

# INTRODUCTION

This is the 9th issue of *Humanism Today*, a project of the faculty and students of The Humanist Institute. Each issue has addressed a theme emerging from the Faculty Colloquium of The Institute or during the annual conference of The North American Committee For Humanism (NACH). At the 1993 Colloquium, the faculty addressed the accusations made by fundamentalism and orthodoxy against Humanism. If those accusations are to be believed, then Humanism is the source nearly all of the evils of the modern world. Humanism has been, it is alleged, the cause of family decay, immorality, promiscuity, drug addiction, the AIDS epidemic and the list could be indefinitely extended. Humanist values are said to have subverted eternal verities and so to have been at least indirectly responsible for what is called a "moral crisis." Humanists, after all, have supported such obviously subversive notions as The United Nations, progressive education, the natural sciences, human rationality, cultural diversity, civil rights, the separation of church and state, "pro-choice," etc. In short, Humanists are a dangerous lot.

Obviously, we Humanists don't agree. Indeed, we believe that it is the rigid, dogmatic, anti-scientific and anti-democratic character of fundamentalism and orthodoxy that blocks effective attention to our problems. We think, for example, of the way in which the AIDS epidemic was handled initially (*see Jane Koretz's essay*); or of the dangers confronting our young people because of moralistic refusals to pay attention to psychosexual development (*see Vern and Bonnie Bullough's essay*). We are concerned with the miseducation of our children symbolized by the attack on public education and the sabotage of a scientific curriculum (*see Harvey Sarles' essay*).

At the same time, Humanism does not claim to have all the answers (*see Joseph Chuman's essay*) but it does insist on the centrality of critical intelligence as well as on the importance of finding an inclusive and ethically defensible response to our difficulties. More deeply, Humanism suggests that behind the political and social agenda of fundamentalism and orthodoxy there is a rejection of the modern world itself including its achievements in the sciences, in the evolution of a more inclusive democracy, in the advance of human rights. Of course, we still have a long way to go and we have no illusions about the ultimate perfectibility of the human condition (*see Robert Tapp's essay*).

In developing this group of essays, we did not wish simply to rehearse timeworn arguments. Symbolic of our interest in moving to new ground is the Humanist view that an exciting and satisfying cosmology is available to us (*see Ralph Alpher's essay*). We need not settle for old dreams and old narratives although that does not diminish our appreciation of the mythologies and wisdom literatures of the past. Much as we have been edified and mystified by the sciences, we also recognize their imaginative and aesthetic power, not least of all because of their explanatory power. Humanism's commitment to the sciences, then, is not merely utilitarian. They represent for us a fascinating step in the human adventure.

Finally, it all comes down to a matter of cultural and social evolution. In that context, whether "we" or "they" win the argument, it is not argument that will decide. Events and realities will be determinative. As John Dewey put it,

Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply ingrained attitudes of aversion and preference. Moreover, the conviction persists-though history shows it to be a hallucination-that all questions that the human mind has

asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume-an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. *We do not solve them,we get over them.* Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating-while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place 1

Obviously, these essays only address some of the issues facing Humanism in responding to the attacks on it. Fortunately, however, *Humanism Today* has in the past dealt with related questions and plans to continue its effort to contribute to the development of Humanist ideas and their application. By way of a glimpse of the record, we note the themes of this past decade:

- Volume 1,1985: Ethics, Religion, Education, Welfare, Peace And The State
- Volume II, 1986: The Aesthetics Of Humanism
- Volume III, 1987: Science And Humanism
- Volume IV, 1988: Rethinking Humanism: History, Philosophy, Science
- Volume V, 1989: The Enlightenment Reconstructed
- Volume VI, 1991: Meaning In Humanism
- Volume VII, 1992: Humanism And New Age Thinking
- Volume VIII, 1993: Humanism And Postmodernism

In the planning stages is a volume which will describe autobiographically the ways in which Humanism has had its effects on the personal lives of Humanists. Its working title is "Living As A Humanist" and it will address the questions: Who am I, Who am I not, and What difference does my Humanism make in my daily life, in my practices, and to my identity?

The Humanist Institute was founded in 1982 in order to help in the education of professional and volunteer Humanist leadership. Sponsored by the North American Committee For Humanism (NACH) its students and its faculty are drawn from the university, the seminary and the various Humanist associations-The American Ethical Union, The American Humanist Association, The Canadian Humanist Association, The Council For Democratic And Secular Humanism, The Fellowship Of Religious Humanists, The Society For Humanistic Judaism, The Unitarian Universalist Association. Many people have supported the work of the Institute with their energies and their resources. More than 50 students have completed their studies and many are at work in various Humanist organizations as ministers, counselors, Ethical Culture Leaders, association executives, elected organizational officers. Other students have applied their Humanist studies in their work-life as lawyers, doctors, business people, journalists, teachers.

JSK and HBR

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *The Influence Of Darwin On Philosophy And Other Essays In Contemporary Thought*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1910, p. 19, Italics are mine.