

Can There Be a New Age Humanism

Frederick Edwards

WE LIVE in a period of rapid technological and social change unparalleled in the history of the world. A significant number of trends, developments, and scientific discoveries have converged to create a situation today that many find confusing, others find threatening, and some even find thrilling.

Whether we are talking about global satellite communication, space travel, the information revolution, genetic engineering, new birth technologies, or exciting fossil discoveries - science and technology are transforming the world's values more dramatically and more completely than organized religion or organized political movements have ever been capable of. And we know that this transformation has provided a fertile field for the growth of new religions, the revival of old ones, and the development of new therapies. In short, it has brought us into a New Age. Let me explain.

In the early 1960's, the birth control pill became widely available. This brought increased attention and acceptance to contraception and family planning. It also reduced the pregnancy risk for those wishing to enjoy sex outside marriage and allowed women more control over their own bodies. In short order we saw family size in the developed nations shrink, sexual freedom expand, and the women's rights movement rise to social prominence. Today, majority values about sex outside marriage, marriage age, family size, population control, and the place of women in society are very different from what they were prior to the sixties.

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But the revolution isn't over. Today we have the new birth technologies: in vitro fertilization, sperm and egg banks, the ill-fated surrogate parenting, and soon, advance selection of the gender of one's offspring. Such developments force a whole host of new moral and legal dilemmas upon us - requiring, once again, the development of a changed set of moral standards. We will think differently tomorrow because of the technologies we assimilate into our cultures today.

Biotechnology is another developing area. This includes genetic engineering, patenting of new life forms, cloning, and possibly trans-species hybrids. With these developments, the features of each life form will become capable of modification. One benefit will be that genetic diseases, normally treated again and again in each generation of an afflicted family, will now be wiped out of the line altogether. Like some communicable diseases, some genetic diseases will be brought to extinction. With nearly the same license that we have manipulated machines in the past we will soon begin to manipulate organisms. There can be no question that this will have an incalculable impact on our values about life and about the quality of life.

Recent developments in medical technology have already forced a plethora of new ethical issues upon us. In fact, we have come so far that professionals now disagree on when a person comes into existence and when a person actually dies:

Does human life begin at conception, at the appearance of brain waves, at birth, or some time after? What we decide affects our views concerning the freezing of embryos, the rights of such embryos, fetal adoption, a mother's prenatal care obligation, the atmosphere in the birthing room, the selective nontreatment of defective newborns.

Does human life end with the death of the heart, the death of the brain, or the loss of "significant life?" What we decide affects our views on hospice, living wills, and euthanasia. It also forces us to decide in the future if it is OK to use comatose individuals as "living" organ banks or, as Dr. Kavorkian advocates and I oppose, harvest death-row inmates for their body parts. Medical technology is daily changing our values concerning human life.

Global satellite communication has made the world smaller

and has increased public interest and involvement in international politics. We can now watch a war, or a democratic revolution, as it happens, and from both sides. And we can see how actions taken in one place affect the environment in some other. The slogan, "Think globally, organize locally" sums up much of the resulting politics. And through the video cassette recorder and cable TV, individual choice in information gathering has been enhanced. No longer do people need to get their ethics, their esthetics, or their politics from a common source. The existence of alternatives and options in almost everything can limit the influence of mass propaganda.

Then there are computers. Through desktop publishing, computer owner can become a publisher. Home computer modems make possible individual information-gathering on a global scale. In short, private and individual choice is also enhanced through the computer, as much as is the power of individuals to invade the privacy of others.

Space travel is changing our goals. We will, in time, no longer be limited to this globe for our pursuits and interests. Colonies in space will - as have all colonies in human history - bring into existence alternative societies and novel ideas. Different visions of life's purpose will emerge.

Meanwhile, startling fossil discoveries of our evolutionary ancestors are giving us an increasingly clearer view of who we are and what we are about. The irony is that these discoveries are coming at a time when we are developing the capability, through genetic research, to change the very natures we are just coming to understand.

The conclusion is clear. Technology changes society and changes values. We find ourselves today in the midst of an incredible transformation - one that is wreaking havoc on our culture.

