

HOLIDAYS OF HUMANISM

by Sherwin T. Wine

DO HOLIDAYS AND HUMANISM GO TOGETHER?

That question has been a troubling challenge for Humanism from the very beginning of its "coming out." To many Humanists holidays smack of church celebrations and organized religion. They suggest authoritarian schedules and burdensome rituals. Holidays are the kinds of things the religious enemy indulges. Outside the safe, secular, national variety, like the Fourth of July, they should simply be avoided.

Here lies the problem. Most people, including Humanists, like holiday celebrations. They need them. Holidays are opportunities to reinforce community ties. Holidays are vehicles for ideological affirmation. Holidays are times to express emotional attachments. For most people, even if they did not exist, they would have to be invented. Especially in a world where everybody defines his identity by the holidays he celebrates, there is social pressure for even the most rabid of anti-religious Humanists to develop a calendar of their own.

But we Humanists, even if we are eager to develop a holiday format, encounter many obstacles. We have no old historic tradition of holiday celebration to draw on, no nostalgia-laden ceremonies hallowed by ancestral approval to work with. It takes centuries to produce the power of Christmas, Easter or Passover.

We are notorious individualists, resisting all forms of organization and denouncing all attempts to regiment our behavior. Trying to persuade Humanists on one continent to do the same thing at the same time arouses the anxiety of conformity and regimentation. We are also misinformed rationalists, poo-pooing pagentry and passion, even though there is nothing about either that is inconsistent with reason.

But Humanistic communities without holidays are condemned to the dreary lecture formats that never generated the enthusiasm and solidarity we need. Ceremonial calendars give structure to ideologies. And Humanism is no exception.

In the past, Humanists have dabbled in holidays. Two procedures evolved. The first was a radical reinterpretation of old established religious holidays. Christmas and Easter were secularized. Their traditional justifications were torn away and replaced by Humanistic reinterpretation. Christmas became a secular New Year celebration. Easter found motivation in the emergence of spring. Among Unitarians and Humanists with religious connections, this format remains popular. But, from the Humanistic point of view, it is non-productive. Historic Christian holidays reinforce Christian identity no matter what you do with Christmas or Easter. They will always be perceived as Christian celebrations.

The second procedure was the natural alternative. Many Humanist groups, seeking to find a universal calendar that was unattached to any

religious tradition, turned to the circle of the seasons. The two solstices and the two equinoxes seemed ideal neutral substitutes. They dramatized the natural forces of a natural universe as well as the annual cycles of living. Among avowed secular Humanists and atheists, this format achieved some recognition. But to no avail. In an urban culture divorced from any real intimacy with nature and the seasons, equinoxes and solstices are not very important to most people, including Humanists. Not only do they not mark any significant change in our daily living. They also enjoy no public recognition. And for universalists seeking universal holidays for all humanity, the nature calendar is parochial. What is fall in London is spring in Buenos Aires. A winter festival in the summer is a little less than ludicrous. If the two "historic" procedures are inadequate, what are the alternatives?

If Humanist holidays are to have any chance of success in the Humanist world, they need to satisfy the following five criteria: (1) They cannot be attached to the major holidays of any religious or national tradition. If they are, they will simply reinforce the religious or national tradition with which they are historically associated in the public mind. (2) They need historic depth. The dates of the holidays should coincide with times of the year which enjoy public recognition and which have connection with folk traditions and folk memories, but which no longer have any formal involvement with religious and national calendars. May Day, Halloween and April Fool's Day are examples. (3) The dates should be easy to remember. The first day of the month, since it introduces a new time unit, makes its mark on our memory. (4) The holidays must be appropriately spread so that every important season of the year is represented. A calendar which bunched celebrations together would diminish the value of anyone. And (5) there must be some specific, unique activity which is identified with the day. Christmas trees, Passover Seders, and Easter eggs are things to make and do. They give reality to the days they dramatize. Merely assembling to hear a lecture makes one holiday indistinguishable from the other.

