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EXplaining & EXtolling Scientific Humanism

Dear: My goal for this chapter is to try to show you what I mean by the third part of my proposed four-part strategy for counteracting theists (and maybe even converting them into humanists). Again, the four parts of my strategy (the same strategy that little kids use on other kids who are “real brats”) are: 1) ridicule them, 2) provide better examples for them to follow [the previous chapter], 3) explain to them what they’re doing wrong and how they should behave better [this chapter], and “if they still don’t get it”, then 4) exclude them from cooperative activities [the next chapter]. Specifically, what I want to address in this chapter is not so much “to explain to them what they’re doing wrong” [because I’ve addressed that topic in many previous **X**-chapters (as well as many **P**-chapters); in sum, what they do wrong is to hold beliefs more strongly than relevant and reliable evidence warrants] but to suggest ways to explain and even to extol [viz., “praise enthusiastically”, from Latin *extollere*, meaning “to raise (*tollere*) upward”] atheism, agnosticism, and scientific humanism, or in short, “free thought.”

At the outset, I should admit that there’s a “nuisance question” that should be addressed, which was illustrated in the previous sentence. The question is: what to call such people? In some cases, people who sought to break free from the ruling clerics’ chains have been religious (e.g., Jesus and Sidney Rigdon), but then, when a new breed of clerical rulers emerged (e.g., aligned with “Saint” Paul, “Saint” Constantine, and various popes, Muhammad, and Joseph Smith), then the freedom seekers have been called names such as heathens, infidels, atheists, agnostics, humanists, naturalists, secular humanists, scientific humanist, etc., including “free thinkers”.

Illustrative of the problem of what to call such people is the following entry for Rudolf Carnap in Mark Gilbert’s list of “Famous Dead Atheists”:¹

¹ The list is at <http://www.jmarkgilbert.com/atheists.html>.

Rudolf Carnap, German-American philosopher (1891–1970). A central figure of the Vienna Circle, which was devoted to the philosophy of logical positivism. In his *Intellectual Autobiography* printed in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (Paul Schilpp, ed., La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1963) he [Carnap] described the basic worldview he shared with the rest of the Circle in the following terms: "... the first is the view that man has no supernatural protectors or enemies... Second, we had the conviction that mankind is able to change the conditions of life in such a way that many of the sufferings of today may be avoided... the third is the view that all deliberate action presupposes knowledge of the world, that the scientific method is the best method of acquiring knowledge, and that therefore, science must be regarded as one of the most valuable instruments for the improvement of human life. In Vienna we had no names for these views; if we look for a brief designation in American terminology for the combination of these three convictions, the best would seem to be 'scientific humanism'."

And though I don't want to dwell on the "nuisance question" about what to call "them" (or better, "us"!), let me mention a few points.

An appropriate name for such people needs to adequately address two separate attributes. One deals with their opinions about the nature of the universe; thereby, such people are commonly labeled atheists [which literally means "not believing in god"], agnostics [literally, "not knowing (about the existence of any god)"], naturalists [as opposed to "supernaturalists"], and the recent term, Brights [meaning the same as "naturalists"]. The other attribute needing identification deals with opinions contained in such people's philosophies (on topics ranging from ethics to politics). Common terms are rationalists (to contrast with the irrationalism of religious people), humanitarians or humanists (but some such people are religious), secular humanists (thereby distinguishing them from religious humanists), or scientific humanists (who are distinguished by their conclusion that application of the scientific method is the most rational way to try to help solve humanity's problems).

And if you think, Dear, that the naming of such people is irrelevant, then in general, I'd tend to agree with you – but there are some stupid (and some horrible) aspects of naming people that sometimes need to be addressed. For example, to call African American people "Blacks" (even if some of them do it!) is undesirable, since such a term in our language connotes the opposite from good (e.g., "little white lies", "white paper", "white listing" *versus* "blacklisting", "black arts", "black hearted", "black magic", "blackmailed", "black market", "blackguard", and so on). Similarly, some "free thinkers" use that term in part out of frustration (even anger) at being

labeled by terms such as “atheist” and “agnostic” by people whose thoughts are so constrained by their clerics that they define the rest of us with a term such as ‘atheist’ (which essentially means “you’re not one of us good people who believes in god”) or ‘agnostic’ (which essentially means “you’re not one of us smart people who knows”). That is, the prefix “a” in ‘atheist’ and ‘agnostic’ is the Greek prefix meaning ‘not’ (as in ‘atom’ meaning “not divisible”). So, how about if we “scientific humanists” start negating them, by labeling all religious people as the “unscientific antihumanists” or even “unscientific antihumans” that they are?!²

But whatever term is used to “label” such people (and I prefer such terms as free thinkers, naturalists, Brights, humanists, or scientific humanists), I suspect that essentially all of us realize that explaining “our cause” – even promoting “our cause” – is “a hard sell”. A major reason for why it’s such a hard sell (but yet, we’re optimistic that it can be “sold”!) was recently conveyed well as follows [to which I’ve added a note in brackets].³

The Promises of Atheism

by J. Eric Harrington

In the Atheist Fortune Cookie file [i.e., Wayne Aiken’s list of quotations, which I’ve reference many times], I came across this little gem:

The positive and negative reinforcements of religion verses Atheism tell quite a story. First of all, most religions promise you Heaven and promise that your enemies will be punished in Hell. What these promises amount to is an assurance of justice, one of humankind’s greatest longings. Atheism promises nothing. (C. W. Dalton, *The Right Brain and Religion*)

But what of the last part of the quote above? It says that Atheism promises nothing. In a way, this is true. As I understand it, Atheism is an absence of beliefs in any sort of god. When looked at in that light, it does tend to make Atheism look rather unappealing. It can’t “promise” anything as pleasant as heaven or as satisfying as watching those whom we think deserve it getting punished. After all, it’s simply the negation of the promises of religions. Atheism is a matter of looking over the promises made by the various religions and saying “Hmmm – I don’t think so.” Atheism is more a matter of looking at the world in a skeptical light and accepting only that for which there is evidence.

² I go into this topic in some detail in one of my January 2008 posts at <http://zenofzero.blogspot.com>.

³ Copied from <http://home.earthlink.net/~jehdjh/promath.html>.

So perhaps Atheism promises nothing – yet it delivers so much more to atheists than what it promises. It delivers the ability to see our surroundings for what they are – our true home, the only place where we will ever have a chance to be happy. It delivers the realization that while nothing we do is “perfect,” those things we do are as close to the ideal as we will ever come. If humans are ever to have happiness, it’ll only come through our own efforts. If there is ever to be some sort of justice, it will be achieved through human work. If we are ever to live in peace, it will only come when we learn to reconcile with our enemies and share our home in the real world, instead of leaving it for future generations or God to accomplish it for us.

Can we accomplish these things? Perhaps not. One thing is clear to me. None of the things I personally like to dream about – peace, happiness, love, and so on – will ever be given to me by any god, no matter what promises are given. If I’m ever to have a chance to get the things I want, I’ll have to work for them. In the same manner, such is the case of the entire human race.

Incidentally, Dear, notice in the above quotation that Harrington did something that’s common: he started addressing “atheism”, but soon his analysis led him to addressing “humanist causes” (such as “peace, happiness, love, and so on”).

Fundamentally, humanism is a “hard sell” because it’s asking people to trade in their daydreams for reality. Religions sell delusions: that your life has a “grand purpose”, that you have an “immortal soul”, that, if you’ll just be good (in some religions, all you need do is “believe” – and pay your tithes!), then you’ll live forever in Paradise, that in your “afterlife”, justice will finally prevail (when your enemies will finally get their “just desserts” in Hell), and so on. No wonder people buy into such delusions: they’re delicious! As Demosthenes wrote in 349 BCE: “A man is his own easiest dupe, for what he wishes to be true he generally believes to be true.” Julius Caesar said similar: “People believe what they want”. Remember, Dear, ‘belief’, itself, literally means “wish to be”.

Meanwhile, realists (naturalists, scientific humanists, etc.) have nothing to “sell” but reality – and reality, normally, isn’t nearly so rosy as the world seen through any religion’s rose-colored glasses. Nature can be brutal, personal justice can be thwarted, social justice can seem out of reach, kindness can seem to be rare, the environment deteriorates, poverty increases, wars rage, and so on – and the only way to improve “the human condition” seems to be through an enormous amount of “hard slogging”. Yet, the reality is, there’s no other way. No god has ever shown it gives a damn about even a single human; if help is to be found, we humans will

need to help ourselves. As Shakespeare said: “Hell is empty and all the devils are here... It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

Anyway, setting aside the naming of such people and the difficulties in getting others to become scientific humanists, to gain an overview of what humanism is and what humanists do, consider the following “Amsterdam Declaration 2002”, more information about which you can find at the website of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU, the world union of humanist organizations).⁴

In 1952, at the first World Humanist Congress, the founding fathers of IHEU agreed [on] a statement of the fundamental principles of modern Humanism. They called it “The Amsterdam Declaration”. That declaration was a child of its time: set in the world of great power politics and the Cold War.

The 50th anniversary World Humanist Congress in 2002, again meeting in the Netherlands, unanimously passed a resolution updating that declaration: “The Amsterdam Declaration 2002”. Following the Congress, this updated declaration was adopted unanimously by the IHEU General Assembly, and thus became the official defining statement of World Humanism.

Amsterdam Declaration 2002

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world’s great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

Humanism is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world’s problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends. [These “ends”, the “values” pursued by Humanists, can be seen from the following goals.]

⁴ The text copied is from <http://www.iheu.org/amsterdamdeclaration>; I’ve added some notes in brackets.

Humanism supports democracy and human rights. Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.

Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility. Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognizes our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their worldviews on all of humanity. Humanism recognizes that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision [i.e., the scientific method].

Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognizes the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfillment.

Humanism is a life stance aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilizing free inquiry, the power of science, and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavor.

