

Adopting Our Forebears

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Conversion stories

The vast majority of humanists are "converts," "come-out-ers." They presently find themselves in an orientation not of their birth situations, not of their childhoods. There is a sense, however, in which conversion is always both a "conversion from" and a "conversion to." This process can best be explored by some stories.

One story from the shtetl involves Isaac who has been converted to Christianity by Father Ivan. Some time later Isaac invites Ivan to dinner. It is Friday. Isaac checks the oven and a shocked Ivan smells and sees a sizzling goose. Ivan says that he cannot eat goose on Friday, but Isaac explains that the oven contains not goose but a fish. Father Ivan insists on what he has seen, and Isaac explains that if Ivan can make a Christian out of a Jew, he Isaac can make a fish out of a goose.

A variant of this story is the old saw that Unitarianism could turn an Irish boy from Brooklyn into a Boston Brahmin in a few years. Or the more complex canard that the University of Chicago was a place where Jewish professors made Catholics out of the sons and daughters of Protestant farms.

Each of these tales suggests that conversion is always a layering process, and adding of new directions to an established substrate. It is that adding process that this paper explores. What does it mean, how does it occur, how can it best be facilitated?

Disenchantment and Reenchantment

In an earlier study of 12,000 Unitarian Universalists, it became clear that over 90% of them were "converts" who had left their childhood faiths around highschool age but did not come to

their present belief-value orientations until college age. Actual affiliation with Unitarian Universalism did not come until somewhat later, usually with the early parenthood years. It seemed appropriate then to use the terms "disenchantment" and "re-enchantment" to describe these processes. What is important to note with these processes is that they may occur quite sequentially but without organizational support. Put another way, the new values are found in the large culture within contexts of higher learning. The university is a potential hotbed of new ideas, new values, new lifestyles. These are the values of the Enlightenment, of humanism.

The Unitarian-Universalists typically found their new values in the university. Despite the absence of firm data, we suggest that this same life cycle patterning characterizes Ethical Culturalists, Humanistic Jews, and secular humanists of various kinds. We include in this generalization that sizable minority of self-taught persons among us who have learned to swim in this same value-pool on their own.

conversion as integration

Also evident among the Unitarian Universalists was the fact that the conversion/re-enchantment process entailed an integration of values. On a broad range of personal and social values, consistent choices were much more evident among those designated "posttraditional" than among the considerably smaller number of "traditional" converts.

At the risk of using a much-maligned metaphor, this was evidence of a "market economy" among the converts. When the choices are made for one's self, as an adult, the values chosen are more likely to be coherent and consistent than whatever were originally imprinted as children perceived and interiorized parental values. In the United States particularly, this free enterprise among faiths has spawned an enormous range of choices for the changers. It is also clear (at least among the Unitarian Universalists) that this changing has a kind of underlying rationale of optimizing comfort. Those born in more conservative religions were much more likely

to have spent an interim period in a less conservative situation before taking the plunge into the UU liberal waters. In societies with state churches, one would suspect that the only alternative to preserving a childhood faith may be some unorganized form of "unfaith."

In any event, the significant courage required to leave a parental faith-nest is likely to lead to strongly-held new beliefs and values which are personality-integrative. This process eventually may (we would insist, "should") lead to a search for companions, living and dead, to ease the transition.

Some parallels from world religions may throw light on this process.

The Lineage of the Guru

It is common in India for young men (much less for young women) to be sent to a guru who instructs in the religious beliefs, practices, and duties of the father's caste. Traditionally this was a prolonged form of religious instruction. In the course of it, the young man would acquire a new "lineage" tracing back through the guru to the guru's guru and eventually to some famous rishi or reformer. This could lead to members of the same family having different "personal" gods. But it was primarily a way of rooting the boy in a broader tradition than simply that of his birth family.

Some Indians have additional gurus to whom they have apprenticed (musicians, scholars, etc.), leading to other historical connections. The net effect of this is to root the individual more and more deeply into what is claimed to be a continuing tradition and heritage.

