegoats is going to exorcise them. They might also pay a bit more attention to some of the degrading causes, such as poverty, ill health, racial hatred, religious bigotry, and inhumane educational practices. If they and others did that, we might begin to have an authentic moral majority in this nation and thus fulfill the true promise of the teacher and creature aspects of Christianity. ■

¹ J. Charles Park, "The New Right: Threat to Democracy in Education," *Educational Leadership* 38 (November 1980): 146-149.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.