

Dialogue

AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION

MAY 2004

ON SPIRITUALITY

Joseph Chuman, Leader, Bergen

CON



It is still with us. The spirituality craze continues to weave its way through American life and culture. From New Age enthusiasms to the State of

the Union address, spirituality and its more staid twin, religion, remain powerful forces in personal and public life. And, of course, they always have been.

“Spirituality” brings out the skeptic in me. When some one tells me that he or she is

“into spirituality,” I reflexively want to know “What do you mean by that?” Though I have long abandoned the Marxian notion that “religion is the opiate of the people” as being too reductionist (religion is oftener an inspirer to action, not merely an anodyne to earthly suffering), I retain enough credence in Marx’s insight to feel that religion, or spirituality if you will, has a lot of explaining to do. Religion has too often allied itself with very reactionary forces, more enchanted with authoritarianism and maintaining the hegemonic and patriarchal power of those in control, than it has with the values of liberation, equality and justice. And it still does: Look at the marriage of religion and

politics in the current administration.

But I also have problems with the new, freelance, anti-authoritarian spirituality as well. It often seems too individualist, too narcissistic, too self-serving, and thereby too readily bypasses an essential commitment to social ethics and social responsibility, which I hold most dear. If forced to choose, I temperamentally prefer a universe that demands something of me beyond the self-satisfying feel good moment. The new spirituality also too readily takes a complex phenomenon like religion and pares it down to something like a consumer item one appropriates. The search

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SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Bart Worden, Leader, Westchester

Hats off to San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom for his pluck in ordering the issuing of marriage licenses to same sex couples and for his stand that equal protection guaranteed in the state constitution must take precedence over the California ballot initiative that limits marriage to a civil contract between a man and a woman.

I am typically a law-abiding citizen and don’t usually endorse openly disregarding laws, but I make an exception in the case of fighting for the right of same-sex couples



to marry. The San Francisco case highlights the important issues: the state should not discourage people from entering into committed relationships and should protect individuals from a “tyranny of the majority” when public opinion endorses laws that are discriminatory.

Same-sex couples have been the targets of hatred and discrimination in this country for generations. Homosexual behavior has been condemned as an abomination and seen as grossly immoral, but the condemnation is not deserved. There are many behaviors prohibited by religious scriptures that have become widely accepted in

modern times, and many behaviors endorsed by scriptures have been ignored. The morality of homosexual behavior should be considered in its own light and within the context of our current culture. Believers in freedom and equality—the cornerstones of the Constitution of the United States of America—ought to consider that the same behaviors condemned as immoral when engaged in by two people of the same sex are often seen as desirable and worthwhile when engaged in by heterosexual couples. For many, love is the most sacred act possible for human beings. It is time for us to make space for love as

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BELONGING

Arnold Fishman, President, AEU

We all belong to groups. We join them for various reasons with different expectations. What should we do when those expectations are not met? There are, of course, many options open to us. We could quit. And, if the reasons for joining in the first place are no longer applicable, this is, perhaps, the best course of action. Lives change and with that, needs change. Circumstances change. “Does she have a pretty girl friend?” is no longer the impor-

tant question. The world changes. “Better dead than red” seems far away. But if you joined a group as a response to some perceived need and that need remains unchanged, then the act of joining is, I submit, a signal of some sort of commitment to the group. That commitment is that you will do your share to fashion the group to fulfill its destiny and thereby meet your expectations.

Belonging permits the organization to have its own reciprocal expectations. Each member has a right to rely upon your cooperation in the advancement of the



group’s aims and should be confident in anticipating your willingness to do your share in bringing about its success. Quitting is not an ethical option until you can

honestly say that, as seen through the eyes of the other members, you have fulfilled the reasonable expectations of the group. This is especially true with respect to commitments you have made. Certainly you must do what you have agreed to do. You cannot walk away owing anything and consider yourself to have behaved

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CHUMAN

for the "blissful moment" is on par with the search for a new refrigerator or pair of designer jeans. Behind the new spirituality I see lurking the very unholy dynamics of the very unholy market. Moreover, I sense that "spirituality" is often without content. It is far easier to sermonize about feeling good than it is to actually know something in depth and with substance and rigor.

The intellectual veto: With the exception of the few members who are born into it, but even for them, Ethical Culture is a religion of choice. This means that a prime attractor is going to be ideas, even as social relations thicken our community. What moves us to Ethical Culture is the appeal of our ideas and ideals, and by implication, criticism of other ideas. Hence, the intellect becomes the wedge that determines whether we are in Ethical Culture or not. We put dignity at the center of our values, and it seems to me that this must include priority given to intellectual integrity, for there surely cannot be much dignity in professing what one does not believe to be true. Admittedly, in these times, many people who are flocking to the churches and temples are there for reasons that seem to downplay matters of belief in favor of uplifting experience, and the contradictions this raises seem not to drive them away. For many, the blandishments of social togetherness and all else that contemporary religion offers trump the requirements of intellectual consistency.

An Ethical Culture that abided this contradiction would be itself a contradiction in terms. Therefore, speaking for myself, religion or spirituality that demands belief in spiritual beings, gods, God, miracles, divine authority, or any manner of supernaturalism, as most do, is not for me.

PRO

Where does this exercise of criticism and intellectual winnowing leave me? Despite these massive disclaimers, humanist that I am, the search for spirituality for me is vital and important. I think religious seekers and spiritual questors ask the right questions, though I most often dissent from their conclusions.

The foundational questions of the spiritual endeavor, which lie at the heart of the human existential condition, are these: What is my place in the scheme of things? How am I connected to the broader universe?

I conclude that there are at least four possible responses that do not take us out of a naturalistic framework nor violate a humanist conscience. The common denominator of these four types is the felt connection between oneself and something beyond us that is wider

and frequently more encompassing. Here is a brief sketch of these types of religious humanism:

1. **Nature Mysticism:** A deeply felt connection with the natural world. The poetry of Wordsworth and the musings of Emerson reflect this sensibility. But so does the experience of the hiker who gazes at the sunset, the starry heavens or the pristine landscape and apprehends, as a matter of feeling not just thought, "I and the natural world are made of the same stuff. I am part of it all. It and I are one."

