

AMERICAN HUMANISM

Howard Mumford Jones

(Excerpted from "The Substance of Humanism", the last chapter of *American Humanism: Its Meaning for World Survival* (1957), by Mr. Jones, Volume 14 in the "World Perspectives" series, which included such other authors as Jacques Maritain, Walter Gropius, Konrad Adenauer, Fred Hoyle, Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich. Thanks to Harry Graber for bringing this interesting book to our attention.)

Note: Mumford Jones was a Pulitzer and (twice) National Book Awards winner, as well as a Guggenheim Fellow, who died in 1980. Much of *American Humanism* is about what he, as a cultural conservative (he was 65 when this was published in 1957), sees as a decline in the arts and especially in academia in the 20th century – a century about which he's not terribly sanguine.

While recognizing the great technological and standard-of-living advances in mid-20th century America, Mumford Jones decries the resulting "corporatism" in higher education that is turning out more technicians and engineers than what we used to call "well-rounded" and "classically-educated" men (typical of his time, he doesn't seem to recognize the other half of the human species). Nevertheless, I think he has much of value to say about humanism in general and American humanism in particular.

We must keep in mind that the America he was writing about in 1957 had just survived a Great Depression, had fought and won a worldwide war against fascism, and was enjoying prosperity and a standard of living undreamt-of in human history. At the same time, American society was evolving/devolving (take your pick) from its Jeffersonian small-town/small-government roots into "masscult", and was also facing the real possibility of the end of civilization in a nuclear Armageddon vs. Stalin's Soviet Union – "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ..." -- JR

WE CAN ACQUIRE WISDOM about the potentialities of an American century only when we will cease to talk about the humanities as if these parts of learning possess some mystical quality not found anywhere else; when we cease to infer that humanistic scholarship has a unique value not found in science or the social sciences; and when, however much we desire to increase the number of humane persons in the world, we stop assuming that their humanity will increase if they study music and literature, but shrink if they study science and engineering. Humanistic scholarship is a normal human activity, intended to increase our knowledge of the humanities. The humanities may help us to educate persons who eventually turn out to be humane in either sense of the word. But the humanities *per se* are only areas of discourse, just as humanistic scholarship is only another name for *expertise* in given fields. Everything depends upon the interpretation of the one, and the uses of the other, and this in turn demands an understanding of *humanism*, something neither frightening nor formidable. It is only a particular theory of knowledge and of man.

The term itself came into being as a useful word to distinguish secular knowledge from theology, or knowledge of divine purposes. Doubtless everything is interwoven with everything else; doubtless the Renaissance was indebted to the Middle Ages and the Middle Ages to the classical world, and so on to the dark backward and abysm of time, but nonetheless the rise of humanism in the 15th and 16th centuries was an attempt that, even if it admitted theology as the queen of the sciences, proposed that theology should be a constitutional monarch, if a monarch at all, and not a despot, even if an enlightened despot. The nature of man as man, not the nature of man as a soul weekly wandering between birth into sin and death as a gateway to hell; man as man, a being in his own right, whatever one's religious view of him might be -- this was the original intent and meaning of humanism in the West. Therefore it was that the original humanists, with all their original vacillations and weaknesses on their heads, gladly wandered back in time to the groves of Academe in order to comprehend mankind outside of Christianity and under some other dispensation than that of Augustinian theology.

This historical truth does not mean that humanism was opposed to religion, since there was also such a thing as Christian humanism. It means only that the humanists desired to comprehend the human race, not Christians only. If in the long run the acceptance of Christian salvation was necessary for the understanding of the human race, well and good. If in the long run the acceptance of variant doctrines of salvation -- for example, Catholic and Protestant doctrines -- assisted one to understand the human race, well and good also. If in the long run the human race also made sense before or outside of Christianity -- for example, in the persons of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, or in the persons of cultured Saracens, or Hindus, or Chinese, in parts of the globe that had never known Christianity, this also was well and good. Possibly the Christian point of view was the best, even the only, way to understand mankind. Possibly also Christianity was but one of the interesting products of human history. In any event the humanists began with the human race, not with the church, and in making this shift altered the basis of human knowledge. Like all great shifts of emphasis in history, it is a shift simple in itself but difficult to comprehend, so difficult, indeed, that some excellent scholars have virtually refused to admit that it ever occurred. Nevertheless, this is the first essential element in humanism: that it is non-theological.

