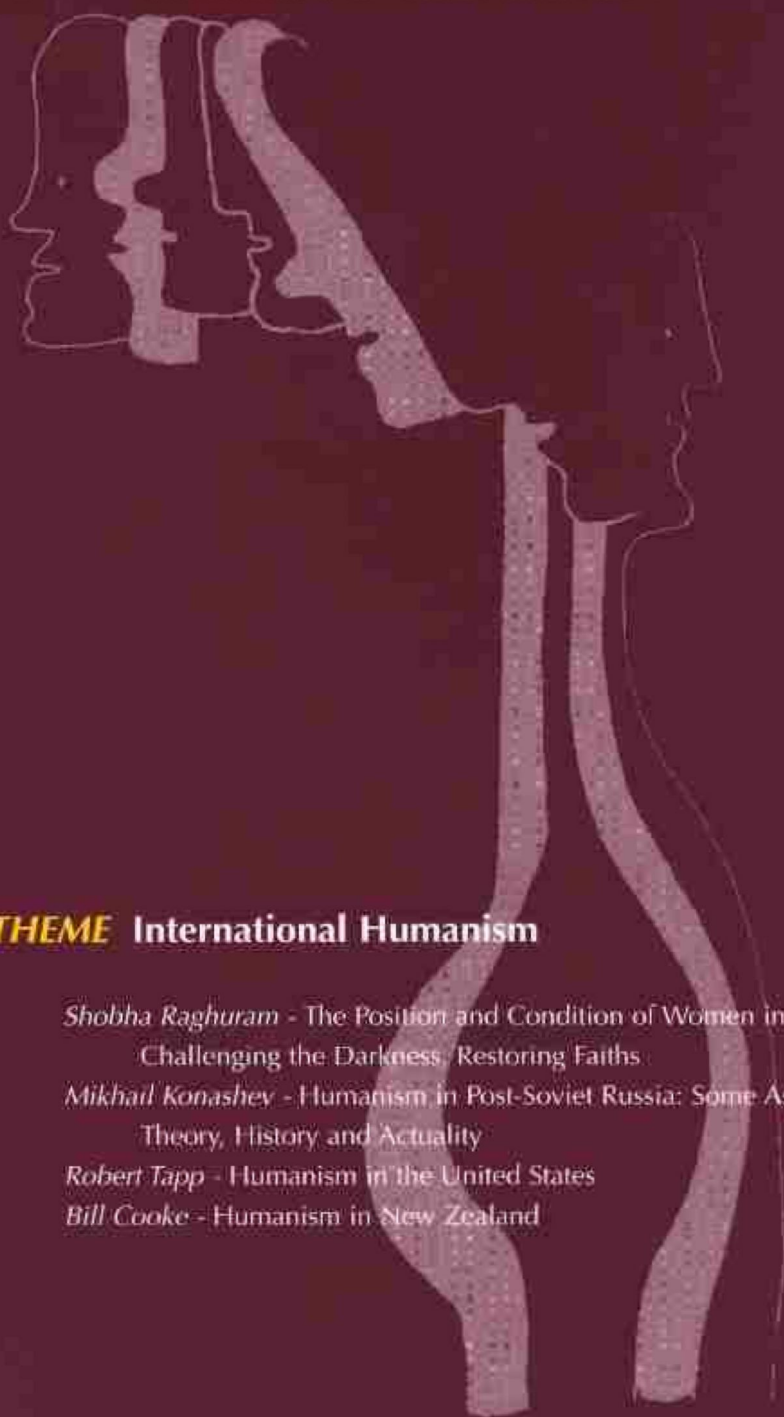


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Humanism in the United States

Robert B. Tapp

Most outsiders are puzzled at the high percentage of churchgoers in the U.S., and even more puzzled at the higher percentage of citizens who believe in some kind of god. The hostility to Darwinian evolution is noteworthy, even extending to the court-appointed current president George W. Bush. This situation has both causes and consequences, and these obviously affect U.S. humanists. I use that term to describe that small group who have both abandoned theisms and traditional religions and embraced a set of values that trace back to the Enlightenment. They typically emphasize the sciences as embodying critical reason, and democracy as promoting maximal human good.

