

IIIUMANIST FLASHBACK

The Once and Future Humanist Institute

Those who hold minority philosophical views—including North American nontheistic, naturalistic humanists—have traditionally been prone to disagree with all who don't think exactly like themselves. Thus, the varied trajectories of modern humanism (free-thought, free religion, liberal religion, Ethical Culture, religious humanism, and secular humanism) are strewn with factionalism and personal feuds. The ability to compromise, adjust, negotiate, synthesize, or even empathize has often been woefully absent—resulting in conflict within and between various humanist institutions.

In an effort to offer an antidote to such splintering, the North American Committee for Humanism was established in 1982. On its founding board were humanist leaders affiliated with the American Ethical Union; the American Humanist Association; the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (now the Council for Secular Humanism); the Fellowship of Religious Humanists (now Friends of Religious Humanism), an affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association; the Humanist Association of Canada; and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. NACH's first project utilizing this united effort was the establishment of the Humanist Institute, which enrolled its first class in 1984.

Although the institute was committed to the task of training new humanist leaders for the future, current leaders sometimes joined the classes—their presence helping to develop the nascent curriculum. Gradually, the institute broadened its purposes to include the training of humanists not necessarily seeking an identifiable humanist career but simply wanting to become more effective humanist voices.

The founding dean of the institute was Howard Radest, who served at that time as director of the Ethical Culture

Schools in New York City. Humanist Institute classes met in Manhattan through the hospitality of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Radest mentored the first class and began the construction of what would be an intensive course of study. The ongoing dialectic among students and faculty helped shape topics for the second- and third-year curricula.

As the institute evolved, new mentors were added, being paired to achieve balance regarding gender, philosophical approach, and organizational background. The institute was further strengthened by an adjunct faculty made up of individuals who could help in teaching courses. This faculty held an annual colloquium, the papers of which were published in *Humanism Today*, the institute's annual journal. (There have been eleven volumes so far, covering such topics as education, science, aesthetics, the New Age phenomenon, the Enlightenment, and postmodernism. The next issue will be devoted to humanism and globalization.)

Academically, class readings were at the graduate level, and seminars principally involved Socratic dialogue as opposed to traditional lectures. Given ACH's mission to facilitate a bonding of humanists from varied traditions, the institute curriculum embraced the ideas of a wide range of freethought, liberal religious, religious humanist, and secular humanist forerunners.

From the outset, major attention was devoted to science as a source of humanist thinking. Students were expected to develop a working knowledge of frontiers of modern science as they affect society, and to evaluate various pseudosciences critically. They also became involved in critiquing contemporary attacks on science by post-modernists as well as the religious right.

Major sessions were also built

around racism and gender issues, with the goal of cutting through simplistic solutions and helping students lead groups into more reality-based and sophisticated positions. In addition, considerable attention was paid to economic and political issues, which necessitated an analysis of "atheism without humanism." Currently, more attention is devoted to problems of market economies and questions of justice in the distribution of wealth.

Great emphasis was also given to changing family structures, with both their promises and problems. Academic ethics was studied, particularly in relation to child moral development and the educational process. Along with such topics, there were institute sessions on humanism and the *arts* and the place ceremonies occupy in humanist living.

Today, all this continues. As the institute brings a sophisticated reading of the modern condition into fruitful dialogue among humanists of various traditions, it seeks to broaden the usual humanist concerns to include issues like racism, sexism, ageism, and intellectual and social freedom. The institute seeks to help humanists come to terms with various economic systems, foster a reduction in social violence, promote the intelligent development and application of technology, assist in the building of cultures in which science can flourish, and, above all, develop rational, moral perspectives that can expand the quality of life for rich and poor individuals and nations alike. These concerns, along with environmentalism and human rights, are global in nature and demand a global ethic—one that stands alone, unencumbered by ideological, theological, and "spiritual" dogmas and ambiguities.

If imitation is a form of flattery, the institute has done well. For in recent years, new leadership training classes

have appeared within the American Ethical Union, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Desirable or competitive as these may seem, none has offered the kind of exposure to ecumenical humanism as does the Humanist Institute.

