

The Faith Dimension of Humanism

Beverley Earles

WHEN HE WAS visiting New Zealand in the 1930's the playwright Bernard Shaw declared that university students, especially aspiring politicians, should have "a competent general knowledge of the Moslem and Hindu religions, of Buddhism, Shinto, Communism, Fascism, capitalism- and of all the forces which are really alive in the world today." He said that universities which do not teach and discuss these things "are not universities at all. They are booby traps."²

While it is unlikely that Shaw is responsible for Religious Studies now being available in almost all of our universities in New Zealand, his point is nevertheless of critical importance, for it is within the discipline of Religious Studies that one raises the perennial issues of the meanings and values of existence. These issues are raised not simply out of intellectual interest but because they have expressed the loyalties of peoples past and present and all around the world. In philosophy one can spend a great deal of time studying ideas, beliefs and arguments; all three of which may have nothing to do with what really "moves" people and with what matters most to them. In Religious Studies, on the other hand, one studies faith and tradition and faith refers to primary commitment, and tradition refers to the expression of that commitment in all its changing institutions, doctrines, ritual, myths and so forth. In Religious Studies in other words, we study the things which have indeed mattered most to people, which have commanded their loyalty and which consequently have had profound effects on society throughout history. For these reasons

Beverley Earles Ph.D. In Religious Studies With the English Language Program at the University of Arkansas.

² Brian Colless and Peter Donovan, "The Religion of the New Zealanders" In Colless and Donovan eds. *Religion in New Zealand Society*, (Dunmore Press, 1980), p. 14.

we must indeed agree that religious traditions and those activities which fulfill similar roles should have a place in any institution calling itself a university.

Since World War II the study of religion has been increasingly carried out within departments known by the titles of World Religions, Religious Studies, and so forth. These departments are not departments of theology. They do not exist for the study of only one religious tradition and far less are they committed to defend anyone such tradition. Religious Studies has little to do with what goes on in seminaries. Within Religious Studies, it is assumed that students set out to examine the religious dimension of human existence in all its diversity as objectively, as systematically and yet as sympathetically as they can. But (and there is of course a but), the problem is that students of religion rarely examine the Humanist tradition. If they learn about Humanism at all they do so in reference to the Renaissance, occasionally in discussions of the Chinese sage Confucius and perhaps (in passing) within the context of secularisation or a history of atheism.

In the course of my research I made several scandalous discoveries. One of these was in the recently published *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. This Encyclopedia was published in 1987 and edited by the eminent religious scholar of Chicago, Mircea Eliade. In the entry under Humanism in the twentieth century is dealt with in but *one* sentence and the final one at that. The statement is, and I quote, "The humanist way of thinking has remained in evidence into the twentieth century." In 1987 then, there was nothing more to be said about Humanism, nothing more to be said in spite of the following (abbreviated) list of facts: There are Humanist groups in existence that declare themselves to be religious; there are Humanist institutions on every continent except Antarctica and several of these have memberships that way outnumber those of some sectarian groups that scholars choose to study for years on end; the Netherlands and Norway Humanists have the same constitutional status as the churches and receive equivalent and indeed very substantial financial assistance on the grounds that they provide a *Junctional alternative* to the churches. The critical point of this last example is that the Dutch and Norwegian Humanists provide a first class, concrete illustration of the ambiguous reference of "religion" in the secular West. This ambiguity has created much stress and strife within the Humanist movement over how best to describe itself; but it actually presents a much greater problem, one which shakes the foundations of modern Western thinking on faith and religion. It

challenges prevailing assumptions as to what is to be properly termed "religion."

Humanism is not studied by students of religion principally for this reason: Humanists are not recognized as persons of faith. Humanists are not recognized as persons of faith because scholars typically have a parochial understanding of what "faith" and "religion" are. To make matters worse, the scholarly view of "religion" is essentially the popular Western view and a great many Humanists have bought into it. Many Humanists think that they are not religious, many think that they are faithless and consequently their absence from comparative and historical works of religion is not a matter of concern to them. But the problem with all this is that the way in which Humanists, that is, the living in commitment to Humanist ideals, manifestly shares common ground with the way in which committed Jews, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and indeed all committed human beings live. It is this fact that has given rise to the debate between religious and secular Humanists over how best to describe Humanism. It is this fact that won't go away no matter how much arguing and linguistic maneuvering goes on. It really is a great pity that, with the exception of a small group of sociologists of religion and some Unitarian scholars, academics will not touch the problem. If they acknowledge the existence of the problem at all they simply find it too difficult to deal with. It is much less complicated to do more work on ten Moonies in some remote town or more work on an obscure aspect of 14th century Judaism or Islam or Hinduism. It is a great deal easier to get published when one deals with what everyone "knows" is religion.

