

Our Identity—What, and Where?

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, May 11, 2008
by **Robert Tapp**, Dean Emeritus Humanist Institute, NYC

Abstract: Are we atheists, humanists, agnostics, ethicals, religious liberals, progressives, spiritual but not religious, bright, post-traditional, cosmopolitan? Most of us give varied answers depending upon our questioner and on the occasion. And our favored identity has probably changed over time as well.

When we ask why we keep coming back here, is it not because here is that rare community of people whose values we share, and whose commitment to make this a better world excites us? Wherever the chance of birth may have started us, we now have become part of this new family.

As more of our neighbors outgrow the limitations of their birth-cultures, it becomes more urgent for the ethical option here to become a living option. How we present it, and how we act and describe ourselves is central. As we have "come out", we must help others do the same.

We are enormously grateful to come here since this Society has been host to the Humanist Institute since its inception, and since Ethical Culture has been so important to us in our history. When Tony and I worked this out, we came up with the topic "What should we call ourselves?" but we did not have a determined date. Now that I know it is Mother's Day. I want to say to the younger mothers that your children are to be congratulated for having selected so wisely! What I want to say to the other mothers here, and the other people here, is "Does your mother know that you're here?" Or to us older ones, "What would she have done had she known?"

This is a special site that we have come to, graduated into, grown into or whatever word you want to use. One of our cousins in this country that produces religions all over the place is Unitarianism. There is a fascinating woman in that tradition, and I keep saying to my friends as I travel. Did your tradition have anyone like this? In 1861, Julia Ward Howe wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. She was an abolitionist and a feminist. If you look at the Unitarian hymnals, by 1891 they had reworded the song, eliminating some of the bloodier passages. Unitarian minister Frederick Hosmer had taken the bloody guts out of it.

How many of us realize, however, that in 1870 she wrote another poem and founded Mother's Day. I want to read you just one section of her poem culminating her 12 year struggle to have the nation recognize the role of mothers in the public sphere. It could have been written today.

*We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn*

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

*All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.*

We should all be writing something like this. That's now most of us here in Ethical Societies or Unitarian Universalist churches or Humanistic Judaism societies are also affiliated with other humanist groups. Most of us belong to the American humanist Association or the Center for Inquiry and thus move beyond traditional religious identification.

Philosophically, we realized since the 18th-century Enlightenment that there was no good reason for the world to have had any start. It could have been here forever. Now of course we have a sounder theory in the big bang than in earlier times, in Immanuel Kant's time. He made a ledger showing that there were equally good arguments for an eternal universe or a finite universe, and he showed that the same could be said about most of the arguments for God. And since Darwin most of us have seen that the world is not very well designed, and in fact, whatever is here could have come about, quite naturally. Indeed it did come about quite naturally, for those of us who have studied our history.

So today's bestseller Christopher Hitchens is plowing a well-plowed furl. Religion is morally a risky thing, very often a bad thing. Hitchens may slightly overstate when he says religion poisons everything but the fact is for varied reasons most of us have moved from some there position to here. How should we describe it here, and how should we deal with the problems that moving from some there to here? Problems with family, for instance; problems with neighbors; problems with friends; problems with coworkers; and maybe for many of us problems with children too.

How do we justify being in this place? I've been lucky in that I was able in the 1960s to study Unitarian Universalists here and in Canada – when computers were still quite young. We asked many questions, and I subtitled the book *Converts in the Stepfather's House*. What was meant was when today's people became Unitarian Universalists; the building had already changed a great deal. The house already been taken over by those who were no longer Christian. They were stepfathers who had moved beyond even the liberal Christianity of the founders of those denominations.

What should we now be calling ourselves? What's our identity – if you want to use a fancier terminology? How about atheist; humanist; agnostic; ethical; liberal; progressive; spiritual but not religious? Most of us give varied answers to our questioner here, and we give varied answers depending on the occasion. On the bus, probably it's better to go back to your paper. Unitarians have been trying to develop elevator speeches, for instance—30 seconds. That's probably too short a time.

For 15 years I've been teaching classes in our university's, lifelong learning institute. And this year, I called it Unbelievers Unbound. It filled up quickly with equal numbers of men and women, including a returning student of mine now 95 and in a walker. When I had originally proposed the course, journalists were speaking about the “four horsemen,” those atheists who had hit the bestseller list – Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens. By the end of the course that current list of authors was over 20. And we have good figures that now in the United States 14% of us have no

religious affiliation or identification.

