

Humanism 101

by Fred Edwords



The Times They Are a-Changin’

THIS PAST FALL it seemed not a day went by when freethinkers, atheists, secular humanists, and the like weren’t mentioned in the mainstream media. With the devotion of star-struck teenagers, all the major U.S. newspapers ran multiple stories and interviews with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennet, three luminaries who even turned up all together in the pages of *Newsweek* and *Wired* magazine, touting their respective books on secular reasoning and the dangers of religion.

I can remember, back in the late 1960s, that to publish a forthrightly nontheistic book one needed to go through a freethought publisher. Not only would no mainstream U.S. publishing house touch such a work, none of the major vanity houses would accept money from those willing to *pay* for such publication.

There were a few notable exceptions. New York publisher Henry Holt had released Corliss Lamont’s *Issues in Immortality* in 1932, which was revised and reissued as *The Illusion of Immortality* by Philosophical Library in 1950. That same house issued Lamont’s *Humanism as a Philosophy* in 1949, which was revised in 1957 as *The Philosophy of Humanism* and published by Frederick Ungar. But these titles weren’t well known outside the freethought community.

Also in 1957 British publisher George Allen and Unwin released Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*. The title essay, previously available only from atheist pamphleteer Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, received wide distribution and the book became a bestseller in Britain. Yet nothing of a similar stature and popularity followed.

To remedy this situation, Prometheus Books was founded in 1969 by then editor of the *Humanist* Paul Kurtz. For more than a decade afterwards, however, it remained a niche publisher, its earliest titles being promoted heavily through the American Humanist Association.

Then suddenly in 1974 the Nash publishing house issued George H. Smith’s *Atheism: The Case Against God*, a book that became widely available and was much discussed in the nontheistic community. Prometheus republished it in 1979 and has kept it in print ever since. Around this time Prometheus also expanded its reach into the college market with more mainstream fare. This strategy would eventually create a larger audience for nontheistic titles, but this still

didn’t add up to a large market for such books.

In 1999 Wendy Kaminer, in *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety* (Pantheon), complained that advocating atheism and criticizing religion were still “like burning a flag in an American Legion hall.” Five years later Susan Jacoby echoed this concern in *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (Metropolitan Books, 2004), noting that there was once a time in U.S. history, in the late 1800s, when a freethought orator like Robert G. Ingersoll could be wildly popular.

But 2004 was the year the dam broke. When W.W. Norton published a stridently atheist work, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, the author took to the lecture circuit and the book went on to win the 2005 PEN/Martha Albrand Award. Harris followed with *Letter to a Christian Nation*, published by Random House, which entered the *New York Times* bestseller list at number seven in October 2006.

Between these two came *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* by Daniel Dennett (Penguin Group, 2006) and Julia Sweeney’s one-woman show, *Letting Go of God*. The latter received a positive *New York Times* theater review for being “refreshingly unrancorous, lucid and, yes, inspirational.”

Then, one day before the release of Harris’ latter title, Bantam Books published *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins in both hardcover and audio format. It became number two on the Amazon.com bestseller list and number four on the *New York Times* list in November as Dawkins’ U.S. book tour drew standing-room-only crowds and garnered prominent television appearances and major media reviews. “Secularism is suddenly hip, at least in the publishing world,” wrote Jamie Doward in the October 29, 2006, *Observer* of Great Britain.

Such developments show how different the world is today from the one I faced when first becoming a freethought activist. Back then the cause seemed destined to prosper, if at all, only via gradual social evolution. But now we find ourselves riding a dramatic wave of change. Have the efforts of the past finally begun to pay off? Only if we seize the moment. And only if we then consolidate our gains in readiness for the next backlash. ■

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