

## HUMANISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM: HOW TO SURVIVE THEM BOTH

*By Harold W. Wood, Jr.*

"You need Jesus to take care of you", says one; "Rely only on yourself" says the other.

If one reads the current debate going on in the press, it appears that there are two clear-cut sides battling for the hearts and minds of the American people insofar as religious thinking is concerned. On the one side, there are the Christian fundamentalists, who propound a world view beginning with Genesis, the special creation of Adam, the Fall from grace, and finally the doctrines of redemption by Christ and ultimately the final Armageddon which will destroy the wicked and elevate the "saved" into a new realm.

On the other side, there are the secular humanists, whose world view identifies the supreme goal of mankind as not "salvation", but rather simply to promote human needs and human ideals. According to this view, what is right is whatever tends to promote the health and well-being of human beings, and any other entity is either considered not to exist (e.g., God) or to be not worthy of consideration (e.g. other species), except as they relate to human needs and human desires.

Each view is equally fallacious. Fundamentalism suffers from temporal anachronism; Humanism suffers from an arrogant egotism which ironically prevents humanity from becoming the best which we are capable of being.

Even beyond the fundamentalist/humanist dichotomy there are problems. Most people believe that even the middle-of road view of religion allows for only two viewpoints: first, the Theists, those who believe that God (as revealed in the scripture of the Judeo - Christian heritage) determines the events of the world; and on the other, the Atheists: those who contend that a supernatural being does not exist and that man must depend entirely on himself.

These two extremist positions totally ignore a middle course, a course which is both compatible with current scientific understanding of the nature of the universe, but also with the promotion of a truly sane and healthy human spirit. It is a course that has been dealt with by literary figures for years: Wordsworth, Spinoza, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Wood Krutch, John Muir, John Burroughs, and others. Yet it is an idea largely ignored as the battle between the fundamentalists and the humanists rages; and when it is considered, it is thought of as somehow radical or pagan, notwithstanding its healthy literary tradition in the West and widespread adoption in the East.

But before examining this solution to the extremism so currently popular with both fundamentalist and humanist doctrines, we must understand what is wrong with both fundamentalism and with humanism. Both views suffer from one severe deficiency: they both ignore one simple need: survival.

It is easy for the fundamentalists to ignore Survival as an issue, because their entire theology is based upon the idea of the destruction of the existing world. Their concept of an eternal life is one which can only result in total destruction of the entire Earth, and presumably the Universe as we know it. Such a view has little to recommend it, not only from a scientific basis, but from an eminently practical one: most people would miss living in a new Heaven and Earth where every recognizable earthly things are gone, especially in the biological world. If we can believe the theologians, in Heaven there will be no animals at all, because animals do not possess souls. Thus, those of us who like to have pets, or enjoy the zoo or a quiet walk in the woods, or even those who admire flowers, are simply out of luck. Presumably, in the new Christian Heaven, those who love living things will be barred, perhaps to be assigned eternal damnation in Hell. In fact, those of us who like to eat or breathe are in trouble too, since it is plant and animal life which makes such things possible. What a remarkable and strange attitude! Of course, the fundamentalist will argue that those who survive the Second Coming will have the splendor of their deity to enjoy, thus making earthly enjoyments unnecessary, even irrelevant. They ask us to suspend our desire for the things of this world, to seek a world where everything is unknown save the glory of God. But to give up everything in Creation seems to me to be rather ungrateful to the deity which supposedly put it here, and the idea of designing one's life to achieve a state which is so unconditionally an unknown requires an attitude of rejection of the present Universe which seems too callous for most of us to follow.

But the Humanist alternative is not much better. The humanists assert that man, and man alone, must be the master of his own fate. If that is so, then we can expect the human spirit to bring us what it has always brought us in the past: war, torture, and the tyranny of mass conformity. If we are left to solve our problems on our own, we are sadly out of luck, for one thing the Humanists fail to realize is that we depend for our survival not upon human will-power, but upon a complex interaction of the biosphere, atmosphere, and hydrosphere which we have only begun to untangle. If mankind is to survive, we are going to need a lot more than human will-power and ingenuity. We'll need to have as many other species around as possible to provide us with everything from the air we breathe, the food we eat, to the industrial raw materials we could use if they are not destroyed before we can even discover them, much less make use of them.

To be sure, some Humanists attempt to ascribe an appreciation of nature to their philosophy. Humanist apologist Corliss Lamont, in Humanism as a Philosophy, Philosophical Library, New York, 1949) argues

that "Humanism gives ample scope to those reactions of awe and wonder that so many men have experienced when they gaze upon the unending array of stars, see a sun-streaked waterfall hurtling over a high precipice or view the sweep and splendor of mountains, sea and sky." (Page 213). But to what value does he ascribe such experiences? Purely of "nature as an aesthetic object", and Lamont is careful to state that a Humanists appreciation of nature "does not set up the non-human world as somehow more worthy of attention than man or as aesthetically superior to art." (Page 216.) He even takes pains to differentiate Humanism from any "pantheistic and sometimes super-naturalistic overtones which Wordsworth, especially, was prone to bring into his poetry." Page 217. Such a view says simply that nature is of value solely as an aesthetic object; its purpose is for man's benefit, and does not have any benefit for itself - nor is there any cosmological influence whereby Man can see himself as part of Nature, except in the most limited scientific sense.