The percentages of people in places like this are unfortunately, too small to let us speak with any precision. What should we call these people – unbelievers? How about Brights – that's a new term that some people love and some people hate. Is it too arrogant? Those who support it argue that gay at one time seemed like an arrogant word. And now it's perfectly acceptable. More recently, the Brights have called people who were not in their movement *Supers*, meaning they have some kind of supernatural belief, an equally positive term that may make it easier for some of us to a doubt. Bright or do we call ourselves a non-supernaturalists? When we call our selves naturalists, some people might think that we like to look at bugs and plants. I have trouble in some places calling myself a humanist since I once taught in a humanities department and people who taught there also called themselves humanists. How about Cosmopolitan, a nice term that we can trace all the way back to Diogenes. Kwame Appiah has written an excellent book with that title, in which he explores his own British-African background in terms of local and universal cosmopolitanism.

Or maybe we should retain the words that Tom Paine wrote:

I do not believe in the Jewish church, or the Roman Church, or the Turkish church, or any church that I know of. My mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

Before Christopher Hitchens wrote his current book arguing that God is not great, he wrote an excellent book on Tom Paine.

Some critics are now saying that it makes no sense to raise these issues since the critiques of religion are hundreds of years old. Isn't that odd! Even if all of them were hundreds of years old, they are hardly yet known or hardly followed.

We still have to raise the question where should we go from here. Paul Kurtz recently suggested that we call ourselves “multi-secular.” That would take more than an elevator ride to explain. I want to remind you of a recent speech by Sam Harris. The same Sam Harris, who was the first of the four Horsemen, whose book *The End of Faith* created the current controversy. Speaking last fall to the packed meeting of the American Atheist Alliance, he said:

I think that “atheist” is a term that we do not need the same way that we don't need a word for someone who rejects astrology. We simply do not call people “non-astrologers.” All we need are words like “reason” and “evidence” and “common sense” and “bullshit” to put astrologers in their place, and so it could be with religion.

Now Harris has a way of speaking bluntly. But then he said “we should not call ourselves anything. We should go under the radar and while there, we should be decent, responsible people who destroy bad ideas whenever we find them.” There were, I must tell you, boos from the audience at that point, and he has been justifying this new stand ever since.

The more one teaches, the more one tries to communicate, the more one comes to realize that words mean what audiences intend, not what speakers intend. You have to do a little bit of polling afterwards to see what people heard. I guess I learned this when I

taught for many years an undergraduate course in 19th-century humanities where for two whole weeks, students read Darwin. And I would use the Gallup poll, three-way question – before they read Darwin and after they read Darwin. You remember the Gallup phrasing – the world was created by God in its present form, some 10,000 years ago – or – it was evolved over millions of years in a process directed by God – or – it was evolved over millions of years and God had no part in that. Oddly enough I found that students were essentially unchanged as a result of their reading of Darwin. That confirmed an earlier suspicion that religion was something acquired in childhood and seldom changed by subsequent experiences. Even more curiously, the responses of Catholics and Protestants (in Minnesota that meant mostly Lutherans) were essentially the same even though both churches more or less accepted evolutionary science. My students had clearly picked up their religion on the televangelist circuit, now one of the most powerful socializers of young people in the developed world.

Why come back to this question of what we should be talking about here. My solution will revolve around two words – knowledge and value. They are linked, but for the moment I want to treat them separately. Many of us as adults engaged in a kind of education that we now are able to provide from the beginnings for our children – discovering many possibilities and then selecting by an evaluation of their consequences. We came here, to this Ethical Society, precisely because of its commitment to such an approach to knowing. If one simply looks at the history of this Society in this city, it has been innovating over and over again. Not content just to say, we believe in love, or only believe in justice, but going much further than that.

In 1784 Immanuel Kant wrote a short essay that doesn't get quoted often enough, which he titled *What is Enlightenment*.

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The model of enlightenment is therefore *Sapere aude* – Dare to be wise. Have courage to use your own understanding.

Now of course the slogan of this building, and of people who stand and have stood in this building, is *Deed before Creed* – a good Kantian slogan. One can find hints of it before the eighteenth century. But then in Western Europe – and only a few countries there – and a little bit later in America, something new occurred, new in human history. Not just a shift to reason, ancient Greeks and medieval theologians talk a great deal about reason. But reason applied to hypotheses that if proved would tell us what the world was really like. Not what we wished it was like, or what some ancient scriptures had claimed it to be like – but what it was really like. Some historians have said that we come from the intellectual Enlightenment in Europe to the practical Enlightenment in the new United States. In France, the reign of terror and Napoleonic shifts back and forth had delayed the emergence of a democratic society.

