

# Humanism and Spirituality

## Joseph Chuman

**DR. GOREN** raises some challenging issues for us, and I am very grateful for the opportunity to respond to her thoughtful paper. In response to her thesis I want to develop several points of my own.

I need to state at the outset that I am in sympathy with her contention that our humanism fails to address basic and deep-seated needs of human beings, which in a provisional way, we can define as spiritual. I also agree that if we are to attempt to build a spiritual dimension into our humanism, then Third Force psychology is a place for us to look. I will say more about this later, noting however, that if we accept this in principle, the challenge then becomes to operationalize it in practice. The overall problem is that organized humanism, in the name of anti-authoritarianism, has eschewed the structures and disciplines by which to maximize the possibility to have so-called peak experiences. In short, how to do it, becomes the issue.

Where I radically depart from Dr. Goren's view is in her identification of Maslovian psychology with the New Age. Whereas there may be some overlap in the thought of some more reflective promoters of New Age ideas, this is not where the heart of New Age interest lies. In fact, it's my contention that the suppositions behind the New Age Movement are essentially anathema to the interests of the types of humanism represented by the constituent groups of the North American Committee for Humanism. This is so whether that humanism

Joseph Chuman is Leader of the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County and an Associate Dean of the Humanist Institute; serves on the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

be defined as secular or religious. In short the New Age Movement has little to offer us save to shed light on the social crises of our times which give rise to such a Movement, especially among those well educated segments of the population who should know better.

What I wish to do is four things. The first is to define and describe some of the presuppositions of New Age spirituality and which I believe are categorically impermissible as a basis for contemporary humanism. My approach here is essentially philosophical.

Next, I briefly want to present some of my thoughts on why I believe interest in New Age ideas has gained currency in our time. My concerns here are essentially sociological.

Then I want to affirm the search for spirituality within a humanistic framework. As implied, my convictions are very similar to Dr. Goren's. Hence I approach a humanistic spirituality with psychology as well as aesthetics in mind.

I will close with some reflections on why I find the political consequence of New Age thinking disturbing and what we need to do to invigorate the political commitments which I believe humanism demands of us.

First I want to make clear where I stand and explicate some of my most deeply held values.

The variety of humanism I represent is Ethical Culture. As with humanism in general Ethical Culture underscores human responsibility in giving shape and meaning to our world and our destiny. But in addition to these broad commitments, Ethical Culture lays out for itself a specific emphasis. As a humanism, Ethical Culture's distinctive focus is on upholding the dignity of human beings. Borrowing from definitions which the German philosopher Kant elaborated, to proclaim that the human being possesses dignity, or worth, is to proclaim that he or she is, in effect, without a price contrary to the way in which we affix a price to a piece of furniture or to any material object. We cannot barter or exchange a human being as we would a commodity.

For Kant, the dignity of human beings, their inviolability - their moral status as ends - is related to the free use of their reason. Unlike other created objects, animate and inanimate, human beings possess reason which can direct them to moral actions. even when their biologically driven impulses and inclinations lead them elsewhere. Our pricelessness, for Kant, is a function of our status as free beings. And our status as free

beings is ultimately lodged in our capacity to use our reason.

But whether we accept Kant's elegant formulation or not, I think that most reflective people would affirm what common sense tells us, namely that our sense of dignity, our capacity to be dignified human beings, is directly related to the responsible use of our reason. In short, there is no dignity in professing what, to the best collective wisdom of the human race, is not so. Our sense of responsibility needs to lead us to the responsible use of our intellects. We would rightfully look with contempt or pity upon an adult who thought and professed his or her beliefs with the credulity and ignorance of a child, no matter how sweet or pure of heart that person might be. A telling hallmark of responsibility, of maturity, integrity and of dignity is the ripened ability to correct one's assumptions on the basis of experience, both one's own and *experiences which are not one's own*. The refusal or inability to do this is to commit the error of solipsism, or the belief that the outside world is exclusively an object of my own consciousness. It's an error which lies at the heart of what I think is most repugnant about New Age indulgences.