Religious U.S. background

Probably less than 10 percent of U.S. adults could be classed as atheists or agnostics. A considerably smaller percentage of these *have* probably moved toward Enlightenment values of reason, intellectual and social freedom, and universal standards of justice. And far less than 1 percent have felt the need to affiliate with explicitly humanist groups.

Separation of church and state

To understand the situation in the United States as it applies to such humanists, we need to *review* a bit of history. At the present time the separation of churches from the government is reasonably established. The separation began with the early founders of the Republic who retained sharp memories of the troubles that had been caused in European history by ecclesiastical interferences with public life. Many of them were deists who saw religion as a natural activity that needed no churches for instruction or support. In building a constitution for the 13 original compact colonies, many of whom had established churches, the Constitution-writers were committed to a neutral, secular, central government. The Constitution does not even include the word 'god!' But it clearly proscribed the use of the central government to favor or fund any or aUreligions. On a practical level, the plethora of reli-

gions within U.S. society has made separation more feasible. The intensive turf wars that would otherwise erupt could have been fatal.

The early settlers brought a *variety* of religions with them, and often practiced the same religion with different languages. One answer to persecution by a religious majority was westward migration, the other was to pushing for a disestablishment that would create a more level playing field. On that playing field, new religions and quasi-religions were spawned. An early French *observer*, Alexis de Tocqueville, saw clearly the results of this voluntarism. He also, as a reformed aristocrat, foresaw the kind of mass culture that could emerge in this first truly democratic state where simpler and more popular tastes would come to prevail.

Cinematic secularism

New industries often attract those who have difficulty entering more established industries. The American cinema is a perfect example. Many American Jews pioneered in this industry. As the powerful new medium developed, they embodied a very secular world view - one that focused on sensation and pleasure in this world and essentially ignored those other worlds that have been so central to particular religions, along with the beliefs, rituals, and practices that characterized those religions. In effect, the world of the *movies* was a world devoid of religion.

Fifty years ago, Dwight MacDonald used the terms 'masscult' and 'midcult' to characterize these developing competitors to a previous 'high' culture. The emergence in twentieth-century America of a cinema world accelerated the development of a popular culture that included radio, sports, music, and - most pervasive and powerful of all- television. All of these have been now co-opted by an advertising-driven business culture that both creates and satisfies desires. We need not go as far as Frederik Jameson, who sees this as an essential feature of 'late capitalism', in order to note that marketing drives media, and therefore a kind of lowest common denominator determines where the money flows. For many years, Ted Koppel's *Nightline* has been the best source of news in some depth on the commercial *television* channels that dominate the U.S. scene. In the struggle for viewer/market shares among

these commercial TV networks, *even* he became expendable - replaceable by David Letterman, a popular entertainer from another channel. Since the early evening newscasts had already been turned into feel-good entertainment, this would have *removed* the last remaining late night show of news-in-depth (which had already lost much of its audience by being scheduled later and later). To quote an anonymous network executive, 'The relevancy of "Nightline" just is not there anymore'.

Imagine - just *five* months after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center - the main sources of information in a mass society have abdicated serious responsibility for keeping a public and electorate informed! In schools, if they are lucky, children learn about the Roman manipulation of 'bread and circus' without discovering that they too are being seduced. We have moved away from any celebrations of heroes and heroines to a collecting of celebrities - by definition a short-lived species. One may hope that the Internet will continue its role as a world-wide *purveyor* of free information. But this too can be commercially co-opted.

