

## DEVELOPING A HUMANISTIC CALENDAR

*by Frederick Edwards*

While some Humanists seek to settle the question of which dates and observances are most appropriate to Humanism, I prefer to work in the opposite direction, to *unsettle* the question-to *broaden* the issue. Because we have not yet explored all the options, it is too early in the inquiry for us to etch Humanist holidays in stone. And so I have taken it upon myself to explore these options and place those I discover in a growing Humanist calendar—a calendar that is at once a datebook, Humanist "calendar of saints," almanac, and appointment reminder. Such a calendar can then be a fruitful hunting ground for those seeking to experiment with new ideas for Humanist holidays.

In developing this Humanist calendar, I have gathered information on six major types of events. They are:

1. Celebrations of major traditional and ancient religions
2. Ongoing astronomical events
3. National and international holidays
4. Birth and death dates of significant individuals
5. Relevant historical events
6. Dates of forthcoming events

Though not all of these dates are going to be celebrated or declared Humanist holidays, they do make valuable entries in a published Humanist calendar. This is because they can often be of use to humanistic groups that are planning meetings, publishing articles, seeking topics for discussion, or organizing publicity activities. They are also of educational value for the person using the calendar, helping a times to put a number of matters into perspective.

Let us, then, look at each of these categories one-by-one and see the relevance they hold for Humanism and Humanists.

*Celebrations of major traditional and ancient religions.* These celebrations connect us, better than anything else can, to our roots. When one looks on traditional and ancient religious observances from an anthropological point of view, one comes to see the significance these observances played in the lives of the people who participated in them. Though we as Humanists do not believe in many of the things held as true by ancient and modern faiths, we still share a common humanity. And it is the thread of that humanity passing through these observances that interests us.

Many traditional and ancient holidays relate to the changing of the seasons. For the Spring it is Easter and Passover. Christian Humanists might practice a humanized Easter while Jewish Humanists might observe a humanized Passover. But Secular Humanists might prefer to observe the date that both of these traditions seemed, through calendar errors, to get wrong—the date of the Vernal Equinox. It is the week in which this astronomical event falls that has been voted by the Board of Directors of the American Humanist Association as World Humanist Week. The day itself

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has been dubbed by many modern and New Age Groups as Earth Day. The celebrations of this time of year vary among Humanists, with some following ancient Roman and other early customs by having egg hunts and feasts, others following more current traditional religious practices, and still others developing wholly new ways of celebrating the feeling of rebirth and joy that Spring seems to bring.

The Summer Solstice does not appear to bring with it the same holiday spirit as flows from the Vernal Equinox. I know of no major religious traditions here and no one I know has bothered to unearth any ancient ones. But many Humanists feel this is as good a time as any to throw a party or hold a picnic, and so that is often what they do. This all ties in with item number 2, the celebration of astronomical events. It can create the feeling of getting back in balance by renewing touch with nature. How this sort of celebration will make any sense when engaged in by people living on space stations or in colonies on the moon is a problem I will leave to Humanists who find themselves one day in this predicament.

Autumnal Equinox or the beginning of Fall fares little better when it comes to traditional or ancient religious holidays. Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur come about this time, but there seem to be no universal Christian observances. The closest event of general observance is Halloween a month later. The astronomical significance is lost by then, but the seasonal significance is clearly there, since all the attractive signs of Fall are present to be enjoyed. If one objects to Halloween, one can wait just one day and observe the ancient Druid Harvest Celebration November 1. To some New Age people, a pilgrimage to Stonehenge seems to be in order at this time.