The final paragraph of the above succinctly summarizes a major task facing humanists: to make more humans aware of “what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to.” But before substantially more people will “associate themselves with us in this endeavor”, substantially more people need to learn about humanism, and what I'd like to do, now, is turn to some comments and suggestions about “how to get the message out”, to try to “sell” more people on humanism.

Certainly the message has been promoted for a long time and by some of the world's most brilliant people. Throughout this book, I've shown you many

examples from the past (statements by Lao-tze, Confucius, the Buddha, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, Lucretius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, etc.), and should you desire to see more and more detail, I'd encourage you to search on the internet using search terms such as "history of humanism". Here, to start, let me show you some more recent quotations by some brilliant humanists and then show you some recent essays.

To have a positive religion is not necessary. To be in harmony with yourself and the universe is what counts, and this is possible without positive and specific formulation in words. (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

My atheism, like that of Spinoza, is true piety towards the universe and denies only gods fashioned by men in their own image to be servants of their human interests. (George Santayana)

The philosophy of Atheism represents a concept of life without any metaphysical Beyond or Divine Regulator. It is the concept of an actual, real world with its liberating, expanding and beautifying possibilities, as against an unreal world, which, with its spirits, oracles, and mean contentment has kept humanity in helpless degradation. (Emma Goldman)

When men can no longer be theists, they must, if they are civilized, become humanists. (Walter Lippmann)

A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time toward a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create. (Bertrand Russell)

It seems to me that the idea of a personal God is an anthropological concept which I cannot take seriously. I also cannot imagine some will or goal outside the human sphere... Science has been charged with undermining morality, but the charge is unjust. A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death. (Albert Einstein)

Because morality is a social necessity, the moment faith in god is banished, man's gaze turns from god to man and he becomes socially conscious. Religious belief prevented the growth of a sense of realism. But atheism at once makes man realistic and alive to the needs of morality. (Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, "Gora")

Humanists recognize that it is only when people feel free to think for themselves, using reason as their guide, that they are best capable of developing values that succeed in satisfying human needs and serving human interests. (Isaac Asimov)

Humanism, in all its simplicity, is the only genuine spirituality. (Albert Schweitzer)

Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all. (Linus Pauling)

When we speak of equality, of women and men, of Blacks and Whites, of all the world's people, we are talking about humanism. (Gloria Steinem)

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness. (The Dalai Lama)

As for some recent essays describing humanism, I'll start with the following brilliant presentation by Edward Ericson.

Reclaiming the High Ground⁵

by Edward L. Ericson⁶

When the International Humanist and Ethical Union was organized in 1952, it set forth its statement of purpose in five brief paragraphs expressing three core principles concerning science, democracy, and ethics. These were, specifically, the use of science for human betterment, commitment to the democratic process in government and other human relations, and reliance on ethics as the essential ground of human dignity, rights, and responsible freedom.

Now, a half century later, we find that human knowledge about our universe and ourselves has increased immensely. Most promising of all has been the rapid growth in scientific knowledge of the interplay of genetic and cultural forces in shaping our social and moral traits. Evolutionary biology and naturalistic ethics are joining together to create a kind of unified field theory of human nature and its needs – a vision never before achievable.

An expanding body of knowledge supports the view that there is a biosocial foundation, encoded in our very genes from a long process of evolutionary selection, that sets the boundaries and substantially conditions the quality and direction of our moral feelings and behavior. Evolutionary biology is beginning to uncover and particularize what many of us humanists have always believed in principle about the

⁵ Copied from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_5_60/ai_65133035/print, which includes the copyright notices © 2000 American Humanist Association and © 2000 Gale Group.

⁶ “Edward L. Ericson, a retired Ethical Culture leader, has been a member of the American Humanist Association for fifty-one years and was the recipient of the AHA’s 1990 Humanist Pioneer Award.”

natural origin and basis of our ethical traits: the inborn capacity for empathy and compassion, the need to give and receive love, the developmental patterns of socialization which support a sense of fairness and justice, and the recognition of shared obligations and common interests – all of which go into the makeup of self-aware, social beings. It is increasingly apparent that we are within striking distance of refuting forever the canard that a naturalistic philosophy, unsupported by a supernatural or transcendental source, is incapable of providing a reliable foundation for the moral and rewarding life.

Yet, while we may take hope from these prospects, we can hardly be sanguine about the commonplace misconceptions, distortions, and deliberate misrepresentations of humanist naturalism. Some of this misinformation comes from the avowed enemies of science and, particularly, from bitter-end resistance to evolutionary theory. But regrettably, too much comes from well meaning friends who are simply misled by the pervasive fear of science, especially as it touches upon questions of human nature and conduct.

If you doubt the effectiveness of this drumbeat of resistance to science and reason, consider the following. While only 7 percent of adults in the United Kingdom believe in the special creation of the human species, a University of California study recently found that 45 percent of U.S. adults reject evolution and believe that the first human beings were miraculously created within the past 10,000 years. *Newsweek* found an overwhelming belief in miracles: 84 percent of those polled believe that miracles occur, 79 percent think that the miracles of the Bible were actual events, and 72 percent are convinced that survivors of accidents are spared by God's intervention.

In light of this, one might reasonably ask why the United States trails so far behind other advanced nations in assimilating the results of scientific and historical research. U.S. scientists are in the very forefront of evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology, yet there is little acceptance of their findings here at home.

Then again, why should this matter? One may argue that humanists and other advocates of a naturalistic worldview should simply have the grace to accept their minority status. And I might agree – if this were a mere difference of opinion among people of tolerance and goodwill. Thomas Jefferson contended that, in a free and open encounter, truth will prevail. But how free is this encounter if, in the contest for minds, the religious right has declared a culture war?

Some of us may believe the issue is one about fact and theory. But those who contend against science and reason view the issue differently. For them it is a moral question. If you believe as Darwin believed, you do so because you are morally perverse, as Darwin was morally perverse. The fact that Darwin was a highly principled, considerate, compassionate man – as all of his biographers abundantly testify – is pointless. Darwin was wicked because he advocated unholy truths. And ethical humanism is Darwin's moral perversity writ large!

With a welter of conflicting meanings attached to the words humanist and humanism, clarification is in order. Many use the words humanist and humanitarian interchangeably, compounding the confusion. We may hope that as conscientious humanists we are humanitarian, but millions of others are humanitarian who hold to other philosophical commitments. Still others identify humanism with a particular liberal social agenda; but while the majority of humanists may be social liberals, it is not invariably so.

The core of the humanist philosophy is naturalism – the proposition that the natural world proceeds according to its own internal dynamics, without divine or supernatural control or guidance, and that we human beings are creations of that process. It is instructive to recall that the philosophers of the early humanist movement debated as to which term more adequately described their position: humanism or naturalism. The two concepts are complementary and inseparable.

For our purposes, I define a humanist as one who holds that the source, or locus, of our values, including our moral and inspirational values, is to be found within human nature and experience. Yes, Virginia, there is a human nature – a basic moral nature – and science is confirming it. Good and bad, the beautiful and the ugly, are so not because God decreed them (unless you are addicted to poetic metaphor); rather, they are consequences of our nature, dictated by deep human needs, aversions, and aspirations. Rightness is not about a divine will; it is about human beings – our needs, our vulnerabilities and potentials, our place in human society, and our place in the universe of living things.

The detractors of humanism accuse us of being anthropocentric and supposing we are God – that in our hubris we think we can live by any rules we please or by no rules at all. This is a bizarre argument coming as it does from those who believe that the world was created especially for their dominion, that they incarnate the very likeness and lineage of God. Talk about anthropocentrism! Who are the real anthropocentrics?

The unkindest and most uninformed criticism – coming even from those who should know better – charges humanists with disregarding the nonhuman forms of life, with being indifferent to the biosphere, with being guilty of what is inelegantly called species-ism. This accusation, which defies history and does violence to the biographies of our greatest pioneers, comes down to nothing more than a bad pun, a play on the word: human-ism. Yet presumably philosophically literate people weigh down their learned journals with polemics beating to death this particular straw mouse.

If we have anything to be proud of in our humanist tradition – and we have much to be proud of – it is the profound contribution of our humanist forebears and contemporaries in advancing the understanding and protection of Earth's biosphere – of recognizing the interdependence of all living things.

As with so much else, it really begins with Darwin, who was far from being the tooth-and-claw triumphalist popularly imagined. With uncanny insight Darwin saw the complex balances – the interplay – of every environmental niche and recognized its fragility.

In the very years in which the [International Humanist and Ethical Union] IHEU was founded, Julian Huxley – arguably the world’s leading exponent of humanism and the IHEU’s founding honorary chair – was successfully establishing the Galapagos Islands’ nature preserve. Protecting most of the archipelago’s territory by creating the Darwin Research Station to study and help conserve the islands’ unique species and habitats was only one of a number of Huxley’s undertakings worldwide. He and other leading humanist scientists in the United Kingdom and elsewhere spearheaded the fledgling international program to protect wildlife and preserve biodiversity. The American Humanist Association’s 1977 Humanist of the Year, philosopher Corliss Lamont, made possible the purchase and preservation of nature preserves in the Hudson River region in New York State, as well as elsewhere. In Florida, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, a philosophical humanist by her own account, toiled for more than half a century to protect the Everglades. And we are surely aware of the more recent contribution of Edward O. Wilson – the 1999 Humanist of the Year – toward the preservation of biodiversity. This is just a sampler of humanist involvement.

In addition, many of our rank-and-file members have worked over the years in other organizations toward these ends. In the mid-1960s, I served on the organizing board of Washingtonians for Clean Air, in Washington, D.C. So we humanists have not been exactly blind to these issues. And don’t forget the overwhelming threat of a nuclear dusting of our planet – that was my generation’s urgent, all-consuming ecological concern. It was the late Carl Sagan – the 1981 Humanist of the Year – who led the effort to warn the world about the risks of a nuclear winter in the event of even a “small” nuclear war.

