

# UC Humanist Sees the New Right 'Diminishing the Human Spirit'

By Kay Mills

SANTA BARBARA

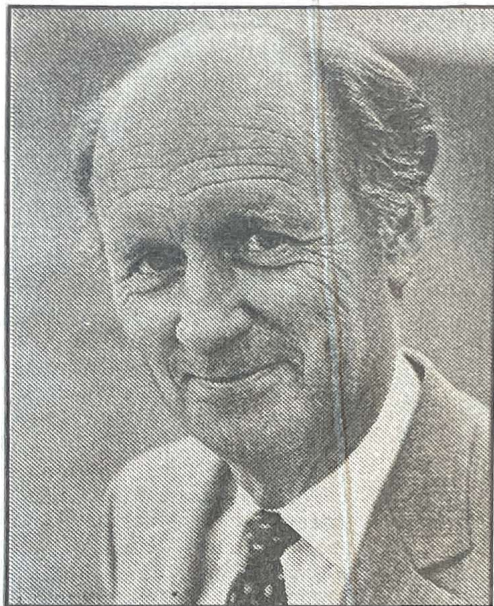
**T**he battle for the American mind occurs and reoccurs in U.S. history. The most recent contest matches the certitude of American fundamentalist movements against the inquiry, often scholarly but almost always uncertain, of the American humanists.

Such national figures as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, leading the Moral Majority, say the nation is slipping toward decay and political disarray along a slope greased by "secular humanists" who view man, not God, as the center of existence. Opponents say that by exploring the humanities—literature, philosophy, history and related fields—people will better understand human complexity and may develop a commitment to build a workable society for all people. Study of the humanities, they insist, is not incompatible with a religious tradition.

California, usually a fertile soil for confrontations between research and revelation, has been spared much of the public battle, perhaps thanks to Walter H. Capps, a humanist and a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. For a person who studies the contemplative life and has written about it in a 1983 book, "The Monastic Impulse" (Crossroad), Capps is also tied to the temporal life. He teaches courses on Vietnam and on the Moral Majority; he is chairman of the California Council for the Humanities, observing its 10th anniversary this month, and he is national president of the Federation of State Councils for the Humanities.

Capps has argued that the New Right has "a strong potential for diminishing the human spirit." Many humanists shared the fear that ideas might be suppressed when the Reagan Administration came to power with Moral Majority backing.

Capps himself had initially warned the



LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

## Walter H. Capps

humanities federation that "there was this wild movement in Lynchburg, Va., and they were calling humanities advocates 'secular humanists' and we really ought to build a defense against them . . . ." Falwell was perceived to be a particular threat to education because the Moral Majority believes that each time secular humanists are successful in the schools they fashion "a human being who stands in opposition to . . . the Christian religious perspective," Capps wrote.

"I know I got that job [as federation president] because the people knew my interest in the subject of neo-conservatism and they thought I would fight against that group," Capps said. "I have not had to do that."

The threat, especially in California, turned out to be more theoretical than real; it simply has not materialized, Capps says, although he acknowledges that

others humanists may not be as sanguine as he. Careful in selecting his words, Capps thinks humanities councils have survived because they anticipated potential ideological brush fires and applied academic amelioration. Humanities programs have become less political and more educational; that has helped them persist. Some activists may not approve, but that is what has happened, Capps says.

"In the old days humanities programs would fund something like Russian Awareness Week and you'd bring in people who might talk about the failures of State Department policies in dealing with the Russians. Now you have to be careful of things like that," Capps said in an interview at his Santa Barbara home.

"I'm not at liberty to say all the things I did behind the scenes," he said, but in this state, "the Falwellites never had any power with the California humanities council." With a \$750,000 budget, the council finances local history projects, educational conferences, films and lectures.

