Editor's Preface

Sunday morning at 11:00 is America's most segregated hour, according to one of Martin Luther Ling Jr.'s favorite aphorisms. Forty-five years after he first uttered those sentiments, much of the religious world at worship is still monochromatic. We humanists and UUs could make a telling point of this, except for the fact that both our movements are themselves overwhelmingly white and upper middle class. In an increasingly diverse society though (and certainly both UUs and humanists represent major deviations from the norm) the important question for all organizations is not so much whether you are diverse, but whether you are nimble and savvy enough to react to the diversity constructively.

More than thirty-five years ago, Bill Jones gave UUs and Religious Humanists a significant set of tools with which to react: the grid of oppression, and the infamous question of whether the deity of "whiteanity" was complicit in American racism. The question is a complex one, and I leave it up to the eight respondents whose thoughts appear in this issue, plus Dr. Jones himself, to fill in (some of) the details.

Six of these good folks gathered at the Annual Luncheon Meeting of HUUmanists last June in Fort Lauderdale, along with an audience of 150 or so, to fete Bill, and to renew yet again the conversation to which he has made such significant contributions. The event proceeded with good humor—imagine the ethical contours of a world in which the chickens we eat so freely were armed—and deeply serious reflection on the impact of racial and economic repression.

To introduce the panelists' remarks, we have two sermons delivered by UU ministers Carolyn Brown and Matt Tittle, providing, along with their own appreciation, both an overview of Jones' work, and some of the commentary and criticism it has engendered.

Panelist Sharon Welch weaves an affecting mosaic of the study of oppression among and with less affluent mid-south whites, allowing us to see the clash of values and assumptions between the liberal academic world which in many ways defines both humanism and UUism, and some of the people, on behalf of whom, we so often claim to labor.

Anthony Pinn speaks of continuing and widening the seminal work of Jones, all the while waiting for the sequel, only to discover that it was being lived out, rather than written down. He ties Jones to the human and humanist work of self-realization.

True to this, the three other presenters focus heavily on Jones' personal influence in their own lives, as well as his intellectual contributions. In this lies a lesson for HUUmanists, I am convinced: that our stories, told with and about one another, are as important a factor in our sense of community, as any program or issue. We thank Mel Hoover, Norma Poinsett and Archene Turner for their openness, both in their presentations, and on these pages.

We thank also, Bill Sinkford, who used the occasion to once again issue a challenge to HUUmanists, to examine to what extent we are complicit in anti-Christian expressions that he sees in UUism. You will recall that the last great surge in HUUmanist interest and membership came in part, in response to Bill's call at the beginning of his first term as UUA President, for our Association to find a common language of reverence. To sort out the legitimate and constructive parts of that call from what many saw as an attempt to move UUism beyond humanism, has occupied much of our thoughts and actions since. Now we are asked to look at not only what role generic religious language might play in our self-expression, but also specifically, whether the liberal Christianity that is (part of) our history, and part of the current diversity of UUism, has a claim on us.

Just as we cannot ignore the issue of race because there are so few people of color in our

ranks, (in fact that particular lack of diversity is precisely why race remains such an important focus) so too we cannot just dismiss the question of liberal Christianity, and whether there are subtle and not-so-subtle forms of oppression being practiced against UU liberal Christians, just because their world and ours does not often seem to overlap greatly.

One valid response to Bill's challenge is to wonder aloud (and I hereby invite some future contributor to do so at greater length) just what form oppression can be said to take when the power differentials are nowhere near as clear as they are on the racial issue for our entire nation. UU Christians are a clear minority in our movement, but they have connections to, and take in part their identity from, the dominant (often clumsily so) religious majority in this society. UU Humanists, on the other hand, while a clear plurality, and possibly still a majority in our movement, count ourselves as a faction within a far, far smaller national demographic, the roughly 10% of the US population that self-identifies as Humanist/skeptical/secular, and which still struggles for status and acceptance.

Part of that struggle recently has been the phenomenal success of, and subsequent critical response to, a string of best sellers about Atheism narrowly, and the wider secular movement generally. Books by the so-called Four Horsemen—Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens—have helped to raise the secular point of view to something approaching, well, not quite respectability, but perhaps genteel notoriety. Jim Farmalant, in a piece first printed in the March, 2008, German humanist/freethought journal, "Aufklärung und Kritik," gives us an extended review of the literature, concentrating quite thoroughly on Harris and Dennett, the two less well known polemicists in the quartet. Along with shorter reviews of Dawkins and Hitchens, Farmalant includes a brief coda on Greg Epstein's vision of the New Humanism.

Finally, while much is being made, appropriately this year, of Darwin's 200th birthday (I've been splashed across the front page of the second section of the local daily twice recently, impersonating Charles) and the 150th anniversary of the publication of "On the Origin of Species," we will celebrate between these covers a less noticed sesquicentennial—of Mill's "On Liberty." Yes, John Stewart (no, not *that* John Stewart!), master of the run-on but incredibly straightforward sentence.

I read Mill, I find, with a constant intake of breath—amazed that despite his profligate use of commas and colons, I am still with him. I edit Mill (well, just this once) with a trembling hand, amazed that I dare to take *anything* away from an author who proposes, successfully—to give us the near complete history of political and religious liberty in a few dozen sentences (OK, some of them *are* pretty long sentences).

I have dared to remove only those passages that related overly to the tenor of his age, and to place in addition, a few more paragraph breaks than he did, so as to let you breathe. Few philosophers write with Mill's quiet insistence that he has qualified things sufficiently to get the matter exactly right. Few readers disagree, See if it is not so.

—*Roger Brewin*