THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN HUMANISM
What Worked; What Did Not Work

by Edwin H. Wi/son

Asking what worked implies a goal or measure. Perhaps we have had mixed goals. One is growth. Whatever we have done, we have not grown to the proportions of a mass movement. Gordon Kent, a Humanist Unitarian minister was among those who thought we had that potential. His book, *Humanism for the Millions* went through a number of large editions. In the vernacular, his book presumed that Humanism would spread "like wildfire." Even the fundamentalist journals, especially *Christianity Today,* wailed that it was a serious threat to Christendom.

When I retired as Executive Director of the Americn Humanist Association in 1963, the membership was in excess of 6,000. Under my successor, with a raise in dues and a move of headquarters to California, membership dropped to about 3,000. As new dimensions developed from differing backgrounds, there was a splintering movement. Even today the total number of self-professed, labeled, joining Humanists, even adding in subscribers to *The Humanist,* is not great.

Professor A. Eustace Haydon warned those of us who first sought organization, that organizing and issuing a Manifesto, as we did in 1933, would provide a target for entrenched Christian orthodoxy. He also felt that the real strength of Humanism was as a world-wide cultural movement, without formal organization or label. On both counts he appears to have been right. What has worked has been to advance the Humanist idea, to influence intellectual leaders by spreading the scientific spirit and the democratic faith in humankind.

The relationship of more than thirty organiztions from around the world in the international Humanist and Ethical Union is evidence that the potential of a global movement with its ethical stress on the well being of all humanity in the here and now is out there. When I first interviewed Julian Huxley at Bloomington, Indiana, in 1951, he said "You may quote me as saying that the next great world religion will be some form of Humanism." What has not happened, it seems to me, is the launching of a vigorous and effective plan to spread Humanism. Lack of funds may well be the reason. In my early days with the A.H.A. I talked about finances with Dr. George Stoddard, then President of the University of Illinois. He said, "Get a program, Wilson, and you will find the money." The Utrecht Secretariat has done an efficient job of involving the groups that have come to I.H.E.U. At Amsterdam in 1952, I had visions of a schism at the start if the word "Ethical" was not included in the name of the organization formed. The British and American Humanists wanted it called "The International Humanist Association." I moved that it be "The International Humanist and Ethical Association." Jerome Nathanson moved the substitution of "Union" for" Association,", and so the I.H.E.U. was named. The means is needed for an agressive outreach on a global scale to the Humanists in various nations and cultures. The North American Committee for

Humanism (NACH) shows that Humanism and Ethical Culture have grown closer over time. Even with volunteers, I.H.E.U. should spread humanism around the globe.

The Humanist movement has not yet agreed whether it is a philosophy, a religion, or a way of life. There was no intent to form another church or denomination when the Humanist Manifesto was issued. It stated frankly: "So stand the theses of religious humanism." There was no such intention when the A.H.A. was incorporated in 1941. The doors were open not only to humanistic religious liberals, but also to freethinkers, rationalists, agnostics, secularists, and atheists. Even that brought problems; the issue of religious humanism is raised and debated *ad nauseum* by the unchurched or anti-church members of the A.H.A. My position was and is that it can be all or anyone of the three: a religion, a philosophy, or an ethical way of life. Often it has semed to me that the more secularly minded Humanists among us have been generalizing from too limited a knowledge of religion; possibly from their own narrow experience with one or perhaps two religions. A number of the signers of "A Humanist Manifesto" (1933) had arrived at Humanism through a study of world religions. Sometimes secularists have let the prevailing Christians define religion for them. I once saw a letter from one amiable Humanist, an atheist, written (but never mailed) to a notoriously abrasive atheist, saying that "one doesn't have to be hateful to be an atheist." In a sense if we are non-theists if we are without god, if we are not under an authoritarian church and its creeds, we are atheists. The word "atheist" has, however, been loaded with negative connotations by counter propaganda. Untruthful smears in defense of the theistic faith are maliciously spread.

The ancient saying, "I am human; nothing human is alien to my understanding" would seem to make it almost mandatory, in order fully to be a Humanist, to try to understand those who come into the Humanist movement from any background, and seek "a common faith" as John Dewey called his book on religion. Dr. Dewey liked the word religious better than the word religion. And he liked the world naturalism better than the word humanism. Evolutionary naturalism seems to be one of the things most commonly shared by the Humanist groups around the world. Science is on our side, and perhaps time. The human person is given a related but unique level and value in evolutionary theory. The way to Humanist unity required effort at mutual understanding and respect for one another in our difference. In the Humanist movement we certainly want all the secularists, atheists and agnostics we can persuade to come our way, but all should understand one another and cooperate in pursuit of common goals.

