

## THE LITERATURE OF HUMANISM

by John Hoad

In addressing the topic, I first asked myself how I would define it. Does it mean: Writings by Humanists? Literature suitable for Humanists? Literature promoting Humanism? Or literature that informs our Humanism? I settled on: Literature that informs and enriches our understanding of Humanists-as read from a Humanist perspective.

The first task then is to define "Humanist Perspective." My attempt at a definition would run as follows: Humanism is a way of stating that our perception of reality is always an exercise of human construing; that is, that religion, art, science, are all human representations of reality. Otherwise put, Humanism is a paradigm of conceptual leverage on reality that places the fulcrum of conceptual leverage inside the human mind and human experience. Humans can only know humanly: we can only process reality within human frames of reference. To unpack this further, one would have to say more about the selective criteria by which we would determine what a "human frame of reference" can only process reality within human frames of reference. To unpack this further, one would have to say more about the selective criteria by which we would determine what a "human frame of reference" can and cannot encompass. But that is the task of a different discussion.

Also, the topic is being discussed within the setting of a conference in which Humanist leaders and leaders-in-training are sharing their approaches. To be more comprehensive in one's approach, it would be necessary to go further into the way in which Humanist leadership is a function of a "culture" and partakes of "representativeness" and "symbolism." Josef Pieper in "Leisure the Basis of Culture" argued that our ceremonies arise out of pauses from the work by which we survive, the pauses being used to reflect on and celebrate the rest of life. Arthur Grimble in "Islands" drew the parallel between a Pacific islander and a Roman Catholic missionary as they sought to ensure the safe passage into the next life of persons for whom they felt a responsibility. Does that kind of representative responsibility continue to be a part of Humanist leadership? The question will be addressed further in the Humanist Institute. Here we need only note that the reading of the leader will have a representative quality: When a member says of a leader, "He does a great deal of our reading for us"-this is what is at work.

I would suggest four areas of reading as important to the Humanist leader:

1. WINDOW ON THE WORLD. This literature is the stuff that keeps us aware of what is going on in our world, read not to turn us into political specialists, if that's not our ballpark, but to make us aware. What we choose may change with the years. My own selection includes *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post Weekly* edition, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *New York Review of Books*, and so on. Don't neglect the comics and cartoons for their insight into human nature and for their tremendous impact nationally-witness Trudeau's recent embroilments, or Bloom Country.

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2. SCIENCE LITERATURE. My long-ago Professor of Soil Science, Professor Fred Hardy, may have been too specific when he asserted that "every educated person should have Arthur Holmes' *Physical Geology* on his or her bookshelves." But we had a point in claiming that we need to be in touch with the world of modern science. We live in an ambience created by science and we need to go beyond simply using its products to having an intellectual connection with that world of thought. I suggest: *Science* 85, *Science Digest*, *Discover*, *Natural History*, the *Smithsonian*, *Audubon*, *Science News*, *Scientific American*. Maybe one will have a favorite author: Lewis Thomas, Stephen Gould, Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov. It is important that Humanists allow their philosophizing to be inclusive of the insights and discoveries being made about both human nature and the universal reality that surrounds us. Melvin Konner's *The Tangled Wing* speaks of "biological constraints on the human spirit" and it would be exciting to listen in on scientists from different disciplines sharing with us clues from their fields as to what *Homo sapiens* can find of meaning in its evolution on this globe.

3. RELIGIOUS LITERATURE. Take your pick: I am very fond of reading in Zen literature. But I would urge one special area of religious reading-what is known as "the Bible:" that combination of Jewish scriptures and Christian scriptures defined as "canonical," that is, paradigmatic, by the synagogue and the later church. But first we must have in place the "Humanist perspective" as the lens through which we read. We now have sufficient "distance" from the Greeks to read and use their literature in a Humanist way-in fact, we can elevate Socrates as a Humanist hero while dismissing the fact that he prayed to his gods, listened to an inner "voice" for guidance, confessed that his career had been guided by a dream, and did his philosophizing in a society carried on the backs of slaves and the subjugation of women. We can learn to do the same relative to the religious experiences recorded in the Bible. We can bring anthropological, sociological, and psychological insights to bear on the understanding of this record of experience by fellow human beings. Embroiled in controversy with fundamentalist apologists and accepting their frame of reference for the debate, we can get no further with the task I am proposing. We need to see the Biblical literature as similar to the kind of thing we would produce if asked to prepare a compendium from American history of literature expressive of the American people. Would we only have nice things in such a collection? Surely, the European invasion of already occupied territory would be there, and the war between North and South, and the Pentagon papers and the Watergate transcripts, as much as Emerson and Whitman. The Bible is a similar compendium, edited in the light of the ethical religion of the great 8th century B.C.E. Israelite prophets. They made religion ethical. We still need to hear them.

Similarly, when we get beyond the fundamentalist/freethinker controversy, we will go back and study this literature in a new way. Whether there was a historical Jesus or not-I find Wells' case against very unconvincing-there can be little doubt that there was in first century Judaism a tremendous creative outburst of insight into the ethics of human behavior associated with a real or fictional young Jew named Jesus. Humanists would

do well to claim him as much as they have claimed Socrates.

4. LITERATURE OF THE HUMAN IMAGINATION. Annie Dillard in *Living by Fiction* engages in an interesting debate on the way and the extent to which novelists and poets are presenters of the really real. Contending that the theologians have been discredited, that the philosophers are too narrowly occupied, and that the scientists have not taken up the responsibility, where the question of the meaning of human life is the issue, Dillard points to fiction as our source of meaning for today. Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* contends that ethics needs a presumed narrative as a base from which to operate. I think he has a point. So we need Shakespeare and our literary artists to give narrative frameworks to our lives. We can do some rehabilitating of the old myths, but we need new ones as well. And our first successes may come not from finding one narrative that gives us a "grand scheme of things," but several more limited but powerful scenarios for our inspiration. The story of evolution is one such modern myth and it does have a far-reaching application to our understanding of our universe and ourselves. But we still need to fill in the pages with our own creative contribution to the story, giving substance to a fully human ideal.