

The Exciting Promise of Humanism

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Every religion has its promise, the special reward it offers to the faithful. Such a promise is often the main feature that attracts outsiders in. As such, it can become a primary selling point and motivator.

The ancient promise of Christianity is eternal life in heaven. I can remember a back in the late 1960s listening to one radio preacher describing it in detail with vivid word pictures as he rhapsodized over how wonderful it would feel to be there. I can remember as a child learning about the streets paved with gold and rivers flowing with milk and honey.

Different denominations also offer secondary promises, such as wealth and happiness in this life, God's helping hand in times of trouble, and even physical healings.

In Buddhism, the promise is somewhat different. If you follow the Noble Eightfold Path of conduct, you will experience inner peace and eventually, through a series of rebirths, the state of Nirvana. This state is the blowing out of all craving, attachment, and desire.

New Age religions tend to promise increased powers of mind that will bring about inner peace, happiness, power over external events, cosmic knowledge, and ultimate union with God.

Like in politics, so in religion: the key is PROMISE BIG.

In the past, humanists have sometimes thought of themselves as too noble and honest to stoop to such strategies for gaining converts. So, instead of offering our own "campaign promises," we used to prefer to run down the promises of all the other groups. Instead of focusing on a better way of our own, we kept the spotlight on those ideas we disagreed with. Only we didn't seem able to do it with the captivating music of Omar Khayyam:

Of threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!
One thing at least is certain—This Life flies;
One thing is certain and the rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies.

This seemed to be our message, and to some it still is. But, if this is our message, are humanists merely the consumer crusaders of the metaphysical world, the Ralph Naders of the religious realm? Is our only role that of protecting the gullible from the purveyors of spiritual Florida swamp land?

This is, of course, a noble calling, worthy of the best efforts of talented individuals. But is it ALL we should be about? From much of our older rhetoric, you would think so. On the other hand, today many humanists are directing their focus on what HUMANISM has to offer.

And when that is done, the relevant question becomes "What is the promise of humanism?"

Well, we already know what we can't promise. As sober realists and no-nonsense straight-shooters, we're experts in throwing the wet blanket of rationalism over the fondest hopes of our fellows. We know the "bad news," but what's our "good news," what is the gospel of humanism?

One way to find out is to ask ourselves how we would present humanism to someone who has never been exposed to traditional religion. Here would be a person in no need of disillusionment and possessing no idols in need of smashing. We could now go directly to the goal of offering the "good news" of humanism.

If some humanists would find themselves *speechless* in a situation like this, it could be because they believe humanism is simply the "default" condition of humanity, the "natural state" that prevails when no brainwash is present. And I've known a number of humanists who have put it to me in exactly those terms.

But, if that's the case, then the solemn duty of every humanist when confronting a person unexposed to religion is to immediately teach him or her all about it! In this way, the person will learn what to watch out for, will be prepared, and will be put on guard.

But I don't accept that humanism is the default condition of humanity. And years ago I was indeed confronted with individuals unexposed to traditional religion. I confronted them every day. They were my children.

How did I teach my children humanism? Well, I didn't do it by running down religions they had never heard about. I didn't do it by exposing them to the varieties of religious experience. Instead, I exposed them to the varieties of worldly experience. My children, by the time they reached kindergarten, already enjoyed travel, pictures, movies, music, people, animals, flowers, daydreams, stories, words, numbers, shapes, colors, and the joy of learning. I wanted them to live the good life envisioned by humanism, to experience the promise first hand. That's why, when I asked my eldest daughter, Livia, when we were traveling in Oklahoma, what the praying hands in front of the Oral Roberts medical complex were doing, she exclaimed, "They're clapping!"

Did my children become humanists? Yes they did. And other humanist parents I know who used a similar approach were pleased with the results. The implication is clear. The promise of humanism is a good life here and now.

So, let's discuss it in detail. What IS the "good life?" Can it be pursued directly? Can EVERYONE have it (that is, do we have a promise we can keep; can humanism deliver the goods)? And finally, will it play in Peoria?

Lloyd and Mary Morain talked about the good life in their 1954 Beacon Press book, *Humanism as the Next Step*, when they wrote:

As a starting point let us take the idea that this life should be experienced deeply, lived fully, with sensitive awareness and appreciation of that which is around us.

This was the first of their seven key ideas of humanism. They elaborated further, saying:

Back through the centuries whenever people have enjoyed keenly the sights and sounds and other sensations of the world about them, and enjoyed these for what they were—not because they stood for something else—they were experiencing life humanistically. Whenever they felt keen interest in the drama of human life about them and ardently desired to take part in it they felt as humanists.

Referring to this attitude as "zest for living," they were following the lead of Bertrand Russell who, in his book *The Conquest of Happiness*, referred to "zest" as "the most universal and distinctive mark" of the happy individual. People with this quality, Russell argued, are those who come at life with a sound appetite, are glad to have what is before them, partake of things until they have enough, and know when to stop.