Emergence of teLevangelism

In technologically advanced societies, TV is the main purveyor of information - more than radio or newspapers (and certainly more than governmental or private organizations). At one time, the U.S. *government* required TV networks to *provide* a certain amount of 'public service' broadcasting. This meant that on Sunday mornings (when many of the citizenry were still sleeping) networks *gave* Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish organizations free time.

With the 'rush to deregulate' that characterized the Nixon and Reagan regimes, this high quality educational programming disappeared and the networks were able to sell all of their time to the highest bidders. Independent 'evangelists' soon created TV 'ministries' where much of their time had to be devoted to fundraising in order that more stations could be acquired. In the freedom of religious licensing that necessarily accompanies church/state separation, anyone can create a 'church' or 'ministry' or 'denomination', license clergy, and enjoy exemption from taxes. There

had been a three-tier clergy in the U.S. for many years: graduates of seminaries that required prior college certification (mainline churches), graduates of 'Bible colleges' (newer denominations with lesser status needs), and itinerant, often part-time, preachers ordained by denominations that stressed 'calling' rather than training. The new TV preachers came from the second and third tiers and typically proclaimed an openly anti-intellectual, highly emotional kind of fundamentalism - strong on miracles and healings.

The *conservative* wing of the Republican party has been able to forge a supportive and powerful alliance between this latter-day fundamentalism with *conservative* Catholics - centering on opposition to abortion and hostile to evolution (calling it 'secular humanism'). These forces were homophobic, hostile to feminism, and often openly racist.

The New AKe

Martin Luther once said that people will either have 'Gott oder Abgott' (god or idol). Humanists may wish this were not true but the evidence is all about us. Many people feel a need for cosmic support and help. If their chosen religion does not provide these, they seek a kind of cafeteria-line drawn from all cultures and fill their plates with exotica. If the traditional religious ask persons to believe without proof or means of testing, how much more so with the magical offerings on the fringes! Homeopathy, spiritualism, clairvoyance, faith healing, untested medications - the list is long and the rewards great (for the purveyors).

This religious situation creates an astounding amount of religious ignorance. Very few public schools *even* attempt to provide comparative religion courses, taking instead the easier route of avoiding the subject. Naturally the students' understanding of both human and national history is seriously flawed. In addition, many learn a so-called biology that avoids Darwinian evolution completely. For many years I taught 19th century humanities in our largest public university. My students read a good deal of Darwin. As the course began, I always polled them, using a national Gallup *survey* question on evolution and design. The surprising thing was that about 30 percent of the Lutherans, Catholics, and more *conservative* Protestants

believed the earth to have been created in its present form, by God, about 10,000 years ago! Surprising, because neither Lutherans nor Catholics 'officially' oppose evolution. My conclusion was that young people had all learned about Christianity through popular televangelism. A kind of Gresham's Law situation - where bad knowledge drives out good knowledge.

Cultural U.S. background

For much of the past century, conventional social science wisdom has argued that economic and social progress would inevitably promote secularization, and traditional religions would wither. Certainly this has not been the U.S. experience. Let me suggest some of the factors.

Enlightenment versus slavery

National memories and histories have ways of being seriously flawed. Battles are always recounted by victors, and needs of the present influence selectivity in remembering and suppressing. Serious social historicism, which attempts to tell the full story - of women, workers, children, minorities - is only in its third academic generation. An ideal situation might be one in which histories were always written by disciplined outsiders, who were better able to see, and avoid, the biases of the locals.

By the 1776 American Revolution, the values of the Enlightenment had many partisans here - Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, John Adams. Universal human rights were rooted in human nature, and governments were to be tolerated only when they *served* such rights. But that intellectual commitment was tempered by the involvement with chattel slavery and an economy, especially in the southern states, dependent on slave labor. After the *civil* war was won by the northern states, the former slavers soon turned their defeat into a victory by creating a system of racial segregation. The racism underlying this pervaded the whole society. The legal bulwarks of this racism lasted through more than half of the 20th century, and many of the social bulwarks still persist (as well as some of

the theological bulwarks). If the mark of non-racism is equal opportunity, a level playing field - that is far from accomplished.