Julian Huxley once told me that his book *Religion Without Revelation* represented a personal ground clearing. It was his effort to clarify the issue of religion for himself. Huxley went to those scholars who were attempting to study religion objectively. A movement to apply the scientific spirit to the study of religion was well underway in the 1930s. In this book Huxley cited many of those identified with the religious sciences. Those scholars had a special concern for objectivity, for letting the facts speak for themselves, for recognizing their own bias. The religious sciences did not prove popular.

The good teaching jobs went to those who claimed to reconcile science and religion, and who showed how to put the new knowledge into the old symbols.

Alfred Loisy, an excommunicated Jesuit scholar, once declared that a definition of religion to be adequate must include all its principal examples including early Buddhism, which was atheistic, and Confusiasism which was agnostic.

Humanist Sermons, a volume edited by Curtis W. Reese, was published in 1927, six years before Humanist Manifesto. Several who did not sign the first mamtesto did not do so largely because of a fear of a creed. Among such non-signers were Max C. Otto, James Hart and Harold Buschman, editor of *The New Humanist* which published "A Humanist Manifesto" in 1933. At least two ministers who had sermons in *Humanist Sermons* did not sign Manifesto I. Frederick M. Eliot was not asked because it was felt (correctly) that he was a theist. John Haynes Holmes was asked and he gave extensive comments on the first draft circulated for input, but declined to sign because of point six which stated that the time was past for "theism, deism and the several varieties of new thought." Professor Edwin A. Burtt questioned the necessity and wisdom of rejecting theism in any form, but he signed in spite of his reservations.

I believe the right thing was done in the rejection ofthe modernist effort at putting new wine in old bottles recently called "the redefinition racket" by Dr. Corliss Lamont. "A movement does not progress by surrendering its principles," Dr. Lamont also has stated in reference to semantic obfuscation. Without that clear stand on a non-theistic, naturalistic foundation, the Humanist movement might have gone the way of Christian modernism-into eclipse. Humanism might have blended into an ill defined, vague modernism. Earlier in a speech at Harvard College to Unitarian laymen, Curtis Reese had frankly and clearly stated that "God is philosophically possible, scientifically unproved, and religiously unnecessary."

Dating back to the Free Religious Association, rather lonely and isolated voices had stated a similar view. Duncan Howlett in his book *The Critical Way in Religion* mentions Dietrich Bonhoffer's rejection of the God of theism. Bonhoffer said in a letter from prison:

> "There is no longer a need for God as a working hypothesis, either in morals or philosophy. In the name of intellectual honesty these working hypotheses should be dropped or dispensed with so far as possible. "

Bonhoffer was probably not the only factor in the questioning of the place of the traditional idea of God in modern thought.

In the sixties three movements reached the headlines with sensational impact. One was called "The Death of God" movement. Names of scholars associated with this movement are William Hamilton, Paul VanBuren and Thomas J.J. Altizer. A second movement call the "Honest to God" movement was articulated in a popular paperback by A.T. Robinson an Anglican clergyman. The third, advanced by Gabriel Vahanian and Harvey Cox, was

known as "Christian Secularism" or "Secularity." The most significant thing about these assaults on the traditional God of theism was that they soon faded out and their proponents turned to other things. With their demise, the influence of Protestant modernism diminished, and the way was cleared for the reaffirmation of the old answers by the Fundamentalist Right.

Who now remembers VanBuren, Hamilton, Altizer or Gabriel Vahanian? Harvey Cox with his discussion of the Secular City has not been forgotten, but Christian Secularity as a movement largely has been. Humanism would probably have been buried unnoticed without the frank rejection of theism.

There are reasons why some honest thinkers cling to the idea of God. Beyond the possible fear of being called atheist or of alienating one's self from many friends, there are emotional ties that are difficult to give up. In many cases the withdrawal or rejection of the symbols and liturgies of theism has created a conflict between head and heart. Edward Scribner Ames, philosopher and teacher of religion, described in his class room lectures an idea of God as the projection of the group, in some ways comparable to Alma Mater or even Santa Claus. I once heard him reply to a student who told him he had lost his job in a Disciples' church by failure to preach God. "If you had listened to me," Dr. Ames said, "you would still be there." At the end of his course I said to Dr. Ames, "If I had a God, I would want a *real* God." "My God *is* a real God!" he thundered at me. He was lost to the formal Humanist organization and not even asked to sign the Manifesto at a time when we were very conscious of the semantic issue. Henry Nelson Wieman once seemed to me to have two Gods, one as God the explanation for the head, and the other the Loving Father God of worship for the heart. But with "creativity" his ultimate concern, expressed in "Humanist Manifesto II" (1973), he signed.