This vision reminds us again of Omar Khayyam:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and—sans End!

Which sounds like the hedonistic doctrine humanists are accused of advocating:

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

Or, as *Mad* magazine once put it —

A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread, and Thou—
Pretty soon I'll be drunk, fat, and in trouble.

But there is much more involved in the humanist notion of the good life. The physical pleasures are only a part of it, not to be denied of course, but far from representing the whole. For the humanist there are also the pleasures of an unfettered mind making new discoveries, solving problems, and creating. There is the enjoyment of art, music, dance, and drama. There is the joy of helping others and the challenge of working to make the world a better and more peaceful place. And, of course, there are the pleasures associated with love and family. The humanist seeks the enjoyment of as many of these as possible.

In this, we are clearly at one with the ancient Greek ideal of wholeness and the integration of life. For example, in the ancient Olympic games, competition included not only athletics but drama, music, poetry, and philosophy. And the whole combination was viewed as a religious event. The Greeks put it together and did it all. So can we.

In having zest for living, we join with the ancient Chinese who, in following Confucius, saw much of life as play—which accounted for their enjoyment of ceremony and especially their love of toys.

This *worldly* and good-natured view of life, that claims no ultimate knowledge, stands out when contrasted with Hinduism. Whereas the Yogi is often seen as renouncing desire, living an ascetic life-style, and acquiring eternal knowledge, Socrates, the sage of the ancient Greeks, deliberately provoked certain appetites in himself, lived a social and active life, and professed to have no knowledge whatever!

It is also radically different from traditional Christianity, which has sometimes called this world a vale of tears, has seen pleasures as vanity, and seems to find the goal of human life beyond the grave. Such believers might quote Ecclesiastes—

Better to go to the house of mourning
than to the house of feasting;
for to this end all men come,
let the living take this to heart.
Better sadness than laughter,
a severe face confers some benefit.

Jerusalem Bible

As an antidote, Robert Louis Stevenson offered these words in his Christmas Sermon:

Gentleness and cheerfulness, these come before all morality: they are the perfect duties. If your morals make you dreary, depend on it they are wrong. I do not say, "give them up," for they may be all you have; but conceal them like a vice, lest they should spoil the lives of better men."

Edwin H. Wilson, the grand old man of religious humanism who, for 90 plus years, lived the promise, summed it up when he wrote:

The Humanist lives as if this world were all and enough. He is not otherworldly. He holds that the time spent on the contemplation of a possible afterlife is time wasted. He fears no hell and seeks no heaven, save that which he and others created on earth. He willingly accepts the world that exists on this side of the grave as the place for moral struggle and creative living. He seeks the life abundant for his neighbor as for himself. He is content to live one world at a time and let the next life—if such there may be—take care of itself.

The way those interests should be carried out here is described by Havelock Ellis in his book, *The Dance of Life*. There he presents living as an art, one best characterized as a dance. In this, he follows the ancient Greeks who chose the image of dancing because, unlike walking or running, dancing is not generally viewed as a goal-oriented activity leading from point A to B. One dances for the sheer joy of the activity. It is the process more than the product that counts. And this is how the humanist good life is to be lived.

So, when someone asks a humanist, "What is the purpose of life?" the humanist should answer, "Life is not purpose, life is art." The meaning is found in the doing.

This is a revolutionary and truly unique way of looking at the world. It is a way that finds the question of cosmic purpose irrelevant, one that is unmoved by the author of Ecclesiastes who, in contemplating the question of ultimate value, writes—

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and what vanity it all is, what chasing of the wind!

The humanist response is that Solomon seems to have missed the point. The people, ideas, things, and actions we love do not depend for their worth on how long they last or their supposed cosmic significance. They are things in themselves to be enjoyed for their own sakes. Life is an art, not a task. Life is for us, not for the universe. And life is for now, not for eternity.

But there's more. We can take Edwin Wilson's statement that this life is all and enough and beef it up a bit to declare that this life is more than enough. Then it will express the humanist optimism of Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote in *A Child's Garden of Verses*:

The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

(We ought to get some rosary beads and repeat this every day.)

There is more in this world than I could experience in a thousand different lifetimes. There is a richness here, a cornucopia of choices, a wealth of opportunities. There is so much to see, to do, to read, to learn. The question is not, "What shall I do with my life?" but "What shall I do next?!"

Different people choose different things. Most humanists will choose a life oriented outward, not only to enjoying the good life but sharing the good life through helping others. Yet other people may choose the inner life of contemplation. By making such a choice, each one misses something the other is enjoying. But that can't be helped. Any time one makes a choice in the use of one's time, one fails to engage in all the other possible uses for that time, including having other experiences.