But what does that Enlightenment mean? How do you sustain the enlightenment? That's the trick. You sustain it by education, and this is where we have difficulty. Think of our current situation. We have a verbal slogan *No Child Left Behind*. And then we have actual tests of what it's meant and almost every child has been left behind. We have

no uniform rules applying to states in terms of how they count or test their students or even how they count dropouts or the differential rates among black and brown and poorer and white in this country that is the most advanced of the developed countries! We don't serve education by under-funded schools. We don't change it by demeaning the vocation of teaching. We don't serve it with our biases about ethnicity and class. We certainly don't focus it by emphasis on math and reading. Why have we dropped out, in most cases, instruction in the arts? Why have we dropped out music instruction and music appreciation? Why have we dropped out social sciences, and why on the whole have we dropped out any serious teaching of history?

You've probably all seen the studies that are made periodically of how many of us believe that dinosaurs and humans coexisted – or, the question of whether organic life has evolved. If I ask high school graduates that half of them will say no. And if I asked college graduates, 29% will still say no. In other words, all that grounds modern biology, all that Darwin saw so clearly, never got across in the schools – maybe never even got presented. There was a study in 2006 that 22% of all Americans could name all five Simpson family members but only one in 1000 Americans could name all five of the First Amendment freedoms.

How, why have we cheated our kids this way? That is part of the problem. Now let me turn from the knowledge issue to the values issue. Milton Rokeach, a mentor of mine, spent most of his career studying values. Older ones here may remember in college being presented with two lists of values, and being asked to rank them – which is number one for you and which is number 18. Rokeach had pulled these out of inventories that his colleagues had been using. These were all good values, and the question was how important each one of them is to individuals. Orderly, clean, freedom, equality.... What he found was very interesting. Two of the key values that emerged, going from the simple results of the testing to where people said that they functioned, were the values of freedom and equality.

Early social psychology had studied attitudes, whether people preferred such simple matters as vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Somewhat above this was the level of belief studies. Rokeach, looking at this research, proposed that there was a hierarchy and values stood about both beliefs and attitudes. To know a value was to know the several beliefs that it typically embraced and those many attitudes that stem from such beliefs. From our research on values, we would have a better idea now of how people were alike but also of how they differed. Back in the 1960s, when the Cold War was at its peak, Rokeach discovered that those who put both freedom and equality very low were fascists; those who put equality high and freedom low identified themselves as communists; those who put freedom high and equality low were capitalists; and those who put both freedom and equality high were socialists. We may be less comfortable with that “socialist” label today, but the point he was really making was how important values were in terms of understanding human behavior and that this was much more important than studying beliefs or attitudes. If a group like this for instance were to ask each other how much you like the music this morning, the responses would depend very much on who was here. But if we asked something high on the values scale – how he feels about freedom or, how she feels about inequality – we would better understand the kind of moral pioneering that is going on in places like this.

Alright, we are here because of the centrality of knowledge and the centrality of values. But what should we, you, call ourselves? Don't tell people that you are an atheist or an agnostic or use terms like that. Or even the term that someone created a few years ago, an "apatheist". He meant that he didn't really care about those issues and if his friends wanted to believe in a god it was no big issue for him. There were other things more important. I don't think the word has really taken off, but he did get an essay in the *Atlantic* in 2003, and I am sure we will continue to come up with new words to describe how we talk about ourselves when we pull out of the main and cultural stream.

Let me suggest that we think about some of the new values that have been pioneered just because of the knowledge orientation that has characterized people in groups like this. Obviously, we use our knowledge to say that human life could be improved. Take stem cell research. Some people will say No since life begins at fertilization. But when does life begin? Congress brought together several years ago a group of scientists and there was absolutely no agreement there as to when we should speak of life beginning. Maybe we should conclude that this is an unnecessary question and people who should know are unable at this point in time to come to a conclusion. Some of you may remember that wonderful film from the British Monty Python group with its segment of cardinals pushing baby carriages singing "Every sperm is sacred." That very difficult way of knowing when life began means that we can and should proceed with stem cell research that can correct the bodily flaws many of us carry.

Knowledge/values also means that we can begin with a kind of environmental realism, moving beyond the debates about exploiting nature or restoring nature or preserving nature. When I was a more active member in California of the Sierra Club, our slogan was *leave every campsite untouched*. When you left your camp, no one should know that you had camped. That's wonderful for a vacation, but I would hate to have proposed it for Manhattan Island. If no one had done anything to that, I'd hate to think of this building not existing. Given this conflict between environmentalism and romanticism, how do you stand between those two?