Heavy immigrations

The present U.S. is a nation of immigrants. Even the Native Americans ('Indians' in Columbus' geographically-mistaken labeling) had crossed from Asia on the ancient Bering Strait land bridge to get here. The predominantly-English and predominantly-Protestant European settlers were joined in the nineteenth century by many Catholics as a result of annexations from France and Mexico, and later by many Euro-Catholics fleeing poverty and many Jews fleeing pogroms. Slavery, as we have already noted, had created a large, but suppressed, bloc of involuntary African immigrants. While Ralph Waldo Emerson, that Transcendentalist lecturer and philosopher who was so important in moving Unitarians away from their Christian roots, could speak eloquently of Americans as 'a new race' most of his fellow citizens were deeply burdened by older myths of racial superiority and Protestant religious arrogance. The prevalent racism of those days - having already stigmatized African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans as inferior - added Irish, South and East Europeans, Jews, Asians, and Pacific Islanders to the list.

Invisible women and anxieties regarding sexuality

With some notable exceptions (among Quakers, Congregationalists, Unitarians, Universalists), American men had viewed 'their' women as biologically useful but politically invisible. Freed slaves could vote (in the North, at least) long before women could (and the emerging feminist movement was quick to emphasize this). Accompanying historic American sexism was a gender stereotyping that ascribed certain qualities to women that truly 'masculine' men should not exhibit: gentleness, sensitivity, nurturance. The same sexism was ambivalent about the true nature of 'woman' - seeing her alternatively as virgin and whore, but never as a full and normal person.

Christian sexism exhibits deep distrust of sexuality and largely faults the human female for this. She is the

temptress - of Adam, the 'first man', and of all his descendants. Christian asceticism reflects this by viewing those who could rise *above* their sexuality as superior humans, destined for higher eternal rewards. The married state is clearly a lesser state to the celibate one. In the U.S., these views were first conveyed by a Puritan Calvinism that distrusted 'aUforms of pleasure' as much too closely related to the mortal body which had been, at least since Plato, the 'prison-house' of an eternal soul. The current 'pro-life' stance of conservative Protestants and of official Catholicism reflects this heritage. Opposition to abortion really means opposition to contraception which means opposition to any sexuality not motivated by procreation.

In patriarchal societies, of course, this strained interpretation of human biology and psychology, with its heavy loading of guilts, was primarily imposed on women. They were left with the role of child-carers and family-sustainers. Men remained much freer to indulge their 'male lusts' and enjoy their pleasures. Often there was either myth (or surgery) to make sure that there was no female pleasure in matters sexual. Conservative America has also been very homophobic, stemming from this same aversion to non-procreative sexuality and any pleasures thus derived. This remains a powerful element in American politics. Years ago, Leslie Fiedler wrote a celebrated article contending that the two deepest themes in U.S. society were race and homophobia, and that Mark Twain had perceived and satirized this very clearly. Fiedler's title: 'Come Back into the Raft, Huck Honey:

Public education as americanizer

Given the great diversity of new immigrants, culturally and linguistically, the U.S. was a pioneer in the development of a free public education system. The role of education was to prepare children for their stations in class society. This meant basic skills in reading and mathematics, skills needed for the new industrialization. But there was also a stress on citizenship - which meant unlearning 'Old World' ways and the move toward what was termed a 'melting pot'. The value system of the 19th century schools was de facto Protestant, and American Catholics struggled against this and eventually developed a parallel parochial school system.

The lasting argument has been the role of public tax moneys. Catholic parents have felt they *deserve* this support. The civil rights *movement* since the 1960s - which aimed at getting African Americans a fair share of educational, political, and job opportunities - led to the counter-creation of *private* 'academies' in places like the South where racial separation still seemed a feasible goal.