Goodly Fellowship of Saints and Martyrs

Many Christians use rhetoric of this type to indicate those exemplary folk who have gone before. They should not only be emulated but are available in some sense as intercessors and com-

panions. Their stories and symbols pervade the lives of the faithful.

Filial Piety

The Chinese tradition, particularly in its Confucian modulations, makes much of the role of the fathers and grandfathers as tutelary presences. This links into a whole ancestral shrine tradition, symbolizing the power and stability of tradition.

Jesus' Lineage

Christian thinkers have enhanced the significance of Jesus by creating an ancestry for him. The gospel writers "Matthew" and "Luke" each trace a lineage reaching back to King David. They are obviously working independently since the accounts differ. The gospel of "John" traces him further back to a "Word" which was "in the beginning." This is a slightly different process than the ones already described, something done by the living to the dead instead of something the living do to themselves. But it serves many of the same purposes-rooting, enhancing, relating.

A Humanist Alternative

The processes we have described are all essentially processes of "formation," of ways that a particular culture guarantees that the young will be replicas of the old. They work better in traditional cultures where change is a thing to be feared rather than welcomed.

A classic statement of this, with its Victorian prose as well, was voiced by T.H. Huxley in his 1893 Romanes Lecture. He was arguing, against the "social Darwinists," that the "natural" state of things was not to be imitated by human societies. That "gladiatorial view" of life must instead be combated. A "moral" position should be embraced which demands that

each man who enters into the enjoyment of the advantages of a polity shall be mindful of his debt to those who have laboriously constructed it; and shall take heed that no act of his weakens the fabric in which he has been permitted to live. Laws and moral pre

cepts are directed to the end of curbing the cosmic process and reminding the individual of his duty to the community, to the protection and influence of which he owes, if not existence itself, at least the life of something better than a brutal savage.

This negative view of nature has been considerably obviated by the "modern synthesis." We now see more continuity between those evolutionary mechanisms at work on a biological level and those at work on a cultural level. Henry Murray coined the term "idenes" for the almost self-replicating units of cultural evolution. More recently Richard Dawkins has been using the term "memes" for similar purposes. Dawkins has further brought biological and cultural evolution into a common non-purposive ("non-teleological") framework.

The coming of modernity, with its dreams of progress and evolution, began to change things. Individuals now begin to cherish freedom as a state that permits one to choose what one wants to become (rather than celebrating what one "is"). Julian Huxley's reflections are most helpful here. Our human form of is indeed part of a non-purposive nature BUT we are that part of nature (sole, as far as we know) that understands the mechanisms of evolution, and we thus have a special responsibility laid upon us by that knowledge.

One of our responsibilities is to recognize that tomorrow's survival requirements (and therefore adaptations) are unknown and that we must therefore optimize variation today. This applies to cultural as well as biological domains. A modern humanism takes this as a starting point. Variants of sociobiology, cultural evolutionism easily fall within the rubric. The main point is that the strictures of any earlier positivism no longer apply. Rather than imposing "ought" on "is," we find ourselves living within a better described "is" that embraces a range of "oughts," some more and some less adaptive. Since modern evolutionism is only "postdictive" and not "predictive" (to use George Simpson's felicitous phrasing), an ongoing inquiry is required to make the best es-

timates of the potentially adaptive moral choices that fall within present perimeters of the possible.

An Historicism of...

If we understand historicizing to be an ongoing inquiry into a past that can never be fully recovered or adequately interpreted, we accept the ongoing nature of memory recovery, and learn to utilize its several components.

...discovery

Obviously historicizing involves a search for traces, clues, documents and the like that may still be extant. But it also involves those interests and perspectives present inquirers bring to interpretive sense and meaning. Think how recently we have come to attend to the past activities of women, slaves, gay persons. If we once relied on "intellectual historians" to uncover the forgotten, how much more do we now rely on "social historians" to extend the picture of what has happened before our own time.

...connecting

Humanists have long resonated with Horace's assertion that nothing human was alien to him. This means, of course, that our inquiry into the past recognizes no boundaries, no parents, families, castes or races or religions. Nor is size a criterion. A tribal experience could be as significant as a national or civilizational one. The ongoing experiments of humanity are grist for modern needs.