Then comes the cliché that humanism ignores the place of feeling in life. Again we go back to Darwin. One of his most painstaking researches explored emotions in animals and human beings. Long before others saw, he insisted upon the evolutionary significance of emotions in the survival and evolution of the higher social animals. His 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* stands as a landmark and triumph of sensitive observation. He laid the foundation upon which Jane Goodall, another humanist, built.

The relationship between evolution and ethics develops from that base. The relationship was pondered by Darwin’s champion, Thomas Henry Huxley, was ably advanced in the evolutionary humanism of Huxley’s grandson, Julian, and now expands with increasing tempo in the marvelously productive work of Edward O. Wilson and others.

Humanism’s alleged blindness toward aesthetics and what are called spiritual values is hard to sustain. We can point to John Dewey, the *bete noir* of humanism’s critics,

whose *Art As Experience* is a milestone in the philosophy of aesthetics, especially in understanding life's inspirational summits, what Dewey called consummatory experience – a concept that foreshadows the peak experience concept of humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow. We might also recall George Santayana, that uncompromising materialist and atheist who brought deep sensitivity and insight into understanding the values of religious feeling, expression, and tradition. We can observe the sunburst of modern art that shone upon evolutionary humanism's cradle and which flamed from the same fresh vision of nature. We have effective answers to our detractors if we only know our story. We need to reclaim the riches of our philosophy, recall our history, and get it straight.

Small though our resources and numbers may be, we can do much more than we sometimes do to recover the high ground. It is vital to recognize the difference between defending our beliefs and being defensive about them – the difference between explanation and apology. Our vindications must be positive, forceful, and constructive. Every philosophy, including humanism, can benefit from informed criticism. But condescending dismissals don't meet that standard, and we should not concede defensively as if they did. We have no need to *mea culpa* when we have little to *mea culpa* about.

The critic may protest that my whole argument, as it connects ethics to science, is deeply flawed, shot through with the logical error that G. E. Moore dismissed as the naturalistic fallacy: the error – or supposed error, as the case may be – of attempting to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. The point has been long disputed in both philosophy and science, and we shall not settle it just yet.

However, I venture to argue that the more adamant of Moore's disciples – those who reject science and empirical knowledge as sources of normative ethical guidance – badly overshoot the mark. In his germinal book *Consilience*, Wilson argues that 'ought' is a shorthand term for the compelling force of the store of useful social experience, a compact generalization from those behaviors that have served the evolution of our socially interdependent species. Wilson thinks, therefore, that a science of ethics is not only possible but highly likely as evolutionary biology and psychology advance.

Whether Wilson entirely succeeds in reducing the 'ought' to an 'is', in translating 'good' into the 'optimally beneficial' – into the *biophilic*, to use his term – is an issue we may provisionally lay aside. However, the thrust of his argument for the conjunction of ethics and science is, I suggest, not only valid but of enormous significance.

Dewey believed in the possibility of a science of values and insisted that the seemingly unbridgeable gap between fact and value is bridgeable after all. Values, he reasoned, are facts of a special kind but facts nonetheless, amenable to empirical inquiry. In *Science and the Moral Life*, humanist Max Otto reasoned that science is not a particular subject matter but, rather, a general method of inquiry that can apply

to values. Wilson agrees, for both ethical and aesthetic values, and argues that advances in biosocial knowledge have brought within reach the feasibility of a defensible science of values.

In short, the gap between 'is' and 'ought' is rapidly narrowing. Tell me what is required to make one a better functioning human being, a better neighbor, and a more fully actualized person in a sustainable society, and I shall know the 'ought'.

If I am sick and seek medical attention, my doctor prescribes a medicine to improve my health. We do not accuse the doctor of committing a logical fallacy in the practice of medicine. We do not shut down medical schools or charge drug research laboratories with fraud on the ground that the science of medicine commits the naturalistic fallacy – confusing the 'oughtness' implied in a prescription with the irreducible 'is-ness' of science. Every medical prescription implies both an 'is' and a 'should' in terms of wellness. So what is the fugitive 'ought' hidden within the 'is'?

Perhaps the sage of Pennsylvania Avenue was more perspicacious than he knew when he said it depends on what 'is' is!

Why do we accept for medicine what we deny to normative ethics? Ethics is prescriptive and therefore not amenable to becoming a science; medicine is similarly prescriptive and therefore is amenable to becoming a science. Go figure.

But the science of medicine and the science of ethics are more than analogous. They lie on a continuum, a spectrum of functions that minister to human need and well-being. Treating one as a developing science and the other as not – even in principle – is more an artifact of history and ecclesiastic politics than of logic. The truth is that medicine has moved farther from the shaman's cave than has ethics. Wilson is correct in arguing that ethics will not break out of a 2,000-year-old *cul de sac* of reasoning and lofty vaporizing until it avails itself of the methodology of science.

Experimental psychology offers a parallel. After two millennia as a comparatively quiescent branch of the philosophic academy, psychology broke free to become a vital and dynamic science. Does this suggest that philosophy is useless? Certainly not. Does it indicate that philosophy *per se* is insufficient? Yes, it does.

Perhaps Wilson is too sanguine in believing that science will absorb ethics – in effect reducing the 'ought' to an 'is' without remainder. I anticipate a more mixed outcome. Nevertheless, the prospect is unprecedented. The human basis of the ethical life will become clearer and more defensible. Humanism will gain the traction of a secure foundation from which to meet assaults on our principles and values. Thus reinforced, we can defeat the reproach that without transcendental sanction we have no credible footing for morality or human dignity.

Moses may have brought the tablets of the law down from Mount Sinai but he carried up the mountain a rough draft, encoded in his genes, edited and revised in his nature and the experience of his people.

The way of significant growth for the humanist movement, then, rather than chasing after numbers for numbers' sake, is paying close attention to such first principles as these, never letting our attention be deflected by whatever attack on humanism may be at the moment intellectually fashionable or spiritually in vogue.

As my second illustration, please consider the following excerpt from the presentation on 30 October 1997 by Paul Kurtz at the Harbinger Symposium "Great Religions in a Pluralistic Society", in which he outlines not only his definition of (secular) humanism but also his opinions about future challenges.⁷

Is Secular Humanism a Religion?

by *Paul Kurtz*

What is appropriately meant by *humanism* today? I refer here to humanism in the 20th Century, to the leading humanists of the world. In the first sense, humanism is that philosophical outlook that is related to science. It's connected to the scientific revolution, which began with Galileo in the 16th Century. It is committed to a method of inquiry. That's my basic definition of *humanism*. Humanists believe in free inquiry in every field of human endeavor, and they want to use the methods of science. For humanists, beliefs should be considered tentative hypotheses; they should be tested by the evidence, by their rational coherence, by their experimental consequences. Humanism is an attempt to apply the methods of science as far as possible to all branches of human investigation. Perhaps a better term is *critical thinking*.

Now watch out! Anyone who wants to teach critical thinking in the colleges is a humanist undermining the fabric of American education!

Yes, we want to develop an appreciation for critical thinking. We want to use reason as the guide to life. If you make a claim, you must go beyond pure subjectivism, authority, or any other appeals to emotion, and try to support it by objective methods. Is that dangerous?

Humanists are skeptical, as scientists are, because knowledge is changing, open to revision. We are living through tremendous scientific advances today. In fact, America is a superpower, as you hear over and over. Why? Because we have applied science to technology for human improvement. Science and technology are related in

⁷ Copied from <http://www.theharbinger.org/articles/plural/kurtz.html>.

this rigorous method of inquiry. We're skeptical about claims that cannot be tested. But we can develop, in a constructive way, positive knowledge. That's the first point.

The second point many people find controversial: the humanist view of nature is based on the sciences, on the frontiers of knowledge. What is nature? What is reality? What does it all mean and how does it fit together? Humanists want to draw the answers from the natural sciences (astronomy, physics, geology, chemistry), the biological sciences (including genetics), and the behavioral and social sciences. Science is fallible and to be revised continually. Nonetheless, in four centuries – science is only four centuries old! – we've made more progress in expanding the frontier of human knowledge than in all the millennia before. One problem, though, is that scientists become specialists and know about only their narrow fields. We need to develop an interpretation of nature and of the human being within it, based upon the sciences.

As far as we can tell, the universe is dynamic, expanding, and perhaps 15 billion years old. This is what the astronomers tell us. They are the great prophets of the 20th Century – not the people who wrote the Bible, but the people who really study the heavens, using the best tools of mathematics, observation, and verification. We have an expanding universe, an evolutionary universe.

Evolution is a fact. You cannot understand the nature of Mars or any of the planets in our solar system, or even the planet Earth, without this evolutionary hypothesis. Evolution applies not only to the physical universe, but to the emergence of life, probably three billion years ago on the planet Earth, and the slow evolution of life forms.

The evolutionary hypothesis is among the most fruitful, productive, powerful hypotheses that we've invented since Darwin. As I travel around the world, I find it puzzling that the major opposition to Darwinism and to evolution comes from the United States – actually from certain parts of the United States – and is based upon the Bible. People everywhere ask me, laughing, "What's going on the US? Why are the creationists so powerful? Why are they trying to censor evolution in the schools?" It makes no sense, for if we throw out evolution, we have to throw out astronomy, geology, biology, genetics, the social sciences. Evolution is a powerful hypothesis, confirmed over and over again.

Humans are a part of nature; we are continuous with nature; we are not separate from it. And the mind is a function of the body. Secular humanists find no evidence for immortality of the soul, ghosts, or spirits.

By the way, did you see the front-page story about the ghosts in the *Mobile Register* this morning? Apparently there are very famous ghosts in Alabama. The story mentioned a ghost buster by the name of Mr. Durm. I am pleased to see that the article quoted the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine, which I founded. Writers for the

Skeptical Inquirer examine these cases, and every case for which there is sufficient data can be explained without postulating ghosts.