Because so many people cannot deal comfortably with the moral dilemmas raised by the new technologies, one reaction has been a backlash. This backlash is a repeat performance of past reactions to change. In every age where the old ways were uprooted by new technologies, there were those prophets of conservatism who sought to put the genie back into the bottle. During the industrial revolution, for example, orthodox preachers fumed from the pulpit against the new machines. Congregations were told that God never intended his children to travel as fast as a steam locomotive could take them, and that people were in danger of losing their souls if they sneezed

while aboard such a swiftly moving conveyance.

But another reaction to our modern revolutions has been the creation of new religions and therapies that - in one way or another - play on the excitement of changing times to offer ever more outlandish concepts. Whether we're dealing with the pseudo-technologies of pyramid power, psychic surgery, or channeling; or the self-help strategies of meditation, aural reading, or Scientology processing, phenomena generically labeled "New Age" have affected the thinking of millions.

Again, this is not new. During the period of major transformation at the dawn of the Middle Ages, a mass of new religions sprang up to capture the public imagination. The same thing happened again during the early part of the Industrial Revolution. Exciting times bring exciting ideas - and anxiety. And fast on the heels of anxiety are new therapies promising a cure. That's why we have a New Age movement in today's "age of anxiety."

It isn't enough just to know this. It isn't enough to merely understand why such things happen, to say to yourself: "Golly, that's too bad, I guess people really go nuts during changing times. It's a good thing I still have my wits about *me!*"

What is needed is *action*. Humanism should *thrive* during changing times. The Humanist alternative to traditional belief should be vigorously promoted in a way that answers the nagging questions in the minds of the people. For it is in Humanism that we have one of the most revolutionary and beneficial philosophies there is, its advocates having waited a long time to witness the dislodging of the old values - and yet nothing happens. Humanists, of all people, have been the slowest to leap into the breach, to capitalize on the changes occurring in the public mind-set. Yet the opportunity is ready-made for just such an entry.

Proof of this can be found in the rapidly surprising growth of the New Age. Contrary to the way many Humanists think, the New Age is not merely some new superstition to replace the old. Though it certainly has its share of nonsense and foolishness, which Judith Goren referred to as the trash at Niagara Falls, it also has many important parallels with the Humanist philosophy. Just to restate the point made by Beverly Earles, let me list a few ideas that are shared by many followers of the New Age and by almost all Humanists.

Rejection of the notion of a jealous and punishing god.
Rejection of the dogmatism of fundamentalist
Christianity.
Rejection of religious angst and feelings of guilt.
Strong belief in the power and significance of human
beings.
Acceptance of a concept of human evolution.
Interest in mental self-development.
Recognition of the joys in the here and now, particularly
in relation to food and sex.
Support for global and ecological thinking.
Flexible and excited interest in new ideas.

More could be added, but this will provide an adequate sampling to demonstrate that a significant percentage of the North American population is ripe for a number of the ideas Humanists have been advancing for years. And though Joe Chuman argued persuasively that these people are *not* our audience, this only refers to the hard core. Many followers of the New Age turn to it not because they are inclined toward superstition, but because the New Age is the only show in town.

This, then points up the problem, the reason why those initially attracted to the New Age haven't found a better home in Humanism.

Of course, a few have. But the absence of an effective publicity campaign by Humanists has prevented many more from making the discovery. And those who somehow do manage to stumble upon a Humanist organization, often find themselves either in a den of anti-religious nay-sayers, or in a loosely organized and ill-defined political caucus. There is rarely much offered for the serious seeker of happiness and the good life. Sure, there's an occasional pulpit homily about living better, but that's a far cry from intensive classes, self-help study courses, and organized therapeutic retreats.

As a result, the word "Humanism" more often conjurs up in the public mind images of windy Manifestos, Bible bashing, and intellectuals lecturing endlessly about reason, science, and civil liberties. While Humanism indeed involves all of these things, it's also a philosophy of joy, personal fulfillment, and emotional liberation. It's a philosophy that can bring peace of mind and self-mastery. But heaven forbid that we should ever tell anybody! Is it our darkest secret?

