

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday February 24, 2008

Why Should an A-Theist be Interested in Eschatology?

© Ed Savage

(No Part of this document may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author.)

I want to talk this morning about three elements of humanism that concern me. Only one of these is the advertised topic, eschatology, about the ending of all things, or their beginnings depending how you vision it, so
I'm going to start with an apologetic truth in advertising.

Last spring, I was doing a lot of work on a Science Fiction course, and at the same time, Atheism became the "hot" humanism. So when BJ and I discussed this service, I tossed off a label for my talk to piggyback on that popularity, or (notoriety, as some would have it). However, since then, I've thought a lot about the topic and come to think Atheism is neither really humanist nor really, in my opinion, "hot."

Let me elaborate a bit. I'll start at the beginning: I like to explore, to find and uncover cultural bridges, so to speak. This has led me to drive around CT a bit, and to follow selected streams of ideas through our cultural wilderness.

So, the first span is about bridging humanism and atheism in Connecticut:, Let me explore with you :

- Who are our Atheist groupies? Our Humanists?
- Why are they built over this particular rivulet?
- What's their impact on our travels through life in CT?

Secondly, I want to talk a little bit about the aesthetics of religion and faith, the dreamtimes and walkabouts of one atheist. These musings may owe some to the illustration of this stunning banner mounted by Joe Rubin & Diane Cadrain showing the Carina Nebula, 7500 light years away and 50 light years square, and I also need to bow (or kneel) in the direction of BJ's talk last week about "naturalistic" humanists and prayer. Why, after all, has she encouraged an atheist even to occupy this pulpit today? And finally let's touch on questions from some of the religious secularists, building on the scientific perspective offered from this lectern by Professor Kosmin from Trinity College late last year.

So, back to the first question: why should I, a 30-year church-going Unitarian-Universalist, try to cross bridges with atheists and humanists?

Well, in my own search I found the folks who embody those terms do not fit my antiquated dictionary definitions.

Who are the CT atheists I've met? They're a group of a couple of dozen folk of all ages who meet in Vernon and Willimantic, and perhaps see themselves as successors of Madeline Murray O'Hare's anti-church approach to freedom of religious expression. At one point their local leader, Dennis Himes, said that they mainly want to enforce the separation of church and state through legal means. Last December he posted the American Atheist Association's well-publicized sign on the Vernon town green: "IMAGINE -- no religion." So the atheists got themselves quite a bit of publicity but also stimulated what seemed to religious leaders in the town a spate of dialogue about the role of faith in people's individual lives.

To me the problem with this local group's bridge building is that it is purely reactive and often seems merely negative. However, if one gently pries apart the term "atheist," it could be interpreted more broadly: The parts are: a (meaning "not," and theist: (a believer in God). Thus, ATHEIST may be a conviction that is without a reference to gods. So my challenges to the Atheist group were a couple of questions:

What does an atheist do to bring comfort to the ill and bereaved?

What does your group do to create a loving, responsible, and free community?"

By extension, these notions would veer towards social and environmental justice I think. But this span has not to my knowledge, been much built among the CT Atheists. There is room in the CT religious streams for atheists, if they are willing to cross over a bit.

And that brings me to the humanists for whom in a famous Renaissance piece, one said, "Man is the measure of all things." (He couldn't see the galaxy...)

An American Humanist group has been meeting for many years at the New Haven UU Society. Some of those folks say they're just turned off by "churchy" rituals – even UU ones. Other humanists may be members of a secular Jewish persuasion or Ethical Culture Society. They meet several times a month for discussion and good fellowship. Doug Peary, who I remember hearing one summer in our pulpit, and other UU members often speak about the humanist heritage at their Saturday meetings. We have enjoyed book discussions with them, too, ranging from economics to radical views of the Old Testament. Dave Klotz and Karl Peters also support an interfaith humanist cohort, the Institute for Religion in an Age of Science about whose Star Island seminars Karl has talked eloquently in the past.

Last year, some of the CT Humanists started having a Thursday social dinner in the Hartford area which some of us have enjoyed on occasion, a good chance to catch up with the southern humanists in CT. They are half the story, however; so let me just sketch the organization of UU Humanists for you.

A Unitarian-leaning national group's name is a real tongue twister, the HU-Umanists. There are other web-based groups in the UU spectrum such as the UU Infidels, to which Roy Cook alerted me. The current president of the H UU manists, is David Schaffer, from Hamden. According to Dave their mission is primarily to "enhance, promote, practice and enjoy humanism," and to help UUs "give voice to humanistic values" in their lives. Dave Schafer will be visiting the Secular Mind seminar next month, and I hope that even if you don't join the other Sunday discussions, you will set Sunday, March 30 aside for his talk on Brain Science and Humanism. Bill Shoemaker's March 13 seminar should be a good introduction to that topic.