For reasons as often political and economic as they were philosophical, Americans in the Age of Enlightenment decided that they wanted a state separated from the church; and in this belief they have prospered for 180 years. Their public school system is secular. Their state-supported universities are secular. Their public libraries are secular. So are most of their art museums and their other cultural institutions. If a religious body desires to establish schools and colleges, libraries and museums under its private control, this is entirely possible in America; all that the Americans ask is that no particular religious body shall control either education or America. From time to time religious bodies impinge upon secular culture in the United States, and from time to time secularism checks this or that religious development, but in the course of two centuries the Americans have managed to make the secular state and their religious organizations live in harmony. In America religious institutions may, if they wish, employ all the resources of secular humanism, and secular education may study religion (or religions), but secular learning does not culminate in theology, and theology does not devote public learning to evangelical ends. To Americans this is commonplace; what they do not always realize is that it is one of the most brilliant commonplaces of modern times. What they also do not always realize is that, even with us differentiating the role of the state and the role of the church and differentiating also the way and purpose of pursuing knowledge for secular ends and for sacred ends, they are emphasizing one of the central ideas of Western humanism.

In the pages of the *Census of Religious Bodies in the United States* the fascinated reader will discover a small denomination with the title, The One True Holy Apostolic Overcoming Church of God. The Americans do not deny the possibility that there may be a one true holy apostolic overcoming church of God, but even if there were one such universally accepted by all mankind, they would still believe, if their constitutional precept is any indication, that mankind has got further by pursuing knowledge for its own sake than by pursuing it as a means to salvation. They do not deny that salvation may help knowledge, and they do not deny that knowledge may be useful for salvation. All they insist upon is that these two realms of discourse shall be kept separate. Their aim, whether they know it or not, is not scholasticism but humanism. ...

It should be said that if there were an American cultural hegemony in the world, or only in a part of the world, it is unlikely to produce religious bitterness. The Americans read with bewilderment the difficulties that Protestantism seems presently to be experiencing in certain overzealous Catholic countries, and they read with indignation the difficulties that religion seems to be experiencing in certain overzealous Communist countries. They had thought mankind had got beyond this sort of thing. In this respect they are better exponents of humanism than certain nations nearer the historical source of humanistic theory. If the "divorce" between belief and knowledge leads mankind into difficulties (and

it sometimes does), the marriage of belief and knowledge seems to Americans to lead mankind into greater difficulties, and they prefer to cling to the tenets of the Enlightenment and of Western humanism in this important regard.

But the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is a meaningless phrase ... the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is not humanism until and unless the context of that pursuit itself is noble. And it is precisely here that the American way of life, excellent in its refusal to sacrifice knowledge to theology, is by no means as clear in its intent as well-wishers might desire.

Just as humanism, in severing itself from theology, did not therefore rush upon atheism and embrace it as a bride, so humanism, in its quiet attempt to find universals rather than a particular belief, did not rush upon materialism, and should not have uncritically accepted the utilitarian definition of learning it acquired in the 19th century and retains in the United States today.

Humanism implies an assumption about man. It implies that every human being by the mere fact of his existence has dignity, that this dignity begins at birth, that the possession of this dignity, even if dimly realized by the processor, is, or ought to be, but continuum of his life, and that to strip him of this dignity is to degrade him in so outrageous a way that we call the degradation inhumane. ...

