

---

## Books

---

# The Two Humanisms in Conflict: Religious vs. Secular

Paul Kurtz

Howard Radest, *The Devil and Secular Humanism: The Children of the Enlightenment* (New York: Praeger, 1990). x + 170 pp., indexed. \$32.95, cloth.

Howard Radest has devoted a lifetime of tireless efforts on behalf of humanism. A leading figure in the Ethical Culture movement in the twentieth century, it is only fitting that he share with us his mature wisdom, concerns, and recommendations for the future. Unfortunately, his analysis in *The Devil and Secular Humanism: The Children of the Enlightenment* is rather pessimistic, for the movement has not achieved the high goals that so many anticipated.

In this passionate and personal exploration, Radest indicts the "Children of the Enlightenment" for not going beyond it. Humanists are so fixated, he believes, in their commitments to anti-clericalism, reason, progress, science, and democracy that they have failed to satisfy the innermost and intimate longings of the individual concerning the meaning of life, how to cope with death and tragedy in a universe without purpose, and how to find compassion and fraternity. Radest is disturbed by the internal quarrels of the humanist movement, still unable to define itself, determine its direction, or achieve unity and coherence. He is especially disturbed by the conflict over

---

*Paul Kurtz is editor of FREE INQUIRY. His recently published book, Eupraxophy, argues that secular humanism is not a religion.*

---

whether humanism is a "religion" or whether it should emphasize secularity and freethought.

Radest in a real sense is the heir to the legacy of Felix Adler, although he has taken a step beyond him into naturalism. Adler, the son of a rabbi, broke with Judaism in the late nineteenth century and went on to found the Ethical Culture societies. He rejected theistic religion, yet he believed in the importance of "spiritual" values; he attempted to give a neo-Kantian basis for ethical duty, retaining his Judaistic sense of moral righteousness.

Ethical Culture societies were founded throughout the United States, Britain, Austria, and elsewhere in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and there were high expectations for their future. The creative idea of Adler and his disciples was to develop a new religion without supernaturalistic nonsense. However, Adler, who was also a professor of philosophy at Columbia University with John Dewey, scorned Dewey's naturalism as a basis of religion or ethics. He still flirted with a sense of the "supersensible" or the "transcendental" as part of his "religious vision."

The Ethical Culture movement, though always small, had considerable influence beyond its numbers in several liberal organizations. By the 1950s Ethical Culture was virtually identified with the left-wing political agenda. Its focus was primarily on "social justice."

But a key feature, which has dismayed many first-time humanist visitors to Ethical Culture societies, is the paradoxical appeal to "religiosity." There are churchlike or synagoguelike chapels and leaders who deliver Sunday sermons,

perform pastoral duties, and conduct "services," though without prayer to a deity. The Ethical Culture movement expresses predominantly a "religion without God": The lessons are not drawn from the Old or the New Testament, but from the literature of Felix Adler, Joseph Blau, Albert Einstein, and others, even John Dewey. There are excellent Ethical Culture schools for children where moral education is taught. Indeed, Howard Radest himself served for a decade as director of the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, regarded as one of the finest in the nation.

The great puzzle for many is why the Ethical Culture movement declined in influence and why its membership never grew, hovering between three and six thousand in recent decades and on the lower end of that scale today. It was not for a lack of funds, facilities, or leaders. At its peak it had considerable financial resources. There were many prominent German-American Jews who, wishing to abandon the religion of Judaism, embraced Adler's kind of quasi-Unitarianism in Ethical Culture garb.

Was their failure due to post-Adlerian leadership, or was the soup served to those who craved something more "spiritual" too baroque for freethinkers who wished nothing at all to do with religious accoutrements? A striking paradox is that so many of the children of Ethical Culturalists or of its schools did not remain within the fold. Was the liberal religion so liberal that it spelled its own demise? I do not by these remarks intend to write a postmortem obituary for Ethical Culture, for perhaps there is still some life left in the body.

In 1933, *Humanist Manifesto I* was issued. It was signed by thirty-three religious humanists, primarily Unitarian ministers, including—largely by happenstance—John Dewey, who had nothing to do with drafting the document but endorsed it after the fact. Radest relates how two ethical leaders, V. T. Thayer and Frank Swift, had also signed the *Manifesto*, and how this painful fact was kept from Adler during his final illness in 1933. In time many of the Ethical Culture leaders—Jerome Nathenson, Algernon Black, Edward Ericson, Khoren Arisian, Radest, and others—came under the influence of Naturalism,

though other leaders still focused on “spirituality” and mysticism, metaphorically interpreted.

