Humanism and Me: A Case History

by Nathaniel Lauriat

The "lyrical theism" of Sam Eliot's time (1898-192?) had, like the Cheshire cat, evaporated until only the smile was left. World War I did not shake it, but the Great Depression (1929-41) certainly did. That revealed the advanced decay of the economic/social substructure of Unitarian faith. Consciously or unconsciously that faith rested on the assumptions that all good is dependent on the doctrine of private property; salvation is by personal character; God is a WASP whose primary residence is in Boston.

Ed: Nate Lauriat entered UU ministry in 1945 using, as he put it "a (very) liberal Christian language. Closely examined it was actually a humanism." He served five Unitarian and UU congregations and as President of Five different Districts. He also had terms on the UUA Board and the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. He died February 22nd, 2004 at the age of 81.

I was born (eighty years ago) a 19th Century Boston Unitarian—raised with King's Chapel School of Religion and Arlington Street Church service every Sunday morning from age 5 to 17. It all seemed natural, good and right as part of an unusually happy family and a comfortable upper middle class life.

After an excellent education in the Brookline MA public Schools I went on to Harvard College. There a major in English Literature backed up by a basic understanding of the history of Western Civilization gave me a good introduction to the ideas and attitudes of the West as then understood. Harvard Divinity Dean Willard Sperry's humane modernism confirmed my inherited preference for Unitarianism. I managed to avoid science entirely, though I had many friends studying in the sciences.

Moving to Meadville (before it was Meadville Lombard) in September 1943, I encountered a new world. When I knocked on the heavy wood door of Meadville House, suitcases in hand, it was opened by a 6' 2" chap from Texas wearing not only blue jeans but also a denim work shirt and cowboy boots. I said, "Hi, I'm a new student here." He replied: "You're that guy from Boston; you're a damned theist; we don't want any theists here, we're all humanists!" and shut the door in my face! I knocked on the door again, he opened it again, and I stuck my foot in it and got in. I like to end the story by saying, "I graduated; he didn't."

Until the previous June, rumor had it, the two tables in the Meadville House Dining Room had been segregated into Humanist and Theist with very little contact between them. But the most intense combatant had, fortunately, graduated. My class, though split, was able to have civil and worthwhile dialogue.

The congregation loved, it, especially the first part, and from them I learned the pain that traditional faith and practice could cause. I had no more use for popular traditional Christianity than they did, but it bored me to hear it endlessly denounced.

For that congregation the core and the appeal was atheism in the particular form: "There is no such God as described in popular Christianity." I thoroughly agreed, but having never believed there was, I was seeking an alternate positive faith.

I did not find it in the preaching, but I did find it in the people, in Ed Buehrer himself, his

admirable wife and his two beautiful daughters. The rest of the congregation were good people, above average, so far as I could see, despite their lack of theological sophistication.

Charles Lyttle was the Humanist on the Faculty. He was quite elderly and past his prime as a teacher. His required course in Unitarian History started with the Stoics and never got past Priestley. His own faith seemed, to be an l890ish optimism of Science and Democracy. Jim Adams became my chief mentor and brought me into the 20th century, as neither Harvard nor my family's faith had. Henry Nelson Wieman had not yet become the guru of "creative interchange." His one idea at that time, was "Not the created good, but the Creative Good," which is not a bad form of theism.

I had the rich opportunity of a tutorial with A. Eustace Haydon, one of the original Humanists. He was a sweet man, broad in his sympathies for the human beings who invented the gods in which he did not believe. It was Winter Quarter and, at our weekly meetings, he left the windows wide open so the pigeons could get at the feed he liberally provided on the windowsill. Sometimes we had to sit in our overcoats! I wrote a paper for him on three converts from 1920s skepticism to traditional religion (T.S.Eliot, C.S.Lewis and Aldous Huxley). He returned it with the note, "I know nothing of these men, but your paper sounds good. A."