An example of the emotional claim of theistic terminology was seen in the excommunication of several Catholic modernists in the early decades of this century. Alfred Loisy, on whom I called in Paris in 1927, showed me a thrice-edited manuscript that contained a Catholic modernist theology which the modernists had hoped to substitute for that of Thomas Aquinas He indicated that the major thing they sought was to have the Papacy recognize that the doctrines of the church change, and always have, so that the church would no longer be a block to intellectual progress. One of the modernists, Father Tyrrel of England, reportedly so missed the sacraments that after excommunication he literally died pinning for their consolation.

In my own experience the transition from theism to humanism was not inwardly easy. I had been taught by a quite religious mother-a Unitarian Christian-to say the Lord's prayer at her knees. Sometime after my discharge from the Air Service, I had rejected a belief in God intellectually, but was dismayed to find that night and morning the words of that prayer would float into my consciousness. I reflected that I had two sets of words in me that had been learned by rote memory: The Lord's Prayer and the nomenclature of the Lewis machine gun. Perhaps, I thought I can exorcise one with the other. So when the words came to me "Our Father who art in Heaven. . .I would say "The lock, the bolt, the piston rod. . .„ "Hallowed

be thy Name..." "the cartridge extractor, the feed lever..." "Thy kingdom come. . .„ et cetera. At the end of a month of this totally private exercise in an effort to maintain my inner integrity and not insincerely or mechanically use a prayer known to be dear to many, I found to my amazement that I got precisely the same emotional concommitant from the words of the Lewis machine gun that I got from the Pater Noster. Only time really took care of that theological carry-over. But the experience to me was real; perhaps my only mistake was publishing it in the Meadville Journal, producing astonishing pro and con results.

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Professor of the History of Religion in the University of Chicago Divinity School stated recently:

> "There is tension between the things that we know in our heads and the things that we know in our hearts. . .a tension that we do not resolve, (though we may temporarily relax it by ignoring it). We tell ourselves (and others) that we study our texts from the outside in the approved manner of objectivity, while we deal with the affairs of the heart from the inside, with passion and commitments. We maintain an objective interest in one sort of religion and a subjective faith in another."

That this condition was felt was manifest in a statement by A. Eustace Haydon in the 1958 Symposium, "A Humanist Manifesto; Twenty Years After." Commentators were asked how they would change it. Referring to the Sixth point and its declaration that the time was past for theism, deism, modernism, etc., Haydon stated: "In the Sixth, I would express sympathetic understanding for those old forms of thinking which we must nevertheless now surrender." Today with the new fundamentalists and their political allies of the radical right we need friendly co-operation with all liberal theists. It may be that where we failed was soon enough to offer emotional substitutes for the things we took away form some by our rejection of the symbols of theism.

Perhaps time will mellow our presentation of Humanism. The effort to develop new service materials in harmony with Humanist beliefs has gone on for a long time. In the earliest mimeographed editions of *The New Humanist, predecessor of The Humanist,* there was a column on such materials.

When Abraham Maslow first presented at a General Assembly of U. U .A. his idea of the Peak Experience as attainable within a naturalistic frame, he said that he had found the usual Unitarian Service bleak and uninspiring. Several ministers grumbled that he couldn't possibly be talking about their church. He could perhaps have been referring to some of the Fellowships in their earlier stages.

The whole field of secular art, poetry, literature, drama, music is ours to claim and use selectively for inspiration and renewal; for the enrichment of the heart side. A recently-published new edition of the *British Hymnal* has

just arrived from Lindsey Press in London. It includes a number of hymns by American Humanists-Kenneth Patton, Jacob Trapp, Vincent Silliman and Edwin H. Wilson. Inspiration intellectually acceptable for Humanists will fill a definite need but should flow naturally out of a self-assured naturalistic and Humanistic celebration of life.

