

# The Religious Left Gathers in Chicago

THE WORD "HUMANISM" can connote many things: to the Moral Majority it is the source of all contemporary evils; to scholars it is a way of approaching ancient literatures. But to those who participated in a small three-day conference on the University of Chicago campus August 25-27, humanism is a religion/philosophy that has found several organizational homes since the 1920s. Acknowledging their present institutional and ideological weaknesses, conferees from seven groups created the North American Committee for Humanism to work toward correcting those weaknesses. The new coalition will be headed by Rabbi Sherwin Wine of Farmington Hills, Michigan - founder of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

The Chicago conference was organized by members of the Unitarian Universalists, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the American Humanist Association and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Although sectarianism, personality clashes, territoriality and aspirations toward ideological purity have, in the past, kept the religious far-left from achieving viable structures, members of these groups share certain basic beliefs. For most of them, ethics comes before faith. For some, faith has been the enemy or uncertain forerunner of ethics. For most, an epistemological naturalism, based on science, is essential. These similarities are reflected in many membership overlaps among the seven groups.

Earlier coalitions have collapsed over such issues as whether humanism *should* be religious (obviously it *can* be), and how much, if any, emotion should be commingled with reason and science. At Chicago, these debates appeared to be muted or even moot. The religious right's strident hostility toward "secular humanism" was noted, but more as an opportunity than as a threat. Speeches and discussions took on a dual focus: the ideological malaise of much contemporary humanism and strategies for locating latent humanists.

**I**N HIS OPENING ADDRESS to the conference, Rabbi Wine stressed the continuity of humanism from the Greeks through the Enlightenment to Humanist Manifestos I (1933) and II (1973). He stated his belief that this movement's present needs would be better served by a rhetoric of "dignity," stressing a human right that is at the same time an achievement, than by a continued stress on "freedom." As the other convenors spoke, it became clear that some kind of consensus had been uncovered: humanism has failed to grow because of undue elitism, arid rationalism and a lack of leadership, humor and emotion.

Paul Kurtz (SUNY, Buffalo) and Lester Kirken-

dall (Oregon State University) both located a "zest for living" at the core of contemporary humanism. Khoren Arisian (Minneapolis Unitarian) spoke of "the romance of being alive." While some speakers saw Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism as the proper propaedeutic to a humanistic vision, the scientific naturalism of Jobo Dewey was more often cited.

Two dramatic presentations - on Robert Ingersoll and Erich Fromm - inspired the group. Al-

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though such presentations might not seem to be quite as symbolic/expressive as hymns, prayers and liturgies, for humanists they serve some of the same purposes.

In gatherings like these, it is always useful to tease out assumptions that are so taken for granted that they are barely articulated: individual humanism needs to be organized into groups and national entities; the forms of these future humanisms will be quite pluralistic - some will be explicitly antireligious, but most will function as alternative religiosities; the Unitarian Universalists, despite their steady drift leftward, do not presently constitute the humanist homeland; present attacks on "secular humanism" from the right will falter with the inherent fissionability of right-wing groups, but in the meantime they will probably provide humanists with considerable unpaid advertising.

The Chicago meeting was not a milestone in terms of bold new directions, financial commitments, or euthanasia of weak organizations. To the extent that organizational modesty and historical honesty are both rare and salutary, however, the religious left has become a stronger threat or promise (depending on one's own theological preferences).

Robert B. Tapp.

## No Comment Department

**A**DDRESSING a press conference recently, Energy Secretary James B. Edwards had these words of praise for the Reagan administration's nuclear policies: "I think the future of nuclear energy is a glowing future."



Operators of the Bethesda Home in Montgomery, Alabama, have been accused of brainwashing the young females in their charge. Bobby Ray Wills, one of the operators, responded to the accusation by acknowledging that the girls were compelled to listen to religious tapes. However, he took exception to the term "brainwashing." "It's a washing," he said, "but it's called bloodwashing and heartwashing."

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