Do we prefer to engage in purely intellectual discussion, to

prove, for the umpteenth time, that mind-body dualism is a myth? Yet, after we've proved it, do we do much with the information? Do we now more fully enjoy and celebrate our bodies? Our feelings? Our senses? Do we live our values like the New Agers do? or do we just cerebrate and verbalize as we sit relatively motionless, for hours on end, bodies flagging into a slumbering stupor while our frontal lobes fire off neurons at full tilt? And do our heads drift a little to one side, and indicate that our marbles have now come to rest in the left hemisphere of the brain?

The reason the New Age promoters, the growing Yuppie mega-churches, and even the evangelicals have been able to benefit from changing times while Humanists haven't is because Humanists too often look down upon efforts to make Humanism *personally* relevant and emotionally satisfying.

The time has come to get serious about applying Humanism to the basic needs of people: to healing the hurts, sharing the joys, and expanding the horizons. The time for lopsided "left-brained Humanism" and Humanists who have become "God's frozen people" is past. We have a rewarding and balanced philosophy that we can teach, in a warm and loving way, to our fellow Human beings. We will not be so arrogant as to *impose* it, but we can be caring enough to *share* it. Up to now, we have selfishly kept it to ourselves and our small circle of friends.

The next century will be the humanistic century only if we change our ways, open up, and reach out to others. And our outreach must appeal to them not only intellectually, but also emotionally, aesthetically, sentimentally, and even physically. The most successful Humanist groups around the world do this. For example, during my travels in India I met with Humanists who were active in counseling battered women, rehabilitating criminals, providing birth control services, even teaching humanistic dances.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Humanist organizations have been able to attract 50% of the non-believing population, including large numbers of young people, to the Humanist movement. Since non-believers represent a sizeable segment of the general population in that country, this amounts to as much as 20% of the Dutch being involved with Humanism in some way. How have they done it?

Part of the explanation lies in their multi-faceted approach to Humanism. The Dutch realized early on that human beings,

even humanistic human beings, are not simply (to use Beverley Earls' term) intellects on legs. People are also social, physical, and emotional beings who are interested in activities that appeal to their aesthetic, gastronomic, muscular, and jocular sensibilities, to name a few. So the Dutch developed a wide range of programs that invited interested people to pick and choose as they wished and contribute as much or as little as they liked. They offered a smorgasbord, and it worked.

A glimpse of this success has been seen in the United States with some chapters of the American Humanists Association, some UU Churches, and some Ethical Culture Societies. These have broken through the limited lecture/discussion program model to also program outdoor excursions, music, gallery tours, celebrations, and a lot more. Their programs are held at various times and on various days to appeal to more people.

When a group of individuals have gone to all the trouble to create a building to house their Sunday services, it is a shame to let that building stand idle the rest of the week. Yet so many churches, liberal and conservative alike, do this. Just think of the increased participation that might result from wider use of the facilities. Just think of the new members to be recruited. Who knows that these other activities might not even eclipse the Sunday morning services altogether? For many secular Humanists, that would be a welcome development!

The public center that appeals to a variety of Human impulses is an organizational model for the future. Most successfulliberal and conservative churches are now moving in that direction and it is making them more effective competitors in the marketplace of ideas. If humanism is to have a place in tomorrow's world, Humanist organizations in the United States will have to adopt this method wholesale.

And they will have to develop study-courses, programs, and one-on-one interactions that provide actual therapeutic benefits to people. There are individuals out there suffering guilt and anxiety because of traditional religious indoctrination. Humanists can help them. There are people who already have outgrown such beliefs but who have nowhere to turn in times of trouble. Humanists can help them. There is a vast audience for self-help books of all types, an audience made up of people who want to be more effective, more organized, more motivated, and to feel better about themselves. Humanists can help them too.

It is entirely consistent with the Humanist philosophy to teach the good life as envisioned by Bertrand Russell, a life motivated by love and guided by knowledge, a life of reason and compassion. Lloyd and Mary Morain talked about the good life in their book, *Humanism as the Next Step*, when they wrote:

As a starting point let us take the idea that this life should be experienced deeply, lived fully, with sensitive awareness and appreciation of that which is around us.

