

## **The Optimism of Humanism**

Jeffrey L. Tate

(Delivered at UUFF, 05 Aug 07)

It's been hard to be an optimistic Humanist these past several years.

For Humanists—socially progressive individuals who don't believe in supernaturalism and do have faith in human reason—the recent time has been filled with causes for pessimism: the Bush administration, terrorism, the Iraq war, pollution, global warming, religious fundamentalism, the power of corporations, the widening gap between the wealthy and everyone else, the healthcare crisis—I'm sure the list could go on for the rest of my time today if we all put our heads together.

When I visit nowadays with my Humanist colleagues, many feel that religious fundamentalists, corporate greed, and militarism have permanently wounded the Enlightenment Project of spreading the fruits of reason. There is often a tone of bewildered hopelessness in their conversations—a sense that somehow the progress of Liberalism has been lost. My twenty-something son tells me that some of his liberal peers have disgustingly dropped-out from efforts to improve society and intend to devote themselves to improving just their own lives. I've heard liberals from his generation say they don't want to bring children into this world because things are bad and are going to be worse.

Humanistic thinkers weren't always so pessimistic. As Dewey said in our reading today, memory and foresight can help failure lose something of its fatality. So remember with me for a moment.

For at least 400 years Humanists and other progressives have worked to lead people away from superstitious thinking, away from narrow clannish self-interest, away from us-them projections of evil onto strangers, and toward the light of reason and expanded empathy.

During the European Enlightenment, humanist intellectuals were extremely optimistic. By the 1700s in Europe, science was showing religious myths to be wrong or unnecessary to explain the world. Political philosophy was spreading the idea that people should govern themselves, and that they should be free to pursue their own happiness and fulfillment. Enlightenment thinkers wrote excitedly about the immanent reign of Reason with a capital "R."

In many ways, the 1800s seemed to confirm those optimistic predictions. The Industrial Revolution spread the benefits of technology. The tyranny of kings waned in the West as democracy spread. Equality and human rights progressed, most notably with the worldwide end of legal slavery.

Progress was being made in the religious arena, too. The US constitution established the first government in history with official separation of church and state. The Unitarian Church officially endorsed non-supernatural religious beliefs. Indeed, events seemed to confirm the Enlightenment optimism about endless progress in the improvement of humankind.

All this optimism came crashing down during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With World War 1, the world's most scientifically advanced nations engaged in the irrational slaughter of millions of their people. Suddenly it was terribly clear that human reason could just as easily—perhaps *more* easily—produce violent nationalism and the machine gun, instead of peace and prosperity.

Further events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century easily validated this pessimistic outlook: Hitler, Stalin, Hiroshima, the nuclear arms race, Vietnam, the final defeat of the Marxist egalitarian dream by unbridled capitalism, the worldwide rise of religious fundamentalism, and most recently, 9/11 and its aftermath. Now, the Enlightenment optimism of Voltaire and his colleagues about the future of humanity easily seems naïve, and our capacity for evil easily seems greater than our capacity for good.

So, how could any thoughtful Humanist—or any other type of Progressive—remain optimistic about the future? Well, let's consider a few examples from the not-so-dark side of recent Western history.

According to the University of British Columbia, over the past 50 years the worldwide number of wars is down dramatically. The total number of conflicts has declined by almost half since the cold war ended. The average number of deaths per conflict has also declined dramatically. Even from 2002 through 2005, the number of armed conflicts being waged around the world shrank 15%, and estimated battle-deaths declined by almost 40%.

The researchers attributed this improvement to both better UN peacekeeping efforts and to the increase in the number of democratic nations. Democracies tend not to go to war against each other.

Most importantly, the researchers believe that a strengthening sense of an *international community* is changing world thinking on when warfare is acceptable. And according to the International Crisis Group in Washington, “The increasing weight of world opinion and action is having an impact on leaders and warlords who in another era would have felt no constraints on war-making.”

Wars may be down, but what about terrorism? Here, too, there actually is good news. A recent report from Uppsalla University in Sweden found that, worldwide, since 1990 terrorist attacks against civilians have declined in the number of deaths they cause. A study by the US Naval Academy found that genocide and other campaigns of mass violence against civilians dropped by 90% between 1989 and 2005.