These values are of the utmost autobiographical and personal significance for me. If the religious life means anything at all, it must signify a personal effort to search out the truth and live within a framework of truthfulness. It needs to make striving for personal integrity both in action and in thought the foundation of the of the life worth living, to invoke the Socratic standard. What this means, therefore, is that we must be always willing to bring our critical faculties to bear in order to discern reality from illusion, and truth from falsehood. Can we ever be absolutely certain that we have arrived at the Truth? Probably not. And it is better that way. But it is the effort, the quest, the struggle, to build myself into truthfulness which embodies the religious life. To profess, therefore, what our critical voice upon reflection tells us is not so, is to lapse from the religious project, and by the lights of Ethical Culture, to undermine the very dignity which is the wellspring of our humanity.

To be personal, I left my ancestral religion, not because I believed that orthodox judaism was evil, or because it lacked sociological value. Rather quite the contrary. There can be little doubt that traditional religion is the conveyor of essential moral insights and teaching. As Emile Durkheim and numerous sociologists of religion have observed, religious belief is a

focal point par excellence for the binding of people together into a community replete with the warmth of human solidarity and mutual support. My departure from orthodox Judaism was based, rather, on the fact that I gave my rabbinic teachers requisite respect by taking them seriously. When they declared the doctrine of "Ha Torah min hashamayim," that is that the "law is from heaven," I drew the conclusion that they were simply making a mistake. Their notion and mine of how reality is put together stared at each other across an unbridgeable abyss. Either something miraculous happened at Sinai, or it didn't, and they made it clear then, as their successors do now, that one can't have it both ways. While they would not have stated it in such terms, my religious teachers were defenders of the so-called "correspondence theory of truth," which basically asserts that when we hold an idea true we do so because we believe that it corresponds to some object or event in the real world. If they had proclaimed the divine revelation on Sinai, but had qualified it with the assertion that what they were really describing is poetry, or metaphor, or myth, or a psychological perception tinged with the exuberance of a peak experience onto which we can impress the idea of divine presence, then I would still be there and not here. I am here and not there because I took them literally at that point, just as they wanted to be taken. For me not to do so would have been an arrogant act of disrespect and intellectual imperialism. In short, I take religious conviction and conscience seriously, even as I may dissent from the content of that conviction.

This confession of faith takes me to my starting point with regard to the question of spirituality and the New Age. If the concept of spirituality evokes resistance from humanists because of its identification with traditional religion, it is for initially very good reasons. Those reasons issue, not from matters of sensibility, but rather from matters relating to profound differences in our respective philosophical understandings of how reality is constituted.

Modern humanism is metaphysically committed to various forms of philosophical naturalism. Spirituality, in its traditional employments, reflects a philosophical dualism. What dualism asserts is that reality is constructed of two wholly different substances, one corporeal, the other incorporeal. These two substances can be denominated as matter and spirit; body and soul; earth and heaven and so forth, of which the former is temporal and the latter eternal. Dualism, of

course, provides the justification for the notion of the immortal soul inhabiting a temporal body, as well as the literal reality of disembodied spirits. Within the Christian context, particularly, matter and spirit stand within a moral hierarchy, so that the spirit is superior and pure, matter base and sinful. Note St. Augustine, who explicitly and with due credit based his theology on the philosophy of the religious neo-Platonists who divided reality into timeless essences, on the one hand, and the transient world of matter on the other:

... the death of the body, the separation of the soul from the body, is not good for anyone, as it is experienced by those who are, as we say, dying. This violent sundering of the two elements, which are conjoined and interwoven in a living being, is bound to be a harsh and unnatural experience as long as it lasts, until the departure of all feeling, which depended on this interconnection of soul and body.<sup>1</sup>

My foundational problem with New Age spirituality is that it proclaims a metaphysical dualism with a sense of exuberance and gusto which would have caused St. Augustine to blush.

As I interpret it, the strength of Abraham Maslow's project was that he created a framework for heightened emotional experience explicitly out of a naturalistic framework. His project remained within a this-worldly, non-dualistic metaphysics, and to my knowledge never claimed or even suggested otherwise. Maslow was making assertions of perception, not of fact.

My reading of the New Age is that its basic philosophical premises are totally at variance with the metaphysical claims of naturalism or a naturalistically-based psychology. The so-called New Age is a loosely bound movement, which seems to revel in the dulling of critical faculties for the sake of satisfying a celebrative need for the imaginary, the fantastic, the occult, the esoteric, even the counterfactual.

