

Humanism

To Raymond Palmer in West Brattleboro, VT:

October 25, 1935

[Minneapolis]

It is good to have some word of you again, and I hasten to comply with your request that I make some comments about the Humanist Society of Chicago.

Backus always felt assured that in time he could restore the prestige of the old Rationalist Society and give it a more vital character. That he failed with the time he allowed himself is obvious, or he would not have moved on to Des Moines. His failure in the two years he worked at the job does not indicate that nothing can be done. Days like these are not of the sort that encourage men to establish new institutions or revive old ones. Backus' optimism may have been well founded. As you know him he is an exceedingly able fellow. There are certain comments to be made, however, in regard to the organization.

Mangasarian was an old-fashioned Bible buster. In his way he probably did an effective job, but Rationalism as a self-conscious movement was dead long before Mangasarian ended his career in Chicago. He failed to keep abreast of modern movements and for that reason went on in pretty much the good old-fashioned nineteenth century way of pointing out the mistakes of Moses and ignoring the stupidities of the contemporary world. Naturally, Mangasarian recruited people who fell in with his prejudices. As I have sometimes said, they transferred their ultimate loyalties from the Christian setting to the setting created by the Republican party. Of the two, give me Christianity at any time.

Isaac Miller Hamilton, who was the mainstay of the old organization, was heartened enough by Backus' effort to get behind the new attempt to run a free-lance religious service in the loop district. By no means will I consider Hamilton an unqualified burden to the group. He contributed very generously--about five hundred dollars a year, I think, and did not interfere with what Backus wanted to say on the platform. During the first season of the latter's leadership, he gave an address on Russia. Rather an adequate account of the situation in the Soviet Union, and a call for reasonable attitudes toward the Bolsheviks. Mr. Hamilton was so enthusiastic that he paid for the publication of the address, and it was more or less widely circulated. That sort of spirit indicates that the man is not a typical stick-in-the-mud such as we find in some of our churches, and that he is amenable to reasonable and dignified treatment of current social political problems. Just how far one could go in the radical direction I shall not venture an opinion, only that I personally would feel somewhat restrained in a group with the Mangasarian flavor in the background.

To Edwin Wilson who was considering leaving his Unitarian ministry in Salt Lake City and move east to work full time for the AHA.

February 25, 1949

[Boston]

The proposal of the A.H.A. really presents you with a major decision. As I well know, a major decision in ones career can be a pretty hectic experience. You apparently have made the decision providing certain conditions can be met. If that is the case there is little purpose in my placing before you certain aspects of the matter that struck me as I read your letter for the first time yesterday and have read it again on this quiet holiday afternoon. I am thinking outloud into my new-fangled audiograph which is really a swell contraption in this increasingly complicated world.

You have got to make up your mind whether the rewards and satisfactions of the parish ministry is less attractive to you than the job of an organizer and publisher. There is much to be said both ways. The parish ministry is full of all sorts of minor irritations, at times, hardships. With them all, however, a successful ministry is a pretty impressive and heartwarming career. You will certainly miss the day by day experience in community leadership and religious fellowship. There is no escape from the fact that a good minister, while his life may be hectic, is rewarded in subtle ways for what he puts into his job. I know of no career and mine has been more varied than some, that yields deeper satisfactions than the Unitarian ministry. Don't jump unless you are pretty sure that there is something you want to do much more than what you have been doing so successfully since 1928.

Another factor that impresses me is the possible danger in making of Humanism a formal, organized movement rather than a point of view characteristic of a large area in human life. The A.H.A. has served magnificently in stimulating a point of view. It has been the best of amateurism. You have had to fight to keep it alive, but there has never been about it the slightest hint that you were being enriched by the fight you were putting up. Once you become a full-time salaried executive you will have to raise your own salary. There is not anything disgraceful about raising ones own salary but there is something different about it. I am sure I can define this difference but I think that you understand what I mean.

I would entrust the future of the Humanist movement to your leadership more readily than I would entrust it to almost anyone else. I see, however, in Humanism some tendency on the part of the half-baked to make it a new cult. That is very unhappily true here in Boston. I am certain that Ken Patton will do more for the future of Humanism in these parts than the Humanist Society. I am quite sure that Charles Francis Potter has done very little for Humanism as compared to the achievement of some of us in that direction who week in week out did our jobs in Unitarian pulpits scattered across the country. You see what I am getting at -- that there is a danger, a danger that you musts at least contend with if you take on the suggested responsibility.

