

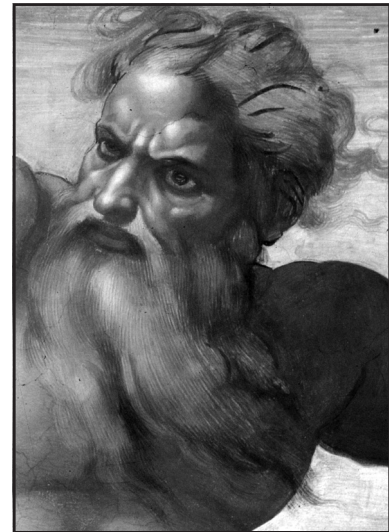
# With God on our Side...

Earlier in the semester, I put up some posters around the college to recruit students for the Peace Studies Certificate. One of them included in large, bold letters the slogans *Deus Veult*, *Gott mit Uns*, *In God We Trust*, *Allahu Ackbar*, followed by the words: *Killing in the name of God, when in the name of reason will it end? Within hours of their going up, I had a phone message from a respected colleague and friend berating me for the posters. I was centuries late. Didn't I know that wars of religion were largely a thing of the past, that many religious groups had been and were forces for peace and that most recent and current wars and conflicts had been and are justified by arguments of reason? He was being deliberately provocative, but it did get me thinking. It is a position I have heard before and I suspect many of you may have, as well. I will argue that Thor and Ares have long since shifted their entire allegiance to Mammon and that murderous cupidity can not proceed on the logic of reason. Its march is fueled by a potent*

*mythical mix in which God continues to play a prominent role. But I am getting ahead of myself.*

While I am aware of the many philosophers who have addressed the question of reason and rationalism, this is not the place, nor am I competent to review all their work. But if the conversation is to move forward, I have to stand on some ground, to submit a working definition.

Here goes. Reason is an intellectual process by which we become warranted in believing propositions in a particular subject area. Upstream, there must always be intuited or deduced prior propositions to serve as premises. In addition, for reason or rational thought to have an effect on behaviour requires that value be invested in the premises. It is simply reasonable to say: "Under these circumstances, when such and such an action was taken the outcome was so and so, therefore, under these similar circumstances, should a similar action be taken, a comparable result can be ex-



Michelangelo's *Creation of the Sun and Moon*, detail

pected." But for reason to have an effect on behaviour or opinion requires a determination that the outcome was desirable or not, and that, therefore, the response to the case at hand should either repeat or avoid the precedent.

The criteria by which I evaluate propositions and on which I establish premises in using reason to guide behaviour and support opinion are the following:

Without reference to a supreme being or to an afterlife, I am bound to contribute as best I can to the dignity of human life, which, for me, rests on and embraces an abiding reverence for all life. I am convinced the resources exist, material and intellectual, to ensure that every human being lives in dignity. I consider it my primary responsibility, with the resources available to me and within my field of activity, to do everything I can to ensure that outcome. Those

principles constitute the basis of what I consider rational humanism.

You may be asking yourself: by valuing premises that support the point I wish to demonstrate, am I not setting up a tautology? Probably, but only for those who consider the sacredness of life or the dignity of all humans as arbitrary and specious values. For them, what follows will read as rationalizing rather than reasoning.

Years ago I had a political science professor whose only words I remember were something like "...politics are always about money and power, often interchangeable, and nobody gives up power willingly." I've come to understand that he was largely right. It seems that conflicts between groups of humans have almost always been about the control of wealth, whether that be in the form of arable land or grazing land, water, ores, minerals, oil or other primary resources or cheap labour or markets for consumer goods and services. Conflicts, it seems, are always for the accumulation of wealth and power, usually to the benefit of the already wealthy and powerful elite of men who are in a position to direct the destiny of the clan, tribe or country. I make these statements without support of examples because I am sure you can come up with a long list of your own.