2. **Reverent Agnosticism:** A sense of awe and reverence before the unknown and the unknowable. We know that we are finite creatures whose awareness is limited by the range of our sense experience, just as our vision is limited to a narrow frequency on the spectrum. Beyond that range, there exists a reality, which is both unknown to us, and unknowable. The reverent agnostic feels both humility before the unknowable yet gratitude for the ability to perceive a part of the infinite universe, however small.

3. **Deweyan Idealism:** The inspiration of ideals that moves us toward a more satisfactory future. John Dewey stated, "Our ideals come from the imagination, but they are not made of imaginary stuff." Out of our frustrations we fashion ideal solutions. Those ideals, in turn, have the force to inspire us toward solutions, which progressively put us into more satisfactory relations with our environment.

4. **Non-Instrumental Holism:** We can appreciate things in our world on their own terms and not from the use we make of them. When this appreciation is applied to human beings, we find a basis for ethics. We appreciate the other as a subject, not an object. When we move beyond this appreciation to engage the other with caring and compassion, we manifest ethics in perhaps the best way possible.

Dialogue

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WORDEN

expressed in same sex relationships.

I have long been puzzled by the nature of objections to same-sex marriage voiced by opponents. Much of what I have read and heard has focused on the need to protect the institution of marriage. On the face of it, this objection seems unreasonable since extending the benefits of marriage to more people would seem to increase the number of married individuals rather than decrease it. But the objection is not simply about the number of people married—somehow the inclusion of same sex marriages is believed to contribute to (if you will forgive the term) adulteration of the institution of marriage by including a group that is not fit to marry to join in.

Opponents point to the incidence of extra-relationship sex among same-sex couples as a reason to prohibit same-sex marriage, noting that sexual fidelity is a critical element of marriage. While that may be called for by various religious faiths and held to by individuals on moral grounds, extra-marital sex is not

uncommon among heterosexual couples nor does the awareness of a partner's sexual activity outside the marriage relationship necessitate dissolution of the marriage.

Opponents also point to a higher incidence of promiscuity and related health problems than in the general population. This objection might carry more weight if the state took an active interest in testing the fitness of prospective couples, but just about any man and woman can get a marriage license simply by showing up, proving their identity and age, and making a few attestations about past marriages.

Likewise concerns that allowing same-sex marriage will undercut the state's endorsement of and protection for families seem hollow—couples are not required to have children to justify their marriages and same-sex couples who have the resources and the interest may choose to have children of their own as do many heterosexual couples through donor insemination or adoption. Let's recall also that for better or worse, the state does not test the fitness of prospective parents nor does the state intervene

into a family's private affairs unless there are grounds for significant abuse or neglect.

A more sensible approach to improving and protecting the institution of marriage would be to put more energy into developing the fitness of prospective couples. Perhaps training and education in how to be a good husband or wife and how to relate effectively with one's spouse and family could be offered to couples and families. Such services might even be welcomed by same-sex couples who have the burden of social disfavor and prejudice on top of the complexities of the marital union.

The state has no business restricting marriage to the union of a man and a woman, and loving couples should have marriage as an option even if they happen to be the same sex. Perhaps my view is not the majority view, but to those who disagree I quote a minister from New York City who said during a conference on religion and sexuality held at the Ethical Culture Society of Westchester, **"If you are against same sex marriage...don't enter into one."**

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FISHMAN

honorably. If organizations do not succeed, it is because their members fail to make them work. If joining and quitting is the pattern, and if needs remain unsatisfied, perhaps some introspection is in order.

Even if you quit, it is not ethical to try to destroy the group because of your disappointment. You can walk away having completely discharged your commitments and the group's reasonable expectations, but you may not do it in a way that injures the remainder of the group. The price of admission must be

at least that high. It must be as important to act ethically toward the organizations you abandon as it is with respect to those you continue to support. Ethically, therefore, when you have concluded that the group can ask no more of you and you must leave in spite of not realizing your goal, you are obligated to do so in a way that does not interfere with the possibility of the group's success in your absence. Those are the obligations of belonging.

This is equally true in group-to-group situations. The American Ethical Union—our federation of twenty-three societies and fellowships—provides support to, and in turn relies upon the support

of, each of the twenty-three. There is strength in this union. Ethical Culture is distinctively different from any other religion or philosophy, and the AEU is the focal point of Ethical Culture in this country. It has the responsibility of preparing tomorrow's leaders to take their places at the several societies, and it is the unique and unifying voice that speaks to the ethical issues confronting our nation and the world. Every society gains immeasurably from its affiliation with the AEU, and the AEU loses immeasurably without the full support of every society.

We must act together to bring out our best.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION?

Arnold Fishman, President of the Philadelphia Ethical Society and the AEU, has developed a platform address entitled "The AEU and You—Perfect Together." In it Mr. Fishman describes his personal journey to the leadership of the AEU and answers the questions: What is it? What does it do? Why is it needed? Any interested society should contact the AEU office.

ETHICS AS A RELIGION

David Saville Muzzey

Condensation of Chapter Two, "Priestly and Prophetic Religions"

R. B. Reichart, Princeton

Each of the varied religions in history can be seen as either priestly in form (the earlier and more prevalent) or prophetic.

Priestly religions came into being in response to the invention of ceremonies to control the unseen powers believed to underlie the mysteries of the environment and life, and the selection of individuals to direct those special ceremonies.

The chief characteristics common to priestly religions as they have developed over the millennia are first, that they are autocratic, second, that they are tied to the preservation of doctrines and practices as against the free exercise of the mind, and third, that they draw a distinction between their clergy (kleros, meaning to set apart) and the rest of humanity.

The clerical mission is to be a channel, for the will and grace of God, to the laity. Thus priestly religion subordinates morality to orthodox belief and ritual, and attacks heresy – departure from the true faith – more severely than moral lapses.

The prophetic type of religion has always been in conflict with the priestly type. The Old Testament prophet (not simply a fore-teller of events) stood forth to rebuke Israel for its neglect of divine law and its borrowed idolatries. The culmination of the line of Hebrew prophets was Jesus, who has inspired prophetic religion for the next two thousand years. His enemies, the priestly masters of Jerusalem, used his followers' identification of him as the prophesied earthly Messiah of the Old Testament as a pretext for demanding his execution.

