

The Roots of Humanism: Map for a Happy Life

By

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In recent years I have become increasingly concerned about what is going on in the name of religion. I see the scam of the Bible toting Militias, Televangelists, Aryan Nations, Christian Coalition and I appreciate the humanist more and more for drawing the line most clearly between themselves and these extremists. The traditional churches are not that clear—they speak the same languages, emphasize the same book, and even the UU church gets a little fuzzy sometimes. But I am happy that neither the UU church nor the humanist philosophy forces me into believing the unbelievable. At the same time, I have utmost admiration for the whole universe, and I adore to no end the accomplishments of human beings, the totality of human creation in the field of the Arts and Sciences. All of this is truly awesome and satisfies my emotional needs—it is quite enough.

And now I want to talk, first, about the philosophy of Humanism, and then about the history, just how it developed over the centuries ... It all starts with the idea of *Naturalism*. Naturalism says that everything supernatural is myth. There is just one great nature. Nothing supernatural ... There is *Naturalistic Humanism*, stressing the conviction that human beings are part of this great nature too. We are nothing separate. And there is *Humanism*, which has human beings as the focal point ... In my opinion, humanism has two major assumptions as its basis; First: there is no personal God. Second: there is no immortality.

If there is no personal God, who guides directly our lives, to whom can we talk, whom can we blame for anything—then we make and are responsible for our own decisions. It's obvious that everybody needs some help to get through life, but this must come from other people, not from some supernatural force. And with the growth of humanity, we are acquiring more and more responsibility—we are in charge of the whole environment on this earth, and also in the atmosphere and outer space.

The idea of immortality is based on Dualistic Theory, which claims that body and soul (or mind, or personality) are two separate items: the soul leaving the dead body and going to some unknown, quiet place. Humanists follow the Monistic Theory, which holds that the body and mind (or soul, or personality) are one. The mind of a newborn baby certainly is not the same as the mind of an adult. Therefore, it seems that the mind grows, lives,

declines, and dies with the body. Science gives us additional clues. In a recent magazine article, the following question was raised: "Will the Millennium bring ways of downloading the contents of the human mind into a computer?" And it went on: "Our memories, personalities and thoughts are but bits and bites of information. All of those could conceivably be transformed to a CD-ROM. And copied. Or slipped into a robot." There is nothing supernatural about that.

If there is no immortality, if this is our only life, our only chance, then we might as well make the best of it. American philosopher Corliss Lamont says, "The quest for a good life is still the central task of mankind." We do aim for a fulfilled life, a joyous life; the pursuit of happiness is okay. Yet, Bertrand Russell cautions: "In the pursuit of happiness aim low, not to strive in vain for perfection." For those who want to hold on to some form of an afterlife, who want to leave the door open to another world, Henry David Thoreau responded: "One world at a time!"

There are other important principles in humanist philosophy: Reason is certainly one of those. We have this tremendous capacity to think, and we want to use it. We want a rational society.

Science and the scientific approach are important to us. This is the way to acquire knowledge ... There is nothing here that would eliminate intuition, emotion, imagination. In fact, I'm convinced that many of the greatest scientific discoveries involved a heavy dose of imagination.

Creativity is part and parcel of a fulfilled life and therefore a key ingredient of this philosophy.

Democracy, in other words, a free and universal society, is the preferred political system because it gives the best opportunities to the most people.

Social Passion is a prerequisite of humanism. "Men who are good by reason ... desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind," says philosopher [Baruch] Spinoza, and "Passion without reason is blind, reason without passion is dead." And this leads to the good stated in the *Humanist Manifesto*: "A shared life in a shared world." Bertrand Russell went as far as saying that patriotism and nationalism are our enemies.

Now I want to come back to the idea of God, which has so many meanings it has almost become meaningless ... Many humanists want to acknowledge some kind of God, sometimes called First Cause, Prime Mover, Sustaining Principle, Providence, etc. Although they recognize scientific principles, they think that something had to get it all started. This,

of course, doesn't explain what got this God started ... The humanists who deny the existence of God simply say that the world has always been here. In either case we have the concept of eternity, which is difficult if not impossible for us to understand. This reminds me of a story that [our minister] Bill Houff has brought to us:

There was this lady who told her professor that he was all wrong with his idea of the universe. The fact was that the earth is standing on a giant turtle. "Oh yeah," said the professor, "then what is the turtle standing on?" "On another turtle," the lady replied. But what is that turtle standing on?" "Don't worry," she interrupted, "there are turtles all the way down!"

