

Editor's Preface

One of the arguments raging in HUManist circles is over the extent to which we should employ the wider community's vocabulary (specifically God-talk) in order to communicate better with faith groups, especially of the liberal variety, and to expand the range of our own language. HUManists with honorable intent take both sides in this issue, first that we should NOT utilize language that misrepresents our basic philosophical and religious stance, and alternately that the metaphorical and poetic usages of religious language are simply too rich and valuable to be cast aside.

I will not review in detail here what we or others do and don't mean by "God" and "the divine," or "faith," or how we will be (mis)interpreted and understood if we do so. But it is certainly worth our exploring as humanists who function within the organized religion of Unitarian Universalism, just what are some of the conversations we might have with other UUs and like minded liberal religionists, regardless of the vocabulary we employ in them.

Debra Haffner, newly minted as a UU minister, suggests that we ought not to retreat from the arena when the more traditionally religious begin discussing scriptural admonitions about such ethical issues as human sexual behavior. The majority of such folks regard the Bible as only one of several reference points; if we dismiss it as simply irrelevant or of no importance to us, we shut down part of a productive conversation. There are many of the liberal persuasion in traditional religious bodies, some of them with humanist leanings, for whom biblical stories serve not as moral instruction, but as simply suggestions for what to take into account in determining ethical behavior. Deborah offers a primer to every HUManist who would join knowledgeably in such a conversation, or secretly hankers to sabotage it while maintaining a degree of intellectual integrity. So be ready, the next time that someone claims "the bible says..." to reply, "Yes, but it is also written..."

Much has been said in recent years about how quantum physics "proves" a traditional religious cosmology. Like creationist arguments, that line tends to end up being both bad science and bad philosophy, specifically by deciding on what the desired conclusion will be, then looking only for evidence that sustains it. From the point of view of religious humanists, it isn't particularly good religion either, conflating as it does fields of endeavor with widely different purposes. Sarah Voss takes a different tack: approaching the transformation of religion through the lens of mathematics. Sarah pursues a UU community ministry of writing and teaching. Trained as a mathematician, she uses fractal geometry and Cantorian set theory to postulate a religion of all religions. When our liberal Christian and theistic brothers and sisters opine that our UU future lies in a more spiritual direction, this article will stand you in good stead; it will give you something more to say in response than "I don't think so..."

I pushed Sarah fairly hard to specifically include religious Humanism in her article; being theistically inclined she pushed back just as hard. So the challenge has been set before you: does her Cantorian religion make sense, and is there (and do we want) a place for us within it? Either way, you'll be better equipped to consider such questions.

Finally on this theme, Lynn Hunt invites us to a burning pop culture conversation about religious imagery. *The Passion of the Christ* reigned atop movie charts for a few

weeks, then got knocked out of the number one spot by *Dawn of the Dead*! It resurrected briefly on Easter weekend. Now it's gone, at least from the top ten box office hits, but the controversy rages on: did it glorify violence, was it anti-Semitic, and if so, deliberately so? Lynn takes a look at the movie and its impact from a perspective humanists should appreciate: how it stacks up as art and polemic against other films covering the same subject. She offers the view that *The Passion* misses an opportunity to add with any subtlety or complexity to a considerable and worthy body of work.

Have we journeyed far enough now from the traditional haunts of humanism? If so, Richard Felton's article may well bring you back to the familiar territory of non-theistic religion within Unitarian Universalism. He explores the sources (from among all our UU historical threads) of our Purposes and Principles. His conclusion is that they arise out of our humanist heritage, not other more traditional or modern alternative sources. More traditionally Christian and theistic UUs have long complained that our Association is guided by language that is almost exclusively humanist; HUUmanists have usually responded that the Purposes and Principles represent a compromise between humanist and other, mostly more traditional sources. If Richard is correct, then that compromise exists only at the level of vocabulary, and the UUA is at its covenantal heart, a humanist religion. His presentation contrasts well with Davidson Loehr's article in the last issue, which contends that the Purposes and Principles are largely irrelevant to the liberal religious tradition.

Two pieces follow by philosophical humanists on the issue of just what is (or is not) wrong with humanism. Jeremy Stangroom and Kenan Malik engaged in new chapters in a long running conversation on the website butterfliesandwheels.com. You'll need to brush up on, among other things, the role of Lysenkoism in Soviet scientific history, Libet's *readiness potential* experiments and Soper's "paradox of humanity's simultaneous immanence and transcendence," in order to keep up with them. On second thought, just plunge in—you'll have a good time and learn a little something about (their opinions of) naturalism and neuroscience along the way. This is the guilty pleasure kind of flat out disputation that humanists have always loved to pursue, and part of the reason that the more traditional and ritualistic elements of UUism shake their heads and wonder about us, and why we like it so much. So light a candle for us if you must, folks, but you don't know what you're missing!

Nathaniel Lauriat submitted a letter to the editor a couple of issues ago, and with it was an autobiographical reflection he asked to have considered for publication. Then he deferred the request, hoping to rework the final passages. He wanted to make it more "formal." That is one of Nate's projects that will go uncompleted: our friend died on February 22 at age 81. He has bequeathed us a conversational and insightful account of a life intertwined with the struggles of our liberal religion to accommodate all who find shelter and companionship under our broad tent. He concludes: "at our best, we humanists—in a thousand formulations—encourage that opening to trust and hope. May we widely succeed in that effort!" Formal enough for me. Here is our companion's final testament, with as light an editorial hand as possible.

Our heritage document this issue is the 1943 Statement by Unitarian Advance, *The Faith Behind Freedom* (attributed primarily to A. Powell Davies), which is the centerpiece of Nate's case history. As with all such pieces we publish, the language has been left largely as it was, and not edited for gender reference. It is my contention that

such works speak to us best when they reflect accurately both the new revelations and the blind spots of their time and circumstances; this one also speaks (sparingly) of God, but is, as Nate put it, “entirely naturalistic in its assumptions and affirmations.”

Finally, book review editor Daniel Chandler works tirelessly, to keep up with both new publications and to snag those that may have escaped general notice a few years back. Daniel approaches his task as a critic (“skilled in judging the qualities or merits...”) without being critical (“inclined to find fault or to judge with severity...”).¹ I have seen books savaged in other humanist publications, and wondered if indeed it was the same author and tome, about which Daniel endeavored to find something positive. I do not read his reviews to learn what to avoid, but to be pointed towards the nuggets in works I might otherwise overlook.

As I write this there have been no letters to the editor with regard to the previous issue—a small downside I suspect to the tighter timelines that come with being back on the regular publication schedule. Several phone calls and emails that said, in effect, “keep up the good work,” contained insufficient detail to make up a missives section. Please do write, or email, or call, about this issue or previous ones. Demur, praise, object or elaborate; argue, amplify, enjoin, cite, say amen or just plain rant (within limits), but do let us know what you think, as part of this ongoing conversation in print.

Roger Brewin

1. *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, New York, Gramercy Books, 1996