For fieldwork I was assigned to Third Church where Ed Buehrer had recently become Minister. Ed was still in his "refugee from orthodoxy" phase. As I remember it (quite possibly with exaggeration) Ed would talk for thirty minutes on the errors and evils of Christianity and then in five minutes say, "Of course, if what you mean by God is…" or "If you see Jesus as... " and give a stock summary of the Unitarianism I had grown up in and found increasingly inadequate to the times.

The ubiquitous Ed Wilson managed to stop by Meadville fairly frequently and we had become good friends. What strikes me (if my memory is correct) is that he grew up in a thoroughly respectable suburban Boston Unitarian church but still became the chief Humanist of his time. On reflection I believe he thus represented the main line of Unitarian development in the first half of the 20th Century. The "lyrical theism" of Sam Eliot's time (1898-1927) had, like the Cheshire cat, evaporated until only the smile was left. World War I did not shake it, but the Great Depression (1929-41) certainly did. That revealed the advanced decay of the economic/social substructure of Unitarian faith. Consciously or unconsciously that faith rested on the assumptions that all good is dependent on the doctrine of private property; salvation is by personal character; God is a WASP whose primary residence is in Boston.

There was no God, prayer, Bible, Jesus or Christianity in our family life at home, though there was a very heavy dose of most of them on Sundays. They actually were regarded as outmoded expressions of truth, to be handled respectfully, especially out of consideration for the unenlightened, but they were not central to the faith as then practiced.

Emerson was. But it was the corrupted post-1865 Emersonian-ism that was followed. They kept the personal, natural intuitionism of Emerson, but replaced the decidedly mystical "Oversoul" with a "scientific" evolutionism. Even worse, they converted "Self Reliance" into Social Darwinism (the survival of the fittest) to justify their superior position. This is all quite consonant with what came to be Humanism except that Humanism substituted a mushy humanitarianism for the Social Darwinism.

This historical development came to public attention in 1947 in, of all things, an AUA pamphlet by Charles E. Park entitled "Why the Humanist-Theist Controversy is Out of Date."[1] Dr. Park was personally and officially the very theist Minister of the very conservative First Church, Boston (1630 and all that). But his strength was in his human insights. Every week he

could get a vital human experience out of even the most obscure of Biblical verses for the Church Newsletter. His point in the pamphlet was simply that the theists were not defending the God that Humanists were attacking and that the Humanists in their assumptions and systems were talking about the same issues that theists were discussing under the heading of god.

Even earlier, in 1943, and more significant, was the Unitarian Advance Statement. This was the product of one of the Committees created in 1937 (when Frederick May Eliot became President of the AUA) to keep the Unitarian Movement from completely expiring, by implementing the recommendations of the Commission On Appraisal that he had headed. Its assignment was to restate the faith in relevant and appealing terms for a new age.

Its main work entitled "The Faith Behind Freedom," was largely, because of its high literary quality, the work of A. Powell Davies of All Souls Church in Washington, I suspect.

Appearing in the middle of World War II, the document reflects the concerns and anxieties of that situation, but it is a remarkably comprehensive and balanced statement. Three key passages read:

> We believe that religion and life are one and that the spiritual world is part of the natural world…
> We believe that man is a child of earth and of the wider mystery of the universe…
> We believe experience reveals a Mystery more sublime and wonderful than human life and which exceeds our understanding. In this we see the source of mind and spirit. We recognize that each of us must name this mystery as his thought directs, but that the language of the heart has called it God… but we believe that God in human history must think through human thoughts and work through human hands.

This is not only a neat, but also a creative straddle between humanist and theist expressions of faith. As an official AUA document it is entirely naturalistic in its assumptions and affirmations. "God" is left as a possible name for the Mystery and the process. Powell Davies himself went on to write several anti-orthodox paperbacks, and for years seemed to be a rabid humanist, but the publication of his book of Prayers, "*The Language of the Heart*," not long before his too early death revealed how central and meaningful "God" was in his outlook.

We should be careful about taking "God" as a possible term for some aspect of existence we favor. I agree that "God" is a figure of speech, but it is a metaphor for issues so basic and central to human existence realistically viewed, that it should be used with reverence and depth. There are existential dimensions in human experience that elude analysis in words.