The third point is that secular humanists – *secular* humanists – are nonreligious. There are religious humanists, but *secular* humanists are not religious. Secular humanists are agnostics or skeptics concerning the God question. They examine the evidence. As for myself, having been a professor of philosophy all my life, I have examined this question year in and year out. Does God exist? I've probably spent more time on the God question than anyone else here – unless there are philosophy professors around – and I find that none of the arguments can stand up to scrutiny. Many people have asked me, "Aren't you afraid that you don't believe in God? What will you do when you meet your Maker?" I quote Bertrand Russell, who would say, "You didn't give me sufficient evidence." If God is a rational being, surely He's not going to punish me for using my mind.

I am also skeptical about the claims of revelation. There are one *billion* or more Muslims on the planet; Islam is the fastest-growing religion, and it's based upon the alleged revelations of Muhammad, about 600 CE on the road to Mecca.

How many people here have read the Book of Mormon? Joseph Smith founded the Mormon religion a hundred fifty years ago, claiming to have had visions from the angel Moroni.

How many people here have read, *really* read, the Bible from cover to cover? Let me see your hands. That's all? Not many! I'm shocked. It's a great piece of literature. Everyone should read the Bible, and read it seriously.

The question that I am raising: Do you accept the revelations of Muhammad, who denies Christianity and Judaism? Do you accept the revelations of Joseph Smith? Do you accept the revelations of Reverend Moon or of Mary Baker Eddy? We can raise serious questions about revelations. I don't have enough time to go into this topic tonight, other than say that the only way I could accept a revelation is if it is corroborated by independent, objective observers, whose testimony is reliable.

What is secular humanism? It is a scientific method of inquiry, and it is skeptical about religious claims. But most important, secular humanism is positive and affirmative. It is committed above all to an ethical outlook. People who say that secular humanists are wicked have apparently not heard what secular humanists say. In fact, secular humanism is the oldest ethical doctrine in the West. It goes back to Socrates and Aristotle who pondered ethical questions and talked about leading a noble life of excellence, about the importance of the virtues. It can be found in the writings of Epicurus and the Epicureans, Marcus Aurelius, and the Stoics. It comes to fruition again with Spinoza and with Immanuel Kant, the greatest German philosopher. Should we remove Kant from the universities? Or the English philosopher John Stuart Mill? Humanism derives from this great tradition of

philosophical efforts to base ethics upon reason. Ethical philosophy attempts to work out a rational interpretation of the moral life as best we can.

On the contrary, religious ethics has often had negative and destructive consequences. For the fatherhood of God people have marched off to wars and killed each other. Look at the German army in the First World War, declaring “*Gott mit uns*” as the French army proclaimed, “*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*” both slaughtering each other on the Western front. Look at the battles between Muslims and Jews, or Hindus and Muslims, or Protestants and Catholics.

Simply believing in God does not make one virtuous. Many evils have been defended in the name of God: slavery in the South before abolition (slavery was based on the inferiority of the black people as being the descendants of Ham – you should read John C. Calhoun, the influential Southern thinker, who so argued), the patriarchal society (demeaning women and insisting that only the man is the lord and master – as is the case with the Promise Keepers today). I was reading *USA Today* this morning, and see that the head of the Promise Keepers has violated the seventh commandment. Remember what the seventh commandment is? You shall not commit adultery. He confesses today and in an upcoming book that he committed adultery and that his daughter had two children born out of wedlock.

So belief in God is no guarantee of virtue. Furthermore, people who believe in God often disagree. Liberal Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Jews, and liberal Catholics favor abortion rights. Conservative Catholics and fundamentalists do not. Muslims believe that God favors polygamy, that a man can have four wives. Christians and Jews do not. Many people draw on religion to condemn homosexuals. Others do not. It is interesting that the Catholic bishops have come out against capital punishment – Catholic bishops agree with secular humanists on this point, or we agree with them. But many fundamentalists here in the South and elsewhere favor capital punishment. So to say that those who believe in God are virtuous is not true, and to claim that all the saints are within the churches and the temples, and all the sinners outside, is simply false.

What is the positive ethics of humanism? The focus is upon happiness and the good life, here and now, in this life, for ourselves and for our fellow human beings. On the other hand, many salvational philosophies believe that we should suffer the pains of this life so that we will have eternal blessings in the afterlife. Humanists want to build a just society, in which all human beings can share in the goods of life and achieve their potentials. Humanists want to distribute happiness as far as possible.

This humanist point of view that began to develop in the 17th and 18th Centuries maintained: “No deity will save us, we must save ourselves.” In other words, we are responsible for our own destinies. Every human being and every society must meet the challenges and develop life in his or her or its own terms. Humanism focuses on the freedom and autonomy of each individual to realize the full life here and now, and that is why the courage to become is so crucial. The good life is a life of creative joy,

of actualization, of creativity in every field, of cooperation and service to others, of shared experience. We ought to do whatever we can, individually and socially, to achieve that.

Humanists do not believe that anything goes. Pat Robertson's TV crew came up to my university once to interview me for a program on humanism. I was pleased that he wanted to get another point of view. This became a half-hour episode of "The 700 Club" a little over ten years ago. The producers would quote me out of context, say, on the humanist view of drug use, and then show someone dead of a drug overdose, lying on the floor. Or, for instance, they would quote me out of context on the humanist view of homosexuality, and then show a gay dance. But the point is that although humanists believe in the right of privacy, they have argued for self-discipline, temperance, and moderation as a part of the good life. We want to satisfy our desires, but also to achieve the fulfillment of our highest talents and aspirations under the rule of reason.

Our relationship to other human beings is crucial. In my book, *Forbidden Fruit*, I argue that there are a set of common moral decencies shared by both believers and nonbelievers: "Honor your father and your mother," "you shall not commit murder," "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not steal," "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbors," etc. These commandments predated the Bible; they were part of the Hammurabi Code before they were written down in the Old Testament. There are other virtues: "to tell the truth," "to be sincere," "to keep promises," "to be dependable," "to be honest," and so on. These are the common heritage of humankind; they cut across cultures. We recognize them and live by them.

However, ethics cannot be fixed for all time and written in stone; ethics has to change and be modified in the light of new conditions. We no longer live in isolated communities; we're part of the global society. So I want to move on to the fifth point in my general definition of humanism: humanism is concerned with developing a social polity. It is committed to democracy. The major critics of totalitarianism in our time, the great intellectuals who opposed totalitarianism, were humanists, such as George Orwell, Sidney Hook, Karl Popper, and others.

Humanism is committed to a doctrine of human rights, a free and open society, the right of privacy. Humanists agree that the best way to solve social problems is by a free markets of ideas. When I was a GI in the Second World War, I went to Hyde Park at the height of the buzz-bomb attack on Britain, and I was amazed to find people on the soapboxes in Hyde Park, with one man saying, "We should allow Mr. Hitler to come into Britain. We should be pacifists and welcome him with open arms." I said to myself, "My, look at this! Britain is facing death, and yet defending freedom of speech in a free society!" That's the whole point that we Americans recognize in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or the free exercise thereof," along with a defense of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. So the democratic outlook and the

humanist outlook converge. I submit that the great democratic revolutions in the last three centuries are basically humanist revolutions. Those of you who accept democracy are really accepting the humanist outlook. The New Testament says, "Leave unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The democrat says, "No, do not leave unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; oppose him! Throw him out of office!" So democracy is crucial.

In addition to democracy, we have at the present moment a new moral imperative, the imperative to build a world community. I realize that Senator Helms in a nearby state is perhaps opposed to this. But it seems to me that in the 21st Century we will be faced with an economy that is global. Here in Mobile, Alabama, your industries and trade depend upon global markets. America does not live isolated. We all depend on trade in our interdependent globe. I think everyone recognizes that today. The power of the American economy comes from our ability to trade in the free market. Yet it is not sufficient to have a global economy. *Humanist Manifesto II* states that in the 20th Century humankind reached a position where we recognize our interdependence with everyone else. We need to develop a new global ethics. No one talks about that, except secular humanists. Yet it is crucial. A global ethic that says, yes, I'm an American (or a Frenchman, or an Indian, or a Chinese), but equally importantly I'm a member of the human species; I'm a member of the world community. That is the overriding imperative today. We are all members of a world community. This is graphically illustrated by global warming and the ecological damage to the environment. Unless we recognize that we have a common planetary habitat and that whatever happens in any part of the globe affects everybody, then it seems to me, we're in deep trouble, and we don't have much time to recognize that.

Building a world community is crucial. I'm talking about a moral community, a community beyond national differences that divide people, beyond ethnic differences, beyond racial or sexual differences, but also beyond religious differences. I fear that often those who speak in the name of God mean "my God." We have to transcend these differences. Part of the secular humanist agenda is to build common ground, a new humanist ethics, an appreciation for human rights, and a quest for values that we can all share. That's my definition of the ethics of secular humanism. It seems to me an appropriate point of view for the present age.

I agree with essentially all the ideas that Katz expressed in the above, and in the final X-chapters, I'll suggest ways that more progress might be made toward "Building a world community" – of humanists. For the rest of this chapter, however, I want to return to the question of how more progress might be made explaining humanism.

Actually, though, the task of explaining humanism goes far, far beyond providing brief lectures or essays (such as those quoted above). In such descriptions, humanism is described as a natural (as opposed to supernatural) worldview, based on science (and therefore based on the scientific method),

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<http://zenofzero.net/>

applied with critical thought toward the goal of helping intelligence expand, while promoting and protecting basic human rights, especially for women and children. To “explain” humanism, therefore, careful and thorough explanations are needed about different worldviews, natural vs. supernatural perspectives, science and the scientific method, critical thinking, humanity’s goals, human rights, and how to promote and protect human rights. If you’ll think a bit about all those topics, Dear (subjects that I’ve at least superficially addressed in the past many chapters), I expect that you’ll agree that the task of explaining humanism is humongous!

