Editorial

Nobody Here but Us Humanists

We think it is time to clarify an issue that apparently is confusing many well-intentioned, and some not so well-intentioned, religious teachers today. The issue is the meaning of the term humanism. The spokesmen and spokeswomen for the Moral Majority (which is neither) and other backward-looking groups have now identified their real enemy. It used to be Satan, and then it was "godless communism," and now it is "secular humanism."

It is, we are told, the secular humanists who are leading us down the pathway to moral degradation. They teach evolution, equal rights for women, the freedom of a woman to decide what shall be done about her own body, and the possibility of improving the human condition by human intelligence and community concern. The worst sin of the secular humanists, of course, is that they are allegedly atheists or agnostics. They deny or question the validity of an idea of God that grew up among a single Middle Eastern people some two to three thousand years ago, an idea derived from a collection of documents known as the Holy Bible, produced by those same people in the course of their historical and cultural development. Since the secular humanist denies or questions this particular idea of God, it is charged that he renounces all things holy in human experience and is, therefore, a godless pariah to be shunned by all true believers and theists. One could suppose that nobody had ever had an authentic experience of the divine and transcendent except through the specific revelation claimed by the fundamentalist Christians. One would suppose that centuries of search, meditation, reverent prayer, and affirmation of faith were as nothing if they cannot somehow be fitted into the context of one particular religion and, in fact, one particular way of thinking and believing within that religious tradition. Although these fundamentalists claim to base their faith upon the Bible, their use of Scripture is highly selective, and humanistic values are also derived from the same book.

We think it is high time that people understand the positive meanings and values of the humanist tradition within Judaism and Christianity, as well as within the other major religious traditions of the human race. Humanism is not the same as atheism or agnosticism. Many humanists have been profound believers in God and in the transcendent values within the reach of human experience and understanding. Only a relatively small group of thinkers have tied humanism exclusively to the denial of God, and even they have left the door open for further human experience that may lead them to review at
present negative or agnostic attitudes. To us, at least, this negative aspect of humanism is one of its least important and least interesting aspects. One might call it "the lesser humanism" and distinguish it from "the greater humanism," which is positive, ethical, reverent, and humble before the wonders, mysteries, and possibilities of nature and the human situation.

The classical statement of humanism is in the old proverb, "Nihil humanum a me alienum puto." (Nothing human is foreign to me or my concern.) Another formulation of humanism is in the adage, "Man is the measure of all things." It would be more accurate to say man is the one who measures all things, since humans can only measure things by the standards and measurements known to them and created by them. We have to use the symbols and languages that are available to us. How else can we understand one another? Our own definition of humanism follows these same lines: "Humanism is an absorbing interest in human beings and all that concerns them." We do not know where we got that definition. Maybe we created it ourselves. At any rate, once humanism is seen not as the denial of one expression of the God idea but as a broad and inclusive affirmation of the wonders and terrors, the beauties and possibilities, the powers and needs of human beings, it can be understood not as a sinister force, but perhaps the most important spiritual force for civilization and human development. The humanistic values have outlasted many warring states and empires as well as many warring theologies and dogmas. When humanity's nationalistic or ideological holocausts are over, these values remain to be rediscovered and reapplied in order to bind up the wounds and lead people toward sanity and moderation, justice and mercy, freedom and responsibility again.

The sources of these humanistic values are in all the great cultures of the human race. They can be found in the teachings of Confucius and LaoTzu about the conduct of life, about kindness, good manners, fair dealings, concern for others, suspicion of the instruments of power and domination, respect for the integrity and freedom of persons. They are present in the teachings of the biblical prophets and Jesus, who echoed many of their thoughts. The intimate connection between love of one's fellow humans and love of God suggests an awareness that piety and theism are tested by human considerations of justice, compassion, and love. One might say that Judeo-Christian humanism was born when the prophet Micah asked, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God?" And he answered his own question: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" The test of theism is the way in which it expresses itself in human terms. If your god leads you to oppression, hardheartedness, and cruelty toward other human beings, you should perhaps inquire what sort of god this is, and whether such a god is worthy of belief and worship, to say nothing of obedience. Theodore Parker, the nineteenth-century preacher and crusader against human slavery, pointed out how theistic faith and practical atheism in ethical terms often go hand in hand.

The Greeks, through their great teachers Socrates and Plato, made their contribution to humanistic values by stressing rationality, self-examination,