It is both the popular view as well as the predominant opinion of scholars that a central feature of religion is belief and that an indispensable belief for religion is that there is a transcendent; religion to be religion must include belief in a supra empirical or supernatural reality. Consequently, most scholars have only paid heed to Humanists, atheists and agnostics peripherally, for humanists, atheists and agnostics are non believers in a transcendent- they are religious "nones," as in n-o-n-e-s. As religious nones, they have nothing of importance to contribute to the discussion of religion.

In treating belief in a transcendent as a critical condition for religion, religious scholars have erred, as indeed have Secular Humanists who have done precisely the same thing. What these individuals show is lack of appreciation for the past 300 years or so of Western history. During the past three hundred years we in

the West have been squeezing the other-world, the transcendent world, out of existence. We have become more secularized, or, to put it another way, this-worldly, for secular means "of this present age" and "of this world." We have been squeezing the other-world out of lives through our scientific endeavors and reality for an increasing number is now a space-time continuum, rather than a two tiered arrangement of heaven and earth.

But does this mean that we are any less religious? Does the absence of a transcendent world mean the absence of religious attitudes? No it does not. People who have shifted their allegiances cannot be assumed to be any less *committed*, or any less *faithful* than those who embraced earlier ideas. *Commitment* has shifted with the shift in ideas. It is this that both myself and the Humanist Manifesto expressed, and Religious Humanists have recognized; but it is also that which Secular Humanists do not wish to be persuaded of and which the scholarly world has been largely blind to. As one of our more famous religious scholars, Ninian Smart, once commented, the academics have found it impossible to agree on a definition of religion but they have nevertheless behaved as though the limits of the field were quite clear. In practice this has meant that secular ideologies have been offlimits.³

When I wrote a dissertation on the faith dimension of Humanism it was as much to educate the Religious Studies establishment as it was to appeal to those Humanists who suffer from the same theoretic blindness. Specifically with respect to the latter, I have for instance concluded that either they do not know or else simply do not want to know that one of their heroes wrote about religion functionally and saw it principally in terms of commitment. Here I am referring to Bertrand Russell who, among other things, suggested that religion has fulfilled certain critical functions in the history of the human race and that where *observable* practices and beliefs have differed, the role of religion has remained pretty constant. This is not to say that Russell consistently wrote about religion in this functional manner- he did not. He maintained that human beings need to make supreme commitments (need to have what I have referred to in this discussion as "faith"), in order to have any meaning and hope in life at all. It was to some of the particular *forms* of commitment, *forms* of faith, that Russell objected. It is indeed true that Russell was one of Christianity's most merciless critics but it is a grave error

³ Ninian Smart, "The Scientific Study of Religion in Its Plurality" In Whaling, F., ed. *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* in 2 volumes, vol 1 The Humanities, (Mouton Publishers, 1984.) p.377.

to imagine that his denunciation of Christianity meant he found nothing of value in that tradition as an expression of human endeavor. It is disappointing indeed to hear rationalists and Humanists deliver the negative tirades of Russell on Christianity and religion without showing any evidence of having read any further. Besides being superficial it is insulting to the spirit of free inquiry and disrespectful of the man whom Humanists regard as one of their greatest heroes. Sometimes Russell spoke of supreme commitment using the word "religious," and at other times using the word "philosophy." I do not think he used the word "faith." In his later years, Russell said that he continued to stand by what he had written about religion in 1916 and what he had to say then differs little in essence from the writings in 1918 of Religious Humanist Roy Wood Sellars, the man who drafted Humanist Manifesto 1. As does Manifesto 1, Russell makes a statement about commitment and hope (faith) and how to have it in a twentieth century context. Russell writes that religion can be brought back in a new way to those who, on intellectual rather than spiritual grounds, have rejected its traditional forms. He says that the new religious forms would:

