

# In Defense of Eupraxophy

Paul Kurtz

MANY TERMS were introduced in the last century to describe skepticism about the claims of theistic religion. Thus "atheism," "rationalism," "freethought," "agnosticism," "humanism," and other similar terms have been used by various movements. Unbelievers today are disturbed by the patent failure in many countries to enlist mass support for the humanist/rationalist/freethought outlook. It is dismaying that religiosity still seems to grow and that the devastating critiques of religious claims so boldly presented historically have often been forgotten. Indeed, every generation seems to need to re-wage the wars of the past, and no matter how many intellectual victories there are, in one sense, very little progress seems to be made, at least in building secular institutions.

That is why, I think, we have to rethink where we are and that the atheist/freethought/agnostic/rationalist movement should take new directions. And that is why I have introduced the term "eupraxophy." Now this term has raised a storm of controversy. Many humanists and freethinkers have welcomed its introduction, but I have been surprised by the degree of animosity among other freethinkers and humanists who find it to be a neologism; or maintain that it is inappropriate and unnecessary. In this paper I wish to defend "eupraxophy."

Paul Kurtz is Professor of Philosophy, SUNY, Buffalo, NY. President of Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH).

### **Failure of the Atheist/Freethought Movement**

I submit that one of the great failures of the atheist and freethought movement may be attributed to the fact that it was largely cerebral and cognitive in function. Heir to the enlightenment, to the new methods of thinking developed in philosophy, and to the application of scientific method and technology to the world, many freethinkers thought that if only they could define a scientific/philosophical outlook, that would be sufficient. If they could only destroy the chains of illusion and the myths of unreason that persisted, they believed that humankind would be emancipated from theistic dogmas and they would breathe the free air of a naturalistic/materialistic outlook.

But in that basic premise they have failed -- for if we have learned anything in the last century, it is that atheism, scientific naturalism, and materialism are not sufficient. Atheism is merely a negative critique of the idea of God. Atheists say that they find insufficient evidence or proofs for the existence of God; therefore they reject the belief in deity. Some may choose to describe themselves as non-theists, others as agnostics, but all reject the claim that God exists. Further, atheism, per se, does not determine any moral outlook or life stance: one can be an atheist and a Stalinist; one can be an atheist and a fascist; an atheist and a democrat.

### **Failure of Attempts to Suppress Religion**

Institutionalized, dogmatic atheism has failed in the Soviet Union and the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. For a long time it was difficult to get reliable information about the level of religious belief and unbelief in these countries. The Soviet Union for over 70 years defended atheism as part of the official ideology of Marxism; and there have been massive efforts to promulgate and propagandize for atheism. Indeed, for a long period of time, brutal programs of suppression were applied by Lenin, Stalin, and their successors. In the Soviet Union Churches were closed; priests, mullahs, and rabbis were sent to concentration camps; the publication of religious documents, freedom of conscience, and religious education were all forbidden. Great efforts were made to enlist the young into atheism and to provide alternative secular ceremonies

and symbols to attract unbelievers. The full tale is only now being told.

On a visit to the Soviet Union recently and in a dialogue with atheists at the Institute for Scientific Atheism at the Academy of Social Sciences in Moscow, we learned that many atheists in the Soviet Union now concede that they have failed to develop a mass movement, and that there are great animosities not only towards the regime, which is viewed as an oppressor, but also towards atheism. The lesson here is that it is perilous to attempt to suppress religion by force. During the French Revolution the churches were closed and burned and priests and nuns were harassed, yet within a short period of time they were restored. The same litany of events seem to be occurring in the Soviet Union, where churches are now being opened, religious seminaries are coming into being, and a new wave of religiosity seems to be sweeping that country. One can ask this question, as I have asked in many studies that I have engaged in: Is there a transcendental temptation, so deep within the human breast, so powerful in impulse, that it is difficult or indeed virtually impossible to suppress it? We know that in many Western countries religion seems to be very strong--but there religion is aligned with economic and social structures and is encouraged or supported by the political authorities. This was not the case in Communist countries, where there were negative efforts by the power structure to stamp out or to repress religion. Yet in spite of that it persisted. I have speculated as to whether or not there is something biological, indeed perhaps even sociobiological, whether there is even a spiritual/metaphysical "gene." I have come to the conclusion that there is not, for the simple reason that it is absent in a significant minority of people--most of the readers of this journal, for example, and that therefore under certain conditions the transcendental temptation will not express itself.

#### **Failure of Marxism-Leninism as a Substitute for Religion**

But the transcendental temptation is so strong that unless functional substitutes are found for it, one cannot deviate from it. I think one explanation for the growth of Leninist-Marxist philosophy, during its heyday, was that the fact that it offered an ideological substitute, a kind of secular utopian vision, for the eschatological myths of religion. One reason for

its failure was that the paradise promised on Earth did not occur; and that people could immediately see that all of the high dreams and hopes for human salvation by building a Garden of Eden on the planet could not be achieved through the means employed by Communists--creating a totalitarian society in which freedom, creativity, and discovery were throttled.