Democratic countries, besides almost never going to war against each other, virtually never allow famines to occur within their borders, and they tend to lead in respecting and expanding human rights. So how is democracy doing in the world?

In the year 1900 just 12% of the world's people lived in democracy. By the year 2000 that number had increased to 63%--now almost two-thirds of people on Earth live in a democracy. According to the monitoring association Freedom House, just in the last 25 years the percent of countries considered "free" or "partly free" has increased by one-fourth.

As we would expect, with increasing democracy comes reduced famine and poverty. Extreme economic poverty is defined as living on the inflation-adjusted equivalent of less than \$1 per day. The proportion of the developing world's population living in extreme poverty fell by 25% during the 1990s, according to World Bank data.

And according to data from the International Labor Organization, worldwide extreme poverty among *workers* (the most common form of poverty in third-world countries) fell by more than half over the past 25 years. It fell by 10% just from 2000 to 2005. Every region on Earth, except Sub-Saharan Africa, has seen a reduction in extreme poverty since 1980.

Infant mortality rates in poorer countries fell by 30% from 1980 to 2002. Life expectancy in poorer countries rose by 8% over the same time. Average life expectancy worldwide has increased by 42% since 1955. [according to the Tofflers (of *Future Shock* fame)].

Literacy has also improved. Male adult literacy rose by 6% in low- and middle-income countries between 1990 and 2002, and female literacy rates rose by 13%.

Another important area of progress is human rights. In 1948, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, for the first time in history, officially obligated the nations of the world to provide their citizens with basic human rights. This was a non-binding declaration, but it is of great importance. The UN is generally considered the "collective conscience of the world," and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is its official position.

In 1966 the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was agreed upon as a *binding treaty* to respect basic human rights among 160 nations. Compliance with the treaty is monitored and reported, and individuals can file complaints to the UN about violations.

Between 1948 and 2002, additional liberal-progressive UN declarations were agreed upon by the nations of the world on the subjects of genocide, torture, racial discrimination, discrimination against women, the rights of children, and in 2002, the International Criminal Court was created to hold leaders accountable for gross violations of human rights.

Now, we all know that compliance with these declarations varies tremendously, and the US has not adopted some of them. But it is significant that these declarations and treaties exist at all. They indicate worldwide progress in the accepted *standards* of respect for human dignity and worth. As the *New Republic* magazine said in a review of the book *Inventing Human Rights*, “Human rights are not triumphant, to be sure; but the idea is holding its own. It is more and more a central element in foreign policy and international affairs and even military strategy. We may be living in a very cruel world, but there is a growing conscience, at least officially and culturally, about its cruelty.”

Another indicator of social progress in any society is the power and status of women. Since 1990 the proportion of women in the legislatures of 16 countries has reached the benchmark of 30% or more that the UN has set as the critical mass where women can have a substantial impact on policymaking. Worldwide, in 2004 almost one in six members of legislatures was a woman. As Devaki Jain, the Indian historian of women’s rights, said, “It would seem that women are slowly gaining ground in their quest for formal power.”

From a Humanist perspective, progress is also being made in the area of superstitious religious belief. Fourteen percent of Americans describe themselves as having “No Religion,” up from 8% a decade ago, according to City University of New York. (I’d like for these folks to all be UUs rather than “no religion.”) And 46% of Britons report that they do not believe in a supernatural god, a figure that is in-line with most northern European nations.

I could go on too long about the benefits of recent scientific advances, medical advances and the power of the Internet to break down global barriers to knowledge and communication, but you know all this as well as I do.

So with everything I’ve just listed, why have Humanists and other progressives been so pessimistic?

We’re demoralized because since 1980 the US and some other parts of the world have been in the midst of a backlash of conservative-authoritarian sentiment. Ever since Reagan, liberals have had to fight to hold onto the progress made from Roosevelt to Carter. In some areas we’ve lost ground. The Iraq War is the most high-profile event of this conservative backlash.

It’s helpful to recognize the historical cycles of social progress. Several researchers have found that temporary *conservative pauses* in a society give the most conservative 25% of the population time to adjust to new, more liberal and less superstitious ways of life. Since the 1700s, on average in the US, these conservative pauses have lasted about 20 to 30 years each, followed by a period of 20 to 40 years of easier social progress.