Those humanists who believe in some kind of god are called Deists. There were some famous personalities among them, such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and many others. Then there is a branch of Religious Humanism (religion adjusted to an intelligent naturalism), which stresses the religious aspects of humanism; and Unitarians might be considered under this label; as opposed to Secular Humanism, which might be represented by Bertrand Russell, who said: "All major religions are untrue and harmful."

Materialism grows out of a very strict naturalism, which says that everything is matter and follows the same natural laws, even inanimate objects. Materialists see the world as one big machine, just rolling along. This leads to *Determinism*, where everything is predetermined.

One of the dangers in any religion or philosophy is that some people will take just part of it and drive it to an extreme, disregarding some of its other tenants. For instance, Marx and Engel developed *Dialectical Materialism*, which became the official philosophy of the Communist Party. And one can go in the opposite direction: if we emphasize that we have individual freedom and individual responsibility, we might conclude that we do not need a government. That's *Libertarianism*. Or one might take only the pleasure part of humanism and become a hedonist ... And so, we have our fringes too. And what they all have in common is that they simply do not work.

And now I would like to go back in history to see where all this came from. So, we go all the way back to the 6th and 5th century China and Confucius. Confucius probably was a true humanist, preaching generosity, peace and friendship and love and life—5th to 4th century BC. In the western world, everything seems to start with the Greeks. And there we have the towering person of Aristotle, the first great naturalist. But just before him and overlapping his life, was Socrates, who established an ethical system and coined the words, "Know thyself," and most of all made everybody think by asking questions. And right from the start we see how dangerous it was/is to be a free thinker. Socrates was forced to take poison and kill himself.

But the really big name in all of western philosophy is Aristotle in the 4th century BC. He made a lot of scientific observations and is considered the founder of the science of biology. But most of all he established a system of logic. All of this together made him the naturalist he was. He was somewhat inconsistent and, of course, a man of his time. He did not object to slavery and thought a woman was an unfinished man. He also imagined an aristocracy of wise men to govern the country. In his old age he felt the pressure from the establishment and thought it was safer to leave Athens. He died soon after he left.

A little more than 300 years later we have Jesus. He cannot be called a humanist, but his teachings are essentially humanistic. Jesus became the greatest free speech victim and martyr for humanity. But it is interesting to note that there is no appeal to reason in the entire Bible.

After that there was not much room for free thinking for a long time. In the 6th century AD, Saint Augustine said, "Cursed is everyone who places his hope in man." The church became increasingly powerful and oppressive, and it was not until the 14th century that counter forces started asserting themselves, which led to the age of the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th century, a transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. That's when people looked back to the golden Age of Antiquity, architecture took on Greek and Roman forms, and there was an explosion of activities in the Arts and Sciences.

One strong movement was called "humanism." This meant mainly the study of ancient languages and philosophies. Its leader was Erasmus of Rotterdam who saw reason as the ultimate guide and promoted "this earthly enjoyment." And he was very interested in breaking the power of the corrupt Catholic clergy. In this way "humanism" became the prelude to the Reformation. The Reformation, however, did not do much for humanism. Martin Luther said: "Reason is the devil's bride and God's worst enemy!" And [Michael] Servetus, who wrote against the idea of Trinity, was burned at the stake on the order of reformer [John] Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. At that time, they preferred to kill by burning because it was less bloody! And so, it was not until the 17th century that some real progress was made.

And then the overpowering intellectual figure was the Dutch philosopher Benedict [Baruch] Spinoza, who influenced all modern philosophy. Spinoza (a Jew of Portugues ancestry) was a very bright young man and started talking and writing about his ideas. He believed in the unity of nature and God and was the first to point out that the soul and body were one and the same. He was soon excommunicated by the synagogue, which meant that he was prohibited from talking to other Jews. And so, he was a very lonesome man, supporting himself as an optician, grinding glass lenses, and with help from some friends. His most important work and one of the most precious in modern philosophy is the book, *Ethics*. He was afraid to publish it during his lifetime. He put the manuscript into his desk drawer,

locked it up and gave the key to a friend, so that it could be published after his death. He said that the Bible stories were myths, and that the Bible was written so that uneducated people could understand it and become God fearing. He said that such stories had to have power, and if Moses had said that an east wind had parted the Red Sea, it just would not have been the same story.