The dignity of man, like free will, cannot be satisfactorily defined. Nevertheless, it is, or seems to be, a universal experience. It consists, apparently, in an inner consciousness of individuation. I am I, and nothing can shake me in this deep conviction of myself; or if, as in drugs or disease, this conviction is shaken, the ensuing horror is so great as silently to testify to the quintessential meaning of individuation, when its loss is realized.

History seems to demonstrate that the attribution of dignity to other human beings is justified by events. In abnormal cases, as in the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, revulsion from this form of obscenity, once the facts are known, seems also to testify to the rightness of our assumption about human dignity. Moreover, anthropologists believe that no society ever exalted cruelty into a virtue *per se*; i.e., Cruelty may have been justified in this or that society as a means to a desirable end, but never as a desirable end *per se*. The inference again seems to be that the offense against the inner sense of dignity is the unpardonable sin.

Modes of expressing the dignity of man constitute the substance of humanism. The pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself takes on dignity in proportion as its aim, avowed or implicit, is the dignity of man, and it ceases to be humanistic in proportion as its aim falls below the assumption that the dignity of man is the proper spur and aim of knowledge. Thus, all knowledge that reduces man to either the status of a machine or the status of an animal is non-humanistic, as in the instance of any form of behavioral psychology which denies that the feeling of free will is an essential datum of consciousness. Nevertheless, knowledge which at first sight seems to have nothing to do with man and may, indeed, seem to reduce him to littleness and obscurity in a ghastly universe, as in the case of astronomy, may yet testify to his dignity because it testifies to his intellectual honesty.

The opening of the American Declaration of independence, passages in the letters of Thomas Jefferson, the pronouncements of Benjamin Franklin, the statements of John Adams -- it is in documents like these at the end of the 18th century amid the full daylight of the Enlightenment that the American version of Western humanism is to be found. It is not uniquely American. It is compounded of many simples, and moreover one hopes that its enduring worth as an American philosophy is not that it is American but that it is philosophic. When a distinguished American president referred to this country as the last, best hope of man, he did so, not because its Americanism made for righteousness and truth, but because righteousness and truth made it American.

In the famous state paper that created the United States a set of propositions was laid down, each of which has been attacked but all of which, taken together, seem to give us the philosophical context in which humanism has its meaning. It is there made a self-evident truth that human beings have dignity; that is, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable

rights, and that among these rights are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. None of these terms can be so clearly defined that no exception can be taken to their definition, but the totality of this vision is a totality of nobility, the assumptions of this paragraph are assumptions springing from a feeling for the dignity of man.

For the 18th century the chief argument for the dignity of man was his capacity for reason. The most striking fact in world history during the 20th century has been a decreasing faith in man, particularly in his general intelligence. By general intelligence I mean the undifferentiated intelligence of men, their capacity to bring forth and recognize the worth of ideas other than those specific to technology and science. The movement of culture from Goethe to Hitler, from Mazzini to Mussolini, from Turgenev to Stalin is an illustration of this tendency. The century of Voltaire yielded to the century of Sartre, and in the same arc of time that heroic man of Scott, of Beethoven, and of Delacroix dwindled into the pitiful man of a novelist like Faulkner and the frightened man of a poet like Eliot.

In the United States we have been swept off our feet by a theory of human nature which has substituted personality for character. Names in the news, it is commonplace, have more value than principle or policy, for these are intellectual concepts, whereas names evoke emotion. We have shifted, or seem to have shifted, from the assumption that man is an entity sufficiently capable of reason to be, though in limited degree, the master of his fate, to the assumption that interested motive and the irrational compulsion *are* his fate; and yet, along with this, in the fields of invention and technology we exactly reverse the emphasis and proclaim that the application of rational methods to comfort and security is the highest achievement of civilization. There is much to be said for comfort and security, provided you first make sure what sort of person is to be made comfortable and secure. But it was not the original intent of the United States to plump for comfort. The original intent was to make this new Republic "the best single gateway ... to the manifold hopes then stirring the minds of men that reason and justice could be substituted for authority and superstition in guiding human affairs." There seems to be no sound reason for confining this notion to the 18th century.

