Finding Humanism listed among the 26 religions represented on the Board of Ministry at Harvard may seem curious, but Humanist chaplain Thomas Ferrick relishes that as one of many anomalies about his job.

Humanism, as defined by the American Humanist Association, “is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives”—yet Ferrick spends his days in Memorial Church, the symbolic center of Harvard’s religious life. He inhabits a tiny basement office within the headquarters of the United Ministry, the umbrella organization for Harvard’s religious representatives, a number of whom owe their inclusion, in part, to his vigorous lobbying on their behalf.

The Jesuit-trained Ferrick cheerfully admits that he and the other board members don’t always manage a united viewpoint. He points out, “The wonderful thing is that when the United Ministry meets and begins to debate different things—say, gay rights—we always use the logic and the rationality of naturalism. When any chaplain’s point of view fails to reach consensus, he or she has to withdraw that issue, and settle for gains in other places. And what an experience it is to test the limits of tolerance and to learn respect for other points of view,” he adds. “It’s a living example of what is possible.”

“Dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches” was the reason a 1643 prospectus gave for the founding of Harvard College, but in post-Enlightenment days, Harvard’s ethos has been more informed by the rationalism of William James and George Santayana. So when Ferrick, armed with endorsements from the American Ethical Union, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, and the American Humanist Association, proposed his services in 1974, many saw it as a case of “bringing coals to Newcastle.” Ferrick, however, was (and is) quick to point out that even though the Emersonian ideal of personal self-sufficiency has been dominant in Harvard culture, there is a distinction between secular pragmatism and secular humanism with its emphasis on ethical behavior. In any event, the president of the United Ministry that year invited Ferrick to make a formal application to join its ranks, and he was accepted.

“It’s likely,” Ferrick speculates, “that the United Ministry decided it would be wise to provide ethical guidance for students lacking a strong religious identification. I’m not here as a watchdog, but I try to get students to transcend their goals of personal success, to choose a social responsibility inherent in the Harvard experience.”

Ferrick brought to his pastoral role at Harvard his eight years’ experience as a Catholic chaplain (first at Dartmouth College and then within the University of Massachusetts system) before he left the priesthood in 1969, propelled by his disillusionment with the church’s authoritarianism and his evolving ideas about the nature of human existence.

In his childhood, the Massachusetts native says, the Catholic Church seemed to offer the certainties life had denied him. Both his parents succumbed to tuberculosis before he was eight, and his early years in foster care were confusing and lonely. Educated in a Catholic environment, he drew consolation from the notion of the Christian God. “In retrospect it was ‘knowledge’ that was the engine of my life,” he says. “I believed I had proof. The rational steps that I could take brought me right to God. Only many years later did I realize that those were not automatic steps up a staircase to God; they were great flights of hope and faith.”

In 1971, the ex-priest was invited to become the leader of the Boston Ethical Society (a position he held until 1974, when the society could no longer afford it). There he became acquainted with the American Humanist Association and its science-based philosophy. “The laws of cause and effect, the laws of randomness, these were so clear, so profound and definite,” he explains, “that I was able to step away from all theological meanderings and philosophical perusals and go toward Humanism.”

Ferrick admits to a slight regret for the absence in organized Humanism of “rituals like singing together or listening to readings of passages from Humanist texts,” though adherents do have naming ceremonies, weddings, burial and memorial services, and their own feast days: Charles Darwin’s birth date (February 12), the summer and winter solstices, and the anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (October 24). “Certainly we all need a little ritual,” he explains.

Despite his commitment to naturalism, and its conviction that nature is all that exists, Ferrick is proud of having prodded the United Ministry to add the Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist religions to their roster. “If there was a sizable group of students who believed in this, that, or the
other thing,” he says, “I was all in favor of their religion being included [on the Board] as long as they fully accepted the obligation of mutual respect.”

After three decades at Harvard, Ferrick plans to retire in June, and this past year, for the first time, hired an assistant chaplain, Greg Epstein, with a view to grooming him as his successor. Epstein, who is training for the rabbinate at the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, believes, like Ferrick, that Humanism is the natural outcome of religion that has kept pace with science, and sees no contradiction in embracing the cultural roots of religions and building on them.