So, viewed from the viewpoint of human survival, both fundamentalism and humanism, theism and atheism, have virtually nothing to offer. Surely, both contain a few ideas which are valuable: most Humanists would agree with the principle of the Golden Rule, and even fundamentalists should recognize that the idea of testing reality with experiment is preferable to holding fast to such ideas as the world being flat or the sun circling around the earth.

But what then is the alternative? There is a middle course that avoids the pitfall of the extremists, but provides both a spiritually satisfying world view and a scientifically valid one. Its name is Pantheism - a term derived from the Greek word "pan" meaning "all", and "theo" referring to god or deity. Pantheism attributes the concept of Deity to Nature itself. Thus viewed, Pantheism as a theology can be substituted in the language of traditional Theism to good effect: if that which one puts one's utmost faith in is God, then the Pantheist puts his or her faith in Nature. If humankind is to survive, the Pantheist asserts that we'll need not only the intelligence we possess, but also the life-sustaining properties of the planet Earth.

For those who dislike talking about things in theistic terms, Pantheism still provides an answer. Unlike the Humanists, which put their faith in human intelligence and ingenuity alone, the Pantheist understands that man is only one member species in the community of life, and that he has both a stewardship responsibility given his technological abilities, and an undeniable need for Nature to ensure his own survival. Put plainly, Nature is the ultimate context of human existence, and those who seek to address human problems only in terms of human politics, economics, and culture are doomed to failure, as history demonstrates.

The Pantheist advocates a new kind of world view; one which sees the "natural world" rather differently than either the views of the fundamentalist or humanist. Notwithstanding the radical differences in belief-systems, both fundamentalism and humanism share at least one

common trait: the earth as seen as little more than a convenient larder for human utilization. Whether seen as raw material for industrial civilization, or as a recreational resource, both viewpoints demean Nature so that it is nothing but a source of goods for human welfare, and solely human welfare.

But the Pantheist views Nature as our Creator and our Sustainer. Not only is such a view in better accord with modern ecological understanding, but it is a viewpoint which holds enormous importance in terms of personal values as well.

Where the fundamentalist and humanist alike sees little in Nature but either the opportunity for creating human wealth by harnessing and harvesting its resources, or perhaps a pleasant respite from urban living, the Pantheist finds in Nature a source of ultimate wisdom. The Pantheist approach is to address the problems of this world holistically: to examine not merely the problems of human welfare, but those of all species. By taking broader account of the needs of all living things, Pantheism provides us with an ethics of conservation: conservation of nature and conservation of the human spirit which is part of that nature. By warmly embracing the world and all of its living things it avoids the solid world and life negation present in fundamentalism and it avoids the arrogance of humanism. Human problems - whether those of a global nature such as poverty and starvation; community problems such as education and crime; or those of a personal nature such as the problems of "morality", drug abuse, or alienation - are recognized as sub-sets of the larger problems of the biosphere, and thus are addressed by Pantheism in a way which takes the opportunity to apply the earth's wisdom to what are normally conceived of as social problems. For example, when properly understood, poverty and starvation are identified not merely as problems of economic distribution,, but are intimately tied with problems of deforestation, desertification, overpopulation, and soil erosion. Similarly, Pantheism offers hope for a solution to personal alienation by providing people with a meaningful cosmology. While Pantheists assert that we do not have a benign, anthropomorphic (and usually male) deity to save us from ourselves, neither are we completely on our own as the humanist asserts because we have physical and spiritual links with the rest of the planet through evolutionary and ecological relationships. Mankind can thrive through a wholesome relationship with Nature, both in the social and personal sense.

By contrast, the fundamentalist chooses to ignore social problems in the hope of the Second Coming and treats most personal problems judgmentally as manifestations of sin. The humanist, on the other hand, would have us rely solely upon human ingenuity to solve social problems which historically has merely gotten us out of one jam into another; and would leave solutions to personal problems to those suffering from a world view based upon estrangement from the natural world of which we are a part, a world which holds the answers to problems which mere humanistic psychology cannot answer.

Only through a dramatically different world view -- one that overcomes the mythology of the past, but also rejects the egoism of human arrogance -- can we hope to usher in a new age of planetary well-being.

There is a sound alternative to both the arrogance of Atheism and the superstition of Monotheism: a modern, informed Pantheism. Let us now return to the leafy world of our origin, and re-examine what can be found there.