Paradoxically, Jesus may have accepted the title of Messiah, which to his contemporaries meant political liberator, because his aim was the spiritual liberation of humanity from sin, and he wished to put an end to the expectation of a political liberator of Israel. In a later chapter we shall see how this wonderful prophetic preacher was transformed by the church into Christ the anointed king – the worst blow religion ever received.

What are the characteristic marks of prophetic religion? First, its devotees are free of the worry that science or philosophy might undermine their faith. Science does conflict with theology because of the bungling attempts of various systems of theology to define religion in terms of the limited knowledge of the past. But though the human intellect may wreak havoc with orthodox dogmas, thought's farthest reaches cannot invalidate the experience of spiritual

aspiration and satisfaction, which mark true religion.

Hence prophetic religion has no need of "ordained" or "consecrated" mediators. In its first four centuries the Christian church had no priests, and only by first being accepted and then co-opted by the Roman Empire did its priestly character emerge. Much of its subsequent history is a story of the collaboration and conflict between the church's temporal and spiritual powers.

Further, one of the basic tenets of Protestantism was the doctrine of the individual's responsibility for their relations with God. Thus, the Protestant minister is not a special channel of divine grace, invested with quasi-magical power. His or her duties dispense with the very sacraments which are of prime importance in priestly religion.

Needless to say, ethical religion is of the prophetic type. It has faith in the as yet unappropriated power of men and women to rise "on stepping stones of their dead selves" to ever higher levels of character. The responsibility is simple and direct. It cannot be avoided or delegated. While we may help one other in the search for righteous behavior, and such help is the best service one can render one's neighbor, no one can supply merit for, nor atone vicariously for, the neighbor's sin. Just as one must feed oneself to sustain life, one must appropriate and assimilate one's own religion, which is spiritual nourishment.

Unless we rise to this imperious responsibility there is little hope that the kingdom of God, which Jesus declared is "within you," will be realized on earth.

In recent centuries ordinary people have slowly risen from the level of actual or symbolic real estate – slavery or serfdom – to a point where "... in the panel being woven now they can look the chiefs of state in the eye, and those chiefs cannot gainsay them. What is the next panel to be? ... We have no lack of pessimists who are certain that the work is beyond us. The development, they say, has come to its logical conclusion, the wheel has made a full turn, and retrogression is all that may be expected. The next panel that comes from the loom of time, they prophesy, will show the level-eyed citizen beginning to quail before the glare of a dictator, beginning to stoop again, and to sink his gaze toward the earth."

From this dire fate one thing and one alone can save us – the revival of prophetic religion, the religion of ethics.



FROM THE UN

*Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld
NGO Representatives to the UN for the
IHEU and the AEU's National Service
Conference*



Will You Still Need Me? Will You Still Feed Me -- When I'm 64? If this old Beatles song were written now, the

number might be 74, perhaps 84, and maybe 94. We are living in the midst of an unprecedented transition, sometimes called the agequake, the rapid aging of the industrialized world, and the forthcoming, even more rapid aging of the underdeveloped world.

The change is dramatic. Will societies have the resources to pay for the increased needs of older people, particularly when the number of working young is diminishing? How will economic and social life be affected? How will aging change people's outlook on life?

In the developed countries, national wealth has increased along with the increase in aging. The underdeveloped countries will reach their agequake before their wealth increases. They will have less time to adjust, raising many troubling questions.

Over the years, the UN has recognized this trend and has explored the many issues it

raises. Every October the UN celebrates the Day of Older Persons. The fact that people are living longer is a major achievement and a reason to celebrate. Two major world conferences on aging have been held, one in 1982, and more recently, in 2002. The 1982 conference mostly concerned the richer countries where the aging had begun. There the issues were discussed in terms of caring for the welfare of older persons. The 2002 conference took a totally different approach. Caring is still important, but the emphasis was on mainstreaming older people, using their skills as a treasured resource.

The approach was intergenerational, avoiding age stratification into youth groups and elder enclaves. By building bridges between generations, the model is a society for all ages.

The facts are simple. In most countries, people are having fewer children, and people are living longer. However, because of the explosive birth rate of the past, some societies are going through a massive youth bulge, with more than half of the population under 25. For example, the birth rate in Saudi Arabia is 62%, in Yemen it's 68%, and Iran 60%. Many of the youth are not prepared for modern life.

These young people are becoming ever more restless without productive work. They present a major political problem for

the present and the future.

By 2050, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. As the twenty-first century began, the world's population included approximately 600 million older people, triple the number recorded 50 years earlier. By mid-century, there will be some 2 billion old—once again, a tripling of the age group in a span of 50 years.

There is also a gender dimension to the aging phenomenon. Women nearly everywhere are living longer than men, so that more of the elderly are women. Women are more likely to be poor, raising many other issues.

At the annual celebration of the International Day of Older Persons, the emphasis was on healthy active aging, education for all ages, human rights and dignity. As an example of the concept of a society for all ages, the string section of the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra, with musicians ranging from 5 to age 91, played some popular pieces and ended with Mozart. The presentation was delightful—the blending of the generations a sheer pleasure.

Thinking personally, aging is what happens while we are making other plans. We have added years to our lives. What kind of life will we add to these years?



FROM THE ARCHIVES*

Marc Bernstein, AEU Archivist

WHAT IS AN ETHICAL SOCIETY?

An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of inducing people to think more about conscience, duty, justice, the cultivation of the higher nature, working for others about High Conduct in all its phases, morality in all its aspects. It exists supremely to emphasize the importance of Ethics.

An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of persuading people to do more than they are doing toward making themselves better men and women and toward improving the rest of the world.

An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of keeping public attention on the moral aspects of the Questions of the Day, and not allowing people to judge on such matters from their own personal interests or from purely material considerations.

An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of organizing practical educational work

in social reform on a basis that shall be strictly neutral on all matters pertaining to religion. In all such effort the Society will seek to establish the motto "the work for the work's sake."

An Ethical Society exists in order to serve as a meeting ground for people who are unable to agree in their religious beliefs and yet who are warmly interested in working together for their own moral improvement and for the moral improvement of the whole human race.

An Ethical Society exists for the sake of cultivating the sense of reverence and fostering the moral and spiritual nature of each person, while allowing every man to think as he pleases or as his judgment may compel him to think.

An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of awakening and fostering higher scruples in one's conduct in the home, personal life, in public affairs, commercial life, and in all one's relations to the city, the State or the nation to which one may belong.