The Jeffersonian concept of the pursuit of knowledge rests upon a philosophy that denies mechanical man. By mechanical man one may mean man physically or psychologically determined by heredity and environment -- an interpretation to which Western thought ever and again returns only to be repelled by its naïveté. Or by mechanical man one may mean man economically determined, whether the form of reasoning take shape as the economic man of classical political economy or his modification as Marxist man forever being molded by Hegelian devolution that never quite devolves. By mechanical man one may also mean religious man -- that is, man so pessimistically interpreted by neo-Calvinist theologians, not to speak of theological physicists, that all he can look forward to is destruction. The American version of Western humanism will not accept any of these versions of man.

The horror of the hydrogen bomb (and its successors, if there are any) is a very great horror, indeed, the more so because it is a man-made horror and may therefore be equated with the work of the evil scientist I spoke of earlier. The evil, however, does not lie in the madness of scientists but in the potential madness of statesmen, so that we can come back, as we must always come back, to civil man - that is, to the question of human dignity and the purposes of the state. What looks like mere American cheerfulness has at this point something more than cheerfulness to offer. It has hope.

Our fears of atomic destruction are such lively fears it is hard for us to realize that the fears of the past were lively also. Consider, however, that at almost any period between the end of the third century and the end of the 13th Western man lived under the constant threat of extinction. Portents and prodigies surprised and terrified him; darkness and mystery surrounded him. The precarious existence of his culture was threatened by unpredictable aliens -- Germans, Slavs, Norsemen, Huns. In one era the Persians, in another the Saracens were dreadful enemies; and the Saracens had the advantage of a superior culture. Comets, earthquakes, tornadoes, pestilence, droughts, cloudbursts, famine, eclipses were frightening evidences of the wild, destructive energy of the universe. From the authority and

superstition that supported this interpretation of life Western humanism intended to relieve mankind. On the whole it has succeeded until recently in doing so.

Clearly, if Western man wastes his energies brooding over destruction, destruction may now become real. But the American version of humanism, despite American success with the hydrogen bomb, is still designed to control destruction and to interpret the universe in other terms than those of Byron and the Marquis de Sade. Literary men of course revel in the allurements of a *Menschendammern*, but the Americans have seldom been misled by literature. One does not notice among biologists, garage mechanics, and members of the medical profession at the same obsession with either destruction or mechanical man. The sun shines, the birds sing, and the Boy Scouts go out on their routine hikes -- I but paraphrase Emerson, a representative American, in modern terms. American humanism insists that rational control is as real as despair, cheerfulness and fortitude as essential as destruction. Judgment and balance are against a premature suicide, or can be made so if we educate philosophically.

In sum, the tradition of Western humanism will be safe, even in an American century, provided the Americans retain their faith in the philosophical assumptions of a democratic republic, not mistaking patriotism for insight. Mankind, whether in the United States or elsewhere, must either halt its flight from reason or be content with authoritarian rule. If scholars and scientists cannot be let alone to pursue knowledge within the gracious framework of belief in the dignity of man, we shall have not scientists but cynics, not scholars but devotees of big Brother in *1984*. If our artists cannot believe in the general intelligence of mankind today, we shall not come to that belief tomorrow unless we return to the tenets of humanism. If we cannot respect the individual as Jefferson respected him, we shall have to suffer the tyranny of the mass.

In their better moments most persons are rather decent, reasonable human beings; it is to strengthen their decency and their reason that American humanism must devote itself. In the simple but magnificent faith that individuals have dignity this humanism takes its stand, and in so proclaiming believes that it can in the long run help to make reason and the will of God prevail. If this be mysticism, so likewise denial and negation are mysticism -- mysticism emotional and opaque. American humanism is neither emotional nor opaque. Belief for belief, the American version of Western humanism has better survival value than systems giving up belief in rationality because it is secular, and celebrating impotence because their adherents are afraid.