Ferrick likes to tell a story that sums up his convictions about the harmonizing virtues of Humanism while acting as his modest yardstick for success. It concerns two Harvard graduates, class of 1924—friends once, who grew apart. John Loeb amassed a fortune in banking and over time donated more than $70 million to the University. Social and political activist Corliss Lamont was a founding member in 1941 of the American Humanist Association and one of Ferrick’s earliest supporters at Harvard. In 1993, when John Loeb read an article the Harvard Gazette ran about Ferrick and the small remittance he survived on, he was moved to endow the chaplaincy, telling a New York Times reporter, “The humanistic approach to deeds, not creeds, appeals to me.” Lamont caught the Times piece and picked up the phone and called his old adversary. A year later, the two met at their seventieth reunion.

“I was present when those two elderly gentlemen met and embraced under the good offices of Humanism,” Ferrick says with satisfaction. “Bertrand Russell said, ‘In the end, kindness is the foremost virtue.’ It’s a survival technique, this kindness. Our civilization depends on it.”  

Lauren Byrne is a freelance writer living in the Cambridge area.

dency, he said, or let the Corporation and the public believe it was “content” with the current state of affairs.

The debate was conducted mostly on an institutional plane. Everett Mendelssohn said his review of the previous meetings’ transcripts revealed concern and dissatisfaction amounting to “a loss of confidence.” While appreciating the president’s expressed commitment to change, the issues could not be resolved by “an apology, a smile, and a Valentine card” (a reference, perhaps, to a New Yorker cartoon of three women in a campus setting captioned, “I hear we’re all getting valentines from Lawrence Summers”).

“We need leadership that is not dictated by instrumental rationality alone,” said Wei-ming Tu, Harvard-Yenching professor of Chinese history and philosophy and of Confucian ethics. “I believe that the time is ripe now for a fundamental change not only in behavior and attitude, but also in the mentality and ethos of the Harvard leadership.”

But Nancy Rosenblum saw Matory’s motion as “misleading, misguided, and mischievous.” Unlike a parliamentary vote, she said, this measure could not replace the administration. It misstated differing degrees of trust between faculty members and the president on different issues. And it diverted attention from the constructive work already under way to effect changes in governance, faculty hiring, and curricular improvement.

Winthrop professor of history Stephan Thernstrom, disclaiming any view on Summers’s management per se, declared that “academic freedom is on trial here.” Even as he regretted the president’s recent apologies for his remarks, Thernstrom said, a “vote to censure him for his speech will set the University back by 50 years, to the days of McCarthyism.”

Maier professor of political economy Benjamin M. Friedman (who served as an adviser on Summers’s doctoral dissertation), urged his colleagues not to take action that “amounts to changing the terms of engagement by which we deal with one another.” He worried that if the motions before the faculty carried, future disputes would automatically result in FAS business being conducted in the press or through no-confidence measures within departments, at the decanal level, or during other presidencies.

In the voting that began after 5 P.M., the faculty rejected that reasoning. Although the results were not announced until after the debate on a second motion introduced by Theda Skocpol, that became something of an anticlimax.

Skocpol’s measure, written with colleagues, read: “The Faculty regrets the President’s mid-January statements about women in science and the adverse consequences of those statements for individuals and for Harvard; and the Faculty also regrets aspects of the President’s managerial approach as discussed in recent meetings of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The Faculty appreciates the President’s stated intent to address these issues, and seeks to meet the challenges facing Harvard in ways that are collegial and consistent with longstanding faculty responsibilities in institutional governance.”

She shared Thernstrom’s commitment to free speech, Skocpol said, but the issue concerning the president’s January remarks on women was “not that they were politically incorrect, but that they were just plain incorrect.” His “unilateral managerial approach” had harmed the faculty. Her motion identified important problems that were “not yet solved.”

In the final debate, Johnstone Family professor of psychology Steven Pinker, whose research underpinned some of Summers’s comments on the biological basis for aptitudes, warned that there was no “defensible principle” behind the part of the motion “regretting” the president’s January talk—and that that absence portended a pernicious erosion of scholarly inquiry at every level of the University. Speaking last, Saltonstall professor of history Charles S. Maier said that the issue was neither academic freedom nor silencing of opinion, but governance.

With that, the results of the balloting on the no-confidence resolution were announced—218 for, 185 against, 18 abstaining—making the second vote (253 to 137 in favor, 18 abstentions) a formality.

Kirby gave the last word to Summers, who told the faculty in a husky voice, “I have done my best these last two months” to listen, “to make appropriate adjustments, and to learn.” And, he said, “I will