Some years ago a group of us in the humanist institute produced the volume we titled *Ecohumanism*. A middle course informed by sciences and not by some kind of ideology.

Or, what is the possible range, the actual range of our human sexual and familial orientations (our "affectional orientations" as you now call them here)? Or, how can we make freedom and dignity flourish and at the same time respect the many positions that humans want to hold and can hold. Or, how do we redefine the human rights so that things like health and education become part of the inclusion? Or, how do we study the uses of violence and what it means. And look at that alternative of nonviolence and the many ways that nonviolence has been employed for democratic changes? Or how, and this is a tough one, how do we look at the redistribution of wealth. I'm using the term most economists use.

In all of this, I'm assuming that we come at this with the best knowledge that we can muster – and that we then bring in the best values that we have and can use in making those interact. Can the best values that we now have be made to operate in this society in our time? Some of these we may have to put aside for a while, and others, we will say, can work now. How do we decide, for instance, what a proper income is? Years ago in

India, I used to plague my Indian friends saying that the disparity between bosses and workers in Indian factories was obscene. It was very often 40 to 1. We have now exceeded that by fivefold in the present United States. We have outdone the rest of the developed world, and have not made this a major part of any of our discussions. Yet every time we talk about a tax, we are talking about redistributing money, aren't we? In the 19th century, we didn't talk about it at all. We need to have serious discussions about how much people deserve for extra efforts and how much people will deserve who simply want to relax in their work. Or how much we want to compensate people who've been cheated, one way or another, by where they were born or religion or ethnicity or whatever it is compared to those who were privileged in their birth.

And finally – that value where we have almost a duty – to take our commitment to scientific knowledge and our commitment to values in terms of their consequences into our consideration of the controlling of power. How do you control the powers of the police? How do you control the powers of the military? And I think in recent years, Americans need to add serious consideration of how one controls the powers of “intelligence”? I don't mean mental intelligence, but government branches of so-called intelligence. How much spying is defensible in terms of national security?

I only recently discovered that I could be served a paper by the people who run the Patriot Act. And I could not even talk about it. I could not go to a lawyer with it. I could become an enemy of the society. And automatically be isolated. So has not controlling those things and asking crucial questions become central for humanists? Since those are some of the values that we have been freer to explore. We are not necessarily alone in this, we few. In many cases we have allies, liberal Christians and Jews and progressive Muslims. I have fun sometimes, when I travel, teaching people about my congressman. Yes, he is black. But he is also a Muslim. And he's also very liberal. This can happen and we have to be careful with our stereotypes.

The challenge is how we can build a society that respects the differences that do exist because of different educational levels and on the other hand, moves out from where we are and moves ahead. I want to spend a little time speaking of democracy. It's something I shouldn't have to but it's something that this organization and Unitarians and others like us have grown up with – a clear and functioning commitment to democracy. You all know that the best guess as to where Lincoln found his famous phrase “of by and for the people” is in a sermon by Boston Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Now I should add that Parker was so alienated from his Unitarian ministry colleagues that he preached in a theater rather than a church building, which would have been too small for the crowds that his radical theology and abolitionism drew. Those words so clearly articulated the democratic dream of the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln worked them into his Gettysburg address – applying that declaration to all Americans, not just the Northern states.

How can we continue to use democracy as a means to weld knowledge and values in a way that everyone can use the product? W. H. Auden once wrote, “Above all, do not commit a social science.” But there is a too-little known group that has been going for about 10 years. Its original name was the Culture Matters Research Project. If you haven't run into it, take a look. Great work from about 60 scholars around the world. Their database is 117 countries, and they have been trying to determine why countries are so

different. The key scholar a man named Lawrence Harrison. Two years ago he published a summary volume titled *The Central Liberal Truth*. His interesting subtitle was *how politics can change a culture and save it from itself*. Most of Harrison's previous career was spent with the USAID in the Caribbean. Thus, he became in some sense an outsider. Instead of romanticizing that all cultures are in some sense equal, he came to realize how varied and different cultures were. He convinced a number of other scholars that it was time to ask that tough question – Why. Why does economic welfare emerge here, but not over there? Why does freedom occur there, but not here?

