

## Religious Humanism

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*Religious* humanism--what's that? Is that like saying leftish right, or uppish down? Everyone knows that humanist are atheists, or at least agnostics, right? The term *humanism* was coined, in part, to be in contrast to *theism*. Theism means belief in God, religion is about God; Humanism is anti-theism, so how can humanism be religious?

To many Humanists--secular Humanists--the term *religious* Humanism is indeed a senseless contradiction of terms. But for many other Humanist the term makes good sense, and in fact many of us believe that religious Humanism is the leading edge of both theology and philosophy. First, a brief background about the origin Humanism.

Through the European Middle Ages, from about 400 CE to 1400 CE, the official theological position was that God was divine and humans were corrupt, cursed with Original Sin from the moment of birth. God was all-knowing and all-good. Humans could not trust their reason or their motivations. The ancient scriptures were *literally* true, and any critiquing of them was forbidden, sacrilegious. Science had to conform to the revealed truth of the scriptures. So the Earth had to be at the center of the universe, with heaven above and hell below. Astronomers who found that a sun-centered solar system more accurately described the movements of planets and stars were forbidden to state their beliefs. The arts had to support official theology, and any variation could be severely punished. Kings had the divine right to rule their people, who were incapable of ruling themselves. Torture or death by burning at the stake could await any scientist, artist, or politician who veered too far from Catholic dogma. It was even forbidden that scripture be presented in any language but Latin, so that the people would be dependent on the priests for all interpretation of the Bible.

Now, we have to be fair to Catholicism of the Middle Ages. As the first European-wide religion, it united the peoples of European kingdoms into one moral system. Being a Christian gave every person a certain status of worth and dignity. Religions at the previous *tribal* level extended their morality to a narrow group. Beyond that group murder, rape and pillage was morally fine. Christianity extended moral consideration and dignity to the lowest of the common people, at least in principle, reigning in the most egregious abuses of people by their rulers and reigning in the most horrific abuses of war. While these abuses certainly continued, they were subject to moral sanction from a European-wide system of Christian belief. The price of this rough civilizing process was absolute intolerance of any questioning of the Catholic dogma that supported it. Identifying humans as corrupt and incapable of finding their own truth helped prevent the questioning and criticism that could have brought down the entire institution.

However, by about 1300 CE scientists, artists, and political leaders were beginning to rebel at such absolute control of reason and creativity. The king of England was forced into limitations of his power by signing the Magna Carta. Copernicus was showing that a sun-centered model of the solar system provided a more accurate calendar than did the Earth-centered model. Galileo's telescope offer more evidence that the Earth was not the center of the universe. Artists began painting the human body more accurately, and began emphasizing *human* beauty. Before long, the Bible was being illegally translated and published in local languages allowing everyone who could read or hear to interpret the

scriptures in their own way. The Catholic church cracked down on this intellectual rebellion as hard as it could. Writers were censured, threatened, jailed, exiled, and burned at the stake. This was truly a *war*: a war of the modern worldview against the medieval worldview.

*Humanism* was born within this war. Being initially the creation of mostly French, English, and Scottish intellectuals, Humanism was firmly on the side of the modern worldview. It used human *reason*--not faith--to show that Christian dogma was constructed by humans from ancient myths and superstitions. Humanism showed that religious dogma had been used through the ages to suppress the freedom of the people, and had for the previous thousand years of the Middle Ages slowed scientific, artistic, and political progress. Humanism viewed religion as childish illusion from which the human race needed to be cured. Humanism was firmly *secular*. That is, it saw *this* world and *this* life as the source of ultimate value and meaning. It looked to human reason in the forms of modern science and philosophy--not the ancient scriptures--as the source of truth. It saw references to spirituality, to God, to soul as dangerous slippery slopes back into superstition and myth.

And, indeed, the progress within science, art, and politics following the Renaissance and the Enlightenment seemed to confirm--among intellectuals at least--that freedom *from* religious ideas was the great gift of Humanism to the Western world. In the 1800s the Unitarian denomination of Protestant Christianity began to accept non-belief in God as a legitimate option for its members. In 1933 forward-looking intellectuals in America, including lots of UU clergy and the great American philosopher John Dewey, signed the Humanist Manifesto, which officially declared the end of the power of religious dogma and mythology, and essentially the end of the belief in God. Reason was in, religion was out.

Humanism has had great power in the general culture of the Western world as well. In our present time almost 20% of Americans report on surveys that they are either atheists or are uncertain about the existence of God, and in Europe the percentage is much higher. Secular Humanism--*anti*-religious, anti-clerical Humanism--has now long won the hearts and minds of Western intellectuals, and seems gradually to be winning the hearts and minds of the general population, too. In many, many ways this 600-year-old rationalizing, secularizing process has been a wonderful thing. Very few of us want to go back to the science, art, politics and religion of the Middle Ages.