The Winter Solstice is perhaps the most popular time of celebration. Major ancient cultures had significant festivities during this season and so does our modern culture today. As with the Christian Easter, so with Christmas, much that is associated with the holiday is of non-Christian origin. In the early American colonies, most Protestants would not celebrate Christmas because it was viewed as a Popish and pagan holiday. This was why Washington's troops didn't object to attacking the Hessians on Christmas morning after crossing the Delaware. It was just another day to them. Only in the 1800's did the holiday begin to become what it is now. Northern European customs were introduced into this country and across Europe during the massive immigrations of that century. These non-Christian customs came to be seen as a way to make Christmas palatable to Protestants, who objected more to the Roman Catholic elements of Christmas than to the pagan ones. It was a way that Protestants could celebrate the holiday too. And so various individuals set out deliberately to fashion a secular observance for the season. Thomas Nast in this country developed the secular Santa Claus, whose official clothing colors were later supplied by the Coca Cola company in their advertising. Charles Dickens, without so much as a bow to the Bible, infused the notion that this was the season to help the poor and unfortunate. It was a new idea for this season. Gift giving was resurrected from various religious traditions, including the Roman Saturnalia and the Jewish Hanukkah. And then all the northern European tribal trappings, from yule logs to mistletoe, were thrown in as a

garnish. If ever there was a successful modern attempt to create a secular holiday upon the foundations of ancient religious traditions, this was it. It has since become the merchandisers' dream.

Humanists, then, will often find the Winter Solstice a time of good cheer, and a way to let their children open all their presents early! Had not Julius Caesar erred when making his calendar, and Constantine not adopted it without change, Christian children would be able to open their gifts sooner, too.

Connected with the celebrations of traditional and ancient religions are *ongoing astronomical events*. The connection is to be expected when one recognizes that most ancient observances were related to nature and the elements. But there are other astronomical events that have not usually been celebrated, such as the days when the earth is closest to and furthest from the Sun (Perihelion and Aphelion, not to be confused with the Solstices, which relate only to the tilting of the earth).

Less frequent astronomical events noted in both ancient and modern times are solar eclipses and the return of Halley's comet. If ancient superstition has looked upon these events with fear and foreboding, sometimes followed by rejoicing, this is no reason for present-day Humanists, the wiser for modern science, to turn up their noses. Eclipses and comets are at least an excuse to throw a party. Even more should be expected for a supernova explosion—they come so rarely. But now let's move ahead to *the celebration of national and international holidays*.

Among North American national holidays that Humanists can celebrate without comment are the U.S. and Canadian thanksgiving days. Actually, the U.S. holiday can have special significance to Humanists because the oldest continuing religious congregation in the United States is that of the First Parish in Plymouth, the church the Pilgrims founded. You see, this church today is avowedly Humanist. Though it has no affiliation, it proudly quotes from documents of the American Humanist Association in its literature. The members see this as perfectly consistent with their Pilgrim roots. However, one can visit the Plymouth Town Square where the church is located and see next door where a faction of disgruntled descendants of the First Parish broke away in the early 1800's to form their own church, denouncing via a plaque on the front of their edifice the evil doctrine of Unitarianism that had so seduced their bretheren.

International holidays of interest to Humanists include the founding of the United Nations and the founding of various branches of the U.N. by famous Humanists like Sir Julian Huxley, Brock Chisholm, and Sir John Boyd Orr. When critics wonder where there are examples of Humanist charity, here is where we can point with pride. For this reason, celebrations are in order.

From ancient tradition, one can celebrate July 23, the date of the First Olympic Games in 776 B.C.E., linking it to the modern observance and the hope it carries of international cooperation. A modern new tradition is the

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celebration of International Women's Day on October 8.

*Birth and death dates of significant individuals* should next be considered. On the matter of birthdays, one can think of many. In ancient times there was Euripides, Socrates, Epicurus, and Seneca. (Epicurus, in his Will, directed his followers to celebrate his birth on the twentieth day of every month.) The Renaissance brought us Petrarch and Erasmus. The Age of Enlightenment gave us Spinoza, Diderot, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Paine. The nineteenth century gave us Ingersoll, Twain, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Darwin. Our own century provides Albert Einstein, John Dewey, Margaret Sanger, and Bertrand Russell. Among the living we can name the AHA Humanists of the Year, in particular one whom we all hope is still living, Dr. Andrei Sakharov. It is with these people that we begin to develop a Humanist "calendar of saints".