But even during conservative backlashes, the clock of progress isn’t really turned back; it’s just slowed down. Today, the major progressive achievements of Roosevelt’s New Deal and Johnson’s Great Society are surviving even the current far right-wing

administration. Bush's attempt to roll back Social Security failed even with a Republican-controlled congress. Gay marriage is slowly progressing; creationism can't get a permanent toehold even in Kansas; and no one's considering returning to racially segregated water fountains.

Our present conservative pause is probably starting to wane now. For example, recent surveys conducted by the Barna Group show that even younger "born again" Christians are more accepting of homosexuality than older ones and are less resistant to affording gays equal rights. We're due for two or three decades of less resistance to progressive social change.

Looking beyond the US, globally the confrontation between secular liberal societies and traditional, authoritarian cultures—such as Islamic theocracies—can make us feel despondent, too. But the symptoms of this confrontation are in large part due to the successful spread of Enlightenment ideas of freedom from traditional dogmatic authorities. It's easy for us to underestimate the magnitude of the cultural earthquake these ideas are causing around the world. What *we* see as social progress, traditional peoples can easily see as social cataclysm.

Traditional authoritarian peoples are being forced to cope with the erosion of their dogmatic worldview. I'm including the 25% of Americans who are most conservative in this category—the same percentage who believe that Jesus will return to Earth this calendar year, by the way. Living within a more liberal-secular world, they have to live with the loss of God's miracles in the scientific-material world, loss of their religion as civil law, reductions in the subordination of women, identity-threatening changes in culture's mores (such as gay rights), society's ego-deflating recognition of those outside of their group as equals, the inability to shield their children from what they see as sacrilegious ideas, and the fact that in the modern world their young adults can—and increasingly will—choose to live within less authoritarian traditions. As Mr. Ahmadinejad, the president of Iraq, said of Western demands, "When we comply with stopping nuclear development they'll demand human rights; when we comply with human rights, they'll demand animal rights." There's a strong element of truth in that. There will be no end to secular-liberal.

These are frightening changes for a person whose worldview is authoritarian and dominated by supernatural religious beliefs. In their view, secular liberalism is like the Borg civilization in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: an unstoppable force that will engulf and destroy their familiar culture. In fact, in the *most* superstitious-authoritarian forms, their beliefs *are* doomed to extinction via testing in the global marketplace of ideas.

Many individuals of strong traditional belief will change only slowly and reluctantly, and some will never change. Some—like the Taliban—will violently resist social change. But their traditional cultures *will* change, one new Internet-savvy generation at a time. Global communications and the ultimate test of what *works best* will see to that.

Of course, change will flow in both directions. The secular West may learn a lot from traditional cultures. As the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas has said, western, secular philosophy has not yet absorbed all of the wisdom of traditional religions.

No matter how much progress we make in forming a universal humanistic society, reality will always be short of our Enlightenment ideals. We will continually take for granted the progress already made, and we will continually be distraught at the superstitions and injustices remaining. So, Humanists and other progressives will always be dissatisfied.

This dissatisfaction is actually a good thing. It keeps us pushing for more progress in humanizing global society. However, dissatisfaction can become a problem when it leads to demoralization and a loss of perspective about how far the world has come in a relatively short time; when it leads to hopeless withdrawal from active participation in furthering the Enlightenment project; when it leads to the sense that we shouldn't even have children to become enlightened adults.

I don't mean to minimize the dangers and challenges that face us. There are plenty of problems in the world, and there always will be. But the world's difficulties are problems to be *solved and coped with*, not defeated by. We Humanists and other progressives can take hope from the Enlightenment's accomplishments of the past 400 years. We can take hope from the history of human Reason in solving tough problems. We can expect that we will continue to cope with the problems of the present and the future. And we can know during these difficult days that probably we are in for more easily progressive years soon.

None of this should make us complacent, however. There is no inevitability about the flow of progress in history. *We* must be the engines of change. Social progress happens because individuals develop a heightened moral awareness and then act on that awareness. They push for changes in the institutions of society. They push to educate others about what is right and good for all. We can never let up in that effort either in the progressive phases of history, or during the inevitable conservative pauses. But through it all we can remain engaged in the Enlightenment Project. And we can remain optimistic. Amen.