An Ethical Society, amid the changes now going on in religious beliefs, exists for the

purpose of persuading men to hold tenaciously to the great Moral Principles established by the experience of past ages, and approved by the voice of conscience, while at the same time always seeking light wherever it may be found.

An Ethical Society exists in order to accomplish these various purposes by means of lecture courses, educational clubs, classes for children, organized efforts for social reform, courses of reading or study, all concentrated on the one aim.

An Ethical Society represents a world-movement to foster an ethical spirit among individuals and to organize educational and reform efforts along ethical lines.

** Circa 1900, lecturer unknown. Leaflet prepared for the St. Louis Ethical Society by the lecturer. The views in the leaflet represent the personal views of the lecturer, whose subject was "Huxley, the Late Great English Agnostic."*



To The Ethical Society of St. Louis:

Hello, I am a student at a Christian School in Oklahoma and I just wanted to know a little bit more about your organization and what you believe. I have been a strong Christian all my life, and I have learned through reading the word of God, that His way, His ethical standard, has always been a comfort to me in my life. I was just curious where you draw your ethical standard from? I was also a little confused about two of your teachings in your Sunday School class. You teach that "ethics is my religion" and "I am free to choose what I believe". What if I choose to believe something that is not ethical, am I going against my "religion?" I would like to know about this so I can understand your views a little bit better. I would also like to know what happens if what I believe what is ethical, goes against what someone else thinks is ethical? I would love it if you could e-mail me these answers and anything else you think that I should know.

—*Curious Student*

We are glad you sought out our website and are continuing your search to understand.

Our ethical decision making process is based in reason, experience, tradition and intuition. Our basic principles are the worth and dignity of each person, their uniqueness and inner personality and journey, the importance of community in support for individuals, and the responsibility of each person to be their best self and to help create a better world.

We have no creedal requirements for members, so we have members from many different religious and non-religious traditions. The formation of additional faith beliefs are not rejected by us. We respect all religious traditions, and would only question beliefs when they harm a person, lead them to harm or neglect others and worsen the human situation.

For us, morality and ethics are basically not a list of negatives and legalisms, but rather an attempt to know oneself and be one's best self, reaching our highest potential. The place where people meet to

seek the highest is holy ground.

So to make a wrong judgment is to go against one's own best self. We believe the inner resources within a human being can lead them in their ethical growth and decision-making.

The fact that different people will arrive at different understandings and decisions is not unique to us. Christians too differ on interpretations and decisions. With the issue of abortion, for example, Christians are divided right down the middle. Often the individual contexts may vary. What we would support is the right to choose one's decision on issues, for one cannot be virtuous without choices.

For example, generally it is not to be one's best self to lie. But can you think of situations where telling a lie might be the best action? To lie in order to save devastating hurt or even to save a life might be justified, don't you think?

I wish you well in your studies. I admire your passionate search to know, understand and live out your best self.

—*Don Johnson, Leader*

To the editor:

I wish to question statements by Lisel Burns (Leader, Brooklyn) in an article on the front page of the March issue.

In her first paragraph, Ms. Burns reduces a raging debate between the Bush administration and critics of his unprovoked bloody military invasion of two small nations into a "civic argument over Iraq," in which "the government and the progressives can both err by mistaking their own partisan political positions for an overall standard for the nation".

Can Ms. Burns be equating the government's "partisan political position" of endless preemptive war that has wasted thousands of Afghan, Iraqi and American lives with the critics "partisan political position" of peaceful resolution of disputes via the UN? Is there any question which one she would choose to be "an overall standard for the nation"?

Does Ms. Burns really believe there is a "shared vision" between a world wracked by endless preemptive war and a cooperative community of nations resolving differences peacefully through the United Nations?

What kind of Ethical Society have we become when we have so much trouble speaking truth to power and choosing good over evil?

—*Bill Hagel, Queens*

Lisel Burns replies:

First, my thanks to Bill Hagel for taking time to communicate his passionate critique of my recent essay's approach to how our Iraq-related foreign policy decisions are debated in the national conversation this year. If I understand his letter, he thinks that I have used language and logic trivializing what he understandably sees as a "raging national debate" by calling it an "argument." Additionally, by my not focusing on the wrongness of recent US foreign policy decisions, which are causing the deaths of thousands of non Americans --and now more than 600 of our own soldiers -- I may have undermined my own, if not also the Ethical movement's (presumed) high moral reputation. Bill seems to suggest that by my chiding both left and right for jumping to state their political positions without bothering to project and discuss a general moral vision for the nation, I am somehow equating the political positions of the conservative perspective with the political positions of the liberal progressive perspective.

I think my point is a little different from Bill's emphasis. My point is that both rigid sides of the issue fuel widespread fear and cynicism unless we unpack our arguments, show the assumptions from which they start, and the standards and ideals they reflect, as separate from particular political strategies. In *Moral Politics, How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (1999) George Lakoff states that the political right took 25 years to craft moral language, cradle it in meaningful metaphor, and link it to arguments in the political world to secure public opinion and votes in both local and national elections. Liberals and leftists, he writes, have a potentially powerful moral vision but few ways to communicate it widely in effective image and language, or to translate it into votes on issues.

Peace upon—and good arguments like this within—all of the houses.

RELIGION WITHOUT GOD

Korte Brueckmann
Ethical Culture Society of Puget Sound

I can understand, I think, why religious people expect everyone to believe in a god, especially a single, omnipotent god who they can ask not only to solve their problems but also the problems of everyone around them and the entire world. Still, there is an arrogance that presumes the answer they have accepted, based in the supernatural, is the answer for everyone. It is not the answer for me.

I reject the idea of a self-aware being who orders the cosmos, watches every action of every creature on Earth and protects the faithful from harm through divine intervention. I do believe that there is a life force that stretches across the universe uniting all living things in an inextricable web of being. It appears that natural forces order the universe, but they are not self-aware. When I think about this force anthropomorphically, which I rarely do, then I think of it as Mother Nature.

The American Heritage Dictionary says superstition is an irrational belief that an object, an action, or a circumstance not logically related to a course of events influences the outcome of those events. That might include a statue, bowing one's head or seeing a black cat cross your path. The dictionary also calls superstition a belief, practice, or rite irrationally maintained by ignorance of the laws of nature or by faith in magic or chance. Those definitions describe my understanding of praying to a supernatural being.