...establish a morality of initiative, not a morality of submission, a morality of hope rather than fear, of things to be done rather than of things to be left undone... The religious life that we must seek will not be one of occasional solemnity and superstitious prohibitions, it will not be sad or ascetic, it will concern itself little with rules of conduct. It will be inspired by a vision of what human life may be and be happy with the joy of creation, living in a large free world of initiative and hope.⁴

Russell in fact saw all this as a return to the older function of philosophy and it is precisely this sentiment which has been echoed more recently by the Humanists Paul Kurtz and Corliss Lamont. Kurtz refers to it as "eupraxophy" that is, practical and benevolent wisdom while Lamont calls it "worthy" philosophy.

In my dissertation of "The Faith Dimension of Humanism," I attempted to show that there is common ground between Humanism and the world religions and that this common ground is ultimate commitment or faith. I deliberately chose to argue my case using those Humanists least likely to be deemed religious by

⁴ Bertrand Russell. "Religion and the Churches" first published in 1916, in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1980.) p. 141.

religious studies scholars and these were the avowedly non religious humanists Bertrand Russell, Dora Russell, Corliss Lamont and Paul Kurtz.

In very general terms my argument went as follows and I should say at the outset that at least some of what I have to say is by no means new to religious Humanists.

When we survey what have been called the Religious Traditions of the world, what do we find in common? Most scholars recognize that there is little to be found in common as far as values, institutions, rituals, beliefs and a variety of other activities are concerned. However it is widely assumed that there is one critical factor shared by all religious people and that is a belief in some kind of supra empirical reality. At this juncture I am returning to a point highlighted in my opening remarks and which must be addressed. And in addressing it. I must say this; the question is not so much whether all religious people have a belief in a transcendent but whether this matters or not for the purposes of identifying religious reality. In other words, what significance, if any, do beliefs, especially belief in a transcendent, really have for identifying religious reality? Suppose we were to find that beliefs are not the most important aspect of the world's religious traditions. Would this not diminish the case for identifying essential common ground through belief? I have already pointed out that modern westerners tend to assume that beliefs are the fundamental religious category, but this is an assumption that is open to question.

In my dissertation, I argued that the scholar who in my opinion has made the most useful contributions to the discussion on religion, faith and belief is Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith is a Canadian and has contributed much to the study of religion at McGill University in Montreal and at Harvard. He is a historian, a theologian, an Islamicist, and an outstanding linguist. Smith has written three very important books, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, *Belief and History*, and *Faith and Belief*. They are essential reading for Humanists.

Smith has engaged in an exhaustive *cross cultural* study of the words "belief," "faith" and "religion," and his findings are of the utmost importance. What I did was to apply them to the Humanist situation. It is difficult to adequately explain Smith's findings in just a few sentences and it needs to be understood that his position is meticulously documented and warrants careful study. Smith has argued that religion originally meant piety, duty and commitment- it did not have a primary reference to belief in a

supreme being. He has also demonstrated with a wealth of evidence that globally and historically the words "belief" and "faith" have been used to describe such commitments. He argues that apart from recently and in but one corner of the world (the Western world), "belief" and "faith" have *not* referred to ideas in people's minds but to ways of living a committed life; the sense of "faith" and "belief" has not been intellectual and static but verbal and active.

I cannot delve into the linguistic details here but I will say this much by way of illustration. The word "faith" was used to translate Greek, Hebrew and Latin nouns for commitment and the word "believe" was used to translate verbs of commitment. In other words, "belief" and "faith" both referred to commitment. The reason we have two different words is simply that there was no verbal form for faith, we couldn't say "to faith" and some other word had to be found. That word was "believe" (which, incidentally, shares a common root with "belove", to hold dear). Among many other examples, Smith points out that "I believe in God" did not refer to "I think there is a supreme being in heaven" (and so forth) and that "Credo" is mistranslated as "I hold certain ideas to be true." When we translate these words in an abstract intellectual manner we are imposing our own definitions onto a situation where they did not, and indeed largely do not apply. (This is also what happens when moderns read the Bible as if it were intended to be a historical account of events in the modern sense of "historical.") Smith forcibly brings this point home when he argues that in the modern sense of "believe," Christians believed *equally* in God and in the devil, but their faith, their commitment, was only to God. Further, says Smith, the infidel in Islam is not the non believer but one who does not respond in *commitment* to the Islamic tradition. In both the Christian and Muslim examples here, the matter of greater significance is commitment rather than ideas.