The advantage which Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other eschatological religions have is that their utopian visions of the next life are not as easily disconfirmed as were the secular visions of Marxist utopianism. The failure of Marxism was that its short-range predictions of building a better world were shown, by comparison with capitalist, non-Marxist, and democratic societies, to be at a disadvantage; and indeed the workers and ordinary people in non-Marxist lands achieved a better standard of living, enjoyed a more creative level, with greater cultural enrichment, than those in the banal kind of Marxist societies developed by bureaucracies. After a century of Marxism--and Marx was no doubt the greatest humanist thinker of the nineteenth century--and after the patent failure of Marxism, the question can now be raised, Where does atheism now stand? Why has the atheist/freethought/rationalist movement failed? Why is it so weak in so many countries of the world?

#### **Defining a Secular Outlook: Humanism**

Now it is no doubt true that secularism and modernism are growing, and that large sectors of the world, under the impact of science, technology, and the democratic revolutions of our time, are liberating people from ancient myths and ecclesiastical priesthods. So there have been gains. But at the same time there has been a failure to define a secular outlook, or to provide an authentic ethical philosophy which can seize the imagination of ordinary people and enter into their lives. The influence of science and secularism persists because of the great advantages they provide in satisfying human needs and in creating a better life by means of technology. But in spite of the scientific/technological revolution, the secularist outlook will not succeed in enlisting human devotion and dedication unless it appeals not simply to the mind, but to the hearts of men and women; unless, that is, it is able to arouse

and stimulate feeling, and unless there is some intensity of emotion.

And that is why I think that the term "humanism" is crucial, because humanism is an effort to suggest that if we reject God and proclaim that "God is dead," we need to affirm human worth. The chief aim of humanism is to create the conditions for the good life here and now, and beyond that to build a global ethics for the world community. The purpose of humanism is to realize and fulfill all the things of which we are capable, and to advance human freedom. Accordingly, there is a positive agenda of humanism, which is constructive, prescriptive, and ethical. Therefore, at the very least, we need to say that yes, we are atheists, but we are also humanists. Humanism has a basic cognitive aspect, and it involves a commitment to rationalism. Again, the rationalist position is cerebral and intellectual--it is committed to the open mind, free inquiry, and skepticism. Rationalists are prepared to examine any claim to truth, but unless it can be supported evidentially, they will suspend judgment or reject it. But humanism involves not simply that, but a way of life. Humanism must address itself to the heart and the passions; it must have some relevance to practice and conduct; and it must have some effect upon how we live. I submit that broadly conceived the freethought movement has failed in that direction. Marxism was an effort to apply humanism to practice, and indeed Marx said that atheism was merely abstract, that it only became meaningfully expressed when it was realized in terms of Communism; and so Communism offered a program and an agenda for the future liberation of mankind. The Marxist-Leninists failed because they developed a new tyranny. And so we now see that Marxism without freedom is not an authentic humanism. But we must not give up on Marx's basic insight that humanism only has meaning if it is related to practice.

### **An Authentic Humanism is a Eupraxophy**

Eupraxophy makes allowances for these components: eu means "good, well," it refers to an ethical dimension and suggests an emphasis upon value; praxis refers to "conduct" or "practical behavior" in the real world; and sophia refers to intellectual wisdom, scientific and philosophical; that is, it refers to a method of inquiry in which we insist upon the appeal to reason and evidence in order to support our beliefs.

This entails a cosmic outlook based upon a naturalistic and materialistic framework. I think that the best term to describe what we're about today is the term "humanism." The term "eupraxophy" is not introduced as a substitute for humanism, but a description of it. There have been at least four efforts to describe humanism. First, some people say that humanism is a religion, and they interpret "religion" in functional terms. This, I think, is totally confusing, for religion involves prayer, and/or devotional piety, and/or some faith in beings or a Being unseen or a Creator, and/or a divine source of reality. Therefore, if humanism lacks all these, it is neither a "religion" nor is it "religious." I prefer the term "*secular* humanism" where need be because many humanists have muddied the waters terribly by claiming that humanism is a religion, and they insist that they are "religious humanists." In this sense they agree with or share the same conviction of Protestant fundamentalists, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews who have attacked humanism, consider it to be religious, and therefore want to exclude it from the public schools because, they argue, it violates the principle of the separation of church and state and the First Amendment. The term "*secular* humanism" clearly specifies that humanism is nonreligious.

Second, many people consider humanism to be a philosophy, and they talk about the philosophy of humanism, or they say that humanism is a life philosophy. This sense has an advantage over religion, because philosophy is cognitive; it does not involve faith, but an intellectual position. Unfortunately, in the twentieth century, philosophy has been transformed. The philosopher attempts to ape the scientist, and he has become a specialist, using the techniques of logic and linguistic analysis. Philosophers today often say that they are neutral. They are simply interested in examining and evaluating what people mean when they use language, and in clarifying presuppositions and assumptions; but the philosopher qua philosopher takes no position. This philosophical outlook wishes to examine all sides of a question, but the result most often is that the philosopher refuses to make up his mind about anything. "Philosophy" may have described humanism in the context of ancient Greece and Rome, but by and large today, philosophy has become a narrow discipline or field of expertise. Surely humanism offers more than this. For it involves a cosmic outlook based upon philosophy and the sciences; it involves a life stance and a normative ethical commitment. It seeks to be

relevant to the question of meaning, who are we, and how shall we live.