But religion isn't just about superstition and myth. It isn't just about creating an intellectual "opiate" for controlling the people, as Karl Marx put it. Religion is also about finding answers to questions such as: What is the ultimate meaning of life, what is the ultimate purpose of life, what is the ultimate good in life? If secular Humanism is today the major alternative to religion, then what answers does it offer to these questions?

Secular Humanism's answers are these: Life, including human life, is nothing but a matter of particles and physical forces organized in a certain arrangements. Any ideas about some spirit or soul either in humans or in the universe is wishful thinking; an illusion, as Freud described it. Evolution on this planet, over the past four billion years, from the level of viruses up to humans, has been completely random. The existence of humans as conscious, reasoning, language-using beings is nothing but our good luck, just a matter of chance. And there is no ultimate Good to life. What humans consider good and moral is a product of their socialization, subject to natural variation among cultures.

Whatever morality that is most supportive of the dominant powers in a culture will be the morality that seems right and natural to its people. There is no absolute standard by which to judge any culture. We in the West have no natural right to criticize the morality of any other culture. Death by stoning may be reprehensible to us, and because of that we may use our power to stop it, but there is no *ultimate* basis for criticizing it. Perhaps by some logical Utilitarian moral algebra--where the greatest good for the greatest number is the final moral yardstick--stoning criminals to death stabilizes the culture at large in various ways and so benefits more than it harms.

Enjoy this life, because that's all there is. Ultimately nothing about our lives or the entire human race matters or has lasting meaning because this planet will be destroyed within another five billion years when the sun dies and explodes; and besides the *entire universe* is eventually going to die either by contraction and explosion, or by expansion and freezing. Ultimately, your life--anyone's life, life in general--has no meaning except whatever meaning *you* can somehow come up with for your individual self. So feel free to create the meaning that most appeals to you: live for the benefit of your family, or for the benefit of charities, or for science, or for art, or for making as much money as you can, or for maximizing your social and political power--or for Jesus, if you like. Just do what makes you happiest because, really, that's all that matters: being happy during your short and meaningless existence.

What if you don't like this secular Humanist dogma? What if you sense that there is something more to life, some ultimate meaning and purpose in life in general and in your particular life? In the West, the alternative to this secular humanist dogma has been, mainly, theism. That is, the alternative to secular Humanism has been some form of Judaic, Islamic, or Christian mythical dogma. And to many well educated Westerners, accepting *that* dogma feels like an intellectual regression to pre-rational, magical ways of thinking So: either accept the warm, reassuring dogma of mythic theology, or accept the cold, disenchanting dogma of secular Humanism; is there a third alternative? Yes, nowadays there is.

Starting with the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel in the early 1800s; then in Charles Darwin's book the *Descent of Man* published in the late 1800s; then in the early-1900s writings of Sri Aurobindo, the Oxford-educated Indian scholar; then in the writings of the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead and the European philosopher Pierre Teilard de Chardin; then in the mid-1950s writings of European philosopher Jean Gebser; then in the 1960s and 70s writings of the psychologist Abraham Maslow; then in the writings of psycho-historian Lloyd deMause; then since 1980 in the writings of a host of scientists and philosophers who are applying the theory of evolution to the social sciences, the most famous group being the General Evolution Research Group; then since 1990 in the writings of thinkers who are synthesizing the insights of Zen into the phenomena of human consciousness with the insights of Western psychology and philosophy, most famously Ken Wilbur---from all this over the past 200 years we have emerging a new paradigm, a strong and viable alternative both to old-style, pre-rational theology and to the meaninglessness of existence offered by 20th-century secular Humanism.

So what is this new paradigm? It's called *religious* Humanism. It takes *consciousness* very seriously.

First, religious Humanism sees that Consciousness is a *natural property of the universe*. It's not true that there is this immaterial thing called consciousness on the one hand vs. physical matter on the other hand, with an incomprehensible link between the two. Rather, consciousness--or at least some kind of *subjective* experience, or interior *state*--is an intrinsic property of the physical universe. Consciousness is the *inside* of the world; physics and other natural sciences describe the *outside* of the world. The intensity and complexity of consciousness depends on how physical matter is organized. At relatively low levels of organized physical complexity, the interior state is very rudimentary and is called *prehension*. At a higher level of complexity, the interior experience of organized matter is called *sentience*--having feelings and intentions. Any mammal has sentience. Physical matter organized in the form of the human brain generates a form of consciousness that is called *sapience*: having language and reason, in addition to feelings and intentions. Consciousness is an intrinsic property of the universe.