Teaching was very much a female profession - actually a profession for unmarried females who conformed to local community standards. Their status and pay remained lower than those of male teachers, and the status and pay of all teachers have remained quite low. There remains enormous resistance to any uniform national standards that would foster equal educational situations.

Corporate interests in educational vocationalism

From the standpoint of owners and stockholders, the aim of the corporation is to make money. This means keeping costs down - and especially keeping labor costs down. *Over* the years there has been a strong cry to focus on the basics as a way of keeping educational costs down. In modern society, workers need to read - but there is less agreement that they should go beyond business manuals to *discover* and enjoy literature. This has led to an enormous variation in the quality of public education. Since residential patterns are stratified by class (and race), minorities and poorer people get the schools with fewer resources and fewer trained teachers. And agriculture and industries requiring unskilled labor can always lobby the government to admit more immigrants.

Public, co-educational, and secular university education

By the end of the 19th century a number of state universities had emerged with central government support. Typically, separate agricultural and liberal arts colleges would be created. Both would be open to women as well as men, and the tuition would remain low (as compared to the earlier, church-sponsored 'private' colleges). A second tier of smaller colleges was created by many states and then a third tier of junior

colleges for less-accomplished students. At the end of World War II, a GI Bill provided millions of veterans with the financial means to get college educations at government expense. By that time, at least one-third of 18-21 year-olds were in some kind of higher education. That percentage has continued to rise, and now half of the students are female.

Since many students attend and reside at colleges and universities far from their homes, they experience earlier social, philosophical, and sexual freedom than in most other developed societies.

Humanist challenges

Some of the religious factors sketched above are common to other Western societies, as are many of the cultural factors. But together they make an America that is in many ways at the end of a distribution curve and not in the middle. And they help account for some of the peculiar stridencies of U.S. humanists. We are probably more *overtly* anti-theological because we have grown up in such a churchgoing, Bible-believing society. And we are probably freer in our speech since we have not had to fight an established church. We are probably more experimental in our moralities since we are already such a pluralistic society. And the great expanse of the nation and occupational mobility of the educated groups have served to lessen family closeness (and therefore lessen the traditional restraints that family loyalty imposes).

Secular vs. religious squabbles

In 1933, in the depths of a great depression, a 'Humanist Manifesto' was published. Most of the signers were Unitarian or Universalist ministers or leaders in Ethical Culture societies. They called for the further development of humanist and nontheistic forms of religion. Those three groups moved closer together and by 1960 clearly more than half of their members used the label 'humanist' to describe their personal positions. Most of them were in local organizations that provided community for like-minded persons, religious education for the young, and engaged in social service.

America's fundamentalists were becoming more political (the Republican party actively courted them to its conservative banner). The strategy was successful and by appealing to racism, the American white South was shifted from the Democratic to the Republican party. By this time the civil rights *movement* had significantly increased the voting power of African Americans, who were heavily Democratic. The *conservative* strategy also involved a party shift for many Catholics who were drawn to the Republican opposition to abortion. One of the claims was that a kind of 'secular humanism' was a 'religion' and was impermissibly controlling public education as well as corrupting the morals of young and old. (Humanists had successfully argued before the Supreme Court that humanism was a kind of religion in briefs supporting the right to conscientious objection on non-God grounds. Since the Court did not want to provide any narrow definition of 'religion', they prevailed). Conservatives were quick to argue that this opened the door for their kinds of religion in public education.

Some humanists met this challenge with a Declaration of Secular Humanism and arguing that humanism flourished best as a strictly nonreligious ideology. In 1961 the Unitarians and Universalists merged, and it briefly appeared that a humanist denomination might result. For a number of reasons, this did not happen. The new denomination was torn by an intense struggle over racial integration *versus* separation. It then moved toward a 'diversity' stress which welcomed Christians, Buddhists, and Pagans and downplayed the prevailing humanist consensus.

