

August 1983

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Charles H. Hagan

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Recommended Citation

Hagan, Charles H. (1983) "Modern Humanism and Religious Tradition: A Dilemma for Church and State," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 50 : No. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol50/iss3/12>

Modern Humanism and Religious Tradition: A Dilemma for Church and State

Rev. Charles H. Hagan

Father Hagan received his doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome with a thesis on the Church's response to secular humanism. He is currently chaplain at the University of Pennsylvania Newman Center and chaplain to the Catholic Physicians' Guild of Philadelphia.

Who is man? Where is he going? Is there a somewhere to go? From philosopher to playwright to playground attendant, people struggle with these questions. For many, the old certainties are not nearly so certain. Often we stand like Columbus on the bridge of a ship heading toward a new world about which we know little.

The human race has well within its grasp the ability to create new forms of life in a tube and end old forms of life in a minute. If we are now more sure of the how, we are less confident about the when. Surely the question of when must be subordinate to two prior questions — "What is human life" and "Who is man?" Before we can speak of how to approach the difficult decisions regarding the beginning and end of human life, we must first know something about that life and how we ought to value it. Certainly the human nature that we have is not something that we created. It is something that we received as a gift and spent centuries in unwrapping. Even the ability "to create" certain forms of life in a test tube has been achieved only through years, even centuries of observation and experimentation.

In 1933, some writers and thinkers in the Western world, no doubt concerned by the appearance of totalitarian regimes and the challenges these regimes posed to personal dignity and freedom, came together and issued a statement called "A Humanist Manifesto" which attempted to spell out certain attitudes about human life in the 20th century. The final document shows the influence of one of its signators, the American philosopher, John Dewey. The statement shows concern that religion is becoming identified with doctrine and methods which are powerless to solve the problems of man in the 20th century. What the writers of this manifesto proposed instead was a religious humanism which in reality is an agnostic humanism. Forty years later in 1973, a similar group issued a more comprehensive statement called "Humanist Manifesto II." These statements are important because they indicate a real concern by some members of the academic and professional community to come to terms with what is perceived by many as a serious problem, namely the continuing acquisition of technical skill and knowledge without the development

of a sufficiently sensitive moral barometer for dealing with these new capabilities. Indeed, in terms of the immediate past one could argue persuasively that there has been a continuing erosion of once-accepted moral standards without accepted replacements.

It seems quite appropriate then, to seriously and honestly face up to this difficult question of how Western man advanced to scientific and technical adulthood and, for the most part, remained in moral infancy. Likewise, it is of great importance to explore the response of one group in our society, modern humanists, and to try to understand how much of modern humanism comes to be estranged from traditional religious beliefs. Finally, it does seem to be necessary for a believer in the 20th century to explore what perspective toward these particular problems of modern man can be gained by approaching the problems from the wisdom gained through a religious tradition.

The influence of modern secular humanism is often much greater than generally perceived because it is a philosophy accepted by many in our society who influence the formulation of laws in various legislative bodies in our country, the decisions of courts and the education of young men and women on our college and high school campuses. Recently, the White House Conference on the Family was critical of the influence of the philosophy of secular humanism on the American family. Modern secular humanism has had a great impact upon the American educational systems and has been responsible to a great extent for the success of efforts to remove God, religious values, and the discussion of moral issues from American public education. John Dewey, often called the Father of American Education, was one of the signers of the first humanist manifesto in 1933 — the first major statement by modern humanists, most of whom could be called “non-religious.” There is no doubt that modern secular humanism is an ideology which includes a vision of the totality of life. It is not based on belief in the existence of a personal God, but on respect for the human person as a unique part of cosmic totality.

There is a concern on the part of many that respect for the human person, without reference to a creator and ultimate guarantor of the value of the human person, is illusory and contrary to the perspective of America's founders. There is further recent evidence that the attempt to banish the expression “religious beliefs” from the public sector is not successful. We are witnessing a new interest in religious questions in our society in response to the emptiness and fragmentation brought about through unbelief and freedom without responsibility. Religious convictions are being expressed quite openly at sporting events, in the media, and on college campuses. In attempting to banish the sacred, our society has seen the risk of losing the very best part of the human person in the ability to wonder and to worship. The attempt to exclude God from human history, as one writer has suggested, is in reality an aggression against man.