Another obvious and significant fact about conflict is that it requires fighters, warriors. Two things about young men make them apt for the job. Fuelled by high octane testosterone, young men tend naturally to be competitive and easily pugnacious. In addition, young men tend to have only the vaguest sense of their

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own mortality. But these two things alone are not enough to entice most young men on to the field of battle to kill other young men, much like themselves, for the benefit of the old men who run their country. Fortunately for those old men, youth tends to see the world in black and white terms and to be naïve enough for idealism. So the old men create or promote motivating, ideological narratives that will garner support for the conflict and entice the young men on to the battlefield. In these, "we" are presented as being superior to "the enemy" by virtue of race

(We are the super race of Arians, for example, while they are relatively barbaric, inferior races, whom we are destined to dominate or destroy.), religion (We are of the true faith, the way to true virtue and the kingdom; they are infidels and heretics whom we must convert to the true faith or kill.), political system (Our system of, say, liberal democracy marks the culmination of political evolution; it is our manifest destiny to bring it, forcibly if need be, to the peoples of the world suffering under abusive, unenlightened systems.), or, most often, a combination of these and other situational elements. My point is that the amassing of wealth and power by the elites of the country must be masked by a narrative that allows its citizens to perceive the cause as righteous and just. Otherwise, there will be no support for the war effort nor will it be possible to get young people to risk death on the battlefield.

I acknowledge that reality is often even more complex than this suggests. And just as the causes and processes that drive us into war are complicated and the threads hard to disentangle, so it is with the covering narratives. They are almost always a potent mix of nationalism, racism, religion and righteousness. For example, with regard to causes, did Hitler believe the stupid nonsense he wrote in *Mein Kampf*?

The complete lack of reasoned logic, the fanatic and frenetic tone suggest he probably believed it as fervently as a deranged shooter does the ravings in his scribbler. And his racist, fascist beliefs were so vehemently felt and conveyed that they carried along millions. Did George W. Bush believe in the Christian and democratic superiority of America and its consequent imperial destiny? He was a good liar if he didn't. Do the thinkers and writers of the Project for the New American Century see things in the same light? Almost certainly not. In those documents it is clearly transparent that American interests stand in for the capitalist interests of its ruling elite. Are the leaders of Islamic imperialism, who propose a theocratic, Islamic empire on a global scale, fervent believers in Islam? Most probably are, others cynically nurture and use the naïve faith of young men, hungry for simple truth and a sense of purpose.

Motivation is rarely simple. The accumulation of wealth and power to be sure, but the primitive impulses of revenge and shame remain powerful imperatives. Much has been written concerning their role in triggering the Second World War. Their part in the post September eleventh invasion of Afghanistan, then Iraq seems obvious as well. And what would Freud and his disciples have to say about the role of Bush father/son issues in the attack on Saddam Hus-

sein? And what of the need to blur historical tracks? America did provide Hussein with support in the form of money, weapons and training, in his war against Iran, support that was ongoing when he was gassing Kurds in 1988. Am I alone in thinking Hussein's trial was awfully short and secretive and his hanging precipitous? Complexities of motivation, indeed.

Then there are the complexities of the exercise of power. Given his stated vision for America, why hasn't President Obama denounced the Bush doctrine and the Project for the New American Century on which it rests, and why has he not called for the repeal of the Patriot Act, which wreaks havoc with individual and civil rights in America, purportedly to facilitate the "war on terror". Within days, far more people had died as a result of that "war" than had in the acts that triggered it. And, as was to be expected, acts of terrorism have increased considerably in frequency and deadliness since the start of hostilities. Could the brilliant Obama still believe in the insane narrative of this "war on terror"? The answer, I should hope, is probably not, and the fact that his administration has proscribed the use of the term suggests as much. But the exercise of power in America is a hugely complex matter. The wheels grind slowly as the body count rises. And the president is far from the most powerful player in the game.

Here in Canada, the exercise of power in our international affairs translates more often than not into the complexities of our relationship

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with America. It involves the terms of our trade agreements both regional and international that bind us to the regulations, conventions and practices imposed by the W.T.O. and the other powerful organizations of unelected men who regulate finance and trade in the interests of capitalism on a global scale and influence geopolitics at every level. Then there is the complicated question of our defense agreements. Consider our involvement in NATO with its cobbled together post-cold-war role, which, on the surface of it, seems to put it at the service of the interests of Western multi-national corporations. As a result of all this, we have to convince young Canadian men and women that going off to fight and perhaps die in Afghanistan is a worthwhile en-

terprise on the basis of reconstruction and democratization. We expect them not to know or to pretend they don't know about the struggle going on for the control of Caspian oil and gas resources. We have to override with myth what they might feel about how the world is run altogether.