In any case, Radest accepts fully the humanism of *Manifesto I*, and he explicitly defines humanism in “religious” terms. *Manifesto I* rejected any supernatural or cosmic guarantee for values, and it stated that “religion must formulate its hopes and canons in light of the scientific spirit and method.” Interestingly, written at the height of the Great Depression, it also comes out for a “socialized and cooperative economic order.”

In 1941 the American Humanist Association (AHA) was founded by Edwin Wilson, a Unitarian minister. Editor of the *Humanist* magazine, he attempted to defend nontheistic “religious humanism.” There have been continuing battles in the AHA between those who wish a thoroughly naturalistic and secularized view of humanism (especially Sidney Hook and Corliss Lamont, who differed with Dewey’s distinction between “religious” and “religion”) and those who wish to emphasize the religious character of humanism. The AHA has never had more than three to five thousand members at its peak, and, like the AEU, has in recent years stagnated in membership. AHA still retains its religious exemption, despite an erroneous 1990 announcement that its tax status had changed; in any event AHA continues to emphasize that its Counsellor program is religious and performs “pastoral” and “ministerial” duties.

In one of its many internecine battles, Wilson was replaced as executive director of the AHA in the 1960s, and he went on to found the Fellowship of Religious Humanists (FRH) and the journal *Religious Humanism*. The members of the FRH number about three hundred, and the circulation of this magazine is about one thousand. One of the purposes of FRH is to influence the Unitarian Universalist Association. Although a substantial number of Unitarians identify with religious humanism, very few of the ministers are willing to be so classified, as a recent poll published in *FREE INQUIRY* (Spring 1991) indicates.

One further thread needs to be

untangled in the mosaic of the religious humanist movement in the United States—that is the emergence in 1968 of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, under the energetic leadership of Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who considers himself an atheist, yet has founded temples, conducts services, and celebrates the traditional Jewish holidays, such as Passover and Chanukah, though in a nontheistic and naturalistic setting. Wine has also helped to create an international, secular humanist, Judaistic movement. He focuses on Jewish identity and ethnic loyalty as values that his members wish to preserve. In discussions with Sherwin Wine over the years I have pointed out the incompatibility of secular humanism with Judaism, and that this language only confuses the issue, but Wine has differed with me on this point.

This leads to the key position advocated by Radest in his book. Radest thinks that the humanist movement went astray somewhere around 1973, with the issuance of *Humanist Manifesto II*. I happen to have drafted that document, which, incidentally, was endorsed by Radest and several hundred humanist leaders worldwide. That document attempted to update the humanist outlook for the post-World War II world, making it relevant to the ethical and social issues of the day. It rejected a commitment to socialism, and it focused on ecology, the defense of civil liberties, sexual freedom and responsibility, the building of a world community, and other issues facing humankind. In retrospect, Radest is distressed by the toning down of religious humanism in *Humanist Manifesto II*.

It was the founding of the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH), *FREE INQUIRY*, and the issuance of the *Secular Humanist Declaration* (also endorsed by Radest and others) that he now thinks was an error. CODESH and *FREE INQUIRY* were established because a massive attack on secular humanism was made by the right wing, the Moral Majority, and a host of fundamentalist and conservative forces. The purpose of CODESH was to respond to the critics, to examine in turn the biblical and religious assumptions of their ethical and

political positions, and to offer a secularist and nontheistic (agnostic and atheistic) affirmative alternative philosophy that was not “religious.” Many right-wing fundamentalists insist that humanism is a religion, and that, therefore, the teaching of secularism or humanism in the public schools violates the First Amendment of the Constitution, and that secular humanism has to be extirpated. We in CODESH deny that secular humanism is a religion, and we think that the teaching of science, evolution, and humanistic values has an appropriate place in the public schools and in public life. Here *FREE INQUIRY* and CODESH draw upon the free-thought and skeptical tradition of Western thought.

Radest believes that secular humanists have too often become “raucous” and “strident” in their protests. He is not unappreciative of secular humanist criticisms of right-wing extremism (its attack on faith healing, for example), but this kind of aggressive behavior, he thinks, reverts to the early protests of the Enlightenment of Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists. Humanism on the defensive is often “belligerent” in its “rationalism” and “anti-clericalism.” Moreover, Radest maintains, it has lost the values of religious humanism, and the aesthetic and moral dimensions of experience. He believes that this form of humanism is in danger of becoming a “humanist fundamentalism.”

Radest, like other post-modern critics, indicts the Enlightenment: “The Enlightenment was once a believable story, but it no longer is,” he writes (p. 120). “In today’s pluriform world the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment is untruthful to experience,” he further states (p. 123). If the children of the Enlightenment need to move beyond it, and it is not toward secular humanism, then where? On this point Radest is unclear.