This was the first of their seven key ideas of Humanism. They elaborated further, saying:

Back through the centuries whenever people have enjoyed keenly the sights and sounds and other sensations of the world about them, and enjoyed these for what they were - not because they stood for something else - they were experiencing life humanistically. Whenever they felt keen interest in the drama of human life about them and ardently desired to take part in it they felt as humanists.

Referring to this attitude as "zest for living," they were following the lead of Bertrand Russell who, in his book *The Conquest of Happiness*, referred to *zest* as "the most universal and distinctive mark" of the happy individual. People with this quality, Russell argued, are those who come at life with a sound appetite, are glad to have what is before them, partake of things until they have enough, and know when to stop.

Humanist organizations need to promote this joyful living. They need to offer classes and courses, videos and home-study guides, books and periodicals, support groups and get-togethers. And Humanists need to understand that the good life can't always be promoted directly. There are barriers to people discovering how to live better, road blocks that hold people back. And it is the breaking down of those that is required before the positive expression of Humanism can be fully realized.

Humanist organizations need to offer programs that help people liberate themselves. The most successful program of the American Humanist Association works along these lines. It is called Rational Recovery, a substance-abuse program for people who are fed up with the traditional religiosity and

frequently addictive nature of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. It is for people who want a *rational* approach to ending chemical dependence.

This program is successful because it meets a crying human need. It helps people in trouble and it helps them grow. The *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, leading TV talk shows, and numerous other publicity channels have given the program massive free exposure. And the results have been overwhelming. Jack Trimpey, the founder of Rational Recovery, has been overwhelmed with responses that keep his phone ringing off the hook daily. He and his wife had to leave their old jobs to devote full time to this program. And the day-before-yesterday, Jack came to town here to participate in a seminar for psychotherapsts conducted by Albert Ellis and the Institute for Rational Living.

AHA chapters, UU churches, and others have gotten behind Rational Recovery to make it one of the fastest growing Humanist endeavors in the country. It shows you what can happen when Humanism is applied to meeting emotional human needs in the here-and-now. But this is only a beginning. There are so many areas of life where an applied Humanism could make a real difference. And in doing so, begin to supplant the powerful influence of the New Age movement. It could begin to do for people what the New Age only *promises* to do.

One subject that is ripe for a popular Humanist program is that of the American tendency toward feelings of guilt. As one learns in Anthropology 101, there are guilt cultures and shame cultures. Well, this country in many ways is a guilt culture. The episodes with Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart are adequate testimony to that.

But Humanism is a philosophy of liberation that can act as a counter to such tendencies. Humanist organizations could be recognized as centers where people come to find inner freedom. Humanists are among the first to recognize that people are not perfect, that all human beings commit mistakes, some intentional and some accidental. But Humanists also recognize that guilt and remorse are sometimes non-productive or even counter-productive.

For example, if we have done wrong, we know we should rationally seek what action we can take to remedy the problem or make amends. If nothing can be done, we can try to learn what we can from the experience so as to avoid repetition in

the future. But we understand that it is hardly productive to wallow in our own self-pity, condemn ourselves, punish ourselves, or live the rest of our lives as though we are undeserving.

Yet so many do this. Were it not so, there would not be the popularity of guilt-oriented religions like conservative Christianity. In ancient Israel, the collective guilt of the tribe was symbolically placed on a goat and the scapegoat sent out into the wilderness. But with the coming of Christianity, Christ became the scapegoat for the sins of the individual. His death was to free all those who believed in the guilt of past actions. The "saved" thought of themselves as "washed in Christ's guiltless blood," and fully pardoned for their transgressions.

This symbolic blood-sacrifice is an intellectualized version of a primitive scheme for expiation of guilt. As long as humans have lived in societies they have often sought to invent such schemes. Guilt is such a painful and disorienting emotion that society cannot function if it is allowed free reign.

Yet such guilt expiation schemes accomplish no real good. The wrong has still been done. This leaves the thinking person in a quandary. Since no ritual can undo an actual wrongdoing, should the thinking person continue to feel guilty? Many would say "yes". But this would render that person less efficient than the one who has a superstitious schema. Suddenly the twin goals of honesty to oneself and rational living seem at odds.

