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The Wall of Separation Crumbles as Candidates Seek a Special Relationship With the Religious Establishment

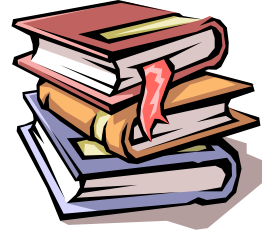
By
Nigel Roberts

How do you make critical decisions? For Al Gore, the answer is simple: WWJD—shorthand for *What Would Jesus Do*. At least that is what Vice President Gore told a *Washington Post* reporter. Today it's commonplace for politicians to court the endorsement of the religious establishment by trying to publicly prove their religious credentials. Consequently, this practice has degenerated into a holier-than-thou game between Democratic and Republican rivals.

Humanists should take special notice of the growing alliance between the religious community and the presidential (and vice presidential) candidates. Both Al Gore and George Bush have promised to create a special relationship, in their prospective administrations, with the nation's religious establishment.

Corliss Lamont stressed that, "democracy in religion and philosophy" should exist; thus, nontheist and nonreligious Americans should be free to profess and publicize their views equally with their theist and religious counterparts.

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Full House

Stephen Jay Gould

Book Review

By Nigel Roberts

We do not have control over natural evolution, but we can control the evolution of human society. Accordingly, we must take responsibility for our destiny. Humanists must seize opportunities to challenge those who seek to lead humanity toward ignoble ends. That is the message that one finds submerged in *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*. Although Gould's purpose is not to present a Humanist theme, one can glean a Humanist message.

In the final chapter of his work, Gould concludes that the idea of "progress" is possible at the human societal level – but not at the natural evolution level. Progress, according to Gould, does not apply to evolution. However, since humans have control over the direction of societal development

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Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values—be they religious, social, or political—have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

MEETINGS

1. **October 10 at 6:30 p.m.** We will meet at the Moonstruck East Restaurant (upstairs), 449 Third Avenue at 31st Street. Dorothy Klein will give a talk entitled "Unweaving the Rainbow" - a report on Richard Dawkins' book which describes how nature has programmed the developing child to be obedient and exploitable in the best interest of survival but not necessarily in the child's long range best interests.
2. **October 24 at 6:30 p.m.** We will meet at The Moonstruck East Restaurant. Speaker Tom Riggins . will give a talk entitled "Elihu Palmer and American Rationalism". Palmer (1764-1806) was the most advanced and militant Freethinker in the years right after the American Revolution, almost Thomas Paine's only friend in the years before Paine died in obscurity in 1807. Palmer and his wife (Paine's nurse and maid in his last years) were vocal leaders of early American Freethought, almost totally forgotten today. The speaker wants to acquaint us with this forbearer of modern Humanism in the United States.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

We encourage you to submit announcements, letters and articles to the editor for publication. Articles should be about 500 words. Send submissions to: Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York, 777 UN Plaza (Lobby Floor), New York, NY 10017-3521, Attn: Editor. You can also submit by e-mail to:

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EVENTS OF INTEREST

- October 6 & 7. The C.U.N.Y. Graduate School and University Center, located at 365 Fifth Avenue (at the corner of 34th Street), is holding a two-day conference: "Independent Politics in a Global World." This conference will bring together political scientists, historians, activists, journalists and others to examine the historical and current status of third parties in America and analyze future prospects for social movements and independent electoral politics at the national, state and local levels. Call 212-817-8215 for more information.
- October 16. The Brecht Forum, located at 122 West 27th Street, 10th floor (between 6th & 7th Avenues), is beginning a six-session forum entitled "American Radicalism: Continuity and Change From the Revolution to the 1960s." Call (212) 242-4201 for details.

Book Review

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(in terms of technology, science, and thus the quality of human life), progress is possible.

Stephen Jay Gould teaches biology, geology, and the history of science at Harvard University. He is also an honorary curator in invertebrates at the American Museum of Natural History. He has written sev-

eral books and numerous articles dealing with evolution and science.

Full House is a rebuke to those evolutionists who believe that Homo Sapiens are the apex of evolution. He writes, “*Full House* presents the general argument for denying that progress defines the history of life or even exists as a general trend at all. Within such a view of life-as-a-whole, humans can occupy no preferred status as a pinnacle or culmination.”

Progress is intentional, directed change toward increasing complexity and sophistication. Since the evolutionary process is random (and not directed), one cannot discuss evolution in terms of progress, according to Gould. It is accidental that life on earth has evolved toward greater complexity. Moreover, it is erroneous to think that Homo Sapiens are somehow the intentional goal of evolution.

Gould wants us to re-conceptualize evolution. Stop picturing the evolutionary process as a ladder rising from the ground toward the sky, with Homo Sapiens at the top rung. Instead, a wild, multi-branched bush better illustrates evolution. The idea is that human beings are a part of, not distinct from, other species on this planet. What is more, this wild bush is not growing in any particular direction, so the concept of progress does not apply.