...weaving

Putting threads into fabrics and even patterns-this is the stuff of historicizing. To make connections where ancient agents didn't or even couldn't; to see connections between ancient Epicureans and Buddhists (for instance), is the challenge. Precisely because our needs are not their needs, many of the deadends of our forebears could prove valuable leads for us.

...transmitting

All these discoveries need to be communicated, to our neighbors, to our children, and to a world-at-large. We speak fondly of the days when Robert Ingersoll or John Dietrich could command a vast audience with rhetoric, but those days may be behind us. Whether humanism can be communicated by sound-bite or with MTV-like flashes is still to be tested.

We have only dipped our toes into the cyber-waters, and there is much to be learned about this inherently democratic, yet high-tech kind of network. But our computers afford us instant, inexpensive, and inherently attractive ways of communicating not only with each other but with the growing number of persons tuned to cyberspace.

Most importantly, we need to reexamine our ways of communicating our humanism to our own children. While many of us are still "recovering," working through the scars of some abandoned orthodoxy, this is not the case with our children. Theirs is a readiness to enter the humanist agenda at a very different point, and we must understand this and help them in it.

Finally we will need to assess the historic differences between "popular" and "high" culture." Humanists have traditionally relied on the media of high culture, but these lines are increasingly blurred. We already find ourselves addressing audiences with very different canons of taste. One of the brilliant moves of the American Humanist Association was to recognize the ideological potentials of "science fiction" and encourage humanistic uses of it.

The Humanists' Metanarrative

Modern humanists have resisted dualisms in their thinking. This history of thought has been well-chronicled by Arthur Lovejoy in *The Revolt Against Dualism*. John Dewey's work early in this century set the stage for a massive rethinking of philosophy. We began to search for verbs to replace our nouns; not as an affec

tation but to indicate the place of action and the sometime ambiguous role of agents in agency.

Dewey also represented the shift from physics to biology as the important metaphor for understanding human behaviors. In a very real sense he climaxed the attempts of the nineteenth-century to bring Darwin's evolution into the realms of human affairs. His 1909 essay "The Effect of Darwin on Philosophy" deserves an annual reading by all humanists. American soil was particularly prepared for this shift.

The American Enlightenment had always stressed practice over theory, from Jefferson on (cf. Commager as a prime reinterpreter). The Transcendentalist gloss on this was to look forward and bypass the past. One result of this has been the relatively small role that history has had in many liberal circles. It was something we had escaped, (thank God or Man!).

Forerunners

Humanists need awareness of the varied anticipations of their naturalistic worldview in many different cultures. Such developments, for one thing, have served to moderate the supernaturalisms emerging in the early stages of most cultures.

Confucian scholars
Theravadin Buddhists
India's naturalists
Stoic and Epicurean philosophers
Hellenistic skeptics
Renaissance world-embracers

The Unified Cosmos of 16th-century Science

One of Galileo's great achievements was the liberation of physics from philosophy (asthenunderstood). This, coupled with his claim that a single physics could suffice for both terrestrial and

celestial loci, set the stage for the development of an experimental method in the sciences that in principle could resolve questions in all known places. This was an enormous step in naturalizing theological heavens and hells. The resistance of ecclesiastical authorities should therefore be no surprise.

In one sense, modern science does have its rootage in Western Christian culture. But rather than a natural or inevitable emergent, it must be viewed largely as a protest to the dualisms cherished by that culture. As Whitehead argues, this emergence would have been unthinkable without the mathematical developments in the West. But these can be best characterized as a continuation of Hellenistic concerns, not as anything inherently connected with the theological concerns of Christendom.

In a very short time, individuals began to draw the obvious conclusions, speculating on "natural religions," "natural philosophies," "religions without revelation," and the like.

Humanistic Western Thought-movements

Space here does not permit inclusion of names and bibliographical suggestions. Readers will have no difficulty adding these to my list, as well as expanding the list itself.