Many religious humanists are very uncomfortable with *FREE INQUIRY*’s continued defense of the Enlightenment, reason, and science, our belief in human potentialities, and our criticism of religion. These humanists share Radest’s discomfiture. They think anti-clericalism at best is in “bad taste,” and at worst apt to “alienate liberal allies.” A long-

standing and valiant humanist, Edd Doerr, founder of Americans for Religious Liberty, thinks that, in the struggle for the separation of church and state, humanists need all the allies they can find, and that it is unwise to offend Orthodox Jews, devout Catholics, or mainline Protestants who might otherwise share their liberal sentiments. The better part of prudence, these critics insist, is not to criticize the ontological foundations of one's religious liberal bedfellows, but to work with them on joint issues, seeking to find common ground.

I can appreciate the desire to find allies. Many wish to be polite, to avoid the social ostracism that atheists and freethinkers of the past have suffered from the Establishment. Unfortunately, in America, and the rest of the world, there is almost never any skeptical criticism of the sacred cows, though humanism, secularism, irreligion, and skepticism are constantly attacked by "true believers" from pulpit and media platforms. The claim is made over and over again that morality must rest on theological grounds, that it is not possible to be moral without belief in God, that modern science proves God's existence, that the Bible is divinely inspired.

Religious humanists, like secularists, reject these premises, but they do not wish to ruffle feathers. Are humanists to abdicate responsibility by treading softly and muting vigorous criticism of such preposterous claims? There is almost no dissent today about religious doctrines. I fail to see why it is "strident" or "raucous" to challenge them. On the contrary, I submit that today's abandonment of the radical criticism of religion by religious humanists is a major betrayal of humanism's commitment to free inquiry.

The tragedy of the humanist movement, in my view, is that it has not been willing to break away from its ethnic foundations (the Society of Secular Humanistic Judaism) or its religious foundations (UUA, Ethical Culture, FRF, and AHA). It should not be held hostage to Unitarian, Judaistic, or Adlerian institutional forms, but needs to develop its own identity and integrity. If God is dead, our major concern must

be to assert that humans are alive. This does not mean that we should exalt Reason, forget Passion, and not appeal to the whole person.

I have introduced the term *eupraxiophy*, which has been criticized by religious humanists precisely because it gets across the point that humanism is not a religion. It is more than philosophy, ethics, or science, for it provides a cosmic outlook and wisdom (*sophia*) and it offers good, practical wisdom and guidance in life (*eupraxia*). Isn't it time that we finally cut the umbilical cord of religion and religiosity and attempt to take genuinely new directions for humanism?

Incidentally, most Enlightenment figures never abandoned Deism: They maintained their commitment to a belief in God. The development of a thoroughly secular, atheist, or agnostic humanism is relatively new in human history, going back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But as humanists enter the twenty-first century, we need to be, in my view, honest and truthful about who we are and what we stand for.

For a long time I followed a path similar to Radest's. I held that humanism could become the religion of the

future, and that, as such, it could inspire a "religious commitment." I was profoundly mistaken in that view. I think that it is time that humanism strike out anew and resist obfuscation with religious language. This is the task of CODESH and FREE INQUIRY.

I do not mean by my above remarks not to show any appreciation for the subtle richness of Radest's analysis. I think that all humanists will profit from reading this book. I appreciate his view that we need to relate humanist values to the personal lives of individuals. Humanism is more than social protest, more than an intellectual, political, or ethical agenda. It must speak to the private soliloquies of each and every person—and we need biographies of what it has meant in the lives of individual humanists.

Radest's final plea in his book I find both eloquent and meaningful:

It is the radical claim of humanism that we can live rich and full lives while denying eternity. It is the even more radical claim that such lives are more satisfying precisely because they come closer to truthfulness and do not rely on illusions. (p. 159)

To which, I say, "Amen." ●

---

## Unmasking Nostradamus

### Gerald Larue

*The Mask of Nostradamus*, by James Randi (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990). 256 pp. \$19.95, cloth.

For those of us who have pondered the sayings of Nostradamus and read the efforts by so-called experts to force what he wrote into their particular interpretations, James Randi's nonsense, commonsense book, *The*

---

*Gerald Larue is chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion.*

---

*Mask of Nostradamus*, comes as a breath of fresh air.

Randi prepares the stage for his investigation by establishing Nostradamus's place in the historical setting of the sixteenth century. Then he discloses "the rules of the prophecy game," including: "Make *lots* of predictions, and hope that some come true. If they do, point to them with pride. Ignore the others." He also advises would-be prophets: "Be vague and ambiguous"; "Use lots of symbolism"; and "Predict catastrophes." By employing these guidelines at the right time and in the