

# The HUMAN QUEST

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THE HUMAN QUEST IS A  
PLATFORM FOR FREE  
EXPRESSION OF OPINION  
ABOUT OUR DEEPEST  
HOPES, VALUES, AND  
ULTIMATE CONCERNS.

# Is intellectual religion endangered?

By Robert Taff

An interesting discussion had been proceeding on chat pages around a story that I distributed on megachurches and their clientele. Reactions have been quite varied, always interesting, even if sometimes rude (I haven't yet seen requests to "shut up" on any pages I frequent).

Here's a news item:

LONDON (AP) -11-26-2002. Winston Churchill, the resolute prime minister who led Britain to victory in World War II, has been named the greatest Briton of all time in a popular vote conducted by the British Broadcasting Corp .... Churchill edged out Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel on Sunday to win the "Great Britons" contest, which attracted more than 1million phone and Internet votes. Princess Diana came in third ... The other finalists were Queen Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare, scientists Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, naval hero Horatio Nelson, Beatie John Lennon and Oliver Cromwell, leader of England's 17th-century revolution.

Can you imagine Darwin making any list in the US? More importantly, do you see any common criteria linking these 10? That, plus many of our own comments, renews my longstanding vow never to start a sentence "What people want/need is ...."

Our species is too varied, by interactions of both nature and nurture. Some US citizens want a six-pack, time, and a TV. Some want a real war preferably from a very high altitude. Some money, some fame, some pleasures of various kinds. Some want to know what their country can do for them (tax cuts!) while a few still ponder what they can do for their country.

A pitifully small number of us worry what we can do for humanity!

G. K. Chesterton, reactionary British Roman Catholic, used to say that Christianity "hadn't been tried and found wanting, it had been tried and found too hard." Is humanism easy? What makes any of us think humanism (secular, religious, or hybridized) is going to draw millions in the foreseeable future? Few are ready to give up their god(s) who promise them happiness, success, eternal life. Nor are they ready to be marginalized by families, co-workers, friends, and neighbors (if they come out as "ethicalists who are also atheists").

Let's get real! US Christianity is alive, well, and increasingly reactionary in the usual sense of that word. Liberal forms of Christianity, Judaism and Islam (to name America's dominant religions) are being supplanted by aggressive fundamentalisms.

The majority of American voters, never very civic minded, have spat upon the public sphere in ignorance and selfishness. It would be hard to argue that our non-voters hold to any higher values. Thus our federal deficits have already cramped many social programs, and the conference of state governors despairs of greater deficits than at any time since 1945.

Our media are fully co-opted by corporations interested primarily in advertising revenues, and our educational system settles too easily for job-training, even at university levels. Our professionalized sports would have been called distractionary circuses by savvy Romans. Our gun and violence obsessions are notoriously widespread. Our celebrity economy (to use an apt recent phrase) has trivialized almost all the arts.

If this dismal description has some accuracy, what of the vaunted gains of liberals and humanists? Voting rights are abused and unused in many states (not just in the South). Civil rights mean much less without access to quality education. As for

women's rights, wait for Chief Justice Scalia. Civil liberties are collapsing under the rush to "patriotism." Children's rights? Empty without education and health. Environmentalist concerns? Sidelined.

Corporate ethics has become an oxymoron. Serious colleagues regularly resort to such terms as neo-fascism and theocracy. And what little relationship human rights had to foreign policy continues to fray.

At the risk of exaggerating somewhat, let me counterpose what seem to be the two extremes that are being urged for humanism. One is to continue business as usual in much tougher times. The social and political ethics clearly displayed in *Free Inquiry* and *The Humanist* and the *UU World* (to name only our leading three journals) no longer resonate with a clear majority of US citizens. Nor do they resonate with the values of the 2 largest religious denominations (Catholics & Southern Baptists).

Humanists before us may have wished for growth but this was always a secondary goal. And they knew enough US history to appreciate that major ethical, social, educational, and political pioneerings had come from the small denominations of Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Quakers.

Those groups all relied heavily on reason to clarify their stances. They were all, if you will, heavily intellectual. Did they lack emotion? Really! But they did feel that their courage and joy stemmed from their commitments. Never were they compensatory alternatives to the commitments.