The HU Umanist organization also publishes a journal and sponsors internet discussions to which Unitarian – Universalist ministers often contribute. I encourage anyone who's interested to log onto the websites: www.Huumanists.org and www.CTHumanist.org, and perhaps join one of the dinners at a local restaurant the last Thursday of the month.

As for the question of how Humanist organizations mean to affect our lives, aside from talking about books, issues, and personal experiences, I believe the CT group members pursue their action agendas through other organizations, and I haven't heard much about those efforts at the few meetings Edith and I've attended in Hamden. Parenthetically, I should alert you to the recent UUA decision to close the bridge for Hu-Umanists in the official Affiliation program.

This decision is being strongly questioned among humanists, it's only one of the important issues about the planning for the Ft. Lauderdale annual convention highlighted in the current UU World magazine. Let me move on to more personal matters now.

I think the above outline of the current activity of these humanist-linking groups is a natural lead-in to talking about the experiences of faith, reason, and religion that have taken me across one span and another, to my advertised arcane reference to eschatology.

A bit of background: As an avid reader in my childhood, I had progressed through children's literature, particularly enjoying the fantasies of George MacDonald, the Brothers Grimm, and the folktales collected as the Arabian Nights. These led, in due course, to readings in science fiction. Like many of you, I was fortunate to grow up during me "Golden Age " of science fiction. I recommend for your re-reading the vision of Arthur C. Clarke's novel presenting one vision of a transcendent evolution of life, *Childhoods End*. It's high point for me is particularly the leap of faith when the alien creature called "Overlord" turns out to be made in the image of Satan, confounding both time and theology in a powerful image. Maybe, as you've been staring at the banner nebula, an object from the heavens beyond human perception, for a while now, you've found some image for yourself.

Beyond that idea of transcendent evolution, an English philosopher, Olaf Stapleton also provided visions of cosmic cycles of man's evolution without limits.: Star maker, and, Last Men First Men, were two of his great novels. In these pieces Stapleton paints pictures of the rise and fall of species and the increasing integration of the mental and physical elements of human life, ultimately ending in the birth and death of stars and galaxies, such as you see in the youthful Carina Nebula of the banner. .

All of these stories parade a triumph of the Spirit, so to speak, over the course of evolutionary epochs and reflect the positive faith in progress of the late 1930s and early 1950s. I suppose I should mention at this point, in case some of us haven't read in this genre recently, that more recent science fiction has become pretty pessimistic. You might enjoy the late Kurt Vonnegut 's sardonically humorous novel, Galapagos. He described the post-apocalyptic devolution of man into a seal like creature, living only for our American culture's essentials: food and sex.

At any rate, I suppose I have to plead guilty to having been infected with a pretty typical case of youthful idealism, crossing towards adult realism! But there it is – An atheist has been, is, and will be entertained with the ultimate questions of life, the universe, and everything else, in other words, eschatology.

There's yet another thread to this memory stream, an affinity for organized religion including this Meeting House. I suppose this is where the ritual prayer theme of the month and my point of view will meet today. I have to take you back a ways.

I was raised pretty typically for a Hartfordite, in the Elmwood Community Church at the other end of town. It was a member of the former Congregationalist denomination, and I was particularly affected by two experiences in that community.

In my early, early adolescence, I went to church camp, and was encouraged to emulate the Buddha and sit under a tree and just experience nature with a capital N. That and the discussion of the Grand Inquisitor section of the Brothers Karamazov, led by Marty Freedman, our Jewish cabin counselor, opened feelings of awe, reverence and oneness with the universe for me, as well as questions about the sources of good and evil as presented in literature.

I think that much of my upbringing had led me towards an instrumental view of nature and life. I'd generally asked what I could DO, rather than what I could BE. So, given the context of the camp experience, I naturally labeled the good feelings, "a sense of God's presence."

My other experience was a trip to the East Harlem Protestant Parish sponsored by the CT Congregational Conference. While I had participated in interracial (well a few interracial) events in Hartford, nothing had prepared me for seeing what poverty in America looked like. While efforts like those Harlem missions' and the UUSC's are continuing, they also stimulate important followerships. And so with me: I spent some time after that trip researching the civil rights issues that were surfacing in the mid-1950s and even followed up that effort with some work for the Middletown NAACP

during my first year of college. Ultimately those experiences were summed in my experience with the selection from Dante's Purgatorio, which we read a few minutes ago, and which I carried with me in a pocket memo book for decades: "What to thee is another's goodness if thou lose thine own?"