There is a long history of attempts by religious. liberals and Humanists to conduct co-operative meetings and publications. (This would make a useful subject for a student's research paper or thesis.) I refer especially to the Free Religious Association of the last century. Its members included Unitarians, Ethical Culturists, rationalists, and secularists. Its annual meetings were exciting and got much publicity, but the members were too individualistic to reach consensus or to enable the Association to survive. In general, as interpreted by Stow Persons in his book *Free Religion*, the group reached a Humanistis theism. There were few non-theists among them, with the possibile exception of William J. Potter. Raymond Bragg had written his Meadville thesis on the F.R.H. and both he and Wilson definitely had the F.R.H.'s effort at Humanistic co-operation in mind in their editing of *The New Humanist.*

When the Fellowship of Religious Humanists was chartered, Illinois law required provision for disposition of corporate assets in case of dissolution. We named the A.H.A., the A.E.U. and the U.U.A. as such recipients and affiliated with all three. Our intention was to serve in part as a bridge organization. For that reason we played a strong part in the calling of a series of conferences, first at Exeter, New Hampshire, then at Oakland, Michigan, and finally in New York City. It was called "CORPEN" (The Conference of Religious, Philosophic, and Ethical Non Conformists.) Ralph Borsodi was responsible for the Exeter, New Hampshire, location. But we did not pursue his desire that the conference be principally aimed at Roman Catholicism. Instead we had a series of broadly planned lectures and discussions; outstanding among them was one led by Abraham Maslow. At Oakland, Michigan, we were joined by Rabbi Sherwin Wine and Society for Humanistic Judaism. Main speakers were Paul Goodman, Joan Baez, Albert Ellis, and Jeffrey Campbell, a black liberal minister.

The content of conferences is important. Discussion of social issues in conference or by publication, especially with economic or political overtones, will not necessarily unite or extend Humanism. As an example consider Point XIV of "A Humanist Manifesto" (1933). In Point XIV it was affirmatively stated that "The Humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate. . . A socialized and co-operative economic order must be established. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world." Some, including economist Frank K. Knight of the University of Chicago, declined to sign specifically because of this point. In the views of the surviving signers and a dozen others asked to comment in a 1953 Symposium "A Humanist Manifesto; Twenty Years After," there was both praise and rejection. In just a few years after the first publication, the officers of the Humanist Press Association voted to let the Manifesto stand as a dated document. It clearly

reflected the depression years and the moderate socialism of Norman Thomas. At one time during the McCarthy era the A.H.A. Board passed a hand-washing "out-damed-spot" type of resolution saying that Point XIV of the Manifesto did not now represent the A.H.A. There was controversy over this point, from the beginning. But Raymond Bradd's foreword to Manifesto One clearly stated the declaration was not a creed.

It is an important question as to how Humanism in its various forms or organization in many nations can assume positions on vital issues. Are we content to let the American Catholic Bishops be the principal ones to speak out on Nuclear Holocaust? Or on War and Peace? Certainly not. Concerned scientists have done so; but I am not sure that the best way is to try to cover all issues in a Manifesto. Position papers or declarations are one way. Some issues can be undertaken more effectively in specialized organizations where as Humanists we can work with others. Civil Liberties is one such issue with both the American Civil Liberties Union and the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee geared to fight for the issue.

Attempts at any further Manifesto, leaving transient issues to dated position papers, should focus on the principles, goals, values, ethics and philosophy of Humanism. Humanist organizations, however, can grow by dealing selectively with neglected or burning issues. One issue that brought growth to the movement following World War II was that of "Science for Humanity." Gerald Wendt was a principal spokesman for us in behalf of the proper uses of science. But also participating were Maurice Visscher, A.J. Carlson, Edwin Grant Conklin, Sir Richard Gregory, as well as many philosophers and social theorists who dealt with the human uses of science. Visscher wrote a column for *The Humanist* under the title "Science for Humanity." Critics who accused Humanists of "Scientism" were answered. At the organization conference of the I.H.E.U. in Amsterdam in 1952, the Dutch Humanists were understandably skeptical, even hostile, to science because of the damage done to Europe by the use of technology in war. But Humanists have been alert to the misuses of science.

Writers for *The Humanist* very early were alert to the nuclear threat. When Gerald Wendt gave us a copy of his book on nuclear power he said. "There is no Humanism in it." Nobel prize winner Hermann Muller, for four years President of A.H.A., was deeply concerned about atomic waste disposal even when nuclear power is devoted to peaceful uses. Leo Szilard, a nuclear scientist, left the hospital with the clock ticking for him to spend the rest of his life working for peace.