And actually, the challenge is even much greater than you might first agree that it is, because programs to explain humanism must be directed less toward people such as yourself who have earned their high-school diplomas in some honors program (and with honors ☺) and who are now headed to university, but instead, directed more toward people who barely scraped through high-school in a nonacademic program, or who dropped out of high school, or who never attended high school, or who never attended any school – as well as those who can neither read nor write! Therefore, Dear, essays (such as the above that I quoted) and books (such as this one!) are of relatively little use to explain humanism “to the masses”.

To reach such people, experience shows that the most effective method is *via* “the mass media”, especially visually (e.g., movies, TV, and video on the internet) and with popular music. That is, to reach “Joe Six-pack” and “Jane Sit-com” the best way is the same as it has been for the past 10,000-or-more years, namely, with stories (some now called “situation comedies” or “sit-coms”), with songs, and with what are now called “talk shows”. As an illustration, although I agree with what Donella (Dana) Meadows wrote and applaud her decision to try to influence the public, I think that she would have agreed that her huge efforts had limited success. She argued for (and produced) reports “with as much documentation, clarity, and persuasiveness as possible” but not “in the most visible public forums”: Joe Six-pack and Jane Sit-com don’t spend much time reading books or “Global Citizen” columns in newspapers; mostly they watch sports, sit-coms, talk-shows, and movies on TV. Consequently, if one desires to educate “the masses” about the problems facing humanity and about possible solutions *via* scientific humanism, it would be more profitable to “sink down” to the level of their TV viewing habits (or addictions). The reality is that Oprah influences millions more people than Dana did – and has made more than a billion dollars doing it!

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Actually, it can be argued (and has been argued) that radio, movies, TV, plus maybe soon the internet are modern societies' new religions – religion in the sense of ideas that “bind” a culture together. In the past, religions provided cultures with most of their “stories” (either in the form of myths or as preserved in their “holy books”); the people would talk about such stories, reflect on their moral messages, and commonly incorporate some part of such stories in their own conversations and in their interpretations of events. Today, in contrast, Americans, for example, are more likely to talk about and even reflect upon something they recently saw on television or in the movies (e.g., men talking about the most recent game; women talking about some event seen on either “the big screen” or “the little screen”). Even a certain grandfather might mention some “great moment” or “great comment” on TV that happened “in the good old days”.

And in some respects, it was better “in the good old days”, when I was a kid. In the 40s, all kids would have listened to Superman (or the Lone Ranger or the Whistler) the night before on radio; the story was an experience shared by all “friends”. Similarly in the 50s and early 60s (for those who had TVs): everyone (“who was anyone”) watched the *Ed Sullivan Show*, *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, etc. In the 60s and 70s, I still fondly remember sitting with your dad and his brother and sister watching Disney shows and *Star Trek*. For others, in the 80s and 90s, kids probably watched *MASH* and *Seinfeld*. But now, technology has progressed so rapidly that television (as a religion, binding the culture together) has splintered into literally hundreds of sects: in the 70s, we had 4 channels (ABC, CBC, NBC, and PBS); in the 80s we had more than 40 cable channels; now we could have 400; soon we'll we able to have “video on demand” (VOD).

To be sure, major progress has occurred during my lifetime with movies and TV programs exposing flaws in our culture's assumptions – and to be sure, writers such as Dana Meadows and the writers and producers of such shows as *Star Trek*, *MASH*, and *Seinfeld* deserve substantial credit for the stimulation they have given to our culture's evolution. The writers and producers of *Star Trek* stimulated people to think of the progress achievable with science and how it could be used to help intelligence expand, *MASH* showed people the hope of interpersonal relations and the application of science in medicine as well as the hopelessness of dealing with bureaucracies and engaging in war, and *Seinfeld* helped people see the artificiality and in many cases silliness of barriers erected between different

cultures. Those are all “humanist themes”; thereby, progress was made explaining scientific humanism; yet, in all the shows in those series that I watched, I don’t recall ever hearing the word “humanism” – which is okay: it’s more important to understand and apply it than name it!

Based on the record in the US, however, surely it’s reasonable to conclude that attempting to educate people about humanism *via* the mass media is relatively inefficient. In turn, the relatively meager success (e.g., with, in 1991, “62.8% of Americans subscribed to the statement ‘I know God exists and have no doubt about it!’”) is undoubtedly caused by what was recognized (and taken advantage of) by many groups, namely: the mass media needn’t be used to educate; it can also be used (maybe even more effectively) to indoctrinate. Foremost among the groups who take advantage of the power of mass media to indoctrinate are advertisers of consumer products as well as religious and political organizations (such as the Mormons, Evangelical Christians, the Nazis, the Soviets, the Saudis, and this country’s political parties).

I won’t go into details showing you the extent of such indoctrination campaigns. I would encourage you to look into the matter yourself. Many books are available on the subject; you probably know some details about the propaganda campaigns of the Nazis and Communists; in earlier chapters I mentioned some examples of televangelicals, and of course, there are the massive propaganda campaigns still promoted by the Saudis and by American political parties. In particular, probably you’re already generally aware of the proselytizing campaigns of the Mormons, but some details might be enlightening. Thus, the Mormon Church has published over 120 million copies of the Book of Mormon since 1830, and in 1999, alone, the ~5 million American members of the LDS Church published and distributed (“free”) over 5 million copies of the Book of Mormon. Similarly, although you’re well aware of the use of mass media to advertise consumer products, did you know that commercial advertising in the U.S. is promoted by approximately 15% of the nation’s work force?!

Although people have few defenses against the onslaught of distortions, misinformation, fabrications, and lies promoted in the mass media, yet if used, these defenses are powerful. The most powerful is the ability to evaluate claims – which means, fundamentally, to demand to see the data. For example, if someone claims that a certain product will make your teeth whiter or that their religion is the only way to get to heaven, demand to see

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the data supporting such claims. Another powerful defense is to constrain one's appetite; as Socrates reportedly remarked while touring the marketplace in Athens: "How many things I have no need of!"

To be sure, substantial progress has been made in many parts of the world educating people about science, and certainly both all educators and all scientists (including "applied scientists" such as in the medical and engineering professions) – the "priests" of the new "religion" – should be congratulated for their progress: think of NASA's picture of "Earthrise", think of The Weather Channel on TV, think of the potentials of the internet! But certainly the progress has been neither uniform nor consistent. For example, your mother watches The Weather Channel to decide what to wear to Church, and terrorists use the internet to promote their prehistoric worldview. As someone else wrote: "nearly every other month, it seems, Osama bin Laden or one of his henchmen appears on the world's television screens to expatiate on the ideology and strategy of global jihad and to urge followers on to more audacious and more lethal efforts."

But again, there are some wonderfully educational exceptions. I'm thinking of some of the tremendous TV programs such as *NOVA* and *Frontline* produced by Public Broadcasting Stations (such as PBS in this country and the BBC in the UK). In addition, many of the reports from the Discovery Channel (especially the Science Channel) and by LINK and Free Speech TV deserve the highest praise. In addition, there are some wonderful TV series (of course such as *Star Trek*) and movies (e.g., Carl Sagan's *Contact*) that also deserve high praise for their help to humanity. Unfortunately, though, data show that people are far more interested in watching sit-coms, soap operas, game shows, and sports. Such is the nature of the problem!

Based on polling results showing that only ~10% of Americans are humanists, it's clear that much more work is needed to solve the problem of explaining humanism to "the masses". In Britain, more progress has been made, with ~36% of the people consider themselves to be humanists, as can be seen from the following 24 November 2006 report, from which I've removed the report's numbered references.⁸

In the 2001 [UK] census 7 out of 10 people ticked the 'Christian' box but, with church attendance now below 7% and under 1 in 3 marriages taking place in church, this figure was clearly more about cultural identity than religious belief.

⁸ The full report is at <http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/newsarticleview.asp?article=2288>.

Today an Ipsos MORI poll has shown that 36% of people [in the UK]... are in fact humanists in their basic outlook. They:

- Feel scientific & other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe (rather than feeling that religious beliefs are needed for a “complete understanding”)
- Believe that “right and wrong” can be explained by human nature alone, and does not necessarily require religious teachings, and
- Base their judgments of right and wrong on “the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world”.

Humanism is a non-religious ethical outlook on life and these answers summarize its key beliefs...

To explain humanism to still more people (especially in the U.S. and other “religious nations” – such as all Islamic nations, where probably fewer than 1% of the people are humanists), much more concerted effort is clearly needed to explain and even extol “free thought”.

One tremendous way (maybe even the best way) to explain and extol free thought (especially to “the masses”) is, as I suggested in the previous chapter, “simply” to tell the amazing stories of the “little people” who have found ways to break free from their religious indoctrinations. There are thousands of such stimulating stories available on the internet, and some of them are so moving that, were it not for oppositions from religious groups, I bet they’d be “blockbuster” TV and movie “hits”. Even with oppositions from religious groups (short of the censorship that occurs in Muslim countries), I bet there are tens (if not hundreds) of millions of people who would eagerly relate to such stories, willing to pay reasonable admission prices for the privilege to learn about such heroes.

There are, in addition, thousands of compelling stories of historical heroes in the “free-thought movement”. For example, think of the stories that could be told (and the resulting movies that could be made) of Socrates, focusing only on his astounding statements “There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance” and “I’m not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world.” Whether his story would end as a tragedy (executed for his thoughts) or a triumph (dying in defense of his country’s laws) could be left for the viewer to ponder – although I trust that another moral of the story

would be obvious to all: just as today in Muslim countries, so it was then, that clerics demanded conformity to “the party line”, under penalty of death.