As is normally the experience, I also raised many questions about my faith, social justice, and what I would do with my life during that college transition. To cut to the chase: I came to a formulation that has carried me pretty well into the present. It seems to me that

the feelings of peace and oneness with the universe as well as
the feelings of outrage at the injustices of man's own creation can have many
labels.

Let me emphasize for today the word "feeling." In effect I am thinking of an aesthetics of religion. In a sense my personal blending of faith and reason is an artistic bridge, not a purely rational creation. I've seen that if I join a community of the faithful, participate in song and ritual as offered in that setting, various labels can be attached to both good and sad feelings that come to me here. The feelings come for various reasons and with effects that range, potentially for some folks, from sainthood to terrorism. Perhaps for most of us those effects are just the occasional departures we take on Sundays from our instrumental lives, from the gathering and getting of our stuff, friends, and work. As BJ noted, the ritual of prayer can be a rational act in this context. For others, as Karl Peters notes in his forthcoming book, the experiences can be transformative, and we are on fortunate occasions, witnesses to and participants in those transformations.

But in my case the Meeting House leads to a skeptical view of the use of the word "spirit": let me be a little pedantic here. I consider "spirit" a kind of portmanteau term, used to point to but not clarify those feelings that a variety of events stimulate. Now this is not meant to be a judgmental skepticism and certainly not an evaluation of those among this congregation whose experiences of religion and church come closer to the life of saints than of atheists and seekers like me.

But this is to say, if I can speak for others, that in many ways, humanists share those saintly joys and act on identifications and values that spring from very similar feelings, although, of course, not using the same labels. And part of sharing has to be supporting this community with both time (as the Savages are doing this month in service leadership), and treasure, as we will soon pledge modestly to do for the coming year. Let me put my rational humanist toe back in the water now, taking just a couple more minutes of your time.

Finally, here are some notes on the key questions from my exploring with a few "Humanists", whose ideas are particularly on my mind these days. They are Machiavelli, Edward Said (SAY-ED), and Robert Coles. I offer their questions, because they don't provide easy answers.

1. What comfort does atheism / secularism offer?

Robert Coles as many of you know is a Harvard trained psychiatrist, author of many books, most memorably, *Children of Crisis*, a study on the effects racial oppression on children. In some of his more recent writings he's explored the ways and whys people's minds stick on music, particularly the music of Bruce Springsteen. In his book, *The Secular Mind*, he investigates how one can bridge religious reflection and secular action in an age of media bombardment and punitive orthodoxy. He challenges pure rationalists.

Coles compares his secular point of view, as a doctor and scientist, with that of religious converts from the view such as Dorothy Dix (the founder of Catholic Workers), Thomas Merton (the Trappist monk), and Reynolds Price (a physician and Southern novelist). This book will be the major text for the "Secular Mind Seminar" that's starting next week after the services. Maybe we can work along some bridges there.

My Second Question : How do humanists clarify the chief issues of war & social justice?

In a recent introduction to the U.S. Marine Corps and Army's Counter- Insurgency Field Manual, Sarah Sewall, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, challenges the basic American values of peace, justice, and economic stability. Let me quote her: " Americans still want to believe that peace and justice can co-exist without friction." The writings of Edward Said take the challenge one step further, as his Arab-Christian perspective brings him to express some gradations of the concepts of "resistance" vs. "terrorism." Resistance on the one hand may have legitimacy to the populations of former Empires, but who will separate that legitimacy from terrorists' intolerable acts ? The current UU World picks up another branch of this question in a provocative article on the doctrines of "just war" and "justice in war." UUs will struggle mightily as conservatives & liberals to bridge to a place of comfort with these issues.

The Third and Last Question: What is to become of us, not the UUs, but the U.S. ?

Machiavelli's book, *The Discourses*, promotes a pessimistic view of our political future. His discussions of the cycles of hard tyranny and soft democracy suggest that it is easy for a succession of strong presidents to maintain the power of the office, and very difficult for a truly representative government to emerge after a period of imperial rule. How can any of our candidates be moved to share their power with people like us? What IS to become of US?

To return finally to my main advertised theme: Why should atheists feel it's important to create bridges to a more blessed place, to a Meeting House like this? Obviously, I think we MUST, for a community of seekers is where we can fully share our aesthetic, rational humanity!

I hope my burden of thoughtful dialogue has been shared usefully today. Thank you for walking with me on the bridge.