In the 18th century we have the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment. And during this time, the big name in European philosophy was the French writer, historian, philosopher Voltaire (assumed name). He was a very intelligent and talented man, writing almost 100 books. He intended to be a deist like Thomas Jefferson and others but had no personal God. He fought fiercely against the Catholic Church, saying: "Crush the infamous thing!" and was more of an internationalist than a Frenchman. Therefore, he was banned from France more than once, lived in England, Germany, Switzerland and died in Paris in 1778. He was convinced that science and logic would solve all problems and believed in the perfectibility of man, which was a new idea at the time. At the same time, he said: "Only charlatans have certainty." Other words attributed to him are: "I wholly disapprove of what you say but will defend to death your right to say it." On his death bed he received many visitors from throughout the world. One of them was Benjamin Franklin, who brought his grandson to see this famous man, but Voltaire did not receive a Christian burial.

Already during Voltaire's lifetime, a strong movement developed against cold rationalism. The leader of this was John Jacques Rousseau, a radical, romantic man who emphasized instinct and feeling and called for going back to nature as opposed to civilization. This then led to the Romantic era of the 19th century.

Straddling the turn of the century and leading from the Classical to the Romantic period is the composer Ludwig von Beethoven. His life and his work indicate that he was a strong humanist. I must admit that for a moment I asked myself: Are we giving up too much when we lose the religious fervor that seemed to create so many artistic masterpieces? I was thinking of the gothic cathedrals built to the glory of God, paintings as the one in the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo and many more, the glorious religious music by Johann Sebastian Bach, etc. But then I realized that there are plenty of humanistic examples. Shakespeare almost never even referred to religion, he was completely earthly oriented; some of Rembrandt's best works were self-portraits (how humanistic); and then Beethoven wrote the 9th Symphony which ends with a choral "Ode to Joy" celebrating the joy of living and the brotherhood of man. It seems that the artist does what he or she wants or must do.

In 1825 the [American] Unitarian church was founded. The founders were not humanists; however, they gave the right to individual religious freedom. And in 1859 Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, which gave humanism another boost. We also have three major philosophers who straddled the turn of the century from the 19th to the 20th. They are

John Dewey, a religious humanist, particularly influencing education; George Santayana, a materialist; [and] Bertrand Russell, a secular humanist.

I want to come back to Santayana, but first let me say a few words about the *Humanist Manifesto 1*: In the 1930s a group of ministers and philosophers wanted to make a definite statement about what the humanist philosophy is. They ended up with 15 carefully crafted paragraphs, which was signed by 34 people, more than half of them being Unitarians. One of them was John Dietrich, who earlier (1911 – 1916) was the very successful minister of the Unitarian Church of Spokane. However, twenty some years later, he felt that it was too rationalistic and that he preferred more emphasis on intuition and imagination. In the 70s a second Manifesto was proposed and published. But since this is a massive and evolving philosophy, it is most difficult to fix it at any one point.

And now back to George Santayana, who really fascinated me, probably because he was so human, a complex man, somewhat in conflict with himself and with society, and displaying a certain amount of ambiguity. He was also a poet. He was born in Madrid, Spain, but moved with his family to the United states when he was 10 or 12 years old. He was a bright and sensitive young man and soon, at age 27, became professor of philosophy at Harvard University. In his early fifties he moved to England and later to Italy, and he died in Rome in 1952.

He observed that every culture known to us was the work of aristocracies, and he was not convinced that a democracy could accomplish that. At the same time, he noted that aristocracy leads to tyranny. He hated the chaos and indecent haste of modern life and was sad about the ugliness surrounding us. He strongly believed in reason, wrote the books *Reason and Common Sense*, *Reason in Society*, *Reason and Art*, *Reason and Science*, and his best work is probably, *Reason and Religion*. He said: "Reason is no foe of the instincts; it is their successful unison." He felt fear created gods, yet loved the Catholic Church for its beauty, and he regretted that he could not be a simple believer any longer. What he liked most was the image of the Virgin Mary, so much so that he had pictures of her and other Saints hanging in his office. Somebody joked: "Santayana says there is no God, and Maria is his mother." Of course, he took the stories in the Bible as myths. He was convinced that the Jews did not take their stories literally, but that the Europeans, with less imagination, considered them erroneously science; and that was the biggest mistake in western theology.

And there you have it, humanism in a nutshell.