Deists

Freethinkers

Liberal Christians

Reform Judaism

Transcendentalists

Kantian ethicists

The "science of religion"

Emerging anthropology and sociology

Free religion

Nineteenth-century novelists

Atheistic movements, poets, philosophers

Psychological reduction isms
Humanistic scientists
Imaginative science/fantasy fiction
Religious humanism
Religious naturalism
Individualistic humanism
Secular humanism

Why Do It?

Our search for roots is not just a game, not just an intellectual exercise. It is a way of rectifying memory, of giving credits where they are due. A former colleague of mine, the great New Testament scholar Morton Scott Enslin, used to proclaim that "any damn fool can be original if he is ignorant enough!"

There are a number of practical returns in better understanding those who came before us.

Heroes for the next generation

The true embodiment of humanism is in the lives of persons, rather than ideologies. We need to celebrate those who live their humanism, and study the ways they have incorporated this into the common life. The current cynicism pervading many Western societies makes all heroes suspect, and we must both deal with this and not succumb to it ourselves.

A focus on real persons rather than just ideas can be a much more effective way to get ourselves, and particularly our children, into other cultures.

Development of critical acceptance

Humanist histories are fraught with sectarian strifes. We, like true sectarians, have a "purity neurosis" that make cooperation difficult. If we are ever to develop a lasting ecumenical humanism,

we will have to become more relaxed and accepting of different emphases and lifestyles. I want to keep the modifier "critical" because there is always a slight danger that some renewed need for numbers will dull us into making dangerous alliances.

Two models need study. The American Friends Service Committee brought together two "denominations" of Quakers that had little in common in terms of ideology and practice. But they did share certain societal commitments, and Rufus Jones and others were able to keep them working together on these and therefore get to know each other and bridge many chasms that had been built over several generations.

The merger of Unitarians and Universalists, however, points up the danger of losing distinctivenesses in new structures. How intimately Christians, humanists, pagans, and many other variants can operate together in a single institution remains to be seen. When we turn from institutional mergers to looser matters of cooperation, we need to do much homework. Our purity needs have left many of us so hostile to religious bodies that we are unwilling to recognize that they too are involved in time and have histories. Many humanists, for instance, have viewed Roman Catholicism as both a powerful institution (which it surely is) and as an unchanging force (which it clearly is not). The fact that, in Western Europe and the US, Catholic women's fertility has dropped to the levels of their neighbors should indicate the problems of authoritarian power in free societies. More to the point, the emergence of currents such as renewal and liberation theologies should convince us that change is endemic and often irresistible.

Humanists have to decide which changes are friendly and which threaten. The rise of fundamentalisms in almost all the world's religions not only illustrates change but points up parallel trends hostile to humanism and to humanistic trends within those religions. Humanists need to temper their rhetoric to realities, and welcome and support liberalizing movements within religious bodies.

Climbing upon shoulders

A further result of our becoming more historical will be our ability to move on, to climb upon the shoulders of those who have already been there, not to have to reinvent the wheel so many times. Our acts of discovering will not only be of persons who struggled in earlier tinges but of ideas and wisdoms that we might otherwise overlook. Our sense of isolation will reduce, and with it will be a reduction in those late-night feelings of hopelessness. To know that there have been others who dreamed and struggled makes it easier to continue our own labors. To learn from those others makes our own labors less arduous.

Doing things better

The more we discover about our adopted roots, the more we can move with an integrity beyond uncritical repetition. Since Dewey, humanism's criteria for truth have centered upon the analysis of consequences and the rejection of false ends/means dichotomies. The mistakes and shortcomings of our forebears should enable us to use critical intelligence to do better.

These same guidelines remind us of the contextuality of all human action, and drive us to understand the historical situations in which we (and our forebears) necessarily operate.