They began this dis-aggregating “culture” into a series of measurable components. In this table that I'm holding up for you, about a dozen such components vary from one culture to another. For instance, what's the literacy rate within a country – and what is the female literacy rate? Those are the kind of numbers now available to us. This table lists the countries in terms of their scores on the United Nations Index of Human Development, which is kind of a welfare index. The United States is pretty high on this index, but if we had chosen our birthplaces by this rating we would probably all be Norwegians. The Scandinavian countries tend to be very high on that index.

This is a fact that requires no kind of theological or philosophical debate. What does it look like if we go to those top-indexed countries? The literacy rate for men and women is about the same. But suppose we go to other countries and explore those literacy rates? Suppose I moved down to the Arab countries. There the weighted average is 68% for everybody and 58% for women. Or if I go to the non-Arab Muslim countries, it is 64 and 51. Or if I go to the Hindu countries, 57 and 45. Those are enormous disparities.

Some of you may be following the school lunch assistance program that George McGovern and the late Gerald Ford created just for giving free lunches to impoverished children. What that meant is that girls will finally get a chance to go to school. If a poor family can only send one child to school, that will typically be the boy. Somehow, we need to both raise and to degender the world literacy rates.

There are other components that we can explore empirically. Many are related. What's the fertility rate country by country? What's the freedom rate? What's the disparity rate between rich and poor in terms of wealth? And in some indices that are quite well-developed, by modern social science – what's the trust index? What's the corruption index country by country? What Harrison was saying was that if we disaggregate culture – that is, if we do a scientific analysis, we can say that cultures involve things like literacy, like fertility, like trust.

Well, how does our world shape up when we raise the question of how religious traditions affect cultures? The Hindu countries are at the very bottom, and the Arab Muslim countries are just slightly above them. The other Muslim countries are only slightly better as are the Buddhist countries. The Confucian countries are pretty good appearing in the middle area of the welfare sort. Orthodox Christian countries are slightly above the middle, and then come Roman Catholic countries. Investigators inserted the Jewish country of Israel, even though it is numerically insignificant – and it ranks quite high. At the very top of the chart, however, are the Protestant countries.

Now here's the question. Does this mean that Protestantism is better than other religions in producing human welfare? It certainly means that all religions are not equal

in terms of how they shape the lives of their adherents. Or does it mean something else? Does it mean that if you can raise the welfare standard of peoples, if you can provide enough food and health and economic basics, then people tend to “protestantize” the religions that they grew up with? I suspect it means that. And therefore the more direct way we can make social change, the more direct way we can put our values to work, the more direct way we can introduce democracy, is the way of helping people to regard their own welfare and how they build countries that will realize these goals.

This, then, is my elevator speech. We are committed to universal values and to that education that makes them appealing. What we have to ask is: Who is on our side? All the sciences, of course, which use knowledge and enlarge the possibilities. And the experience factor of economic well-being. The family that is well fed is much more likely to educate itself and its children.

Who is against us? I don't want to say all of the religions since they do vary. The stronger they are – I am using that word as a better descriptor for what many would call fundamentalist – the more clearly they are on the wrong side. And the most dangerous ones in our part of the world are the millennialist religions. You can use different words to describe them, but I mean the Left Behind, Rapture kind of religions (and there are Muslim and Jewish variants)

What they say is that the best thing you can do is to get Jesus back here. Humans are not going to be able to improve the world. Pastor Hagey, for instance, has been on television with his drive to get all the Jews back to Palestine, so that the Christian Messiah can return. At that point, (alas), Jews will either convert or be slaughtered. Such millennial theologies are ways of speeding up the end of a hopeless world. This is dangerous stuff, and many of our neighbors have been caught up in this kind of dangerous belief.

So my final question is, how do we remember, properly, and on Mother's Day, those words of Julia Ward Howe:

*Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.*

Not just for women but for all of us. And in our time, war corrupts our daughters as well as our sons.

How do we link that vision of the 19th century, rare as it was, into our own 21st century? What do you want to call it? Science, values, knowledge, democracy? Sam Harris may be right. We will get much more mileage out of words such as this than we will of insisting that we are non-believers in something. That is such a negative term, as well as being somewhat empty. We are committed to – I don't want to say believers in – a whole series of tested things that do change worlds. And if you need to convince your own families, your friends, your neighbors – get the kind of data that Lawrence Harrison is assembling. His organization is now called the Culture Change Institute and it's very

good in terms of the studies that are still going on. It's located at the Fletcher School of Tufts University.

Let me stop with this kind of a challenge. Let's rename ourselves. Let's speak of the things that really do count – knowledge and values and democracy. They can fill this building. Let's do it!



A member of the American Ethical Union
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2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org