And actually, stories should be told not only about such freethinkers as Socrates, Confucius, and the Buddha, but even based on the little we know about Jesus (ben Pandera?). Thus, a story could be told (albeit with little supporting evidence!) of a wandering Jew named Jesus who (similar to Socrates) refused to follow the state-sponsored religion – and the ruling clerics saw to it that he suffered the consequences. But instead of telling such an intellectually stimulating story, the damnable Mel Gibson tells a “gory story” about Jesus being mutilated – and makes ~\$350 million doing it! In the case of Muhammad, a story could be told about how he was ridiculed for his early humanistic thoughts by the ruling clergy of Mecca and how he escaped to Medina, but then, maybe the best “humanist story” that could be told about the rest of his life (when he went on a rampage, forcing his religion on others) is to show how inhuman (non-humanistic) people can become when they gain power, as the next breed of damnable clerics.

Further, besides stories about clashes between such well-recognized freethinkers and the clerics of their societies, the stories of many other amazing people should be told. I won't try to produce an exhaustive list of examples (I mentioned a few such people in the previous chapter), but the list should include the Greek “secular humanists” Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Democritus, and Epicurus as well as the Romans: Lucretius, Cicero, Seneca the Younger, and Petronius (“It is fear that first brought gods into the world”). Further, to prod you to think about the heroism of such people, consider a few more of those humanists whose story should be told.

One such was the “philosopher emperor” of Rome, Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180 CE). I saw a movie about him (a long time ago), but I'm sure a better version could be produced. Just imagine it, Dear: the most powerful person in the world (the Emperor of Rome) was thinking such thoughts as those quoted below from his book *The Meditations* (which reveals one of the earliest “independent” assessments of the new, Christian religion).⁹

Have I done something for the general interest? Well then I have had my reward. Let this always be present to thy mind, and never stop doing such good...

⁹ Available at <http://classics.mit.edu/>.

What a soul! [such as that of Epicurus] – that which is ready if, at any moment, it must be separated from the body, and ready either to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist; but so that this readiness comes from a man's own judgment, not from mere obstinacy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with dignity and in a way to persuade another, without tragic show.

Similar amazing stories could be told about scientific humanists as Europe slowly emerged from the darkness imposed by the Catholic Church. Movies could be (and should be!) made about such Italians as Bruno and Galileo, such Englishmen as More, Marlowe, and Hobbes, such Frenchmen as La Rouchefoucauld and of course Voltaire, and of course such Scotsmen as David Hume and Robbie Burns. In addition (and for a change), true stories should be told about the American who arguably was the most important contributor to the founding of both the American and French Republics, namely, Thomas Paine. In his day, he was treated horribly by the Christians, and even today, his memory (similar to the memory of Epicurus) is terribly maligned; in contrast, what a wonderful story could (and should!) be told about someone who wrote (and lived!) such statements as: “My country is the world, and to do good is my religion.”

Think too, Dear, of the true stories that could be told about the religious views of the first presidents of this country – a story that should be told to counteract the lie of “the Christian Reich” that this is “a Christian nation founded on Christian principles”. As you can find on the internet,¹⁰ a stunning summary was given by “the Reverend Bird Wilson, an Episcopal minister in Albany, New York, in a sermon in October 1831”, during which he stated:

...among all our presidents from Washington downward, not one was a professor of religion... of the presidents who had thus far been elected [George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson] not a one had professed a belief in Christianity.

As well, the true story should be told of the religious views of one of America's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln. As he wrote in a letter to J.S. Wakefield, after the 1862 death of his third son from typhoid fever:

My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures have become clearer and stronger with advancing years, and I see no reason for thinking I shall ever change them.

¹⁰ For example, see http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/farrell_till/myth.html.

And oh, the stories that could (and definitely should) be told about Ingersoll “the magnificent.” All should hear “the golden orator” say:

Our civilization is not Christian. It does not come from the skies. It is not a result of “inspiration.” It is the child of invention, of discovery, of applied knowledge – that is to say, of science. When man becomes great and grand enough to admit that all have equal rights; when thought is untrammelled; when worship shall consist in doing useful things; when religion means the discharge of obligations to our fellow men, then, and not until then, will the world be civilized.

Even I (a devoted admirer of Ingersoll) learned only recently that, when he was Attorney General of Illinois and was offered his party’s candidacy for Governor on condition that he remain silent about his religious views, he responded:¹¹

Goodbye, gentlemen! I am not asking to be Governor of Illinois... I have in my composition that which I have declared to the world as my views upon religion. My position I would not, under any circumstances, not even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be President of the United States than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me, not to the State of Illinois. I would not smother one sentiment of my heart to be the Emperor of the round world.

What a contrast between him and the vast majority of modern politicians: Ingersoll was integrity personified!

In fact, while I’m here, let me show you a little more about Ingersoll, copied from the same address (from which the above quotation was copied) by Joseph Lewis “dedicating, as a Public memorial, the house in which Robert G. Ingersoll (1822–1899) was born, Dresend, Yates County, in the state of New York.”

From no matter what category you care to evaluate his worth, from no matter what standard you wish to compare him to others, none equaled the beneficial influence he [Ingersoll] exercised upon the social, political and intellectual life of his time. Walt Whitman said, “America doesn’t know today how proud she ought to be of her Ingersoll.” The great poet Swinburne said that the one man he wanted to meet above all others, if he visited America, was Robert G. Ingersoll. The great Norwegian Bjornstjerne Bjornson said, “I envy the land that brings forth such glorious fruit as

¹¹ Copied from <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/ingersoll.htm>; originally from a 1954 address by Joseph Lewis (available at <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/lewis/lewing01.htm>) entitled *Ingersoll the Magnificent* – which I urge you to read and which was put on the internet by Cliff Walker.

Ingersoll.” A volume could be written containing the praise and appreciation, of the genius of Ingersoll, by the great men and women of his time.

When I visited George Bernard Shaw, in 1948, at his home in Aylot, a suburb of London, he was extremely anxious for me to tell him all that I knew about Ingersoll. During the course of the conversation, he told me that Ingersoll had made a tremendous impression upon him, and had exercised an influence upon him probably greater than that of any other man. He seemed particularly anxious to impress me with the importance of Ingersoll’s influence upon his intellectual endeavors and accomplishments. In view of this admission, what percentage of the greatness of Shaw belongs to Ingersoll? If Ingersoll’s influence upon so great an intellect as George Bernard Shaw was that extensive, what must have been his influence upon others?

What seed of wisdom did he plant into the minds of others, and what accomplishments of theirs should be attributed to him? The world will never know. What about the countless thousands from whom he lifted the clouds of darkness and fear, and who were emancipated from the demoralizing dogmas and creeds of ignorance and superstition? What will be Ingersoll’s influence upon the minds of future generations, who will come under the spell of his magic words, and who will be guided into the channels of human betterment by the unparalleled example of his courageous life? The debt the world owes Robert G. Ingersoll can never be paid.

I remember on one of my many visits with Thomas A. Edison, I brought up the question of Ingersoll. I asked this great genius what he thought of him, and he replied, “He was grand.” I told Mr. Edison that I had been invited to deliver a radio address on Ingersoll, and would he be kind enough to write me a short appreciation of him. This he did, and a photostat of that letter is now a part of this house. In it you will read what Mr. Edison wrote. He said: “I think that Ingersoll had all the attributes of a perfect man, and, in my opinion, no finer personality ever existed....”

In addition, and as a companion to the story about Ingersoll, the true story should be told about the American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 – 1902), to whom every woman (and man!) in America is indebted. Let me show you a little of her story by quoting the article (which I hope you’ll read) entitled “Famous Dead Atheists” by Mark Gilbert.¹²

Stanton was described at her funeral as “a fearless, serene agnostic.” She was tireless in her criticism of religion and the Bible, decrying their denigration of women. She wrote of the Bible, “I found nothing grand in the history of the Jews nor in the morals inculcated in the Pentateuch. Surely the writers had a very low idea of the nature of their god. They made him not only anthropomorphic, but of the very lowest type, jealous and revengeful, loving violence rather than mercy. I know of no other books

¹² Available at <http://www.jmarkgilbert.com/atheists.html>.

that so fully teach the subjection and degradation of women.” [*Women Without Superstition*] And, “The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women’s emancipation.” [*Treasury of Women’s Quotations*]

Her own religious beliefs evolved over the course of her life. As a young woman, she was briefly under the spell of fundamentalist religion. Her family led her out of that by taking her on a trip and giving her sensible things to read. She said, “That disabused my mind of hell and the devil and of a cruel, avenging God, and I have never believed in them since.” [Interview, *Chicago Record*, June 29, 1897, quoted in *Women Without Superstition*]

Her early political addresses were sprinkled generously with references to God, but as she found her own voice, increasing in confidence and battle-scarred by denunciations against her sacrilege in the popular press, invocations lessened. When such references occurred, “Nature” and “God” became interchangeable. [*Women Without Superstition*]

Elizabeth’s daughter, Margaret Stanton Lawrence, recalled, “We children have only pleasant memories of a happy home, of a sunny, cheerful, indulgent mother, whose great effort was to save us from all the fears that shadow the lives of most children. God was to us sunshine, flowers, affection, all that is grand and beautiful in nature. The devil had no place at our fireside, nor the Inferno in our dreams of the future.”

Late in her life, Elizabeth wrote, “I can say that the happiest period of my life has been since I emerged from the shadows of superstitions of the old theologies, relieved from all gloomy apprehensions of the future, satisfied that as my labors and capacities were limited to this sphere of action, I was responsible for nothing beyond my horizon, as I could neither understand nor change the condition of the unknown world. Giving ourselves, then, no trouble about the future, let us make the most of the present, and fill up our lives with earnest work here.” [“The Pleasures of Age,” in *The Boston Investigator*, Feb. 2, 1901, quoted in *Women Without Superstition*]

In her book on the Bible, the *Woman’s Bible*, Stanton hailed the changes since the Bible had been written, when “rationalism took the place of religion and reason triumphed over superstition.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton lived her life without deference to a higher power and advocated such living for others. Her criticism of religion was not limited to “organized religion,” which is popularly disparaged today. She decries “superstition,” which probably indicates all religious belief, and trumpets rationalism and reason. Her identification of God with nature is a way of celebrating the purely secular without directly denouncing the religious beliefs of others. She is in the camp of other freethinkers of her time, such as Robert Green Ingersoll.