To Dr. Moses Levine, at the University of Minnesota, who had given RBB a subscription to The Scientific Monthly:

April 30, 1951

[Boston]

Recently, traveling to California on a train, a young man noted me reading the Monthly. Immediately he assumed that I was a fellow scientist and tried to talk to me in rather abstruse terms. He happened to be a nuclear physicist who had just been in Boston to be interviewed

by M.I.T. physicists and was on his way back to Cal Tech. When I explained my inability to talk his language he was curious that a preacher was enough interested in science to read such a journal. That comment opened the way to some healthy talk on naturalistic humanism. You see in some quarters the fellow who reads The Scientific Monthly is a man of distinction.

To Dr. Maurice Visscher, an old friend and Professor of Physiology at the University of Minnesota Medical School:

May 14, 1952

[Boston]

For too long a time have I delayed acknowledging the receipt of your paper, "Humanism and Theism in Unitarianism." It is a splendid and helpful job. At various points I would like to enter a discussion with you but certainly there is no issue that raises itself as between your understanding and mine.

You deal adequately within the space assigned with the naturalistic theists or empirical theists as represented by Wieman. This development is, it seems to me, the most significant trend in contemporary theological thought. It makes perfectly clear that in intellectual circles worthy of the term the universe is accepted as self sustaining. If God is within nature, not the cause of nature, a great clarity is established. From that assumption onward the problem, as you suggest, is in substantial part semantic.

The day will never dawn when I can write a paper in your field that encompasses the knowledge and thought that you have written in my field. I take comfort in the notion that almost everyone is a religionist and only the wise are physiologists.

I am beginning to think about Sunday morning addresses. For after September 1, 1952 I shall be doing a weekly stint [in Kansas City]. On an early date I intend to speak on the theme, "Are the Scientists Always Changing Their Minds?" One of the sly ways in which theologians are baffling the scientists is to the effect that there is no abiding truth in the findings of the scientist. This is such a sickening simplification that I must have a go at it.

To Curtis Reese in Chicago, IL:

September 22, 1953

[Kansas City]

I am wondering what you thought of John Dietrich's renunciation of humanism. For me the renunciation was fulfillment. The fellow never knew what humanism was about. That innocence. . .made the renunciation inevitable. I wish some one could write a dispassionate article describing the process by which John's recent note could be measured. Because of my personal history, I doubt that it would be gracious for me so to do. There is a career destitute of integrity or honor. I trust that neither of us will have to do his funeral service.

To Mrs. James Ghio, Kansas City, who had asked for reading recommendations:

February 9, 1954

[Kansas City]

I have kept it before me so that I would not forget to fulfill my promise to send you a brief bibliography, which I now enclose. All of the books I am sure you will find interesting. The approaches of the several authors are not identical, rather they tend to be complementary. Roy Wood Sellars is more rationalistic than some of the others, while Max Otto perhaps most radical of the authors represented, writes prose that at times is indistinguishable from poetry.

I thought of including several books by John Dewey for I find the structure of my religious philosophy rooted in him. Experience and Nature is a difficult book, but to my mind the most significant book of philosophy published in the United States in the last half century. A Common Faith, the one Dewey book I have listed is that author's sole volume on religion as such.

A. Eustace Haydon's The Quest of the Ages is splendid and read easily by the layman. Haydon is unsurpassed among living historians of religion and, unlike most of them, he can write in engaging ways.

To Dr. Alfred Stiernotte, New Haven, CT, who has just written a book God and Space-Time:

April 16, 1954

[Kansas City]

Present commitments inevitably lead you to a concern for technical philosophical problems far beyond my competence. I am glad that you are so concerned, but in the name of Holy things, do not give yourself exclusively to such matters. I am sure you won't. Increasingly I am drawn to the Santayana-Edman strain. There you have, it seems to me, mastery in technical matters while at the same time a feeling for the beauty in language and an awareness of the overtones of life.

