Even Roberts parts company with enthusiasts who believe that talk will eventually crowd music off the airwaves, creating a brave new world of informational radio. Yet, he maintains, "talk radio will provide an anchor for our rootless and mobile society and an invisible public forum for our far-flung democracy."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

In Defense Of Sophistry

"For and Against the 'New' Education" by Bernard Knox, in *Humanities* (July–Aug. 1991), National Endowment for the Humanities, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506.

Plato (427–347 B.C.) gave the Sophists a bad name, and it has persisted to this day. The denigration was quite undeserved, observes Knox, a classics professor emeritus at Yale University. In fact, he says, the Sophists, who taught rhetoric in Athens during the fifth century B.C., were "the first professors of the humanities," and they "created an education designed for the first great democracy."

The birth of Athenian democracy in that century had created a need for a new education. Whether to win a majority in the Assembly for a desired policy, or just to win a verdict for oneself in the new courts of law, Athenians now found "the art of persuasion" to be the key to success. And the Sophists—such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias—were professionals in that art. "Protagoras offered to teach, for a price . . . how to make the weaker case appear the stronger. This, of course, is the essence of the art of persuasion: it is the weaker case that needs the rhetoric." But although rhetoric was its core, the Sophists' educational program also included, in rudimentary form, all the liberal arts, Knox says. For the ancient Greeks, Homer and other poets were the authorities on questions of conduct and belief, and the Sophists all claimed to be interpreters of poetry. Their discussions might begin as literary critiques, but they then moved easily into the moral and political realms.

The Sophists, Knox says, "encouraged their students to question every received idea, to subject age-old concepts of the relationship between man and god, man and society, to the criterion of reasoned, organized discussion." For the first time in Athenian history, he says, doubts were expressed about the superiority of Greeks to barbarians, and there was debate over the position of women in society, of political equality, and even of slavery.

Plato, who turned the word *Sophist* into a term of abuse, "also, though this aspect of his work is seldom mentioned, tried to suppress the new humanities," Knox points out. "It was perfectly logical that he should do so. They had been created to provide education in citizenship for that democracy which Plato loathed and despised, not only because it had put his master Socrates to death but also because he saw clearly the real flaws of Athenian imperial democracy—its inability to maintain a stable policy, its encouragement of sycophancy and political corruption." But Plato also perceived as flaws of democracy "what in fact were its virtues—its openness to new ideas, its freedom of speech."

In the fifth century B.C. as today, Knox says, the humanities were on the defensive. Now, the "canon" of the great books of Western civilization is being attacked; but then, too, the humanities were under fire. Then as now, "they were vulnerable to the accusation that they posed questions but gave no definitive answers; that their effect was often unsettling, if not subversive; that they made their devotees unfit for real life." But the humanities came into being as an education for democracy—and that, Knox says, is still the strongest argument for them.

A New Age of Faith?

At the end of a century that has not been kind to religious faith, it is noteworthy that belief has managed to endure. And now two well-known writers—poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, in *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Spring 1991), and neoconservative thinker Irving Kristol, in *Commentary* (Aug. 1991)—dare to predict that religion may enjoy a revival in the 21st century.

Czeslaw Milosz:

[The 18th century] has been called The Age of Reason and our scientific-technological civilization has been traced back to the basic premises laid down by thinkers and scientists of that time.... What should surprise us about that century is its optimism.... Human reason approached then the super-abundance of existing phenomena with a confidence in its own unlimited forces because God assigned to it the task of discovering the marvels of His creation. [It] was The Age of Pious *Reason....*

The next century, the 19th, would exacerbate some tendencies of its predecessor and elaborate what can be called a scientific Weltanschaung *[worldview], in fact quite distant from those harmonious visions of the earlier scientists. Destructive of values, it would prompt Friedrich Nietzsche to announce the advent of "European nihilism."...*

I would be wary in joining all those who hail the new physics as the beginning of an era of recovered harmony.... Yet I am more cynical when in the biochemist Jacques Monod's Chance and Necessity *I find his desperate statement about the one-way path we are launched on by science: "a track which 19th-century scientism saw leading infallibly upward to an empyrean noon hour of mankind, whereas what we see opening before us today is an abyss of darkness." I think Jacques Monod was writing a dirge to bygone attitudes, while science now again stands before a breath-taking, miraculous spectacle of unsuspected complexity and it is the new physics which is responsible for this change of orientation.... The theory of quanta, independently of conclusions drawn from it...restores the mind to its role of a co-creator in the fabric of reality. This favors a shift from belittling man as an insignificant speck in the immensity of galaxies to regarding him again as the main actor in the universal drama.... The enthusiasm of the 18th-century scientists who searched for an objective order looks naive today, yet I sense at the end of our century something like a renewal of a hopeful tone.*

Irving Kristol:

We have, in recent years, observed two major events that represent turning points in the history of the 20th century. The first is the death of socialism, both as an ideal and a political program.... The second is the collapse of secular humanism—the religious basis of socialism—as an ideal, but not yet as an ideological program, a way of life. [However,] as the ideal is withering away, the real will sooner or later follow suit.

If one looks back at the intellectual history of this century, one sees the rationalist religion of secular humanism gradually losing its credibility even as it marches triumphantly through the institutions of our society—through the schools, the courts, the churches, the media. This loss of credibility flows from two fundamental flaws in secular humanism.

First, the philosophical rationalism of secular humanism can, at best, provide us with a statement of the necessary assumptions of a moral code, but it cannot deliver any such code itself....

For a long time now, the Western world has been leading a kind of schizophrenic existence, with a prevailing moral code inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition and a set of secular-humanist beliefs about the nature and destiny of man to which that code is logically irrelevant. Inevitably, belief in the moral code has become more and more attenuated over time, as we have found ourselves baffled by the Nietzschean challenge: if God is really dead, by what authority do we say any particular practice is prohibited or permitted?...

A second flaw in secular humanism is even more fundamental.... If there is one indisputable fact about the human condition it is that no community can survive if it is persuaded—or even if it suspects—that its members are leading meaningless lives in a meaningless universe....

As the spirit of secular humanism loses its momentum, it is reasonable to anticipate that religion will play a more central role in American life.