

SOME REFLECTIONS THE HERITAGE OF HUMANISM

by Joseph Blau

Thank you! Thank you all for this award. [Distinguished Humanist]

In the wake of the annual orgy of award ceremonies, we have all learned that a proper acceptance speech begins modestly with an expression of the honoree's obligations to others. I, too, begin with words of gratitude to others—to you who have seen fit to name me to this honor, you who are here for this occasion—and to many others who have influenced the course of my long life. I can speak by name of only a few of these others because they are most important to me. They have "made me what I am today."

Especially, before I speak of anyone else, I name the most important of the living influences on my being what I am. My wife of nearly half a century, Eleanor W. Blau, has not only encouraged and influenced me in all I have done since I first met her, but she has also actively participated with me. The award to me honors her as well.

I try very hard, not always successfully, to avoid being the kind of oldster in whose conversation (private or, as now, public) the words "in my day" occur frequently. But I do want to tell you about the critical period in the year 1925 that started me off on my way to Kalamazoo—it took me just sixty years to get here! I was sixteen that summer and had completed one semester of the then-current Contemporary Civilization course in Columbia College, and had enrolled for the second semester in the Summer Session. That was the summer of the epic "monkey trial" in Dayton, Tennessee. I had, of course, heard of Charles Darwin; his books, as well as those of T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer and John Fiske, were on my father's bookshelves, and their names had registered on my memory in my high-school classes. But the impact of their work, the Darwinian Revolution, had not hit me until that summer. The selections we read for the work of the class were given vitality, even urgency, by the duel that took place between William Jennings Bryan, on the witness-stand for Fundamentalist Scriptural literalism, and Clarence Darrow, cross-examining Bryan as part of the defense of John T. Scopes, accused of violating the Tennessee statute that banned the teaching of any scientific theory that contradicted the biblical story of creation, literally accepted. To most of you here tonight, this story is remote, if not ancient, history. For me, it is part of my autobiography, a living reality. My youthful indignation at the legally correct, but intellectually skewed, decision in this case led to the "radicalization" of my religious views.

Some years later, my studies in the philosophy and history of religions, with, especially, Herbert W. Schneider and Horace L. Friess, led me *both* to an academic career as a professor of philosophy and of religion, *and* to a continuing personal dedication to liberal religion, as represented both in the Ethical Culture movement and in religious Humanism. These commitments, in turn, fed into my involvement for the past forty years with the current

Humanism Today

problems in the maintenance of full Jeffersonian-Madisonian freedom of religion in the United States. Ultimately, also, it is these commitments that have led to my presence here as one whom you have seen fit to honor.

This work in which I have been engaged for sixty years did not start with me; and it will not end with me. It has been carried forward by many heroic individuals; in our Western tradition, such early Greek philosophers as Democritus, Socrates and Epicurus espoused views akin to those of modern Humanism. They differed from us, chiefly, in lacking the scientific knowledge that enables us to dispense with the traditional God-idea. Their infant science required a source of power outside of nature, but, like their successors, the deists of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, they conceived of nature as passive, requiring a "mover." Even so extreme a thinker as Lucretius, in the first century before the common era, retained the gods in his superb didactic epic, *On the Nature of Things*.

What I am trying to suggest, in these few statements, is that it is by no means the case that modern Humanism has no ancestry. Our movement has a very distinguished intellectual ancestry, certainly in classical thought; and its continuity in the Middle Ages is revealed to our eyes by the close study of the occasional accusations of heresy leveled against some members of the caste. With the Renaissance of the fifteenth to seventeenth century, however, a Humanist movement once more became evident, chiefly among the more educated classes, in European thought, I speak not so much of the literary return to classical, Greco-Roman models, although it is arguable that this literary Humanism, too, as well as the clerical and academic types, represents a reaction against the other-worldly, god-centered universe of the medieval Church.

Scientific knowledge had begun to emerge from its medieval cloak in Italy in the thirteenth century. Yet from the thirteenth to the late eighteenth century, God remained a necessary hypothesis. We, in our time, have benefited from the emergence of scientific knowledge since the thirteenth century. We are the heirs of the Renaissance. Modern science begins with Bacon and Galileo and their like in the seventeenth century. We owe a great deal to Newton, but because he retained the God-hypothesis, many of us are more sympathetic to Pierre Laplace, the French astronomer and mathematician. Laplace was more advanced than most of his contemporaries in Europe or America.

There was, however, a group of intellectuals in all the western world, including the new United States, who were more "advanced" scientifically, but whose religious views still needed the "hypothesis" of a creator-God in order to get the whole business of the universe into operation. The "God" of whom they spoke and wrote was not the personal God of tradition, but rather an intellectual device for getting things going. For the most rational this "*deus*" was as impersonal as the starter of a motor car.

In addition there were those among our predecessors of the early days who were even more extreme. I have a special fondness for Elihu Palmer who founded the "Deistical Society of the State of New York." Palmer's major work was *Principles of Nature: or, a Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species*. " In this work, and the

few smaller works by Palmer that survive, we find ourselves in an atmosphere in which we, as Humanists, are almost comfortable.

In addition, there were a number of our predecessors, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the United States, who saw, even more clearly than we do, the dangers that lay in a union of church and state. Surely the eighteenth century witnessed a widespread revolt against the union, a revolt in which our Humanist generation is still involved and concerned.

Many of the leaders of freethought in the early nineteenth century were members of a "large group of immigrants from the British Isles who swarmed into America after the Panic of 1819." They included Robert Owen and his son, Robert Dale Owen and Ms. Frances Wright. They had, also, a number of American co-workers of whom the best-known included Abner Kneeland, Thomas Hertell and, for a time, the mercurial Orestes A. Brownson, who ultimately became a dissatisfied Roman Catholic.

Another of Brownson's passing enthusiasms was for the Transcendentalist current, best known for its expressions in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. Religiously, however, its finest expression is to be found in Theodore Parker, whose mature ministry saw the development of his "manly theology," or, as we might say, religious Humanism.

In 1859 Charles Darwin published a work that had occupied his attention for nearly thirty years. This book, *The Origin of Species*, and its successor volume of 1871, *The Descent of Man*, presented a well-grounded scientific case for the evolution of the human race and other modern animal and plant varieties. From a moral and religious point of view, Darwin's biological system led to a vision of humanity that could reach out toward its ideals, a rising humanity, rather than a fallen humanity. Under the influence of the Transcendentalists and of Darwinian science, scholars developed the social implications of evolutionary theory; and religious thinkers like Francis Ellingwood Abbot, founder of the Free Religious Association and editor of the influential religious journal, *The Index*, building on the work of earlier philosophers, developed the Humanist implications of Darwin's scientific leap forward. There were degrees of radicalism among those who joined with Abbot's Free Religious Association. Not all of his co-workers were in total agreement. Some were more radical, like Octavius Brooks Frothingham. Some, like Felix Adler and Lucretia Mott, had their own special agendas. Some like Isaac M. Wise were Reform rabbis. They were all devoted to a rational religion.

Mutatis mutandis, the causes for which the Free Religious Association stood were those that we now associate with the groups that constitute the religious Humanism of today. We stand in their lineal tradition. They are the causes that liberal religionists have maintained and supported throughout the past 2500 or more years. We are fortunate in the twentieth century to have this long historical tradition on which we base our own active participation in seeking out the things that matter most to humanity and to its future.