And, as we noted above, just as the causes and processes that drive us into war are complicated and the threads hard to disentangle, so it is with the covering narratives. They are always a potent mix of nationalism, racism, religion and righteousness that must resonate sufficiently with the taxpayers to ensure their support and with the troops to ensure their willingness to fight. And admittedly, theism is only one of the threads. But one thing is certain, nothing in these covering narratives is reasonable or rational. On the contrary, reason tempered by humanism necessarily leads away from, not into war.

Rational humanism supports the development of frameworks, forums and processes that reduce the risk of the repetition of tragic mistakes with regard to human dignity, social justice and human rights. Rational humanism led to the creation of the League of Nations. Short lived and ultimately a failure, it was, nonetheless, well inspired and intended to provide the means for lasting peace. The UN, the second incarnation of a

global organization for peace, is fraught with problems and beleaguered with a history of errors and failures. It has become dangerously politicized. But it also operates in countless ways and with success to reduce the risk of conflict and to ensure the necessities of life in human dignity to people everywhere. It deserves to be understood and its reform supported.

There are, as well, numerous civil society organizations devoted to human rights, social justice and peace deserving of support. Some of these are faith based, as my friend suggests. The Quakers come to mind and there are others. Most religions have an ethical component compatible with humanist values. To those who espouse humanist values but articulate them in religious terms, my question is: "Why put a bird in an airplane?" But that may be the subject of another of my musings. If the ethical concerns of a faith group encourage support of humanist values, the promotion of social justice and human rights, so be it and welcome.

To bring this to a close for now, while theistic motivation in contemporary conflicts may not be as singular and clear as it was when Deus Veult was made the motto of the first crusade, I believe it remains significant. In God We Trust is emblazoned on every greenback spent in support of conflicts around the world.

As was attested to by numerous respected academics at a conference I attended last year, separating the religious from the secular remains nearly impossible in contemporary America, including in government decision making. If one were to interview American soldiers around the world on their motivation for fighting, in what percentage of cases would God figure at or near the top of the list? It is impossible to say, of course, but in a society where God is routinely thanked for his part in procuring entertainment awards, sports trophies and business

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successes, one would have to think the percentage would be rather high. Wherever and whenever Allahu Ackbar is proclaimed by a Jihadist, there is a theistic narrative in support of conflict and killing. If one were to poll Canadian troops in Afghanistan, how often would God figure in the narrative by which they justify their presence there? While theism may not be obvious in the official narrative by which we Cana-

dians justify our involvement there, our soldiers still fight and die under a constitution that, in its preamble, continues to evoke and invoke God.

Rational humanism, I repeat, leads away from, not into war. To justify killing other humans in anything but clear self-defense requires an ideology supported by rationalization, which is the contrary of reason. To rationalize is to create a semblance of reasonable justification for that which is specious and unreasonable. Rationalized justification can mimic reason quite convincingly, and in my view, the only way to distinguish between what is reason and what is rationalization is to ask: "Does this arise from and support a respect for universal human dignity and a reverence for life?" Or one might ask the question on which decisions are said to be made in the Mo-

hawk longhouse: "What does this mean for the seventh generation?" Imagine a world in which all corporate and political decisions were made on the basis of the question: "What will this mean for the grandchildren of my grandchildren?" That, I submit, might well yield a world founded on reason, in which mechanisms of non-violent conflict resolution would replace wars and no war could possibly be justified with reference to a god.

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In this issue, the theme of community is explored in the three articles. The article by Rina Fraticelli addresses a traumatic event in the history of the Stó:lō people and the making of a film about the incident. The Benny Farm project is recalled in its original incarnation by Robbie Dillon while its transformation into *Green Energy Benny Farm* is

considered by researcher, Dan Golberg.

In addition, an interesting and enlightening take on the ongoing debate over the relationship between science and morality is offered by Goldwin Emerson.

The question of euthanasia and assisted suicide is one that is bound to become increasingly hot as we baby-boomers move ever closer to the end. Sandra Lucas offers a rather disquieting look at the state of things in the Netherlands, reputed to be a leader in the field.