Of particular interest to me is the forthcoming 300th birthday of Voltaire. This will occur November 21, 1994, nine years from now. This gives all Humanist groups plenty of time to plan a worldwide celebration, work within their individual countries to secure the issuance of Voltaire commemorative postage stamps, arrange for the reprinting of the complete works of Voltaire, arrange for articles on Voltaire to appear in publications worldwide to renew interest in the enlightenment, and many other things. We can begin now to celebrate his birth annually as part of the buildup effort. What a vehicle this could be for the wide dissemination of Humanist ideas. It would be the ultimate in the celebration of the life of a Humanist "saint. "

Of course, what calendar of saints would be complete without martyrs. And Humanism has its share. Socrates immediately comes to mind, as well as Bruno and Servetus. We can think of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and so many others. The dates of the martyrdom of many humanistic individuals are known and can be duly noted and appropriately observed.

*Relevant historical events* form another class of calendar dates. I have divided these into the following four categories:

1. Anniversary dates of important events resulting from the lives of significant humanistic individuals
2. Anniversary dates when anti-humanistic individuals met a deserved fate
3. Anniversaries of positive and negative historical events of importance to Humanists or Humanism
4. Anniversaries of events or mythical non-events that Humanists might find amusing and useful for edifying the public.

To start with the first, it is easy to find events that derive from the lives of humanistic individuals. In one of my calendars I have put down the date Darwin set sail on the HMS *Beagle* and the date Salk announced his polio vaccine. This gives one an idea of the sorts of things to look for. Events significant to Humanism that involved many people include things like the founding of the IHEU (which some Humanists regard as a more appropriate date for World Humanist Day and which closely coincides with the time of

year that NACH normally holds its conference) and the issuance of the first Humanist Manifesto.

Dates when anti-humanistic individuals met a deserved fate are less likely to be celebrated, but sometimes ought to be remembered. Often they don't involve a single individual, for example, the closing of the Holy Inquisition, but are worth noting. Also, infamous historical dates like the bombing of Hiroshima are often remembered so that we do not allow ourselves to forget what should never be allowed to happen again. These are special days of mourning and contemplation, and no Humanist calendar would be complete without them.

On the humorous side are dates of events that remind us of our foibles and the errors of non-Humanists, such as the opening of the Scopes "Monkey Trial" on July 10, 1925, or the day the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility was announced—as recently as July 18, 1870. Pseudo-historical non-events are even more fun. It's nice to look at a calendar and be able to declare, "Wow, it was on this day in 8498 B.C.E., at 1:00 p.m., that Atlantis began to sink!" or "Hey, not only is this the anniversary of the creation of the Universe at 9:00 a.m., 4004 B.C.E., but it is also Johnny Carson's birthday!" And who would want to forget the day that Lazarus died for the second time (December 17 in the year 63) or when Mohammed ascended into heaven on horseback (May 31, in the year 632)? Let non-Humanists have totally somber calendars. Our philosophy promotes a sense of humor.

*Dates of forthcoming events* make up the most practical use of a Humanistic calendar. To the extent that Humanist groups are capable of notifying other Humanist groups of the dates of their conferences and special observances is to the extent that a universal Humanist calendar can be developed that will promote ecumenical Humanist participation in the various activities of organized Humanism. Events not strictly related to Humanist organizations, but of interest to Humanists, are another area. This would apply to special demonstrations and rallies. A most recent one that could have used more Humanist involvement was the action by abortion rights groups to hold a speakout. Networking through effective inter-communication would be necessary to make any Humanist events calendar workable.

A Humanist calendar is an evolving thing. As we learn more about our roots, gather more information about birthdates of historical personages important to us, pin down the dates of historical events in history of our philosophy, and promote greater cooperation between Humanist groups, the calendar will grow and become increasingly useful. Even though the AHA will not issue a formal calendar for 1986, I continue to collect dates. We are publishing this information bimonthly in the AHA membership publication *Free Mind*. In this manner, dates of forthcoming Humanist events can most easily be included. I encourage your input in helping me gather and provide more information on the holidays, observances, and dates of interest concerning Humanism.