Capps has adopted a search-and-mediate approach, inviting advocates of the New Right to come into his classroom. "I say these are movements in our country now and it's important for us to understand them rather than simply reading about them. I tell the speakers they can't come in here and simply preach; they have to tell us what this is about, how they got involved . . . I don't think any students who listen to that decide to become card-carrying members of the Moral Majority, but I think they're able to place it in perspective."

Capps, 51, became involved with the humanities at Portland (Ore.) State University about 30 years ago, in a philosophy course. His background was a Scandinavian Lutheran upbringing in Omaha, Neb. At Portland he read Plato's "The Republic" and was "on an emotional high" for several months. "I'd devour it. I'd carry it

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Kay Mills is a Times editorial writer.



# Humanist

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around with me and reread it. I couldn't understand how anything outside the Bible could have that kind of impact." The impact was one of dual focus, "to divide the world between the world of change and the world of permanence, and to talk about the values that are perennial and permanent. I didn't get so much of that out of the religious tradition. The religious tradition was oriented more toward salvation and toward where you go after you die, which didn't interest me much then and doesn't now particularly."

His studies at Portland State confirmed a commitment to do something in the public domain: "That's been the consistent thing from the beginning—teaching at a state school, being a part of the public humanities program in California, being on the humanities federation."

AUGUS GEDG

Finally there is a promise in your Editorial Pages will be new, sensible and honest. That of Lee Iacocca. His age and future columns in The Times are exciting; one that defines the issues facing us.

I look forward to a frank, intelligent approach to national problems; one devoid of "talk," "hot dogs, apple pie Chevrolet" slogans, and the "the buck" philosophy that characterized this Administration. **WILLIAM J. LO**

You have just made my day! Iacocca is going to be writing in The Times as a columnist. Wow! What a great choice you made, and I certainly hope you will be able to persuade him to write more than eight commentaries. The first one was great! Remember, "Eight Is Not Enough."

MARION W. BENNETT  
Pasadena

If Iacocca's writings live up to their reputation, we can expect lots of candor on the Editorial Pages of The Times.

There are areas where, one would expect, we can even this outspoken business man be candid, when surrounded by the assassins of his own business community. I.e., the following:

1—The prosecution of responsible executives for the illegal practices of their corporations.

Capps wanted to broaden public awareness of issues he cared about and to become Americanized in the process. "I can't psychoanalyze myself, but I wanted to become more than a Swedish Lutheran . . . to speak in a place where people wouldn't be able to stereotype you, saying that because you are one religion or one ethnic background, you think one particular way."

After earning degrees at Yale University, Capps came to UC Santa Barbara in the first days of its religious-studies program and found a particularly hospitable intellectual climate. "It seems almost everything that happens in the field of religion happens here and it sometimes happens here first. The contact between Eastern religions and Western religions is a reality here. We don't hear about a Buddhist as somebody who is far, far away. Muslims, too. Other religious traditions are very much in evidence here."

Today Capps is at work on a book on the New Right, an expansion of ideas he expressed in "The Unfinished War" (Beacon Press, 1982)

about the rise of both introspection and conservative religious trends as a result of the inconclusive Vietnam experience.

Capps' general thesis is that there is a reason for the New Right:

"The New Right knows that liberals have lost something when it comes to commitment and allegiance but the New Right . . . is better for diagnostic purposes than for substantive purposes. It's going to have a real political problem by 1988. It's had the happy coincidence of a Falwell and a Reagan combining on so many things. Without the political leadership, it wouldn't have gotten as far as it has.

"It also does not have a very compelling religious base. There's not as much Christianity as ought to be there. I think it's racist and I think it's anti-Semitic, or always in danger of breaking out that way.

"What I don't like about the New Right is that I don't think it enhances the ability of the human spirit to give expression. I think it bottles it. I think it doesn't enlarge humankind." □

chip in so our citizens won't lose their homes in mud slides two months from now. Or will we be talking of mud slushing toward "expensive homes?"

LYNN D. SHEPODD  
Pasadena

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