Third, there are those who claim that humanism, indeed freethought and atheism, are basically scientific, and when they are asked to describe humanism, they say it is a science. I think this view is also mistaken, for humanism draws from the sciences, and it involves an appreciation of its implications for the human condition. It is a mistake to say that humanism is equivalent to a science, or of the sciences. For the sciences have become extremely specialized and departmentalized, and it is difficult to get scientists qua scientists to deal with the broader implications of their findings. Humanism is a reflection upon the sciences, attempting to develop a naturalistic, non-theistic interpretation of the cosmic scene and of the human species within it.

Fourth, there are those who maintain that the defining characteristic of humanism is that it is ethical; that is, that it expresses a moral point of view and that it is committed to a set of ethical values. I think that this is true, for what is distinctive in the humanist point of view is that there are a set of values, such as a commitment to the good life here and now, to social justice, to the ethics of freedom and democracy, to the building of a world community, etc. But, again, humanism and ethics are not the same thing, because ethics as a field of philosophy is concerned with the critical and cognitive analysis of principles and values, and it attempts to be dispassionate about that. Indeed, a great deal of effort in the twentieth century ethics has been with metaethics, i.e., questions of linguistic and epistemological analysis. But humanism involves a normative commitment. Although it has an ethical element, it involves conviction and devotion, and it spills out into practice.

### **Defining Eupraxophy--The Need for the New Word**

That is why I think that neither religion, philosophy, science, nor ethics fully describes or comprehends the nature of humanism. Humanism is a philosophical, scientific, and moral expression, but it takes one step beyond that. For in rejecting ancient supernatural/mythological/theological views about the universe, as unsupported by evidence and reasons, and as inappropriate to the human condition in the post-modern world, it states that we have to develop a new cosmic

outlook and a new way of life, both individually and socially. Now the term "eupraxophy" I think does this. It involves a eupraxis, i.e., a moral way of life, or life stance, a basic commitment to a style of living, doing, and acting, a set of values upon which we stand; it entails a *Weltanschauung*, a cosmic outlook, a scientific and philosophical interpretation of nature and of our place within it; and it offers some degree of wisdom in conduct. It incorporates *both* practical and/or normative wisdom, and intellectual or cognitive significance. The advantage of the term "eupraxophy" is that, drawing upon Greek roots, it cuts across language stocks; it is not limited to the English language, but has meaning in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and other linguistic systems. In the modern world many technical terms have Latin or Greek roots. Indeed, so much of the language of science, medicine, physics, and astronomy, etc. has become international because of its Greek roots. I submit that the term "eupraxophy" is a useful term, indeed, a term of significance and import in the present context. There have been other eupraxophies historically--Epicureanism, skepticism, or Stoicism as philosophical-ethical schools of thought and conduct--and in the present: Marxism, liberal utilitarianism, etc.

### **Humanism and Eupraxophy--The Challenge for the Future**

Humanist eupraxophy is committed to atheism and freethought, but that's only one part of its platform, because humanists are committed to the open mind, skepticism, and agnosticism about all belief systems. But over and beyond that humanists are also committed to ethical and even social values and programs in which the realization and freedom of the individual in a just democratic society and world community is an end to be achieved. Thus humanism is both cognitive and passionate; and it has meaning and significance, but only if it can arouse convictions. As we enter the twenty-first century, the great challenge that we face is to define and defend the scientific outlook and the scientific method, to emancipate people from ancient myths and dogmas that have suppressed them, to fulfill and realize the highest and noblest human ideals and moral values. But the great question is, Will this outlook prevail? Will these ideals inspire human beings? If a eupraxophy is to succeed it must be of sufficient vitality to provide us with both a picture of the place of the human species



within the scheme of things and ideals that can arouse us. We need an affirmative statement. We need to make it patently evident that we are *for* something. Unless we can demonstrate by deed as well as belief that we are not simply negative, eager to destroy the religious institutions of the past, but that we are prepared to build creatively and constructively new institutions for the future, then I believe that the freethought/atheist/rationalist/humanist movement will continue to languish.

We need to step up to a new plateau, and that, I submit, must be a plateau that defines a new eupraxophy that is relevant to the human condition, can inspire human beings to commitment and action, and provide meaning to their lives. This task is all the more pressing given the apparent collapse of Marxism, and the great vacuum in the world for inspiring ideals. Unless an authentic, democratic, scientific, and secular humanism can be identified as a viable alternative, then we may again be threatened by a new outburst of orthodox theism, and new cults of irrationality are most likely to emerge to plague humankind.