In my own congregation, the Birmingham Temple, we have experimented with a Humanistic calendar of four holidays. None of them is attached to the major holidays of any religious or national tradition. Three of them have historic roots in the Western world, using the reinforcement of folk traditions and folk memories. Each of them has an easily remembered date on the first day of the month. All of the celebrations are associated with a unique activity.

November 1. *World Day*. Although this holiday coincides with the Christian All-Saints Day, its secularized pre-Christian roots in Halloween are stronger in public awareness. Halloween, at least in North America, is very much a part of the popular culture. Coming only a week after the birthday anniversary of the United Nations and already featuring the use of UNICEF cartons for "begging" children, it provides an ideal time to celebrate the Humanist ideals of world unity and world peace. Many kinds of unique activities are possible. Public affirmations of world citizenship, distribution of world (UN) flags, collections of money to aid education and health in other countries (UNICEF) can be dramatic and can involve both parents and children.

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January I. *New Year's Day*. The Roman calendar has become the universal secular calendar of all humanity. In the world of business, science, and professional education, the Roman New Year's Day reigns supreme. From Tokyo to Dakar, it is the uncontested symbol of the emergence of a pragmatic international culture that shares a single way of counting time. Only in the realm of religion and religious politics do the older calendars prevail. The New Year's party is a secular event with almost total popular participation. While Christmas retains its Christian connection, January I has been totally secularized. It's a perfect time for exchanging gifts, re-evaluating past commitments and making new resolutions.

February I. *Humanism Day*. While February I has no historic public reinforcement, it does come midway between November I and May Day, the period of most intense urban activity north of the Equator. Since every organized philosophy of life needs public opportunities when community members have the chance to affirm their commitments to its principles and practices, Humanism Day allows for that affirmation. One of the possibilities for the holiday is an Affirmation Ceremony, in which members of the community who have completed a course of supervised study in Humanist history and philosophy jointly acknowledge their commitments and receive recognition and approval from their community. The ceremony and the holiday become vehicles for intensifying Humanist education and awareness.

May I. *People Day*. May Day is an old pagan fertility festival. It is a minor celebration in the Christian calendar. It is a grand event in socialist countries. For many decades Humanists on the Left made this *their* holiday, their day of identity reinforcement. While it has emerged as a major holiday in many Eastern nations, it is not identified with the national cultures of any one of them. And while it has come to be associated with the politics of socialism in many eyes, it still retains folk memories of Maypoles and traditional ceremonies for many conservative farmers and urbanites. Because it has become so totally secularized for both liberals and conservatives, it is an ideal candidate for a "permanent" Humanist calendar. Calling it People Day allows us to use it to dramatize the Humanist reliance on human power and human reason. Honoring our heroes, the Humanist men and women of international fame who serve as role models for our behavior, is an ideal unique activity for the day. If theists can have their pantheon of gods and saints, we can celebrate our "anthropeion" of Humanist leaders and philosophers. Epicurus, John Stuart Mill, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Margaret Sanger, John Dewey, Erich Fromm, and dozens of others become the dramatic focus on the day. Organized communities need heroes to give flesh to abstract ideas. And they need the opportunity to honor them through public ceremonies of re-commitment.

These four holidays have been developed as effective festivals over the past decade in my community. Two of the holidays, World Day and People Day, have been shared with success with other Humanist communities both within the Detroit area and beyond. Their success lies partly in the fact that they are equally meaningful to children as to adults. They have become family events.

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The success of Humanism as an organized movement in North America depends on many things—a popular literature, media communication, communities of adults and children, and trained professional leaders. It also depends on the development of an aesthetic emotional support system in which a Humanist calendar of Humanist holidays is of primary importance. One of the responsibilities we have as a leadership conference is to help create this necessary calendar. Simply offering a smorgasbord of hero birthdays and event anniversaries is not enough. Holidays only work when they are shared with large number of "co-believers." We have to zero in on one, two, or three celebrations that we as Humanist leaders work together to develop and mentally "push." Whether any of the four I have proposed is chosen is not important. There are many other candidates. What is important is that we choose-and choose together.