So, if a monk or celibate priest speaks to me about the ecstasies of spiritual contemplation, I respond by sharing how thrilled I was in the birthing room watching my children being born. If a young evangelical describes to me the experience of being "born again," I can't wait to talk about the exciting moment when I first appreciated geometry. If heaven is described to me in graphic detail, I immediately want to show my photos of sunsets, seascapes, and mountain ranges.

I'm in love with life, and too busy with it to find time for things allegedly outside it.

But now we can ask, if this is the promise of humanism—if this is the promise of liberal religion—is it a promise limited only to the affluent, the intelligent, the educated? If so, then are we making a promise we can't always keep? This is the criticism leveled against us by the otherworldly religions. While we say that they can't keep their otherworldly promises, they explain that they turned to this other world because we humanists didn't keep our worldly promises.

Otherworldly faiths offer the "joys of the spirit" to those who have been denied "the pleasures of the flesh." And the claim is that such spiritual joys are more permanent and universal than is our pleasure. But why give up so easily, denying oneself worldly enjoyment to feed on a mirage in its stead? Isn't this settling for less, and retreating into an unwarranted resignation? Bertrand Russell thought so when, in chapter 2 of *The Conquest of Happiness*, he took the author of Ecclesiastes to task for denouncing the very things that make happiness possible and give life meaning.

Nonetheless, I must admit that I benefit from growing up in a middle-class environment in a wealthy country where I have access to such variety. But all is not lost in more impoverished environments in less wealthy countries. At the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, India, an extended family of humanists teach the poor the joys of traditional folk dance, music, athletics (especially acrobatics), science, animal husbandry, occupational skills, and, most important of all, the vast world made possible only through reading. Many of the beneficiaries of this effort are not only poor and uneducated, but are often disabled and abandoned. Yet in a country steeped in an ancient tradition of otherworldliness due to just such harsh realities, the promise of humanism is offered and met. The International Association for Religious Freedom, the world organization of liberal religions, has similar projects in India and is getting similar results. The promise is no illusion.

And I look at my own life, asking myself how useful the promise of the good life would be to me if I suddenly went deaf, or blind, or couldn't walk. And yet I can answer with Robert Louis Stevenson that the world is indeed so full of things that can make me happy. A calamity is a limitation, but if I were limited only to reading, I would find the world is so full of a number of books that I could not read them all in a lifetime. If I were limited only to seeing, I could not see all I want to see in a lifetime. If I were limited only to hearing, I could not hear all I want to hear in a lifetime. I have not tested all the thoughts I want to test, or worked out all the ideas I have started but don't have time to develop. I haven't written all the speeches I want to write. I haven't met all the people I

could meet or faced all the challenges I could face. Calamities destroy the promise usually because we concentrate on what we have lost instead of letting the misfortune simply focus our pursuits in a new direction.

The ancient Stoic remedy for misfortune is as much a part of this promise as is the Cyrenaic enjoyment of good fortune. When misfortune limits you, shift your focus and move on. I would argue that we can, in most cases, keep the promise of happiness in the here and now. And even when all cannot be delight—for life indeed includes a large share of obligations, struggles, sorrows, and pain—the larger context can still be that of an artful life.

And when, in those rare instances, we find that the realization of the promise is futile, as in the case of an agonizing terminal illness, humanism offers the freedom to exit this life at will and with dignity. This is voluntary euthanasia, an area of great importance to Humanists.

So, in the end, the promise is not a perfect one. But we admit that. Others may seem to offer more perfect promises, but can they deliver? I have no evidence that anyone has ever gotten to heaven, realized Nirvana, or merged with God. But I see evidence every day that the promise of the good life is no mirage.

So, I'll stick with the honesty of humanism, that this life is all there is, and with the promise of humanism, that this can be more than enough. And this promise will serve as my motivation to make life better when all is not as it should be. For I can better enjoy the promise on a clean rather than a dirty planet. And I can enjoy it better when I am helping others to participate in it.

This is a philosophy I can be proud of. And, being proud of it, I can confidently share it with others. I can offer the "good news" of its promise and know I am doing something valuable for others.

As a result, humanism need no longer be a philosophy exclusively for those bold enough to face an uncaring cosmos with defiance, for those fearless enough "to go where no one has gone before," and for those impudent enough to call the majority of humanity cowards for fleeing to a sweeter tale. Most people are moved by exciting promises. They are captivated by thrilling visions. This philosophy can be for them too.

There's nothing wrong with offering a zesty promise if we have one. And have one we do. So let us humanists stress it, publicize it, and present it as our entry in the religious/philosophical sweepstakes. I submit to you that this one shift in our focus will do more to counter the harmful effects of otherworldly belief than all the rationalistic arguments of history's greatest freethinkers. So let's give it a shot.

We have nothing to lose but our minority status.

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