In addition, what stories could be told – and so desperately need to be told – about how the principal religions of our culture were created. Of course it

would be difficult to determine what actually occurred in each religion (for reasons that I'll try to show you in the "excursion" **Yx**, dealing with "Your Indoctrination in the Mountainous God Lie), but if the best (most honest and knowledgeable) historians would dedicate themselves to telling people "the truth", I'm certain that the results would be stunning.

I've tried to understand these origins as best I can in the few years that I've spent investigating them, and though I know that I don't know enough to claim that I have fathomed even a fraction of the seemingly bottomless pit of "priestly fabrications", yet the skeletons that I have glimpsed in the closets of the principal religions of our culture should be enough to "scare the religion" out of anyone! Let me briefly indicate what I mean.

- Judaism (and the other "Abrahamic religions", including Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism) wasn't founded by Abraham (who, if he ever existed, was little more than the chief of another incidental tribe of sheep herders) nor was Judaism formally defined with the laws of Moses (who, if he ever existed, seems to have been an expelled Egyptian priest); instead, Judaism seems to have been created by Ezra and co-conspirators, so their benefactor (the Persian Emperor) could maintain political control over a portion of his empire by mingling Hebrew legends with the Persian religion (Zoroastrianism) into a "holy book" that Christians call "The Old Testament".
- Christianity wasn't founded by "Jesus the Christ" (if he ever existed) but was, first, an amalgamation of the "mystery religions" (such as Gnosticism) by the Jewish dissident Paul, then a mishmash by other Jewish dissidents with the "wisdom literature" of the time (plagiarizing Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and Indian ideas), resulting in a huge number of "gospels", and then finally, a political amalgamation of the result with most of the "pagan" religions of the Roman Empire, "inspired" by the murderous, megalomaniac ambitions of the "butcher Emperor" Constantine and consummated by the greed and cunning of "the Christian fathers".
- Islam wasn't derived from some divine inspiration received by Muhammad from some angel (Gabriel), but was derived, at first, from his desire to have his fellow Arabs replace their polytheism with the monotheism of the Christians and Jews whom he had encountered (and he chose the Arab's moon god to be the "one, true god"), and then, from

his (and subsequent Arab megalomaniacs') desires first to rule Arabian cities, then all of Arabia, and then (and still) the entire world. And actually, he and fellow Muslim megalomaniacs were and still are amazing successful: five times per day, approximately 1.2 billion people prostrate themselves toward the center of Arabia, willingly submitting themselves to Arab rule!

- Mormonism, also, wasn't derived from any "divine inspiration" but from Sidney Rigdon's desire to revenge his being expelled from his ministry in a group of Baptists led by Joseph Campbell, a revenge that Rigdon accomplished with an elaborate series of deceptions: first he purloined the original manuscript of a book written by the (then deceased) author Solomon Spaulding, next he added (to the stolen manuscript) passages from the Bible plus his own theological speculations (about "the latter days"), and then, he developed an elaborate ruse to foist the resulting "Book of Mormon", first on his own congregation and then on anyone foolish enough to "believe" the ruse. Specifically, Rigdon first gave his "revised" version of Spaulding's manuscript to Joseph Smith (and "secretaries") to rewrite it (so Rigdon's handwriting wouldn't be recognized), next, the notorious "gold digger" Smith concocted the ruse that he had found "the Golden Bible" *via* instructions from "the angel Moroni", and after all of those shenanigans, Rigdon received the "Book of Mormon" from his co-conspirators and used it to convert his own congregation from a wayward Baptist sect into the first group of Mormons, with Joseph Smith as its "prophet" and led by Rigdon as his new religion's "high priest".

Such stories – the true stories (of lies) – could be and should be told!

As for TV (and radio) "talk shows" and "documentaries" that I wish would be produced, an excellent and even inspiring illustration was recently described in the PBS series *WIDE ANGLE* in program entitled "Dishing Democracy". The following is from an overview of the program.¹³

Dishing Democracy

The Issue

Across the Arab world, the impact of satellite TV has been profound. More than a decade after what is often described as the Arab satellite revolution, satellite channels

¹³ This, and more, is at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/cairo/index.html>.

have created a virtual Arab metropolis exploring new ideas, pushing boundaries and encouraging debate – from the ground up. Before the advent of satellite dishes, most Arab viewers depended on terrestrial state television, which meant few channels and some form of government oversight of everything that went to air. Since 1990, the number of satellite channels sky-rocketed from one to more than two hundred today. The outcome was the introduction of independent journalism in the Arab world that includes live reports from the field, news analysis, and talk shows that bring political debate and taboo subjects like homosexuality, polygamy, wife battering, and equality between the sexes into the public spotlight.

The Film

WIDE ANGLE goes behind the scenes at Arab television channel MBC in Cairo for an inside look at the hit all-female talk show, *KALAM NAWAEM*. The film provides a nuanced portrait of four Arab women harnessing the power of transnational satellite TV to boldly and effectively push social reform. With exclusive access to both the private and the professional lives of the hosts and producers, the cameras capture censorship discussions, tension and camaraderie in the dressing room, and viewer reactions on the Arab street.

If you get a chance to see this (or a similar) program, Dear, then I expect that you'll be impressed with the potential rapid changes in Muslim societies that will almost certainly result from satellite television, whose penetration in all societies is booming. For example, as the same source states:¹⁴

In a region characterized by repressive, authoritarian regimes, satellite television's ability to transcend national borders and government control makes it an important catalyst for democracy. Competition increases adherence to better journalistic standards. Field reports inform public opinion, and audience participation in on-air debates strengthens the expression of public opinion. Freedom of information creates an informed public, encourages transparent decision-making and ultimately acts as a tool to hold government institutions accountable.

News programs build expectations and a heightened sense of urgency for democratic change by illuminating corruption, inequality, and restrictions of freedom. Footage of democratic elections in Iraq and the Palestinian Territories and President Hosni Mubarak's inclusion of opposition parties in Egypt's presidential elections are examples of events broadcast across borders that have the power to provoke disagreement and encourage debate.

Debate programs on news channels are fertile ground for difference of opinions. *Al Jazeera*, for example, provides a platform to voice opposition, and in doing so, sets the example for a democratic foundation to millions of Arabs worldwide. *MORE THAN ONE DIRECTION*, one of its many weekly talk shows, offers experts and

¹⁴ Copied from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/cairo/handbook4.html>.

guests a platform to debate a variety of opinions regarding politics, society and culture in the Arab world.

While ballots might traditionally be the way citizens exercise their influence in society, in the Middle East the ballot is surpassed by the remote control and the text message. Some of the most successful programs, across genres, are those that involve audience participation. Music competition programs like *STAR ACADEMY* and *SUPER STAR* ask viewers to send a text message indicating their favorite contestant. This global trend is revolutionizing societal norms and behavior. Voting in a TV show, let alone in an election, was a foreign concept to millions of Arabs just a decade ago.

Further, I expect that most Muslim governments will almost certainly be unable to stop such TV shows from continuing, because (I predict) “we, the people” (in particular, “they the people”) – the common people, who always have had the ultimate power in any society – would demand that such shows continue. And of course it’s the case that such shows aren’t yet explaining humanism to the people, but it’ll come, I predict, step by slow step.¹⁵

Unfortunately, however, such technology is a double-edged sword. That is, simultaneously with the potential of expanding knowledge (e.g., about scientific humanism), many TV shows – and even entire TV networks – will continue to promote ignorance and evil. For example, one might hope that a short cut to women’s liberation would be *via* the “mass media”, especially *via* TV and movies (since their messages can be absorbed so quickly and easily). It’s clear, however, that such media can be used equally effectively for brainwashing as for education. For example, think of the time during your most recent visit with us when you traveled to visit your other grandmother, and there, you spent the day watching a Mormon “devotional day” on TV. Further, think of how much time and money is spent in this country by people (including your mother) listening to and watching religious broadcasts.

Thereby, one can gain support for questioning Aristotle’s idea that “all people, by nature, desire knowledge”. That is, apparently a substantial fraction of the people desire to know only answers (whether right or wrong) and desire support for what they’re already confident is “the truth”. Stated differently, a substantial fraction of the people apparently doesn’t want to

¹⁵ As I report in a recent post in my blog (<http://zenofzero.blogspot.com/2008/02/islams-dark-ages-grow-dimmer.html>) a major step backwards has recently occurred, with the ministers of “information” of Arab countries agreeing on restrictions on satellite TV programs.

know what's correct; they want reassurance that they're "right". Many people, maybe even the majority, seem to love to wallow in their own prejudices – like pigs in mud. Still, as ordinary people ruled by religious fundamentalists get glimpses of humanism (e.g., on satellite TV and maybe at some "underground" movies) and as a fortunate few in Islamic countries are able to gain uncensored and unfettered access to the internet, then bit by bit, the patriarchs and their clerics will probably lose power.

If you desire to try to help solve such problem, Dear, maybe you could contribute toward progress in *eXtricating humanity from eXcruciating problems... by eXpanding public education... through eXposing more people to different worldviews*, not necessarily *via* travel (because generally it's too expensive) and not necessarily *via* the internet (because generally it's messages aren't sufficiently stimulating) but *via mass-media stories and movies that eXplain and eXplore worldview origins, histories, and resulting perspectives on solving contemporary personal and public problems...* I mean, after all, it's "all well and good" to try to improve the internet (e.g., by establishing a peer-review system) and it "sure it would help" if the number and roles of middle-men (and -women) between producers and consumers of ideas (*viz.*, publishers and librarians) could be drastically reduced (e.g., by putting all books on line), but meanwhile, if you really want to expand public education, it's obvious that most progress could be made *via* the mass media, especially *via* movies and television. If you want a powerful example of what I mean, then consider this: all religions were concocted by storytellers!