Separate organizations thus competed, using such banners as religious humanism, secular humanism, humanistic Judaism, rationalism, free thought, freedom-from-religion. In 1982 individuals from these various factions met to find a better way to represent and increase the small number of U.S. humanists, creating the North American Committee for Humanism. The main result was The Humanist Institute, a graduate-level training center for humanist leaders. Students would come together 3 times a year for 3 years during which period they would intensively study humanist histories, philosophies, and futures. The assumption was that prolonged study together would produce

bonding and reduce unnecessary *competitive* polemics. As of now, more than 80 students have completed this course. In the meantime, educational programs have been created by the Council for Secular Humanism, Ethical Culture, and Humanistic Judaism.

Antiscientific and postmodern currents

The American university has traditionally been the place where many persons have *discovered* and embraced humanism. As distinct from European universities, students do not immediately specialize. Almost all take a wide range of liberal arts courses which can broaden philosophical horizons.

In university circles, recent years have seen a growing critique of reason and science - particularly within the humanities and social sciences. In many cases, humanism has been explicitly rejected. At least within the U.S., this has created a major generational gap among humanists. Some U.S. humanists have promoted skepticism as a way of explaining the methods of the sciences and of helping people see through New Age nostrums. But the sensationalist thirsts of the media usually win out among people already conditioned to distrust sciences with their insistence on experiment and evidence.

More promising directions

Let me suggest a few directions in which I see the more creative U.S. humanists moving, and then single out the one I myself see as most fruitful for 'humanist flourishing' .

Adequate Universal Education in the Media Age

Public schooling in most U.S. inner cities is underfunded and inadequate. Much of the remedy is in going to courts and arguing fairness. Smaller class sizes, better training and rewarding of teachers, and broad and enriched curricula. The 'white flight' which enlarged suburbs and left the inner cities to minorities can be partially combated by equalization laws.

Clearly, democracy can only flourish with an educated citizenry. This means a continued broadening of the

curriculum. Verbal and mathematical skills are a necessary foundation but must be used for a fuller understanding of the cultures in which individuals live. Santayana said that persons who do not know history will be condemned to repeat it. I saw echoes of this in a recent T-shirt slogan: 'Those who don't have their own histories - will *have* to live OURS:

One of the best cures for nationalism and parochialism is the study of comparative ideologies and religions - those things that *have* continued to *provoke* wars and terrorisms. The more one learns about our common histories, the harder it becomes to cling blindly to one's inherited truth as THE truth. And the more necessary it becomes to explore better 'truths' that will *serve* more people.

Family / sex pioneering / gender

Multiple families, reflecting remarriages, are at the center of the U.S. stage. Humanists are probably over-represented here, and also probably less conflicted by myths about traditional families. If the central role of the family is the promotion of individual flourishing - a central humanist goal- much can be learned by and from humanists about accomplishing this. Modern humanist groups have also been well ahead of the larger society in the normalizing of same-sex relationships and families - and here also have much to teach the larger society.

The first woman minister in the U.S. was ordained by Universalists, and the Unitarians also played a salient role in opening pulpits to women. In more recent years, Ethical Culture has encouraged women leaders. Overall, *however*, organized humanists in the U.S. *have* been largely male.

Youth

Most U.S. humanists grew up with more traditional orientations, shifting in the young adult years. There are some indications that this kind of freedom and shifting is now occurring earlier, in high school years. One causal factor is the *discovery* of religious pluralism and the weakening that this brings to religious exclusivisms. In those unusual schools that offer *objective* instruction in religions (sometimes under the 'comparative religion' label), this process probably accelerates.

Humanists should be pushing for more of this, since it also helps learners see the variety of moralities found among and within religious groups. That will help students see that moralities are not only separate from religions, but are best explored with secular and non-religious analyses.