The Conference for the Scientific Spirit and Democratic Faith initiated by *The Humanist* met for several years in New York and brought many prominent persons into active cooperation with the Humanist movement. Not only scientists but philosophers and educators participated, as well as liberal ministers and Ethical leaders. The Conference method could be resumed to spread Humanist ideas and to unite us in co-operative projects with the more critical thinkers in America who are opposed to the anti-intellectualism of the new right. Paul Kurtz proposed a dialogue with the Fundamentalists. I think our energies would be more effectively spent in an outreach to and co-operation with those persons in the m traditional faiths who are opposed to the new Fundamentalists.

At the same time that we seek to draw wider circles, and cooperate with persons of goodwill, the various Humanist groups of organized Humanism should close ranks, and reorder priorities so that we are more effecitve. The diversification of the movement, through valid expressions of different backgrounds and emphases, has not increased the total number of professing, joining Humanists. But the growth potential is there. Democratic ideals, Humanistic values and the scientific spirit are found throughout our western culture. In perceiving that aspect of secularity, the Fundamentalists are right, but not in trying to make a new devil out of that perception. Their reationary movement is an assault on democratic culture itself. Their goal is a new medievalism. Our task is to revive and extend the enlightenment.

By simplifying our operations we should be able to focus on a few major issues. A.H.A. especially seems to me to have too many projects, commissions, and committees. Recognizing issues that can be dealt with better by other organizations but which get support from individual Humanists is one way of simplifying and cooperating. Another simplification can be made by referring to the I.H.E.U. those issues that are global in scope. This would require better financing and support of the international organization. Volunteers on task forces of I.H.E.U. might survey by mail the member organizations and try to reach consensus on such issues as the nuclear threat or world population, apartheid, hunger. A step in the right direction was made when I.H.E.U. very early voted to become a non-governmental organization (NGO) of the United Nations.

With I.H.E.U. meeting only once in four years, Humanism needs a voice internationally that is an expression of its member groups. The Board can speak in its own name, but in a survey report giving respectful representation of minority or varying views, it could reach for consensus.

The North American Committee for Humanism with is expanded program including the Humanist Insitute, publication of *Humanism Today* and representation of various Humanist organiztaions on its Board is in a strategic position to resume the type of Conference held at Exeter, New Hampshire (CORPEN).

Such conferences as those held in Exeter can attract and mobilize some of the best brains available in the secular world. The potential is there awaiting leadership. Hopefully the Humanist Institute is training a new generation of committed, professional leaders who will come out swinging and articulate in the extension and defense of the Humanist philosophy and/or religion.

With the need for wider co-operation augmented by the threatening political thrust of the New Right, there is a clear challenge to us all to focus on growth and effective extension of our ideas.

Just where to speak out as a group and where to remain silent or find expression through other groups is not always easy to decide. A suit has been filed "Asimov vs. The United States" challenging the Hatch Amendment to Title VII of the Education for Economic Security Act. The challenged

amendment prohibits the use of Magnet School Fund for teaching an unidentified something called "Secular Humansim." This law seems clearly an unconstitutional and discriminatory attack on Humanism. Such an affront to Humanity as the policy of apartheid in South Africa would seem to make mandatory Humanist protest everywhere. By centering on such common issues as defense of our public schools and libraries; on the implications of critical scholarship for the place and meaning of religion; on the philosophy of democracy; on the proper uses of science; on evolution versus biblical creationism; and on opposition to nuclear war, we can arrive at common goals and a wider circle.

The present political-religious reaction calls for such cooperation. When asked what he thought of the fundamentalist New Right, James Michener said, "It scares the hell out of me!" The use of "Secular Humanism" as a scapegoat is comparable to the Nazi use of the Jews as an excuse to destroy them. Norman Lear's success through "People For the American Way" in combatting censorship in Texas shows the value of cooperation with liberal Christians and Jews.. But we also need a direct defense of Humanism and evolutionary naturalism. That, we must do for ourselves with all the help we can get. As some see it religious authoritarianism is ominously merging with political reaction. Humanistic and democratic values are threatened. Critical thought and social services are being diminished.

As a move towards cooperation the Americn Humanist Association has produced a film "Making Wider Circles." Its premier showing was in Los Angeles in September, 1985. Isaac Asimov, President ofthe A.H.A., will be the narrator. Another promising outreach program is in the projected Humanist Forum to be called by Isaac Asimov, who will invite surviving Humanists of the Year and other leading Humanists for discussion of issues.

With co-operation and commitment to Humanist idea, we will take advantage of the reactionary situation for growth both in numbers and in influence.