I know that you're well aware of the ability of storytellers (especially movie makers) to stimulate your emotions – and exactly that ability to stimulate people is the reason for the adjective 'mass' in "mass media" – but the need is to capitalize on the potentials of the mass media for educating people rather than "just" stimulating them emotionally. And of course there's need to be alert to both advantages and disadvantages of the abilities of advertising, religious, and political organizations and leaders to stimulate the emotions "of the masses" (witness Hitler *vs.* Churchill) and of the abilities of mass-media executives to "give the people what they want" (from heroic tales to stories laden with violence).

Meanwhile, though, we ordinary humans (we whom the mass-media executives consider to be "the masses") can make a difference: we can make a difference not only by informing "leaders" through our choices of

what we personally pay attention to (and ignore), vote for (and against), and pay to attend (or refuse to pay), but also by how we stimulate similar behavior in children. That is, although without doubt, the “masters of media marketing” have learned how to manipulate the masses, yet “we the masses” have the ability to manipulate the media masters! In the future, I’m sure that “entertainment on demand” will dominate; for example, consider the success of Apple’s I-pod, weakening radio. Similar will undoubtedly occur (and in fact, is now occurring) with videos on demand.

In particular, I expect that in the future, the appeals of religious TV shows and networks (as in the US and Islamic countries) will be limited to the brainwashed and the brain damaged, and that the fraction of the total population thus “mentally challenged” will noticeably diminish during the coming decades, as more entertaining and informative programs and appropriate medicine for damaged minds become available. I therefore expect that, once people have tasted some of the fruits from the tree of knowledge (that is, science), such as satellite TV, the internet, and even cell phones, then the clerics’ god (i.e., the clerics) will finally understand the line from *Genesis* 3, 22 and balefully repeat: “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil...” We can hope that they’ll even add: “So now, it appears we’ve run our con game for as long as we can; now, we’ll need to go out and get a job like the rest of them.”

Yet, as important as TV has become for spreading knowledge of scientific humanism to “the masses”, it’s also important to try to explain humanism also to “the intelligentsia”, for which newspapers, articles, nonfiction-books, and the internet are usually more appropriate than TV dramas, sit-coms, and talk-shows. During their careers, each enlightened school teacher can influence more than a thousand students and each enlightened professor can influence more than a hundred thousand students (especially through publishing textbooks and other communications). As a specific illustration, consider the following op-ed article by the playwright David Williamson, which was published in the Australian newspaper *The Australian*.¹⁶

Deliver us from the god delusion that imperils our humanity

by David Williamson, *The Australian*

¹⁶ Copied from <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21002684-7583,00.html>.

BACK in the 1970s the Australian band Skyhooks, one of the most inventive and intelligent pop groups we've had, wrote a song called *Horror Movie* that suggested you don't have to go to the cinema for your horror. It was "right there on your TV".

If anything, the horror that we see on our nightly news, particularly on SBS, has got worse since then. Item after item highlights the human capacity for violence, depravity, irrationality, hatred, indifference, arrogance, intolerance and greed.

The media, of course, tend to highlight the worst of human behavior as that's what attracts attention. We are also capable of behaving warmly, decently, honestly, compassionately, thoughtfully and tactfully, but the horror of the dark side of human nature is no less disturbing because it's only part of the story, especially when it's shoved in your face night after night.

What I would love to see in 2007 is the horror movie become somewhat less horrific.

I would like to think that in 2007 clear, rational and powerful ideas with heaps of evidence to back them up would impinge on the minds of those who are generating those horror movies on television.

Given humanity's seemingly limited capacity to act rationally, this is, of course, a pretty forlorn hope, but hope tends to peak at the start of every new year, when we briefly believe that the personal and societal mistakes of the past year needn't be repeated.

My fantasy for 2007 is that religious extremists of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths in particular will sit down and read Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* and be sufficiently impressed by its argument and evidence to acknowledge that belief in a god of any kind is a delusion that has wreaked untold damage on the world since the dawn of recorded time.

As Dawkins points out, it's not hard to see why that delusion is so widespread and fervently held. Evolution has built into our psyches a strong tendency to obey authority. At the start of our lives our parents are obeyed, because their wisdom is necessary for our survival, and this transfers later in life to other authority figures. The ultimate authority figure is God, or whatever your religion calls its head honcho.

It's also easy to understand that a fear of death and, even worse, a fear of insignificance makes it comforting to think that there is this very partisan God up there who cares deeply about you and all your co-religionists and promises you a wonderful afterlife denied to all adherents of "false" gods.

The belief that your group has its own special god inevitably leads you to feel superior to, and angry about, people who have chosen the "wrong" god. A prescriptive set of ideas on how to behave dictated from on high may be a clear and simple way to structure life, but when those instructions include denigrating or

wreaking harm on others simply because they aren't a part of your group, the moral authority of such rules is zero.

Anything that purports to absolve one from making personal moral decisions based on the concepts of humanity and justice has to be highly suspect.

Even in a free and secular society such as ours, where vigorous debate is considered an essential component of our capacity to make important decisions, there is a tendency to treat anyone who has religious beliefs as somehow beyond criticism.

If a Christian believes that the earth was created by God exactly 6,000 years ago, then they are often said to be entitled to that belief because it is a product of their faith. To point out that it's arrant nonsense, given the overwhelming evidence available that the Earth is much older than that, is considered by many to be bad form.

For Jewish settlers in the West Bank to claim that God has given them a mandate to build houses on other people's land is equally ridiculous but nevertheless used as a justification for a practice that is helping to poison any hope that the horror movie we call the Middle East will come to an end.

A Muslim extremist who believes that his God is green lighting the random killing of infidels has to be viewed, by any rational analysis, as an extremely malignant product of religion. Yet, many so-called moderate Muslims still seem to regard these extremists as some kind of cultural heroes, or if not that, then someone whose behavior is understandable given the supposed indignities that Christian nations have forced on Muslims.

There are undoubted psychological benefits of religious belief in terms of increased self-esteem and group solidarity, but they come at great cost.

Adherence to a particular religion is another variant of irrational tribal behavior, no different in essence to the nationalism that has also generated so many horror movies through the ages.

It no doubt made many Germans feel good to believe they were members of the master race, and in our age the tendency of the US to feel a moral and cultural superiority to the rest of the world wreaks its own kind of havoc. Ultimately, to believe you are a superior human being on the basis of any kind of tribal affiliation is a luxury the world can no longer afford.

It makes no more sense to believe that being an Australian makes one inherently superior to a person from any other nation than it does to believe that being a supporter of the Collingwood football team makes one a profoundly more acceptable human being than someone who supports Carlton.

My hope for 2007 is that the world will draw just a fraction closer to realizing that we are all part of one big tribe on a very fragile planet, and that people who parrot the prejudices of their particular creed will start to realize how toxic their belief system is to any hope that the innate decency of humanity will ultimately triumph.

Indeed, if only all people would become humanists, then hope for humanity would follow! As I've written before: would that all people today would feel something similar to what Socrates must have felt when he said: "I'm not Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world". Would that people today would say: "I'm not Caucasian, Negroid, or Oriental. I'm not a Hindu, Hebrew, or Hispanic. I'm not a Mormon, Muslim, or Mongolian. I'm a human!"

For the enlightenment of scientific humanism to spread even further, what's needed is for "ordinary people" to understand humanism sufficiently well so that they could explain it to their neighbors. For example, if I were asked to explain scientific humanism to my neighbor, maybe I'd try something similar to the following.

Scientific humanism is simply the attempt to use the scientific method to try to solve human problems.

The scientific method is simply what sensible people use to solve their problems. In a nutshell, it's to guess, test, and reassess. As Feynman said: It's a way to try to make sure we're not fooling ourselves. Many animals do the same.

For example, when the first bird started to experiment with breaking shells by dropping them on the ground, the bird was using the scientific method, namely, experiment. Similarly, when the first monkey tried breaking nuts with rocks, the monkey was applying the scientific method: guess, test, and reassess. And when the first ape tried getting termites out of hole using a stick, then the ape was using the scientific method to try to make sure he wasn't fooling himself.

Humans continued to develop the scientific method, leading to the development of stone tools, spears, bows and arrows, control of fire, husbandry, irrigation systems, and so on, out to an including the internet. Simultaneously, by applying the scientific method, humans developed optimum ways for getting along in groups: sharing, helping, teaching,

policing, governing, protecting, developing, and in general, enjoying – not only the company of others but the products of innumerable arts and crafts, from murals to music. That’s scientific humanism.

In fact, at their bases, the foundation of all religions is scientific humanism, but the contraptions built on this solid foundation are priestly fabrications and rituals, concocted primarily for the benefit of the clerics. The clerics abandoned the scientific method, replacing it with idle speculations (about gods, souls, life after death, and sundry supernatural junk). They still preach various versions of the kindness principle practiced by dolphins and other social animals, but rather than continue to promote the scientific method to learn more, they childishly cling to the “sacred scripture” in their “holy books”, which contain scientific understanding frozen at the level of savages. Thereby, the clerics promote the *status quo* – at levels that were behind the times even thousands of years ago!

Similarly, Dear, if you’re ever called upon to explain what scientific humanism is “all about”, perhaps you’d like to say something close to: it’s the best of what makes us human; it’s how we’ve managed to evolve; it’s the bases of all religions – which the clerics of the world subsequently corrupted, partially paralyzing humanity’s growth, so that the clerics could avoid working for a living. Scientific humanism is dedicated to helping humanity to continue to evolve.

Yet, Dear, I wouldn’t recommend that you go on a campaign to “proselytize” for scientific humanism. That is, I wouldn’t recommend that you promote still another “ideology”, even if one so sensible as scientific humanism. But I would recommend that you promote science (i.e., knowledge) and many aspects of humanism, such as protecting and expanding human rights – and the best way to promote such is as Marcus Aurelius said to himself:

No longer talk at all about the kind of man that a good man ought to be, but be such.

Oh, and I’d also recommend that you promote people getting enough exercise – again, by setting an example!