Smith is saying that it is not that people haven't believed things, it is that the critical part has been the *response* to those beliefs. It is because scholars and (in my opinion) Secular Humanists alike fasten onto belief, particularly to belief in a transcendent as if that were the critical thing that they fail to see the common ground of faith that all committed people, *regardless of their beliefs*, share. To fasten onto belief in a transcendent is to express relatively recent Western cultural biases and to overlook what really matters. It is to fail to understand the commitments of

both our own and other cultures and it is to fail to understand what Humanists are all about.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has persuasively argued that the fundamental category in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religious tradition is faith- living commitment to that which is regarded as true and good and I can argue the very same case for Humanism.

To be a Humanist is to say this: Given that knowledge and values are of human origin, given that we must make the most of our one and only opportunity to live, given that to be human is to be precious, so I pledge myself in commitment, so I set my heart, so I have faith. Anyone can have the Humanist worldview, anyone can for instance have the Humanist *beliefs* that all values and knowledge are of human origin, that we are responsible for making our own lives and so forth. But unless people respond in commitment to the Humanist world view they are not Humanists. No more do other committed persons, do genuine Humanists surround themselves in ideas to which they do not respond.

In the works of Paul Kurtz, Corliss Lamont, and Bertrand and Dora Russell it is the *commitment* that is central. How best to *describe* this commitment is various- religious, secular, and so forth. When I surveyed 27 past and present board members of the American Humanist Association I found that only a few referred to themselves as "Religious Humanists" and about half thought that Humanism was functionally religious. A few listed beliefs as being of greater importance to them than other aspects of Humanism such as deeds and fellowship but all of them affirmed that commitment to humanistic endeavor was fundamental. In my assessment it is this order of commitment which has been called "faith" in the history of humanity.

Faith is something much broader, more basic and more lasting than the beliefs in which it happens to be expressed. A Christian's, Buddhist's, Hindu's or Humanist's beliefs may change out of all recognition during his/her lifetime and Humanists would hope that beliefs do change, though they probably change too little. The point is that while there may be radical changes in belief, yet a person may remain all through it a person of faith. This is why the death of God did not mean the death of faith but its intellectual reformulation and this is why, when someone once asked Bertrand Russell if he would die for his beliefs, he replied, "Of course not." "After all," he said, "I might be wrong."

Beliefs are a mental interpretation of reality, They are essential, we cannot do without them, their value should not be denied

but they are not all. Faith on the other hand is a total attitude and not just a mental interpretation of reality and it is as much a part of a genuine Humanist as it is of any other kind of committed person.

I stated earlier that secularization is the process in which reality is becoming increasingly of this world. What this has meant is that commitments have been shifting from the other-world to this-world and inadequate Gods and ideals have been abandoned. But this is the abandonment of *bellifs*, not of faith. It takes faith to reject inadequate Gods and ideals. It takes faith because one has to reject much that one has taken for granted and in which one has had emotional investment. The giving up of inadequate Gods and ideals takes faith because at its worst it may bring ridicule, rejection by friends and family, and with all of this, enormous loneliness. The prophets throughout the ages have been persons of great faith who have rejected the status quo, committed themselves elsewhere and paid for it, sometimes handsomely. Jesus was a heretic, Gautama the Buddha was a heretic. When Bertrand Russell unfashionably refused to embrace the 1917 Russian Revolution he too was judged a heretic and he lost many of those friends who meant much to him. When Dora Russell tried to encourage genuine dialogue with the Eastern Bloc during the 1950's, the peace movement labelled her a communist heretic and thereby successfully muddied her name for more than a decade. Jesus, Buddha, Bertrand Russell, and Dora Russell were not rebels without a cause. They shifted their commitments, their faith changed in form rather than substance.