"Superstition is the religion of feeble minds," said Edmund Burke. In contrast, Ethical Culture is a religion for robust minds. It is not an easy religion because answers must come from experience in the world around us — not necessarily personal experience, but human experience. In areas where experience is limited, such as questions concerning reincarnation or an afterlife, there are no definitive answers at all. We do not have a book of answers handed down from God. All we have are our minds and our experience and our abilities to interpret the world around us. It is not an easy religion for children, especially, because they want understandable, immutable answers about life, death and creation. I have always tried to answer as fully and honestly as I can the questions that my children ask. How much easier it would be, I often think, to tell them that something is so because God made it so. That feeling lasts only a moment before I think harshly about what an evasion and disservice that is to your children, no matter who you are or what your beliefs.

WHAT ARE YOU, ANYWAY?

Sally DeJesus
Director of Religious Education
Riverdale-Yonkers

Whenever I have been asked "What are you, anyway?" I have responded "Oh, I'm a human being." About half the time the next question would be "No, really, where are you from?" I politely answer "I'm from Earth."

Perhaps it makes some people more comfortable to find a category for me—or who they think I am—and that's the problem. Discovering my cultural background or where I was born, although it has significance, really doesn't offer any idea of who I really am, and it may confuse more than enlighten. It would give little information about what I believe in, what I think about, or how I feel. Too often opportunities to really get to know someone new are missed.

Many years have passed since I began to

Even though I disdain superstition, I am guilty of superstitions too. I don't think I believe in any of them, but I adopt them socially. I knock on wood and I make a pleasant remark when someone sneezes. The convention in this land where so many have roots in the Judeo-Christian religion is to say, "God bless you!" when someone sneezes. I grew up saying "Gesundheit!" which is German for "health." I prefer it because it is a secular response to a social obligation. There is a story told of a woman from St. Louis, my hometown and famous for its German heritage, visiting Europe for the first time. She was in Germany and hopelessly lost when she sneezed. "Gesundheit," said a policeman. "Oh good," she exclaimed. "Someone who speaks English."

If you think working out your personal attitude toward the nature of ultimate reality and death sounds like a lot of hard work, I agree whole-heartedly. It is hard work. But it is infinitely preferable to accepting someone else's attitude toward the nature of ultimate reality and death just because it is easier. Ethical Culture is not a religion for the intellectually timid or the mentally flabby. I sincerely hope that we will find our fellowship provides us with a mental workout each week that is just as difficult, necessary and rewarding as physical exercise.



If you remember the hippies and the '60s and the Summer of Love and all the counter culture that grew up around the Vietnam War, then you also remember that there was, along with a rejection of the establishment, a distrust of organized religion. Despite that, there was a tremendous search for spirituality. Most of us lost our way, stopped searching, but did not go back to the established religions, either. That was before we had children. As we aged and procreated we began thinking, some of us, that even if our own spiritual quests were completed, or ended, or empty, we needed more spiritual guidance for our progeny. We began changing our thinking about organized religion because it helped us to provide our children with spiritual foundations. Many of us went back to what we knew and took up again the mantle of Judaism, Christianity or whatever we learned in our early religious environments.

I, too, looked for help from my foundations, but my church was not present in the Northwest. I joined the Unitarians. It was a lot like buying the wrong car. Now I, too, have gone back to my roots and have committed to helping form an Ethical Culture Society here in the Puget Sound Country. I am far from the place I grew up, far from the Mississippi River, the Midwest, the state where I could claim fifth generation status. But with the organization of our Ethical Culture group, and our commitment together to form an Ethical Society, I have come home.

reply this way, and in doing so I feel more connected to the world. I want more than a fleeting recognition, and I'd like to better know the inquirer, too.

A more interesting question might be, "What do you care about?" Ah, then, perhaps, even though we are just strangers waiting for a bus, we could begin a deeper and more lasting understanding of each other.

—Adapted from an article in the *Riverdale-Yonkers* newsletter, Concern

AEU BOARD HIGHLIGHTS



Meeting of March 13, 2004
Carl Romano, Vice-President

BOARD ACTIONS PASSED

1. To commend the **New York State Coalition Against Gun Violence**.
2. For the **Ethical Unsung Hero Award**, Jason West, Mayor of New Paltz, NY, for being among the first to perform marriages for homosexual couples.
3. Whereas, the AEU Board wants to define its possible actions when a society is not in compliance with the by-laws, but there is hope and faith in resolving the situation,

Therefore, we move that:

An AEU member society is not in good standing when it is found by the AEU board to be in substantial, willful, and significant noncompliance with the by-laws and/or the articles of incorporation of the AEU. The AEU board may suspend privileges to a society not in good standing including but not limited to:

Eligibility for and payment of subventions; attendance of members and youth of the society at meetings and conferences other than the Assembly; certification of adjunct leaders; services of AEU consulting leaders; eligibility to apply for loans from the AEU.

4. Interim certification to Leaders-in-Training Kate Lovelady and Randall Best as leaders for the purposes of performing weddings only.

SUMMER SCHOOL 2004

Jone Johnson Lewis stated that there will be 28 to 32 participants in the upcoming Summer School. There is less society diversity than in the past. The idea of establishing a follow-up to Summer School – “Summer School II” was presented. **Action:** As there is an interest in developing a Summer School II, President Fishman appointed Bill Lewis to form and chair a Summer School II Task Force.

A HUMANIST ALTERNATIVE TO PRAYER

Boe Meyerson, Leader, Essex

The coming of Spring along with the return of warmth, and the lengthening of days can often give us renewed feelings of hopefulness. Just as the sun-melted snow uncovers the tender shoots of new growth and life, so too does the sun seem to warm our hearts as well as our bodies and works to liberate those longings, wishes, and buried hopes which can hibernate over the winter.



The human response to deepening awareness of keenly felt hopes and desires varies greatly among individuals, cultures and religions. Among the great monotheistic religions of the west, petitionary prayer is a common reaction. The worshiper expresses the need and asks for help in achieving it. Interestingly, there have been several studies indicating some degree of correlation between praying and obtaining one's wish. As a Naturalist, I found those results intriguing. I do not believe there is a supernatural being answering requests. However, I believe there may be a naturalistic explanation for the findings. There are two discrete action elements to petitionary prayer. (1) One is the expression of one's hope in an emotionally open and often intense manner. (2) The other is the act of requesting assistance from God. If we eliminate the second element and focus on the first one, I believe we can learn something important about living fully and pursuing one's deepest desires.