As for the Statement, so far as I recall, it sank like a stone and was no more seen. Instead our gifted publicist Mel Arnold milked Earl Morse Wilbur for "Freedom, Reason and Tolerance" as our slogan. The extensive falling away of members after 1965 suggests that the allegiance educed by that slogan was not deeply rooted. Perhaps in these more "spiritual" times the statement will be seen to have more relevance.

So where did I come out? In my own terms as a full-fledged humanist, but on a classic basis, closer to Erasmus and Rabelais than to Dietrich and Reese, both of whom I knew. I start from the great saying of Cicero, "*Nihil humanum mihi alienum*," "Nothing that is human is foreign to me." By this I claim all the accomplishments and advances of the human race and enjoy and acknowledge my great debt to them.

By the same principle I share in the stupidity, suffering and sin of the human race. Adolf Hitler is my brother, too. When I was in school Unamuno's "The Tragic View Of

Life" was in vogue, and the complete absence of that dimension in most humanisms makes them unpersuasive to me whose life has included economic distress and world war.

Personally I call myself "a classic Judeo-Christian." By that I mean the old story: Creation, Fall, Salvation, Paradise. All four of these myths are meaningful to me as a human being and as a humanist. I am a product of forces beyond my control on which I am totally dependent. I am (decidedly) imperfect. I have some good qualities and there is hope I may do better. And I hope that there is a blaze of light at the end of the tunnel of human existence, which will make it all worthwhile.

Not that it hasn't been fun and happy. My life has been so fortunate I sometimes feel guilty. It is not so with many of the human beings I have known and know about. I need my classic Judeo-Christian understanding if I am to be a non-anxious presence in some of the situations a minister gets into. And I need it even more for my own support, perspective, and discipline. I suspect most successful ministers, humanist or theist, worked from some such personal foundation of belief.

I found, as my ministry went on, that Unitarians didn't want to hear even liberal Christian language. It simply did not communicate. So I translated the basic ideas and principles into secular terms, and at least some people "heard me gladly."

Observation and experience of the world have reduced my creed to three words: "Good is possible." It's not much, but it is enough to go on since it gives grounds for hope.

By temperament I am an existentialist, and I want religion as drama, not disquisition. I refer to God as "It" to avoid misunderstanding, but I experience life as a personal interaction. It and I, from my point of view, are playing chess. Occasionally I win. More often I lose. When our daughter died of breast cancer at 28 and when my wife fell dead in my arms from a heart attack, I took it very personally. It was good to have an It to protest to. As Coyote told Web Kitchell, if you don't have a God you have no one to curse when things go wrong. And what would we ever do for release without "Goddammit!" It was also good to have an It to remind me that "Though much is taken, much remains."

My adolescent revolt was against my inherited Unitarian faith, expressed through "Onward and upward, forever." Perhaps I am still acting out that resistance. No rational argument will persuade me that everything is going to turn out all right—or move me to contribute sacrificially to that end. Monday-Wednesday-Friday I believe; Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday I do not; Sunday I am undecided. This is perhaps drama taken to the extreme, but at least it's not boring. And I did complete fifty full years of parish, denominational and community work, so I am not only self-indulgent.

My humanism is first of all to be me. Its second point is to meet you as you, hoping we both get enlargement of self by sharing our experience of and response to life. The third point is to try to be useful to other people and helpful in improving the conditions of existence. Even the best theories come in a poor fourth.

Frankly, we just do not know as much as we think we do. The real issues are still veiled in Mystery. Therefore, as Humanists, we too live by faith—faith in ourselves (which does not come easily) and faith in It. Faith is ultimately a choice, and we can only pray for the ability to make it.

Traditionally faith comes by grace, a gift of the Holy Spirit. But we, good Arminians that we are, affirm we can open ourselves in hope to grace. At our best we humanists—in a thousand formulations—encourage that opening to trust *and* hope. May we widely succeed in that effort!

Notes

1. Charles E. Park, *The Inner Victory; Two Hundred Little Sermons,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1946