Secularization is giving rise to new forms of faith and for this reason we have to look in other than traditional places to see them. We cannot expect the Humanist tradition to have very similar features to traditions of an *otherworldly* orientation; although it will share some features because it has come out of earlier traditions, it will also differ because it is grounded in *this* world. I for one had no trouble in demonstrating that we Humanists do have a tradition of faith that can in fact be understood within the categories of Religious Studies analysis. It did not take an inordinate amount of insight to do this yet it was a controversial thing to do.

As I have already said, a tradition expresses faith, it constitutes the observable aspects of faith, but it must now be emphasized that it is also not a thing and it is not a system. It is, as Smith says, a way of being human. Just as the Christians, the Hindus and others have their modes of being Christians and Hin-

dus, we have our modes of being Humanists. And just as in the traditional religions some modes of expression have been more dominant than others, so too is the case in the Humanist tradition. In the Christian tradition in particular, the cognitive mode has been dominant. By the cognitive mode I am referring to the having of certain beliefs about the nature of things. This mode is also dominant in the Secular Humanist tradition but it is hardly evident in Ethical Culture and Zen. In Ethical Culture the ethical mode has been central. In certain forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, ritual has been central and this is also true for Humanistic Judaism.

We Humanists do have a cumulative tradition of faith. We have our cognitive mode, that is we have our beliefs for articulating our identity and I hardly have to rehearse what these are to a Humanist audience. We have our social mode too, that is we have our institutions. Scholars who have dismissed us as being incapable of institutionalizing have overstated the fact. Furthermore, it has been just a bit too convenient to point to some shorUived freethought secular and Humanist organizations as one more reason for not investigating them. We Humanists have our ethical mode- our ways of deciding what is good and what is not good and we have our rituals both for celebrating important life passages and for conducting meaningful Humanist meetings.

We have our experiential mode too. Humanists recognize that experience of those things which we regard as valuable and true does not have to include "close encounters of the 3rd kind." There doesn't have to be an encounter with a "*mysterium tremendum*." Einstein once said that he wanted to spend the rest of his life contemplating what light is. When he said this he was speaking of his engagement in the scientific enterprise and this engagement had primary importance for him. Bertrand Russell, Dora Russell and Corliss Lamont have written of moving experiences they have had in human relationships. These were experiences of ultimate fulfillment and of what is true and good. Human relationships appear to "move" Humanists in ways that encounters with some Other "move" traditional religionists. Humanist faith experiences are "down to earth" but they are still faith experiences. Above all. Humanist faith experiences show how human beings can find fundamental satisfaction in what we as finite, imperfect creatures create. Humanists do not have a diminished view of human creativity and therefore we do not need some Other to make our experiences feel worthwhile at the gut level. It is because those who have yet to become fully secularized do

need some Other to make their experiences fundamentally worthwhile that they find Humanism impossible to embrace.

Finally, as do other paths of faith, we Humanists have our very own mythical mode and I think we should not overlook it. Among scholars there is some disagreement as to what myth is but there is a general consensus that myths function to express truths of a fundamental kind and that therefore myths are not false stories but the means by which peoples explain and justify their place in the universe. Because mythical truths are so fundamental to human existence they carry an authority beyond that of all mundane belief, they function in an unquestioned atmosphere as presuppositions for living. Myths are "controlling images" in our lives.

So what are the Humanist myths, what do Humanists assume? The easiest way to find Humanist myths is to imagine what would constitute a Humanist nightmare; we must ask what it would take to shatter Humanist security. In answer to this I would suggest the following: That the foundations of Humanist living would be seriously shaken if the validity of scientific method were seriously brought into question. While Humanists may disagree on scientific conclusions, the validity of the scientific method itself is presupposed. (Scientific method is actually held to be theoretically open to question but there is little evidence to indicate doubt in this area either at a practical or theoretical level). The foundations of Humanist living would be seriously shaken if it were found that humans do not in fact have a significant degree of freewill and that situation ethics and the attitudes of audacity and courage in life are not in fact fitting for the human condition. And so I could continue. The point is that Humanists live in the midst of myth as do all people; the Humanist tradition of faith has its mythical mode. Humanists need to recognize this mode in order to further self-understanding and scholars would do well to investigate not only Humanist myths but other aspects of the Humanist tradition in the interests of better understanding the contemporary religious situation- particularly in the West. The Humanist tradition should be seen as evidence of a transition that is occurring in religious attitudes in that the other world is losing reality and the power to win commitment from an increasingly this-worldly human population.