When I go into New Age bookstores I see presented a broad range of topics including: past and future lives, astral planes, out of body travel, channeling, the power of pyramids and crystals, creative visualization, and all manner of esoterica as far-reaching as fantasy and imagination can take us. Some

1. St. Augustine, *The City of God*; Penguin Books, London: 1984. p. 515.

might also include within the New Age such old preoccupations as astrology, psychokinesis, flying saucers, etc., which seem rather stale compared to more trendy interests. Some veteran activities such as reincarnation and mediumship are nicely reconstructed to support more current interests. From my reading of the texts, it seems that the New Age is preoccupied with making claims for energy fields and forces, which can find no other empirical validation except in the imaginations of those making claims for them. Taking New Age thinking at its word, it seems to be unified by two underlying philosophical assumptions, both of which I have staked my life on rejecting:

The first is that we can turn off our critical faculties and let loose our consciousness to create facts unchecked against a real world if it makes us feel good to do so. It's the indulgence of the romantic impulse gone amuck. And second, and more to the point, when the New Age talks about spirituality, it denotes a literal belief in real, disembodied spirits. Its devotees mean it not as metaphor, and not as a verbal and symbolic description of a heightened emotional or psychological experience. They mean it as fact. In the tradition of Plato and Augustine, reality is dualistically divided into the astral, i.e. spiritual, and physical planes.

The reality of an extramundane realm is a dogma of the New Age, which like all dogmas, is protected and justified by viciously circular arguments: the capacity to be certain about astral planes and spiritual beings is a function of consciousness. Those who are part of the spiritual awakening are those whose doors of perception have been sufficiently cleansed to enable them to commune with the spiritual realm. Those who don't believe in its reality or who maintain a skeptical approach are simply lacking in a sufficiently cleansed consciousness to know where reality is really at. In other words, ghosts only appear to those who are ready to welcome them. If we are convinced by this type of specious and self-serving reasoning, then, of course, we can embrace any belief at all as real and true, no matter how preposterous, infantile or absurd. It is simply immune from attack. If one believes in disembodied spirits, then there is no reason why one should refrain from describing in minute detail their individual idiosyncrasies, their personalities, preferences and moods. Indeed, volumes

of New Age literature seem to be deeply preoccupied with such concerns.

Let me go right to the source, and read to you from a book entitled *The Emerging New Age*, written by a Dr. J. L. Simmons, a visiting professor of sociology at the University of Missouri, St. Louis and a social psychologist. The passage I read from is entitled "A New Age Manifesto."

Every human being has a spiritual essence which, no matter how buried at the moment, is the living force, the "I" within each individual. Consciousness is not some by-product of biological processes; instead, biological forms are ultimately manifestations of consciousness. The body doesn't "have a soul," rather, the soul temporarily has a body.

All paranormal experiences and psychic abilities stem directly from the nature of the spirit or the soul. We call these events "supernatural," but, in fact, they are some of the most natural things that spirits do. Focused on the spiritual plane as we are when these events occur we tend to ignore them, or explain them away as coincidence and imagination. Also, until very recently we greatly underestimated how widespread such experiences were, because people were hesitant to talk about them publicly. This is changing.

... the evidence points to the spiritual realms being more basic and less illusory than the physical plane. Many believe the physical plane will exist long after we are gone, when, in truth, we will exist long after the physical universe is gone.<sup>2</sup>

These premises add up to a sort of manifesto of the spiritual awakening movement. This might all seem like cold comfort to someone languishing in a Central American prison, or a woman on her own, trying to raise two children on a subsistence salary. It might also seem irrelevant to a young, upwardly mobile professional who is on a good roll in his or her career and relationships. But perhaps such situations only demonstrate how stuck and off course we can get. The bottom-line assertion of the New Age is that things don't have to be the way they are.<sup>2</sup>

2. Simmons, J.L. *The Emerging New Age*; Bear and Co., Santa Fe: 1990pp. 15'16,18.

The conclusion, which follows from the earlier premises, illustrates the moral abominations intrinsic to this type of spiritualist enthusiasm.

Of course the more sophisticated argument which New Agers can throw back at their stodgy and skeptical critics is not only that we are kill-joys, but in our embrace of critical thought and the scientific world-view, we, too, are harboring illusions. This argument, which again is predicated on a type of solipsism, has been answered many times by Freud, Karl Popper among others. The response is simply that the scientific method, which rests upon evidence, is open to alteration and evolution when it comes up against frustrating counter evidence. It can absorb new knowledge as intrinsic to its very procedures. Dogmatically held views of the New Age cannot, because what counts as evidence is not impartially and objectively knowable outside of the subjectivized consciousness of individuals.

