

## **Astro-Humanism: Space as a Spiritual Movement**

**By Walter Putnam**

The space development movement has produced dedicated professionals in many disciplines – science, engineering, economics, and even philosophy – who believe deeply in the need for extraterrestrial expansion of human civilization. Yet, there seems to be a lack of the sort of political will necessary to propel that expansion. The vast majority of Earth’s population is oblivious to the abundance of resources available in our solar system that could not only enhance life on this planet, but also support a flourishing civilization beyond it. Nor are most people aware of the perils that could cause extinction of the human race; or else they choose not to consider them seriously or believe that nothing can be done about them.

It may be the case that only a great spiritual movement can steer humanity toward a desirable outcome for Earth and its inhabitants. Our need is to find the proper form and direction that such a movement should take, taking into consideration a natural tendency to reject outside interference in matters of faith, spiritual wellbeing, and lifestyle choices. Any approach to persuading the masses to support human migration into space must be based on both reason and a deep emotional connection that goes to the core of what makes us human in the first place.

Other great advances of civilization have followed a similar course, albeit usually in a religious context. For all the criticism directed against them, Christianity and Islam together have been responsible for widespread migration of ideas that helped form cohesiveness of societies that allowed them to progress far beyond the spiritual realm. Humanism itself could be considered a sort of spiritual movement in that it champions the human spirit in aspiring for achievement and overcoming difficulties imposed by the natural world against both the individual and civilization as a whole.

Now, what we could call astro-humanism offers the chance to unify the human race – across national, ethnic and religious lines – toward the goal of advancing civilization into space and perhaps to spread the seeds of life and the best of human virtues and values throughout our solar system and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Crossroads**

Still early in the 21st century, we are at a crossroads where humankind must decide what steps to take to avoid calamity on one or more of several fronts: overpopulation and overtaxed resources; destruction through environmental pollution and climate change; violent economic, social, and political upheaval; nuclear holocaust; super volcanic activity; and even the possibility of an asteroid strike.

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<sup>1</sup> Astro-humanism is a common concept within Space Renaissance International, a global initiative to advance the cause of space development. “The Space Renaissance Manifesto,” July 2009, recognizes scientists and philosophers such as Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Krafft Ehricke, Gerald O’Neill, and others as “the fathers of the philosophical current that we call Astronautic Humanism.”

When considering these threats it is important to recognize that we either have the technological capabilities to counter many of them or the scientific knowledge to develop those capabilities. But if science leads to knowledge and engineering provides competence to address human problems there still is a missing ingredient. Knowledge and competence are essential for success, but it is equally important to instill the spiritual impetus that will lead us into the future.

By “spiritual” we do not mean religious, at least as it applies to existing religions. They often not only fail to address contemporary problems, but also compete for the devotion of their human adherents and sometimes even conflict with the goals needed to solve the problems that are faced.

Instead, we have to look at the root of the word – spirit – to get the proper sense of the type of emotional attachment required to motivate people to achieve goals for the common good. On athletic fields, for example, it is easy to observe that team skills and experience are often not enough to win the game, especially when teams of equal abilities face each other. Usually, the ones with the proper spirit will prevail and sometimes even those with lesser skills have overcome the odds against winning because, as is often said, “They wanted it more.” In other words, they were inspired. Feeling was as much a key ingredient as thought.

### **A Matter of Unity**

Even if everyone in the entire world was united in the goal of expansion into space, would we be able to advance without specific interests – corporate, nationalistic, or militaristic, etc. – undermining each other to further their own agendas?

Instead, we do not even have that unity. We have Protestants vs. Catholics, Indians vs. Pakistanis, Shia vs. Sunni, Arabs vs. Jews, liberals vs. conservatives, and so forth in an almost endless variety of schisms that impede practically any universal cooperation at all – much less space development.

In the past, nationalism has provided the kind of emotional push needed to propel such development. Americans old enough to remember the Apollo program recall the sort of patriotism stirred by the first landing on the Moon. However, that sort of national pride is not appropriate for a truly international movement. The people of the world must be united in the vision of one Earth, as described in Frank White’s *The Overview Effect*.

The promise of financial reward has inspired others to support space development. But that will not fulfill the inner desires or satisfy the physical needs of most people. Even if it can be demonstrated that Space Abundance will improve the lot of most people on Earth, there is still little emotional incentive to strive for vast profits for the few.

The two major competing economic systems of the 20th Century are no longer sufficient to meet the goal of space development. Socialism, where it has failed, has done so largely because of rejection of religion – “the opium of the people” – even though as an ethical system, it shares many of the same values. Conversely, capitalism is often

criticized as being “soulless” because of its emphasis on the drive for individual accomplishment even at the expense of the less fortunate, yet it can claim a moral high ground for promoting the general welfare through that individual drive.

### **The Promise of Astro-Humanism**

There needs to be a merging of the best ideas and values of both systems, along with a bonding of the most fundamental beliefs of all the world’s religions – compassion, hope, and belief in a supreme being of which we all are important parts.

In *The Obligation*, Steven Wolfe writes of the inner drive, embedded in our DNA, to continue to spread the life that gave birth to the civilization that now stands on the edge of expansion beyond our native planet.

We can accomplish this through astro-humanism, which is not a system of beliefs in the ordinary sense but one that embraces ideas from all other belief systems that have led humanity to its present position. It is possible to take the best and reject the rest. That is the way forward.

We can recognize that we are all part of a greater, living entity – whether it is our Earth, God, or the Universe – and still champion individual rights and talents and the creative spirit that drives each of us to achieve and advance. We can continue our natural concerns for each other as human beings and for protecting our planet and other creatures on it, while still maintaining our individual interests.<sup>2</sup>

The key is to create awareness of the rational basis of space development, seeking the abundance of resources available outside the gravitational sphere, while giving people a reason to believe there is a higher purpose behind it. That is the sort of spiritual movement that will bring new birth to civilization, a new Renaissance – a Space Renaissance – to humankind.

And, it can be done without groups of people giving up whatever other beliefs they may have already. There is nothing inconsistent about pursuing one’s faith in a supreme being and aspiring to reach closer to it by reaching out into the heavens. In fact, almost any religious practice already holds that as a goal.

Only a negative belief in pending doom for humankind can stand in the way of Space advancement. And even if a large percentage of the global population has adopted such a belief at one time or another, there is no reason to believe that it will prevail in the future. If we accept that there is a positive, creative force in the Universe then we must

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<sup>2</sup> As Lawrence G. Downing, DMin, noted so succinctly and was cited in a previous issue of the *Journal*, “There is within the human frame a powerful presence that we cannot measure, precisely define, or empirically examine, but we recognize its existence and influence on our lives from the beginning of time.... The ancient religious traditions speak of soul, spirit, space, and breath. Some suggest that by whatever term one may select to identify the presence that is an essence of our humanity, we confront a mystery.”

let it follow a natural course, recognizing natural obstacles but working together as a global community to overcome them.

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**Editors' Notes:** Walt Putnam's attempt to harmonize competing systems of thought is a welcome addition to an ongoing debate. Steven Wolfe's article on his book *The Obligation* is article 18 in this issue of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*. **Bob Krone and Gordon Arthur.**