Now what is the new stance being urged by some among us? It is variously claimed to represent "the young" and "the women." The new focus would be on more relaxed community building, freed of the tensions of debates and discussions and arguments and essays. It is a

kind of "megachurch envy." Long before the megachurch emergence (which is typically a neo-fundamentalist phenomenon), this low-commitment, low-ideology success pattern had been pioneered by Religious Science, New Thought, and Unity churches. They pioneered a friendly, non-offensive ministry. Theology was minimal; ministerial education was negligible. As for "ethics," friendliness was sufficient. These were places for Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. No profession of belief was expected at joining, and no consensus of belief would be apparent among participants. These have been the places where a vapid New Age "spirituality" could flourish. Any significant ethical explorations would be seen as divisive, disrupting the community of good feelings.

Before humanists of a congregational persuasion move further toward this second style, they should examine the recent decades of the Unitarian Universalist Association. After a failed flirtation with Black Power movements in the late 1960s, the UUA began to center stage a "welcoming" style (regarding sexual orientations). While commending them for their early outspokenness on this issue, one must note that they have been outdone by the Metropolitan Community Churches (who represented conservative Protestantism simply minus the prejudice).

The UUA then began to downplay the predominant humanism of its members and encourage "pluralism" and "diversity." Caucuses emerged for Buddhism, paganism to testify to the proclaimed "freedom of belief."

The current UUA president now says that humanists will "always be honored" for their past role in strengthening the denomination but that their dominance has passed.

Since many of the UUA ministers come from somewhere else (denominationally or in seminary attendance),

any awareness of the actual histories and traditions (and internal battlings) of Unitarians and Universalists has become peripheral. The newest struggle will be whether the UUA will accept a "poly amory" group as a full affiliate. Sadly, all of these changes have not led to any significant growth. Whether the newer recruits to such a changed denomination are any happier or will stay any longer remains to be seen.

My own preferences here must be obvious. I see little gain in inveighing against "old white men." The same charge could be brought against the thinkers of the Enlightenment or, for that matter, the painters of Impressionism. Such gender-inbalancing needs to be understood sociologically and corrected politically. It is surely sexist to argue that women are somehow inherently superior to men as it is to assume the reverse. And, of course, it is racist to imply that nonwhite is inherently superior or even different from white.

Nor am I much moved by calling each other POOGs (pissed off old guys). Indignation has always been the drive of history's liberals whether young or old. Given our commitments to modern science, the most we can say is despite humanity's long-standing sexism and racism, intra-group differences exceed intergroup ones. Reducing those ethical flaws of much of human history will facilitate the nature/nurture interactions that produce authenticity in selves.

Let's be honest. Humanism is not for everybody whatever they may like/believe/want. Its focus is on ethics, and there is a history of commitments that have emerged from that focus. They may appeal to us but they set many or most of our neighbors' teeth on edge. If we play down those ethics, we cease to be humanists. Our goal is to make those ethics more feasible and more attractive to as many people as possible. Our styles need continually to be returned

to achieve those goals and not just to make others more disdainful of us.

A major ethical division in today's world is whether behavior should be based on some ancient text or authority. Qlon reasoned analysis of consequences in terms of human rights and human flourishing. Non-theistic humanisms have chosen the pragmatic alternative as against traditionalists as well as against those postmodern nihilists who argue that different behaviors simply stem from different cultures.

The strength of the humanist stance is its universal utility and its freedom to rethink matters afresh. The emergences of antislavery, human rights, women's rights, political tolerance, scientific freedom, sustainable ecologism, religious freedom, peaceful alternatives to violence and international law have all depended on the rejection of ancient and sacred authorities. While some have reshaped their ancient authorities into endorsers of these modern ethical demands, humanists have more easily modernized.

People's needs are enormously varied. Even humanists' needs. Some of us are activist, some of us philosophical. Almost all of us are communal in that we want to know that there are other heretics like us who share common visions of a more ethical world.

Some of us want an unhyphenated humanism, others prefer a secular or religious modifier. **If** the Humanist Institute had any goal or has any future, it will require less infighting and more awareness of the very hostile climate in which we operate not only in the US but in ~~lllll.ffi c1~~~ developing ~ !...

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