Expansion of self

Another gain from the exploration of roots is an expansion of the self, a greater awareness of possibilities and opportunities. New connections mean new freedom-to move, to effect, to affect. Adding new connections of one's own discovery and choosing makes the difference between surviving and living, between dependency and assuming responsibility.

deracinate

As the individual becomes more aware of true possibilities, illusory ones will fade. One of the most pervasive and persuasive fantasies in humankind's long trajectory has been the varied segre-

gations of "us" and "them" based upon allegedly differentiating characteristics. None of these hold up in any useful scientific ways. Probably social experience is as effective a solvent of racism as intellectual insight, but this is something that comes best in an educational environment where extraneous criteria (merit, achievement rather than skin color, nose shape, hair, etc.) force the revision of group-conditioned egos.

degender

Gender is almost as elusive as race. We more readily recognize it as a "social construct" since the rise of the women's movement. What is less obvious is the wide human repertoire that opens up when we examine lifestyles and value-styles with genderfree vision. The humanist self of tomorrow will be much freer to choose from that widened repertoire.

historicize

Knowing who you are is important. But incomplete until you develop some sense of where and when you are. To situate ourselves means coming to terms with all the enviroing factors—culture, other persons and their cultures, the non-human cosmos. And these factors are all in time-trajectories. Population pressures, disappearing species, degraded environments all are items that have emerged dramatically in our time. Unless we have historical standards of comparison, we shall never balance the good against the bad. Without such standards, the righteous indignations that fuel many liberal causes will lose their motivating powers.

cosmopolitanize

Can or should persons who begin as North American, Western men and women become universal humans? What would be entailed? Not believing in disembodiable selves, we need to be cautious here lest we fall into a Platonic trap of a self without attributes. We start where we are, work on removing the barriers to perception and understanding of others, and work at a

humanization of ideologies and lifestyles that will liberate ourselves as well as others to live more fully and responsibly in this world.

Rootages for our institutions

For ideologies to persist with any strength, they require institutions. Since medieval times, secular learning in the university has helped humanize ecclesiastically-dominated societies. To some extent the modern university has played this role for a more consistently-secular humanism. But humanists have few successes and many failures in building institutions solely devoted to promoting and sustaining humanism. Too often institutions floundered with the disappearances of their charismatic founders.

Responsible modern humanists need to profit from this dismal history. One clear lesson seems to be the baleful effect of heightened sectarianism. Another seems to be the "regression toward the mean" that occurs. We all want to be liked, and this means that we become more and more like our neighbors. Somewhere between these poles, humanists must learn to move if they are to endow their future with institutional supports. We need an ecumenical humanism that is organizationally embodied. The North American Committee for Humanism is the latest attempt in this direction. Let us hope it can profit from the wreckage of its own forebears.

Reinterpreting human culture/cultures

If the measure of cultures is what they do for their citizenry in terms of expanding the ranges of human personality, a good deal of revisionism will ensue. Human rights will become the chief criterion. How patriarchies prepare for their own self-destruction will be supreme. How is childhood constructed and treated? Is there slavery, in any of its varied forms?

The penchants that conservatives have for "order" will give way to a search for planned and optimized "freedom." We will look more for "freedom to" than "freedom from." Passive mysticisms will seem less attractive than worldly activisms.

Equalitarianism will count more than hierarchy. A "production ethic" will loom larger than a "work ethic." Racism and speciesism will be negative marks. In short, our relativism and our pluralism will always be recognized as starting somewhere, and that somewhere will be the good of the human animal.

Encourage reconceptions within other traditions

"If men were all angels..." translates to "If humans were all humanists " But of course, they're not. We must therefore welcome and encourage liberalizing trends within religions and ideologies. William Ernest Hocking called this "reconception." He assumed that if each religion would seek what is essential to it and ignore peripheral matters, a convergence would occur. As a prophet he may have fallen short, but as a strategist, he was on the money.

If We Succeed...

My agenda would take lifetimes, but each of us can take on parts of it, and we and our colleagues will be the richer for it. Each of these companions, alas, will further expand the agenda. But humanism will be the stronger and more sophisticated for that fact.

¹Robert B. Tapp, *Religion Among the Unitarian Universalists: Converts in the Stepfathers' House*. New York: Academic Press, 1973.