Human society, unlike human evolution, has the potential for progress. While evolution is a random process, we can direct social evolution. Each generation can transmit its

achievements in science and technology to succeeding generations with the aim of improving human life. Yet, social progress is not inevitable. *We must choose progress.*

Although Gould’s main purpose is to dislodge the notion that evolution suggests progress, there is a deeper message for Humanists. While we are unable to direct evolution, we can direct human societal development. We must seek to advance the quality of human life.



The Wall of Separation

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Accordingly, government should not establish any special relationships favoring either the religious or nonreligious communities. If either candidate follows through with his promise to create a special relationship with the religious establishment, many observers contend that the constitutionally erected wall separating church from state will be further threatened. What is more, both candidates would alienate the various groups of nonreligious Americans by favoring the religious community. There is absolutely no legitimate union between the state and the religious establishment.

Presidential candidates began wooing the religious community in rhetoric often bordering on the silly. When asked to name their political and philosophical role model, GOP candidates, one-after-the-other,

named Jesus Christ during debates in Iowa. It seemed as though it would have been political suicide to not join in the Jesus-as-political-philosopher chorus once it began. Clearly, the candidates were being less than completely honest in their responses. Yet, one must seriously wonder about the world-view of our political leaders. George Bush discusses America in religious, almost mystical, terms. In an MSNBC report, George Bush expressed the view that “our country is chosen by god.”

Joseph Lieberman articulated the central theme for both presidential candidates when addressing a Detroit church: He called for “a place for faith in America’s public life.” Both Gore and Bush have already outlined what that place would be under their respective administrations. Gore proposes “a *New Partnership* between government and faith-based groups.” He told the Salvation Army that if elected president, “the voices of faith-based organizations will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration.” Furthermore, he said “a politics of community can be strengthened when we are not afraid to make connections between spirituality and politics.” Not to be outdone by Gore, George Bush promises to establish an *Office of Faith-Based Action* if elected. Its purpose would be to assist religious organizations in their dealings with the government.

The candidates’ plans build on the charitable choice provision of the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill. Charitable

choice funnels public funds to religious-based organizations that administer welfare programs (as long as there are secular alternatives).

One thing seems certain. In January, whether we have a President Gore or Bush, you can expect the wall of separation to show signs of crumbling at the base.



United Nations Watch

In September, 149 world leaders met at the United Nations for the Millennium Summit. Secretary General Kofi Annan challenged them to better manage globalization. In his millennium statement to the distinguished audience, Mr. Annan stated, “the overarching challenge of our times is to make globalization mean more than bigger markets. To make a success of this great upheaval we must learn to govern better, and - above all - to govern better together.”

He identified three categories of global issues: *freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom for future generations to sustain their lives on this planet.*

The Secretary General asserted that human beings are not free and equal in dignity when billions barely survive on less than one dollar a day. He called on the leaders to work in concert to eliminate poverty. To succeed, developing countries must adopt “right policies,” and industrialized nations “must fully open [their] markets to products from developing

countries and give more, and better focused, development assistance.”

Regarding the second category, he suggests that we think in terms of protecting people when discussing security. The proliferation of civil wars and weapons of mass destruction threatens human welfare, but humanity should be free from the fear of war and destruction. In the new century, the world community must approach security issues in terms of conflict prevention.

Finally, protection of the environment is emerging as a pressing global issue. As globalization increases, “we need regulations and incentives to discourage pollution and over-consumption of non-renewable resources and to encourage environmental friendly practices.”



STATE OF WORLD POPULATION: 2000

On September 20, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released its annual State of World Population Report. Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA, summed up the report in a simple message: “The price of inequality is too high to pay.” She stated that the organization’s study shows that “in countries all over the world, gender inequality, discrimination, and violence are holding back not only women but men, not only families but communities and whole nations.” Much of this

discrimination and violence against girls and women are often firmly rooted in cultures around the world.

UNFPA’s area of work includes the reproductive health of women (including family planning and sexual health), advocacy for gender equality, and design of population and development strategies.

This year’s investigation reports these findings:

- One woman in three will experience violence during her lifetime.
- About 1/3 of all pregnancies (some 80 million) are unintended or unwanted.
- About 500,000 women die each year as a result of pregnancy.
- Women are more vulnerable to HIV than men are because of social and physical reasons. In Africa, HIV-positive women outnumber men by 2 million.
- Some 2 million girls under 15 are forced in the sex trade each year.
- Trafficking for sexual purposes is the fastest-growing area of organized crime.



A Reminder:

Membership dues are needed to pay for Chapter expenses.

A business meeting is necessary for election of new officers.

Ideas and suggestions for future programs are requested. Thanks!