The act of wholeheartedly expressing one's desires can be a powerful impetus toward realizing them. Such expression focuses one's imagination, one's thinking, one's priorities with great clarity and potency. Psychotherapists spend a great deal of their time helping patients to become aware of and to validate and own their long buried desires so that they can be liberated from inhibiting constraints. In a sense the power of the uninhibited expressive act serves to prepare the person for action, for the pursuit of their desire. It enhances the intensity and clarity of the desire. A good metaphor would be the drawing of the archer's arrow... the bending of the bow, the tightening of the spring mechanism, and the aiming at the target before release, before the act. It is not surprising that the ancient Greeks and Romans used Cupid and his bow as their metaphor for desire and pursuit to be followed by spring (leaping) of the arrow toward its goal.

The metaphor, however, is older than the ancient Greeks. We can find it in the etymology of the word 'hope.' This word shares a common root with the words 'hop' and 'hoop.' The root word (*qeu-b) is Indo European, the ancient source of all Indian, Middle Eastern and European languages. It means 'to bend forward.' The English term 'hoop' referred originally to the strips of bent wood used to bind with tension the staves of a barrel. The English term 'hop' (to spring forward) has the Anglo Saxon root 'hoppian.' The English term 'hope' has the Anglo Saxon root 'hopa' (as a noun) and 'hopian' (as a verb). So when we engage in the act of hoping for something in a way that focuses and intensifies our clarity and desire through vivid imagination and expression, we are making a 'hopa' — the prelude to action.

Perhaps we may wish to engage communally and ceremonially in common hopes. Perhaps we may wish to keep them private. Either way any humanist can do so unreservedly, without compromise and with a clear intellectual, spiritual, and moral conscience.

I BELIEVE THERE IS NO BETTER MESSAGE FOR THE WORLD THAN ETHICAL CULTURE'S. Consider how attractive it really is: You may join a community of ordinary people pursuing just and ethical lives founded upon the unifying principle of human worth and built as a religious and philosophical democracy for all. In a world led by those who divide, and torn by those who are blind with hatred, our religion is a gentle, insistent rejoinder:

**Yes, it is possible to live well together.
Yes, it is possible to build a better world.**

David Reis, Leader, Queens



WAGING PEACE IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Charles Horwitz, Brooklyn



My wife, Carol, and I traveled to Israel and Palestine for 15 days last

January to witness the tragic conflict there and meet with human rights activists who are waging efforts for peace. We were part of an independent seven-member delegation of secular Jewish New York civil rights and antiwar activists. We were invited by Israeli and Palestinian leaders whom some of our delegation had met last year. What we learned was that in Israel there is a much more of a discussion about the morality and ethics of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza than in our country.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman, 44 and the father of two children, has lived in Israel since 1981. His wife is the first female rabbi ordained in Israel. He is Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR), which is composed of over 100 rabbis and rabbinical students from Orthodox, Conservative and Reform denominations. He said that RHR's founder, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, challenged rabbis to do more than perform traditional religious acts; that Judaism requires Jews to struggle for universal human values and social justice for all people; and that there is a great hypocrisy among many religious Israelis who don't share this view.

RHR tries to get humanistic values into the Israeli dialogue." Because of his high public profile he has received death threats. Rabbi Ascherman has spoken in hundreds of synagogues in the United States and Canada. He said that individual Jews and mainstream synagogues in North America support RHR, which has seven full-time staffers. He added that polls show that 32% of Israelis support RHR's work. "I don't feel like we are a persecuted minority here because we have good relations with large sections of the Jewish community, including the Knesset and the media... and we are members of the Jewish community by right and not just by grace."

He said, "RHR opposes terrorism and does not regard all Palestinians as saints. It supports a humanistic, moral Zionism out of love for Israel. It also supports the United States law that prohibits aid for Israeli settlements in the West Bank or Gaza. We also support a lawsuit in the International Criminal Court against Israel's human rights violations in those areas."

When Rabbi Ascherman joined a non-violent protest last year against the demolition of a Palestinian family's house in East Jerusalem, he asked Israeli soldiers for ten minutes to help the family remove their

belongings. When they refused he said, "Then I will not move from your bulldozers and you will have to carry me away." He was arrested and charged with disobeying governmental orders. His trial on January 14, 2004 was adjourned. Before the trial, over 400 rabbis signed a joint letter urging Israeli authorities to dismiss the charges against him on humanitarian grounds.

He urged our delegation to meet American rabbis when we returned and to ask them to work with us on issues of mutual concern. He reminded us that polls show that most Jews in both Israel and the US support a two-state peace plan based on Israel's 1967 borders. They also oppose Israel's destruction of Palestinian homes and land, construction of the "Security Wall" and the West Bank and Gazan settlements.

As we said goodbye he told us that later that week he would be taking Hillel students from the United States to see Palestinian homes demolished in Hebron and East Jerusalem and to dedicate a medical clinic in an Israeli Bedouin village.

—This is the first of several articles on human rights leaders in Israel and Palestine that will appear in the Brooklyn newsletter.



Movie Review

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

Bob Greenwell, Leader, Mid-Rivers

I demand a refund. I paid to see a movie but all I got was religious propaganda. Worse than religious propaganda, it bombarded my head with graphic images of pain. It was perverse meditation on people inflicting pain on other people, as if such a meditation could increase the amount of love in the world. It doesn't. It won't. It makes things worse.

The whole movie is encapsulated in one scene. Three men on three crosses, Jesus in the middle. On one side the man recognizes Jesus' goodness, and Jesus promises him paradise. The man on the other side laughs at Jesus, and a crow lands and pecks out the man's eyes. The moral: Believe in Jesus and be rewarded; don't believe and be punished. So much for Jesus' command to love.