Economic justice issues

We need to explore the difference between progress in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and progress in equalization of economic opportunities and shares in that profit. So far in the U.S. (and most other developed countries), growth has been quite real but so has the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Self-centeredness has characterized U.S. policy for many years, and this has increased enormously with the current administration. The 'war on terrorism' can easily become an excuse to increase the military-industrial component of the budget and further neglect truly effective economic aid to developing countries. Humanists must risk unpopularity in pointing to the dangers of militarization both at home and abroad.

Globalism and ecoLogical issues

Globalization is, on the one hand, an inevitable process and on the other, a morally neutral one. Unless a number of other issues are included - reducing the rich/poor gap, equalizing economic opportunities, respecting human rights, protecting women and children, ensuring equalities of opportunity both economically and vocationally, protecting the rights of labor to organize - globalization will fail.

From a humanist viewpoint, there is no cosmic protection of the environment nor is there any inherent rightness or goodness in the current ecological situation. The intelligent use of resources is always an intellectual and moral issue, to be judged by consequences. Humanists seek neither to restore nature or to *preserve* it. We are indeed parts of nature, interacting with other parts and using intelligence to make those interactions work best for our own species. This is necessarily a long-term *view*, and one that requires continual scientific analyses and *review*.

Cooperation on ethical issues

Reviewing the history of organized humanisms in the U.S., it is clear that they have been pioneers in several important ethical areas. But their *effectiveness* has often been reduced by an exaggerated sense of the purity of their own *perspective* and an intense disdain for the perspectives of others, particularly if those others still retain allegiances to traditional religions. If the humanists' real aim is to *improve* the world and the lives of humans who inhabit it, they must make their message more attractive and available to their neighbors.

Instead of stressing what they don't *believe*, they must stress those things for which they do care and for which they are willing to work. If they believe that these are indeed potentially universal human values, then the job of humanists is to make them visible and help others move toward them. The merit of such values is that people do not have to be frightened or made guilty in embracing them. Take planned parenthood as an example (the current term is 'intended children', this is a better term than responsible parenthood or wanted children because it stresses not only desire but reflective behavior). Once science/technology has made this human intention possible, most people have had little difficulty moving toward it. Factor in the economic drains of large families and the position becomes universally attractive. It does not need theological support or *even* ecological considerations to motivate people. Will many traditional religious leaders object? Of course. But the proposal can stand on its own merits and appeals. All that is needed is awareness of the possibilities. In the process, people become aware of their own control *over* their own destinies. They also become more aware of their responsibilities toward their neighbors. And this is the essence of humanism.

If we look closely at ways human societies *have* been improved in the past - and the ways that the conservative 'holders-back' have lost their power - we will have more confidence in the potentials of traditional systems to *move* in more humanistic directions. The most difficult humanist value is the power of reason

to solve problems and disputes more *effectively* than violence. We must continually remind *ourselves* and our neighbors of the power of moral power in the recent histories of India, South Africa, the Philippines, and the U.S. South. And those reminders need to be communicated in more than books and words. We must create the dramas, the songs, the stories, the images to keep them alive.

Let me close by suggesting a slogan for humanists *everywhere*: 'Mind the memes!' Several ideas combine here. Richard Dawkins coined the word 'meme' to represent something like the role of genes when we consider social evolution. Memes are persistent yet competing themes and ideas in cultures. And Julian Huxley, in his presidential address at the founding of the IHEU urged that once we know the processes of evolution, both biological and socially, we are responsible for their future directions. And all who visit London know the electronic warning that broadcasts at *every* tube stop: 'Mind the gap: The English *verb* 'mind' carries a number of powerful meanings: be sure to *see*; watch *over*; obey; take care of; watch out for.

One of the major memes is that no meme will work forever. Rich and powerful societies such as the U.S. tend to forget this, and our colleagues around the world need to remind us that ours is a global *movement*, struggling to attain a global focus. Whenever we settle for parochialism or nationalism or hemispherism, we cease to be full humanists.

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