Second, religious Humanism sees that over the past 100,000 years, since the appearance of *homo sapiens*, the *primary* evolutionary force on this planet has been not been based on random genetic variations and natural selection; rather the primary evolutionary force on this planet has been human *mental* evolution. When we study the changes in people and entire cultures from the Stone Age to modern times, a clear pattern emerges. We see that knowledge has increased by many orders of magnitude: knowledge of the physical world, knowledge of the nature of cultures and societies, knowledge of individual psychology. Because of this knowledge, there has been an immense increase through the ages in humans' technical ability to improve their health, to reduce the dangers and drudgery of their daily lives, and to have free time to express their creativity.

Third, religious Humanism sees that over the ages, with lots of set-backs and still very incompletely, humans have gradually become guided less by aggression and more by compassion. Parenting has become less harsh, and more focused on the developmental needs of the child; punishment of criminals has become less brutal, and in most of the developed Western world capital punishment has been eliminated. Public care for the sick and the poor has evolved from poor-houses and alms baskets to governmental social safety-net programs. Formal education has evolved from being a rare luxury to being a birth right of every person. Oppression of females and minorities has been reduced, especially in the West. Endless further examples of increases in the cultural expression of *care*, rather than Old Testament style tit-for-tat justice, could be listed.

Forth, religious Humanism sees that, from the beginning, evolution has *not* been completely random. There has been an *arrow of direction* to evolution. This direction has been described, first by Plato and then by numerous others, as consciousness ever moving toward more Beauty, more Truth, and more Goodness. *Beauty* refers to the increase of complexity with an accompanying increase of harmony among the parts: contrast the beauty of the primordial oceans filled with water and plankton, with the beauty of the modern oceans teeming with innumerable forms of life joined together in complex ecosystems. *Truth* refers to an increase in the scope and effectiveness of knowledge. Goodness refers to an increase in the power of wisdom and compassion. From the moment of the Big Bang 15 billion years ago, the universe itself has been developing, as all beings develop, as all *organisms* develop. From the hot soup immediately following the Big Bang, to the violent condensations of matter that formed stars and then planets, then from simple organic molecules to one-celled organisms, to massive animals with

rudimentary consciousness (dinosaurs), to smaller more adaptive animals that have the most massive consciousness that has ever existed on this earth--humans, that is--the universe has developed. This development has been no more random than is the 70-year development of an embryo into a wise elder. There is no reason to expect that the development of the universe is complete. We can expect continuing advances in the beauty, truth, and goodness present in the world. There is no solid reason to think that this development will ever end. What modern physics predicts as the end of the universe is subject to infinite revisions over the next few billion years. At some point in the future, our current stage of physics and cosmology will be seen as frighteningly incomplete.

What are *we* then? What are humans? What are you and I as individuals? What *are* our lives? Religious Humanism says that modern human consciousness is the current leading edge of the development of the universe. Through each of us, the creative power of the universe is manifesting itself in what is so far its best, most advanced version. We are it. We are the universe at, so far, its most creative, most knowing, and most caring. Your life is the newest link in a chain of development that goes back at least 15 billion years. Your mind is the universe at, so far, its most developed.

Understanding that you are on the leading edge of a movement toward ever increasing beauty, truth, and goodness imparts great meaning to your life. You are not just temporarily organized dirt that is nice for now, but will be gone tomorrow with no trace of meaning--like sand castles on the beach that are fun to build, beautiful to look at, but that leave no trace after high tide. No, your life is, at present, the top floor of a structure that reaches back to the infinite past and will continue to rise into the infinite future. Within your sphere of influence, your life affects both the quality of the consciousness of your contemporaries, and serves as part of the foundation of the consciousness of future individuals. The kind of influence you have in the present, and the quality of foundation you life builds for the future, matters. You life can push forward Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. Literally, you can promote the evolution of consciousness. This arrow of the evolution of the universe is *what you are at the core*, and the more you develop it within your life, the more your life *enacts* this process, the more fulfilled you will feel, and the more you will have a sense of the ultimate value of your existence.

So, why the word *Humanism* in the term religious Humanism? It's because humans, not some man in the sky, are beautiful, true, and good. Why the word *religious* in the term religious Humanism? It's because there is a Divine aspect to the world. The creative power that causes the development of the universe, the development of consciousness, is divine. It is the source of everything beautiful, true, and good. It is present in the world at large, and it is present in each of us. Present in the world, it's often referred to as God. Present in each of us, it's often referred to as Soul. If you like those words, use them. If you don't, then use the word Spirit, or creative evolutionary force, or whatever seems to fit for you.

You are a child of the Divine, and you *are* the Divine. Accept this gift. Let it guide how you live. Further its development within you and within others. Live with the faith that we are riding an exhilarating wave of life moving toward an ever better existence. *That* is religious Humanism. Amen.