To me, the psychological effect of the movie is to engender empathy for Jesus and his mother and followers, and to engender disgust and hatred toward Jesus' tormentors. By lumping in the believing man on the cross with the tormentors, the movie gives license to Christians to be disgusted by and to hate those who are not Christian. The movie makers might claim that the message is forgiveness and nonviolence, as in Jesus' statement to Peter and to several other characters, but the claim is belied by what the movie actually does, which is to show massive gratuitous violence. You don't teach peace by bombarding with images of violence. That is the method used by those who are training soldiers (or terrorists) to kill.

From Ethical Societies I've learned to appreciate works of art that inspire the human spirit, from whatever source, from whatever religion; but not in this case. I sent a letter to Wehrenberg Theatres asking for a refund. It's the first time I've ever done that.

The Church says the Earth is flat, but I know that it is round, for I have seen the shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than in the Church. —*FERDINAND MAGELLAN (1480-1521)*

AEU NEWS & HAPPENINGS

Gathered from Stan Wayne's AEU "Clipping Service"



AUSTIN TX Member Rich Harrison writes about his experience with Save the Children Foundation. He

chose to aid a child in Mexico, and for several years sent funds and exchanged letters and photos with a young girl and her family. Then he traveled to her village over a barely passable road. Her village consisted of mud huts and "within seconds our truck was surrounded by about 50 children and a few adults. The little girl needed time to accept his gifts and then "poco" by "poco" she began to smile and understand why he came to meet her and her family. Now he is a "willing ambassador" of Save The Children, which is on the internet as "savethechildren.org".

BALTIMORE Leader Fritz Williams: "There is no doubt that the productivity revolution is rolling on full steam ahead. We keep discovering new ways to save time, eliminate overhead, and produce more goods and services for every hour we work.... Business leaders and representatives of the Bush Administration remind us constantly that we must make sacrifices to preserve our jobs in the competitive environment our productivity has created. In other words, we are being forced to compete with ourselves. It is one of the great paradoxes and immoralities of our time. The more productive we become, the more we threaten our job security and undermine our wages."

BERGEN NJ Leader Joe Chuman: "One of the tragic political abuses in reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 involves the treatment of immigrants. The current policy under the Department of Homeland Security is to imprison people who come to the United States seeking political asylum. For the most part, these are traumatized men and women who have experienced life-threatening persecution and often torture. For more than a year, the Public Affairs Committee of the Bergen Society has been working to expose and rectify these injustices. We have also been supporting detainees at the Detention Center in Elizabeth. On January 26th, we were able to push ahead these efforts through an exceedingly well-informed meeting with Senator John Corzine's (D-NJ) specialist on immigration and his chief of staff for constituent services, at the senator's Newark office. Six months in the planning, the meeting brought together among the best advocates on the asylum issue.... We hope to approach the commissioner for immigrant

affairs in New Jersey and request the parole of several detainees on condition that (their) communities support them and assure their appearance at their immigration hearings. We requested Senator Corzine's assistance with this effort. We also requested that the senator push for the creation of an under-secretary for asylum affairs within the Homeland Security Department.... Senator Corzine's staff assured us that our concerns would be faithfully communicated to the senator, and that we can depend on his support. At a minimum our delegation opened a dialogue with the senator on a relatively unknown, but morally pressing issue.

BOSTON Stan Wayne: "Another burial of an American soldier at Arlington National Cemetery was being shown on TV. I had the experience we learned to call a 'flashback.' I felt as if it was the Viet Nam war again. 'Flashback' was the word that covered the loss of real time. A traumatic experience in Viet Nam came back again into the emotions of the Americans who, in the fields and rice paddies of Viet Nam, lost their friends and brothers in arms. As the war went on pointlessly and battles for a given hill were 'won' repeatedly, (yes the same hill was taken, abandoned, and retaken) it all became 'déjà vu' all over again: more deaths and no real change. American young men counted the days that were to pass until they would be allowed to go home. Their fear increased with each day that their number would be up. And for a large number, their last day occurred in Viet Nam in a war they could not understand."

BROOKLYN NY Sundays: "Intentional Community"... "Facing History and Ourselves"... "Members Report from Israel and Palestine"... Tributes to Paul Robeson and Nina Simone with readings exploring the Black Experience.

CHICAGO Member Jim Kenny reviewed "The Great Unraveling" by The New York Times op-ed economist, Paul Krugman, because of the urgency of its analysis of the Bush administration. [See *New York, below*] Other Sundays' speakers on stem cell research... "Will There Be Life After Capitalism?"... "Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History"... "Why Theater Matters". So many activity groups: Friday Night at the Movies; Ethnic Dinner Out; Lane Tech Murals Tour; and more.

ESSEX NJ Boe Meyerson, Leader: "Times of war and national crisis bring out the best

and the worst in people. War brings out our courage, fortitude, endurance, capacity for sacrifice, and commitment to a common cause. It also brings out our intolerance, inhumanity, and brutality.... Furthermore, these negative emotions are directed not only toward the enemy, but also toward each other. Those who do not either support or oppose a war are vilified and excoriated as lacking humanity or courage or loyalty.... Some people are losing their sons and daughters in wartime. Others are fighting with words and protests to end the carnage. The stakes are high. But vilification of our fellows is not the best way to achieve one's ends...."

LONG ISLAND NY Leader Anne Klaeyesen's arthritis pains make her recall her birth-giving pains and Felix Adler's reflections on spiritual pain: the pain of utter nothingness which moves us to self-knowledge; powerlessness in the face of overwhelming misery. Human worth and dignity demand that we work to improve the living conditions of others. "These remedies can sound abstract when we ourselves are suffering.... There is much pain in our community, but there is also much joy. We have an opportunity to embrace our spiritual nature, work to improve the conditions under which people live, and seek to bring to light the best that is within us. We accomplish this with empathy, imagining how the other is feeling and making a connection. It is with a loving kindness, for ourselves as well as others, that we can ease pain."

LOS ANGELES Sundays: An author on "Everything About the Bible You Never Had Time to Look Up"... "Critical Thinking Part 2," Lois Lyons..."The Ethics of Neighborhood Councils."

NEW YORK Paul Krugman: "The Present Crisis and America's Future". Krugman is one of the most quoted critics of the Bush Administration as he departs from any evasion of an expression of horror. He declares Bush is an "incessant liar" and finds Bush's economics sheer deception... Member Gloria Van Scott, now a Professor of Theatre and formerly a principal dancer with Katherine Dunham and Agnes de Mille, will present "Scenes Honoring Black History".... The refurbishment of the auditorium has been completed on budget and only one month behind schedule. There has already been an increase in rental interest.... We've begun to sing songs. They may

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

not be the old hymns of joy and sorrow, but they are lively and they remind us of our humanistic aspirations.