But they are not. We know that the initial awareness of wrongdoing reminds us of our error. However, such feelings are not ends in themselves. They are goals to productive action. Such action is to remedy what can be remedied, or to perform in the future in a fashion that will avoid a repeat performance. But once the appropriate action is taken or resolve established, it becomes apparent that there is nothing more that needs to be done. And if one feels a sense of wrongdoing about something that is not actually wrong, then the appropriate course is self-re-education, not remedial action or resolve.

But think how much people waste their lives in useless replays of past wrongs. And those who cannot face their wrongs squarely, and have no guilt expiation scheme in which they can believe. They resort to repression and other efforts to forget what they did. Such actions distract one from a meaningful pursuit of individual goals as much as outright guilt can.

The past is to be neither forgotten nor dwelled upon, but learned from in the interests of better living in the present and future.

This, as I see it, is the Humanist message as applied to this kind of human suffering. But you'd never know it to come to one of our meetings! It's not something we like to talk about. And if we have successfully dealt with our own inner pain, that doesn't foolishly mean we want our Humanist meetings devoted to helping others deal with theirs. So nothing gets done. And those pained by irrational guilt and anxiety turn to their nearest New Age practitioner, or visit their local church or temple, in hopes of finding that solace the Humanist failed to offer or give.

We needn't define Humanism exclusively in abstract and intellectual terms. It can be an emotional thing as well. And, what's more, one shouldn't have to be an intellectual to be a Humanist.

Let me repeat that: *One shouldn't have to be an intellectual to be a Humanist.* Every so-called "intellectual" is a human being too. It is perfectly legitimate for Humanist organizations to promote an expression of Humanism that would appeal to people of other interests. What would be wrong with a more emotional Humanism?

I remember speaking to one woman who I found to be in general sympathy with Humanist ideas. But she told me she still liked to go to church. So I suggested that she consider the Unitarian-Universalist denomination. Her response was interesting. She told me that she had tried them already. I asked her if she had found herself in disagreement with them. She said "No." "What's the matter, then?" I asked. And she said, "There's no excitement there. I don't *feel* anything!"

There are millions of people like her - people who are Humanists but who aren't intellectuals - people who have liberal attitudes, but want some excitement, some emotion, some (how shall I term it) religious adventure.

And that's what the New Age offers - religious adventure for people of tolerance. Just think of the fun and the exciting things New Agers get to do. First, they get to go on a great journey of self-exploration. Second, they get to make thrilling discoveries that can increase their happiness - sort of like going on a treasure hunt through inner space. Third, they get to participate in invigorating ceremonies and unifying rituals. In short, for the New Ager, philosophy is fun!

Well, I think Humanism is fun, too. I think there are Humanist voyages of self-discovery. And there can be ceremonies that express Humanist ideals and principles.

Perhaps most intellectual Humanists won't be interested. But that's OK. I'm not saying this New Age expression of Humanism is for everyone - anymore than a purely intellectual Humanism is for everyone. All I'm saying is that the Humanist movement can become broader without abandoning its principles. It can appeal to the non-intellectual or non-political individual without sacrificing any of its intellectually-discovered conclusions.

So I say, yes, there can be a New Age Humanism. But by "New Age Humanism," I merely mean a popular Humanism; a Humanism that reaches out to people where they are; a self-help Humanism; a Humanism that is fun, is exciting, is full of adventure and self-discovery - and which doesn't require a Ph.D. or membership in Mensa.

If you think such an approach will get nowhere, consider this thought. What if Christianity had only appealed to intellectuals? Would it be the world's most popular religion today? Or would it survive only in learned enclaves, easily overpowered by the far more popular forces worshiping the one and only crucified savior, the dead and risen Adonis.

The Roman Catholic Church appealed to both intellectuals as well as to ordinary people. That is part of the secret of its success. The New Age is increasingly emptying the same. Humanism stands on firmer ground than either. But it lacks popular support. That popular support is there for the asking. Humanists need to apply their philosophy to the meeting of "human needs." Humanists need to speak in ordinary language.

It is only a matter of time before Humanism fully comes into its own.