My conclusion here is that we cannot as humanists hold fast to our sense of dignity, which in the modern world partakes of the critical use of our reasoning faculties and welcome the New Age, which is founded upon an utterly unsubstantiat-able metaphysics and a disreputable epistemology.

But the question remains: Why do so many people seemingly embrace such preposterous notions? Here I will be briefer.

The answer is two-fold. The first has to do with the way in which the human mind is constituted and disposed. The second relates to the justifiable anxieties that people feel when they are part of a culture in decline, which, from a sociological vantage point, is falling apart at the seams. Human beings, in addition to possessing a capacity for reason are symbol-creating, mythopoeic creatures who have a deep need to make meaning of their lives through interpreting their experiences as components of narratives. It is this disposition of the human psyche which is the wellspring of creativity, causes us to resonate with the arts, and is ultimately a basis for the creation of culture. Reason is analytical and critical, but it is this symbolic aspect of mind which rounds out our experiences and gives our understanding of reality a sense of completion and flawlessness.

Our grasp of the world based on sensate experience inevitably contains gaps. And it is the employment of the symbol creating, imaginative faculties to fill in those gaps. Moreover,

our ability to manipulate symbols and project our imagination is often far more intrinsically interesting and captivating than the pursuit of reality unadorned by these projective capacities. Reality can be boring, and so we use our imaginations to create interest and liven things up. This very natural and benign impulse is, again, a basis for art, music, theatre, story-telling, myth and a propensity for exaggeration. It is also a source of religion. Indulgence of our imaginative and symbolic functions is one of the sheer joys of being alive. The problems with the New Age are that it glibly and irresponsibly confuses imagination with fact to an extraordinary degree.

The epistemological excesses of New Age thinking should not lead us to overlook its functional side, as is the case with any system of religious belief. Ideas, no matter how counterfactual, can function in salutary ways. If I am down and out, and lost to drugs and crime, belief in Jesus's love for me may indeed have saving power. By the same token, belief in the efficacy of Ratha's message on how to repair my love life can have a definite functional utility. And like all religions, in their social aspect, commitment to New Age ideas can bind initiates together into a community of shared belief.

This leads to the second reason behind the appeal of the New Age. Here my understanding follows a sociology of knowledge approach. This implies that if we wish to understand broadly based intellectual trends, then we need look at the social structures which give rise to them. There is a complex dialectical relationship between ideas and societal forms. In briefest terms, coherent, solid societies give rise to ideologies which reflect that coherence. Yet our contemporary social fabric is in considerable disarray.

Tragically, we are witnessing the dissolution of families, of neighborhoods and a national polity unified under a vision of a more bountiful future. Moreover, science, rather than being looked to as beneficent genie, is seen as a false prophet of hope. Traditional ideologies of progress and liberalism have died. For many people, especially the middle class, the ideological bottom has fallen out; the fruits of a secular society seem barren and unfulfilling. America's social problems confront us as chronic and stubbornly resistant to meaningful improvement. The result is a deep rooted and broadly felt anxiety. Indulgence in New Age spirituality responds to those socially driven anxieties. It is a function of and a compensation for despair.

Marx penned a beautiful phrase when describing the social origins of religion. He noted that "Religion is the sigh of the afflicted creature, the soul of a heartless world, as it is also the spirit of spiritless conditions."<sup>3</sup> The same observation, I contend, is apt for the phenomenon of the New Age. While Marx's class analysis doesn't precisely apply because the devotees of the New Age are overwhelmingly middle class, the broad linkage between alienating social conditions and desperate and anxiety-generated beliefs, which substitute a wishful world for the real one, I believe, are extremely germane. Marx's observation that "The demand to abandon... illusions... is the demand to give up a condition which requires illusions..<sup>3</sup> applies to the New Age, as to few other mass phenomena of modern life. I should also mention that one of those conditions is an impoverished educational system which has lapsed its mandate to teach critical thinking.