In the ten years since its first graduation, the institute's track record has been impressive. There have been sixty-eight graduates and the eighth class has fifteen students who plan to graduate in 1999. Four graduates and students sit on the current board of directors of the American Humanist Association, and two more are in the organization's employ. Seven graduates are Ethical Culture leaders, and four are leaders-in-training. Eleven are Unitarian-Universalist ministers. Almost without exception,

the other graduates have been committed to and involved with the various organizations which have been represented over the years on the NACH board of directors.

Only through the training of humanist leaders can humanists ensure that their philosophy will be a vital option for our grandchildren. The survival, let alone the flourishing, of ideas requires several supports: leaders, structures, institutions, and funds. These are what make possible the clear statement and restatement of ideas to each generation, as well as a dialogue between these ideas and developing thought. It is toward all of this that the institute continues to provide in-depth training in the humanist philosophy and its applications.

The ninth class of the Humanist In-

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stitute will begin sessions on April 3, 1998. The program consists of three sessions per year, for three years. Those interested may contact the institute at 2 West 64th Street, New York, NY 10023; (212) 873-6500 or (212) 873-0918.

Robert B. Tapp is dean of the Humanist Institute and professor emeritus of humanities, religious studies, and South Asian studies at the University of Minnesota.

LETTERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

lash occurred-not because social programs such as the War on Poverty were failing but because increasing spending on these and other social problems collided directly with one of the most significant political trends of the last two decades: the longstanding goal of conservatives to eliminate most social benefits and social programs from American society, the destruction of the "social security state" or "welfare state." A good portion of this goal-which has shifted the funds to corporate welfare under cover of the "balanced budget" campaign-has now been achieved.

Though Americans are very caring, they have been besieged by an overwhelming volume of propaganda, blunting their social awareness and social concern and blinding them to the corporate motives and goals at the core of this effort.

Jim Cronin

Sedro Woolley, WA

Editor's note: William Raspberry devoted his November 17, 1997, syndicated Washington Post column to Hanson's Humanist article. In a telephone interview with Raspberry, Hanson observed, "Conservatives think we could have won the war in Vietnam but that our lack of will and our unwillingness to make the full commitment tied our hands. Liberals say just the same thing about the War on Poverty."

WORTH NOTING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45

our children, and grandchildren into an age of godlessness. A national 'Coming Out of Homosexuality Day' provides us a means whereby to dispel the lies of the homosexual rights crowd who say they are born that way and cannot change."

- In a follow-up to our last "Worth Noting," Hawaii Citizens for the Separation of State and Church announced that the U.S. Army has removed a gigantic Latin cross from Schofield Barracks, a U.S. Army base. The army's decision came less than forty-five days after HCSSC filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court (Hawaii district) seeking a court order to dismantle and remove the religious monument. Constructed at taxpayer expense in 1962, the thirty-seven-foot-tall Kolekole Pass Cross was an obvious violation of the the establishment clause of the Constitution's First Amendment.

- The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation is seeking suggestions for constructive approaches to the problems of war and peace as part of its 1998 Swackhamer Peace Essay Contest. Prizes of \$1,500, 1,000, and \$500 will be awarded, and all high school students are welcome to

enter. Essays should be 500 to 1,000 words in length. All entries must be postmarked by June 1, 1998, and sent to the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, Swackhamer Peace Essay Contest, 1187 Coast Village Road, Suite 123, Santa Barbara, CA 93108; (805) 965-3443.

The ancient realists were Epicureans, and they were regarded as dangerous to civilization by Roman leaders, who favored the idealistic philosophies of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism. Epicureans denied Providence, viewed man as an evolved animal, saw virtues and laws as manmade, avoided involvement with government, spurned communism, and welcomed women and slaves as fellows. Jews abhorred Epicureans. Nevertheless, evidence emu that Jesus based his teaching on Epicureanism, only changing in theory of how immortal gods are made into a theory of how immortal human heini' ue made. This evidence is in the recently discovered *Gospel Of T1UJmas*, a collection of 113 sayings of Jesus which radically differ from the Bible's. They are demonstrably notes taken while Jesus taught, for they match chronologically the vestiges of history that underly the Muon myth. They reveal the historical Jesus and his recurring use of Epicurean teneU.

You Will Not Taste Death JESUS AND EPICUREANISM

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