To Dr. Alfred Stiernotte in New Haven, CT:

September 15, 1954

[Kansas City]

My many thanks for the copy of God and Space-Time which I received late last week. I cannot say that I have read it but I carefully perused Weiman's introduction and the beginnings of your own part. It is an impressive and imposing job that will bring you to the attention of many, and rightfully so.

I cannot say that I read technical philosophy with ease. On the other hand, I am not unmindful of what I am reading and I know how to be respectful of my betters.

I suppose the reference to Dietrich served your purpose in the context you used it.

Frankly, I cannot accept John Dietrich as a thinker worthy of your book. His mind was superficial, his method corrupt. I do not suggest this in any bitterness but in sorrow. Dietrich never came to terms with any intellectual problem. I recall once asking him where he found himself epistemologically. His response was an expression of bewilderment. If you had quoted Curtis Reese as having found the Humanist position inadequate after years of advocacy of it, it would have been another matter.

The above is not to chide you for I have no right so to do but to say something that I feel it necessary to say even though in sorrow.

To Dr. Alfred Stiernotte in New Haven, CT:

November 17, 1954

[Kansas City]

I think you are on shaky ground when you suggest that half-baked Humanists drove you out of the movement. I recall many years ago asking Scott Nearing whether his expulsion from the Communist party had in any sense modified his Marxism. He responded thus: "Why should ten thousand damned fools lead anyone to change their mind?"

To Rev. Alfred Hobart commenting about Ed Wilson:

February 22, 1955

[Kansas City]

Ed's situation makes me impatient. I advised him not to take over the A.H.A. I tried to point out that once he assumed the responsibility he would run himself ragged trying to raise his own salary. In effect that is what has happened. Ed has not been discreet and at times I fear has been indifferent to all the amenities expected of the brethren. He stopped to see me early one morning last September and told me something of his troubles. While he made light of them, I could not and told him as much. It would be a mistake for Ed to casually leave our ministry. I would fight to keep him in and fight any move to dismiss him from the U.M.A. [Unitarian Ministers Assn.] On the other hand, I would be utterly frank with Ed and his present cavalier attitude.

Ed has been somewhat impatient with me and reports of that impatience I hear from time to time. His complaint is that I have departed from the true faith. Such is not the case. What I have departed from is perfectly understandable. Ed has been after me to have a Humanist Institute here. That I am not reluctant to do intellectually, but institutionally I am in a very unsatisfactory situation. Some years ago Ed gathered to his Board a man in this church, a man who is no Humanist at all but a 19th century rationalist. This fellow is coarse and offensive even to my best informed Humanists. If Ed comes here to an Institute, the fellow up front will be my problem and I have problems enough without such an occasion. Ed is rather blind to the situation that I have described to him in confidence and do what I will he will not see.

The glory of the Humanism in which you and I grew up was its amateur character. Now

that it is professionalized we're inheriting a sectarian character and that is misfortune.

To Mr. Tolbert H. McCarroll in San Francisco, CA:

October 17, 1967

[Kansas City]

I have always cherished my AHA background. Occasionally I have been able to use that identity tactically. I was on a radio talk show some years ago when a lady called in and said, though I was a Unitarian, I sounded like a Humanist, and what was the difference. That gave me a wide door to walk through.

To Mrs. H. D. Shaffer in Kansas City:

December 7, 1967

[Kansas City]

I believe the World Book definition of Humanism is as adequate as any. I might put the matter differently, but in content it would not be far removed from the one you have quoted.

Humanism, as I understand the term, claims no knowledge of supernatural beings. Some Humanists, I am not included, use the term "God" as a symbol for value making processes.

The Ethical Culture movement was founded by Felix Adler in the seventies of the last century. There are several societies in the major cities of the United States, one in London. The enclosed brochure indicates effectively the present status of the movement. I regard my Humanism as akin to that of the Ethical movement.

To James Wells in Seneca, MO:

May 9, 1968

[Kansas City]

It is far from unusual for Unitarian ministers to serve Ethical Societies. Twenty-four years ago I came close to doing it myself, when called to the Leadership of the Chicago Society. Under present circumstances, humanistic Unitarianism is pretty much interchangeable with Ethical Culture.