

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The news is mixed. Fundamentalist religious expression seems on the rise while secularism also thrives. New chapters of various humanist and Freethought groups keep popping up and offering more programming: I just received an invitation from the West Michigan Freethought weekly Meditation Group – this activity “approaches mindfulness meditation from a uniquely non-religious perspective...” and joins film nights, Women’s groups, dinners-for-eight and their twice a month all member presentations. At the same time there seems to be new church construction, especially by conservative pastors and congregations, on every corner.

Within UU ranks, the onslaught of spirituality and God-talk, especially among ministers, continues unabated, while groups such as HUUmanists and UU Infidels attract new adherents, some in reaction to the religious regression, some discovering within UUism, organized humanism for the first time. Still, anecdotal evidence mounts for an overall outflow of humanists from UU churches to the AHA, the CSH, local non-UU groups or simply to no affiliation at all.

Christine Robinson is one who has stayed, and allowed the humanism of her upbringing to change along with the denomination. In a recent sermon series to her Albuquerque congregation, she paints a sympathetic portrait of the development and contributions of our non-theistic strand of liberal religion. An end to the decades long dominance of humanism in the AUA and the UUA was, she believes, inevitable, as was the decline of a particular kind of Unitarian liberal Christianity in the thirties and forties. Change happens, she seems to advise; don’t let it get you down. This isn’t an argumentative piece – you’ll find little here to marshal evidence against. It’s a fellow traveler’s commentary.

Peter Tufts Richardson on the other hand, is looking for a fight. His target is the UUA Commission on Appraisal’s report: “Engaging Our Theological Diversity.” The Commission (a creature of the General Assembly) periodically takes on the task of researching and reporting on major Association trends. They interviewed a great many people around the question: “What is our core?” Richardson thinks they should have saved their energy, making the case that the researchers had an answer in advance: it sounds remarkably like the Unitarian liberal Christianity of which Robinson spoke.

Richard Dawkins likes to say “there are no Postmodernists at 40,000 feet,” and Mike Werner likes to hear him say it. Werner, as a Board member of both HUUmanists and the AHA (and past President of that organization – also growing these days) has had plenty of opportunities to defend humanism against the kind of relativism into which Robinson believes UUism has evolved. He’s a passionate advocate of what he calls the “foundations,” those bedrock liberal religious values that come from asking and attempting to answer the “big questions.” Werner envisions them originally being asked around a primitive campfire, 50 centuries ago, and wonders when folks sit around one five thousand years from now, if they will know that we were willing to fight on behalf of our foundations?

Our Heritage piece this issue is the Hebrew Bible, or more accurately, an accounting of the historical knowledge that underlies the tales, myths, hymns and poetry that make up that scripture. Brant Abramson and the Teachers Press offer the full version of this as a reference book for history and English teachers who refer to the Hebrew Bible in their classes. The admirable aim is to provide teachers with a resource that separates what we know from scriptural claims. Our article is a slightly edited version of the summary sent to schools in many states where the controversies swirl around religion in public schools. The full version is available on approval (read it, and pay only if you find it useful), so consider arming yourself for the struggles to come. Ordering information follows the article.

So what would count as the Humanist Bible? Former high School and College English teacher Beth Staas says it's not Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* or Newton's *Principia*, nor Darwin or a particle physics textbook. It's the corpus of literature, and she offers a baker's dozen from Sophocles "Antigone," through a Shakespearean sonnet, to "All Quiet on the Western Front." The passages range from the expected (Emerson and Thoreau) to the almost obscure (Stevie Smith who decorated her poetry with doodles) but start, interestingly enough, with some of the best erotic verse around, from the Song of Songs.

If the parts of scripture worth keeping for humanists are the poetry, then perhaps parts of theology may survive too, as tales told as if they were true. "A Plea for Fictionalism" is the subtitle of Patrick Loobuyck's examination of ethics in a secularized world after Nietzsche's death of God. It's a fascinating read, starting as it does with the European assumption that we live in an age of science and deconstruction, in which the importance of religious commentary is limited to the confines of religious community. What a delight to edit this piece, and forget for a while that the Kansas Board of Education, faith based initiatives and the ranting of Pat Robertson are legitimate news stories.

Finally Daniel Chandler graces us with a half a dozen reviews (he writes many more but we are limited to 96 pages) of books we either know we ought to get around to, but haven't, or didn't even know were out there, but we're glad he found them. He's asked Jerome Stone (a previous Journal contributor) to join him on this issue.

We start out with a slightly different internal perspective, add a couple of calls to arms, provide some ammunition for the struggle and inspiration for the journey, and finish with a reminder that in other parts of the world, the issues and challenges look very different. Enjoy.

Roger Brewin