Those Humanists who do not recognize the common ground between Humanism and traditional religion, the faith dimension of Humanism, are the living boobytraps of our movement. Granted, they think that to toy with such notions is not only

messy but dangerous, after all it is functional approaches to religion that the Religious Right has used to its advantage against Humanists in North American courts. If one reads the transcripts for example, of the recent Smith vs. Mobile case in Alabama one finds that the Christian plaintiff refers to functional views of both religion and Humanism as *they are to be found in the writings of Humanists themselves*. In other words, Humanists have incriminated themselves by calling themselves religious and have thereby given the plaintiff the ultimate ammunition. In the Mobile case, the Christians refer to Humanist Manifesto I and to the writings of Roy Wood Sellars, Julian Huxley, Edwin Wilson, Khoren Arisian, Gerald Larue, Corliss Lamont and indeed to the writings of "Mr. Secular Humanism" himself, Paul Kurtz.

All of this is true but denial is not going to make the problem go away. Denial of the commonground is not going to hide the fact that there is one. If there were no common ground between living as a Christian and living as a Humanist the problem would not have surfaced in the first place and it is because the common-ground is basic rather than peripheral that a more honest and indeed courageous attempt at dealing with it is needed. We cannot simply *will* the problem away with sophisticated legal maneuverings. Calling Humanism a eupraxophy rather than a religion won't help either because the commonground is still there. Paul Kurtz speaks of eupraxophy as doing *much more* than explaining the world in the light of science. Humanist eupraxophy he says, also stimulates "passionate intensity and the will-to-live, the courage to dream new goals and to bring them to fruition."⁵ In this statement Kurtz seems to be using a different word for what amounts to Humanist faith yet he is a Humanist who is adamantly opposed to there being any essential commonground between Secular Humanist Eupraxophy and the world religious traditions.

This discussion of Humanist faith is in many ways a rearticulation of what religious Humanists have understood for decades. Nevertheless it is important to recognize the support and added insights for the position which can come from the work of scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Even though Smith only mentions the case of secular faith in passing he nevertheless provided me with a tool for understanding Humanism in much greater depth and it certainly showed me how the Humanist tradi-

⁵ Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy - Living Without Religion* (Prometheus Books, 1989) pp. 112-3.

tion can and should be understood within the discipline of Religious Studies.

I think that the word "religion" has become too reified and specific, so culturally biased and superficial that we should do as Smith has done and that is, drop the term altogether and concentrate on what we really mean and that is commitment to what we regard as true and good, faith. And if you think that the word faith has also become abused beyond redemption then let's drop that word too and simply refer to primary commitments.

To talk about primary commitments, to talk about faith, is not simply to use different terminology for everything hitherto deemed functionally religious. The purpose of the exercise is to make it clear that recent Western opinion as to what is religious has been frequently misleading and has in fact held up understanding of both Western and non Western experience. Faith is what unites all Humanists whether they call themselves Secular, Religious, or Eupraxophoric. Faith is also what unites Humanists with religionists and if that creates a political problem then some radical rethinking in constitutional provisions and law is indicated. A tall order, yes, some would say an impossible one, but it is one which I believe could become a reality given will plus patience plus time.

In this discussion, I have tried to explain that faith is not belief because beliefs change whereas one's commitment to living in hope and courage goes on. Faith is the opposite of despair; it has to do with finding things worthwhile and of living in commitment to them. This is nothing less than what Humanists do and they do it with both feet in the twentieth century.

The Humanist tradition is entirely this-worldly but this should not deflect attention from the fact that Humanists are persons of faith and thereby express a development in what is commonly referred to as human religious history. Indeed in taking up the entirely "secular" (this worldly) challenge in total commitment, one can say that Humanists are in the avante garde of the history of faith. Recognition of this fact by both scholars and Secular Humanists alike is long overdue.