But what are we to do, as humanists, in order to appropriate a spirituality of our own? As I suggested at the beginning I endorse Dr. Goren's program. We need to cultivate opportunities in our private lives, in groups, and within humanist communities for deepening our holistic appreciation of things, our sense of embodied emotions and our feelings of connection with other human beings and all of nature. I have long referred to myself as a religious and not a secular humanist, because for me religion partakes of a deeply felt connection with the broader tapestry of reality as well as a non-reductionist appreciation of the inorganic, organic worlds and human beings, especially.

This last point is relevant, if not crucial to a religious understanding of nature, and when applied to persons, of ethics. I can relate to the external world from either of two perspectives. I can approach it in an analytic and instrumental way in which my purposes are to employ the objects of the external world in the service of fulfilling my interests. Or, I can view the world, and the people in it, to be appreciated on their own terms, not to be appropriated or used, but in the fullness of their own beings. The former position, which I equate with an unembellished secularism, gives rise to reductionism. The latter, suggests a holistic view, and is a basis of religious experience appropriate to humanism and naturalism.

3. Marx. *Karl On Religion*; Padover, Saul. ed. and trans.; McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York,; 1974. pp. 35,36.

Can the religious or "spiritual" view we present compete with the phantasmagoria which comprises much of the appeal of the New Age? One of the reasons we are looking at the New Age is because its program seems to be attracting adherents in ways in which we are not.

Here, I need to inject an element of realism into our hopes. We ought not to see ourselves in a competitive light. People affirm different world-views, including religious and superstitious ones, not only because of education, but also because of temperament. Some people, for reasons hidden in the deepest recesses of their psyches, give free rein to the imaginative and the fantastic, even when it means transgressing the boundaries of evidence and reason. They do this with few pangs of conscience. I, and perhaps most of you on the other hand, are the types of intellectual rigorists who feel that something virtually sacred is violated if we do not observe those boundaries.

The very nature of humanism is committed to honoring the dictates of rational consciousness. A mode of criticism must be an important part of what we are and what we do, or else we violate our basic mandate. At some point that mode of critical reflection must run interference with the part of us which yearns for wholeness and which the symbolic and imaginative faculties push ahead. If I am right, then I don't think that we will ever have the same kind of broad appeal which conventional religions and the New Age possess. Our very critical character partially undercuts that effort.

But let us remember that our society is a vast one with innumerable sub-groups and sub-cultures. Our appeal must be to those very many, I don't know how many, who, I suspect, are temperamentally put together as we are, but whom we have not yet reached. This should be our audience and we can do a much better job in appealing to them.

What should be our appeal?

Let me end by saying that the New Age phenomenon gives us a clue. It is the mirror image of those crises which most ail our society, and it is in the dedication to redress those issues that we need to commit ourselves, remembering again that many may not follow.

The most disturbing aspect of the New Age, I believe, is vested in the fact that it is politically diversionary. We live in a society which is bleeding from a thousand wounds. It is a society which is viciously and dangerously divided along the

lines of race and class. We've created through a self-serving social policy an urban underclass which writhes in nihilism and hopelessness. The fractured character of American society informs middle class and suburban sensibilities, to be sure. The indulgence by many of our most talented and well heeled citizens in the intellectual cotton candy which comprises the New Age, though understandable, is, nonetheless, saddening. Those whose interests are vested in maintaining the status quo could not have asked for anything more. We cannot end poverty by meditating in our pyramids, nor can we end war through creatively visualizing peace. We cannot heal the pains of a fractured society by wishing it were not so, or by communing with departed spirits who blather their vapid platitudes. If there is ever to be a New Age, it's my firm conviction that those who are its practioners will not be the ones to deliver it to us.

For some people their spiritual needs will only be satisfied in reaching for the fantastic and in believing what common sense and the best of modem inquiry tell them isn't so. But for others, who are temperamentally put together otherwise, that need will be met through the contemplation of beauty, through the support and warmth of the human bond, through heightened and exhilarating moments of joy. It will come for many through the quiet satisfactions of expressing their compassion, through striving to live one's life with ethical integrity, and through the support of belonging to a caring community. For many, it will come through investing themselves in the efforts to make this world a better place for those who share with us a common destiny. But community, in the final analysis, is the answer to the spiritual malaise of our times.

There are many people who have these very needs. Their fulfillment is right both in and of itself and will go far in redressing the greatest problems and pains of modem life. In the name of an honest humanism it is our task to go out and find them.