NORTH CAROLINA “Grief is the price we pay for love,” writes President Jan Broughton. Four losses were due to deaths of founding members who started the society and the Ethical School. Two losses were a gain for the AEU. Kate Lovelady and Randy Best left to gain leadership experience in the Riverdale-Yonkers and St. Louis societies respectively... Susan O’Neil writes an unusual article about the ethics or importance and joy of not owning a car but riding a bicycle. “For now, as a bicyclist, I am content to travel with the wind in my face and a sense of accomplishment and invigoration, from the physical exercise, after arriving somewhere by my own effort.”

NORTHERN VIRGINIA President Jerry Ziskind: “I recently had a conversation with a friend ... who lived and worked abroad for the past 10 years.... I asked if he missed Ethical Culture while he was abroad.... ‘Where else,’ he mused, ‘could you be gone 10 years and immediately feel reconnected to your community on your return?’ He feels a strong sense of support for who he is.... Here in his community, he can be himself.... He greatly missed the Sunday morning experience. He welcomes the hour or so a week on Sunday mornings when he can focus on issues larger than those in his immediate life.... I don’t think it is necessary to live abroad to appreciate the value of Ethical Culture in our lives....”

NORTHERN WESTCHESTER NY Leader Bob Berson, commenting on Senator Frist’s statement that it is impossible to get 100% health insurance coverage: “... It is important for each of us to participate, to speak out, in whatever way, in whatever place, we can, about whatever issues concern us. If we do not speak out our voices will obviously not be heard and only the strident noises of those whose interests stop with self will be audible. It is my hunch that the tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans could cover health care for the 40 million ‘uninsured’, but I would need an economist to be sure.... It is not impossible and we need to shout it to Washington— along with other shouts and songs of a vision, of a more humane, decent and caring society.”

PHILADELPHIA Leader Richard Kiniry, “What is normal any more? Not

that I ever thought I was normal but at least I had an idea of what it was. Normal meant you didn’t stick out. Normal was the usual, average way of acting. Of course normal also includes the idea of expectation, of judgment. Normal includes norm. If you don’t fit the norm, you are just different, you are also wrong. Normal isn’t being average but fitting the expected boundaries of acceptable behavior. Normal weather is the way it ought to be. If it diverges from that norm, we start to suspect there is something wrong... each new generation of the young reinvents the idea of normal, as bizarre as it may be to the rest of us. The white, middleclass, “Leave it to Beaver” normal has lost its power.... Except for the religious right and other control freaks, most people give others the benefit of the doubt...”

QUEENS NY Leader David Reis: “The ‘right’ in founder Felix Adler’s notion of right relationship implies that we would be more able to uncover human worth in a good relationship than in a bad one. And yet we may observe that it is more difficult than ever to stay in a relationship with one another. The alienation of modern life is profound, if not more so than ever. Who among us has not felt at one time or another that we are not involved enough in bringing positive change to the world around us, and that consequently we need to ‘step up to the plate.’ Or have felt quite conversely that the world demands too much of us, and that we ourselves and our relationships have suffered far too much... and that we need to step back? That we suffer in these ways is in part the human condition, but it is also a particular consequence of modernity....”

RIVERDALE-YONKERS NY Leader Intern Kate Lovelady: “At the AEU Lay Leadership School in 2000 we took a hint from the old Clinton campaign and adopted our motto, ‘It’s the relationship, stupid’.... Ethics is a process; it is a quality of relating; it’s not a set of final answers to memorize and promulgate to others...” The Sunday School (called Ethical Explorations) focused on “Being Generous to Others” but stretched far beyond the idea of giving material gifts, asking questions like, What makes us special? Are we able to make someone laugh? Another theme, “Claiming Our Own Voice” gave the children opportunities to explore the sometimes isolating feelings that go with being truly who we are.”

ST. LOUIS Leader Intern Randy Best: “A question often posed to agnostics, athe-

ists, and practitioners of non-theistic religion is, ‘If you don’t believe in the Bible, where do you ground your morals? If you do not accept the authority of scripture, does it mean that any behavior is acceptable?’... Since I do not draw on external authority, I must look inside myself, down into the depths of my humanity. I must ask myself, What do I truly value? What inspires me? What brings me happiness? What connects me to others, to nature, to the environment? What enhances my life and spirit? What is beautiful and good? What makes me who I am?... I have found that this inward exercise produces an ethics based on my experience of humanness; on my connections with others and my experience of the world....”

“Understanding Islam” by Ahmet Kar Mustafa: tradition, diversity within its several cultures around the globe; historical development. A class in “Voluntary Simplicity” will be offered for 8 weeks: “Learn how to live more with less.”

SUFFOLK COUNTY NY 3rd annual “Darwin Day” – a Saturday with several guest speakers relating to “Evolution of Creationism” and how it became a political force. Platform: Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. An evening of Long Island performers doing “Best of Broadway Music.”

WASHINGTON DC For the 60th anniversary celebration of WES, leaders from other societies have been invited to speak about the Ethical movement. Leader Don Montagna: “Only some Ethical Society members make Ethical Culture their religion.... No person can commit to a faith in an unseen higher power without some personal experience of its validity.... Ethical Culture serves as a religion only for those who can verify it in their own experience.”



AEU CALENDAR

BOARD MEETING

May 8

2 W 64 St., New York, NY

LAY LEADERSHIP SUMMER SCHOOL

July 24—31
Highlands, NC

Now the daring thought that we had in the beginning of the Ethical Movement was to unite in one group, in one bond, those who had this religious feeling and those who simply cared for the moral betterment. . . . In the broader sense religion means zealousness and devotion to something supreme. In the special sense it means cosmic outreaching. Now I myself have always been a religious person in the second sense, and never a mere



moralist. But I founded this Society with the express purpose and intent that it should not consist only of those who stood as I did, who had the same religious feeling and needs, but that it should be open to all those who believed in moral betterment, because that is the point on which we all agree. Our ethical religion has its basis in the effort to improve the world and ourselves morally.

—*Felix Adler*

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