I know these articles offer much food for thought and I look forward to hearing from you in response to the questions they raise.

—*Yves Saint-Pierre*

## Letters to the Editor

I am writing to tell you that I am not pleased with the sudden change in the tone and content of the magazine *Humanist Perspectives*. For some years this has been a thoughtful, reasonable publication, trying, with some success, to provide a humanist critique of things ranging from war to global warming, assisted dying to the coherence of religion.

I now find the articles

over inflated, shrill and unsupported. I remark particularly on some terribly naive pieces in the recent number about Zionism and Palestine. This kind of thing is in the long run destructive, not only of thoughtfulness, but of the credibility of humanism.

I do not think I am subscribed just now, but if I am, you can discontinue my subscription; if I am not, I will not be renew-

ing my subscription at this time.

—*Eric S. MacDonald*  
*Windsor, Nova Scotia*

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I waited for the next issue of *HP* to decide whether to not-renew my subscription or to cancel it immediately. The cause of my discontent was the vituperative attack on Israel in the previous issue. I had

expected a few interesting letters to the editor on the subject in the next issue. Instead you published just one feeble letter and a lengthy, not much to the point, response by the editor.

The uncalled for attack on Israel was heavily biased and laced with many errors of fact—nothing humanist about it.

Will you therefore cancel our subscription immediately.

**—Paul Zollmann  
Almonte, Ontario**

*Mr. Zollmann, Mr. MacDonald,*

*I am in the process of soliciting articles that present an Israeli perspective on the question. To say that Israeli opinion is divided is an understatement. I have in hand an article by Gush Shalom. A coalition of peace groups, Gush Shalom is a significant voice from the left. I am now looking for an informed Canadian Jewish voice to counterbalance their article from a more centrist position. When I have the pieces in place, I will revisit the question. In the meantime, I urge you to stay with us. There is always much to appreciate and enjoy in our publication.*

**—Yves Saint-Pierre**

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Congratulations on your first issue of *Humanist Perspectives*. I think your cover would make a great idea for a poster or bumper sticker. Also, I found Dennis Bartels' brand of humour in "Act of God" particularly funny; we need more of that.

Thank you for your very apt response to David Reeve.

Welcome to your new position and thanks for a great issue.

**—Bill Broderick  
Belleville, Ontario**

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Dear Mr. Saint-Pierre,

Congratulations on taking over the reins at *Humanist Perspectives*. The magazine has improved since its remake and I look forward to seeing it develop further.

I would like to address something that you say in your editorial. Your opinion is that "no religious symbol should appear on or in any government building, nor should any person paid from the public purse, who, in any way deals with the public, wear any religious symbol or dress." While I agree with the first part of your statement wholeheartedly, I have difficulty with the second. It seems to me that, unless it interferes with the actual provision of services, the wearing of religious symbols or clothing should be no more offensive than other clothing or hair styles. How can we tell other people to hide who they are, even if it offends us. There was a time that people with physical or mental handicaps were kept hidden, but our society has progressed beyond that thinking. Can you not look at visible manifestations of religious adherence as simply another form of mental (or perhaps spiritual) handicap? That said, the religious and political

symbols that pollute our public space need to be done away with to prove that we are an all-inclusive society. Keep up the good work.

**—Sheila Eskenazi  
Ste-Lucie-des-Laurentides, QC**

*Ms. Eskenazi,*

*I am not suggesting that anyone be prevented from wearing anything they want except public employees who deal with the public. Imagine a Muslim of Arabic origin living here. This person gets into a contretemps with his landlord who happens to be Jewish. Exasperated by the situation, he goes to a government office to seek counsel or referral. The person across the desk is wearing a yarmulke. Is he likely to feel he will receive fair and equal treatment? Or think of a woman who has been abused by a brutal husband. Suffering serious stress and fighting her own fear, she also goes to a government agency for help. The person across is wearing a hidjab which the victim perceives as a symbol of subjugation to male domination. How is she likely to feel?*

*My only point is that everyone should receive equal and fair treatment from government employees and everyone should feel they can count on that.*

**—Yves Saint-Pierre**

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