

Humanism--Atheism Filled with Pride Jim Mettenbrink

What do John Dewey (father of modern American education), Stephen Gould (paleontologist), Richard Dawkins (evolutionary scientist), Ted Turner (founder of CNN), John Galbraith (economist), Carl Sagan (astronomer), Andrei Sakharov (Soviet dissident / nuclear physicist), Benjamin Spock (pediatrician, author of *Baby and Child Care*), Jonas Salk (developed first polio vaccine), Julian Huxley (drafted UNESCO charter), Betty Friedan (co-founder of NOW) and Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood) have in common? All espoused humanism!

Since leaving office, former president Jimmy Carter has devoted himself to humanitarian causes. Following the Asian tsunami in December 2005, former presidents G.H.W Bush and Clinton rallied humanitarian relief for the stricken. When we hear the word humanitarian, thoughts of compassion and benevolence immediately arise. Humane treatment is the handmaiden to compassion. We name people with such traits humanitarians. Many will equate the “humanitarian” as a “humanist.” Are they the same?

Absolutely not! Anyone who is kind or benevolent toward the afflicted is called a humanitarian. A humanist can be a humanitarian, but not necessarily so. Humanism is a philosophy of life, thus a religion. So, the humanist follows the principles of Humanism. But, little is known of this religion.

Humanism is a form of atheism. Whereas atheism says there is no supernatural God, humanism not only asserts the same, but elevates man to be his own god. Man appeals to no higher authority other than himself. Implicitly, there is no objective, absolute right or wrong, thus anything is permissible provided there is a public consensus. But nothing can be established as absolutely and permanently right or wrong.

In contrast to atheism, modern humanism, in a sense, has been creedalized via a series of manifestos defining and outlining this “self-worshipping” religion.

How did humanism arise in America?

Although humanists trace their roots back to the fourth century B.C., its thrust into modern American society began in the late 1800s. The influence of the Enlightenment, Darwinian evolution and higher biblical criticism gave rise to religious liberalism, which significantly took root in the Unitarian Church in the U. S. Theological liberalism eroded the belief that the Bible was divine truth. So the arbiter of truth was transferred from God to human reason and moral conscience. Whatever man decided truth to be was allegedly truth!

Since liberalism had undermined people’s attitude toward the Bible’s absolute authority and, combined with the Unitarian church’s distaste for creeds, the ground was fertile for atheistic invasion. In fact it came from within the Unitarian church itself.

William Gannett, a minister at St. Paul, Minnesota, reportedly stated that he wanted the basis of fellowship in his congregation to be so broad that even the well-meaning atheist would be welcome. This notion is supported by Gannett’s own agnosticism, “It is hard to prove a God; harder to prove him our God; harder still to prove our immortality.” (*A Year of Miracles*, 1882). The battle within the Unitarian Church continued for several decades between the “God men” and the “no-God men.”

In 1918, Curtis Reese, a liberal Unitarian minister, evolutionist and leader among the “no-God men,” stated at an annual Western Unitarian conference that God was “philosophically possible, scientifically unproved and religiously unnecessary.” Reese aligned a significant number of Unitarian ministers to himself which foreshadowed the formation of a humanist organization. Essentially, he was an organizational catalyst of early Religious Humanism in the U. S. Reese later became the primary editor and signer of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933 and a director of the American Humanist Association (est.1941).

Humanism’s Creed - The Humanist Manifesto

John Dewey, professor at Columbia University, was a humanist and also a signer of the first Humanist Manifesto (1933). He believed Charles Darwin had not only discovered the origin of mankind via organic evolution, but that he had hit on the basic principle of all life – that nothing is absolute, but always changing, ever evolving. This could be restated as, “There are no absolutes in any realm of life, science, morality, ethics, religion, education, ad infinitum.” If anything can be said about humanism’s primary principle of no absolutes, it is that, “The only absolute is no absolutes.” Indeed, humanism itself is not absolute. This is evident in the updating of the Humanist Manifesto three times in 70 years.

In 1952 Charles H. Lyttle, wrote that the first Humanist Manifesto “sought to replace despondency and doubt of God’s loving Providence by confidence in the power of human intelligence and co-operative good will to become its own Providence.” **Much of the beliefs of this Manifesto have found its way into modern day textbooks.** In other words man set himself up as his own god, making and changing the rules of living as he sees fit at the moment.

The First Humanist Manifesto (1933)

After a lot of discussion, dissension and editing, the first Humanist Manifesto was signed by 34 Humanists and published in 1933. As much as the humanists deny it, the manifesto has the nature of a creed with 15 tenets. To the chagrin of a later generation of humanists, this manifesto called the movement “Religious Humanism.” At least these men were honest about what humanism is – a religion. The manifesto’s prologue acknowledges humanism as a religion – “While this age does owe a vast debt to the traditional religions, it is none the less obvious that any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age. To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present.”

As would be expected, there are three major underlying principles in the tenets, (1) There is no supernatural God; (2) Man is authoritative, thus determines his own destiny; (3) A person’s satisfaction in life is his central purpose.

The Second Humanist Manifesto (1973)

Forty years passed until the second Humanist Manifesto was drafted. Although, like the first manifesto, it too uses the word “religion” and “religious” many times. Unlike the first manifesto, the second’s usage refers to “traditional” religions. It appears to be an effort to downplay the fact that humanism is a religion. The prologue sets forth that many humanisms have developed – “scientific,” “ethical,” “democratic,” “religious,” and “Marxist” humanism, thus the beginnings of denominational humanism. The second manifesto is more explicit in separating itself from being a “religion.” In fact, the new name would be Secular Humanism.

The Third Humanist Manifesto (2003)

Humanism has made great strides as a movement in the US and the Western world through its first 70 years. The American Humanist Association (AHA) has between 65-70 chapters around the USA. In recent years, the AHA moved its headquarters to Washington DC. We are left to ponder whether humanism will attempt to influence national governmental policy via this move.

It was 2003 when the AHA set forth the Humanist Manifesto III. Like the first two, it focuses upon man as the sole authority and sets forth man’s purpose as personal satisfaction in his life. Apparently in attempt to make their creed look less like a creed with a catalog of tenets (as manifestos I & II), the third manifesto is more of a policy statement with seven major statements. All three manifestos assert there is no supernatural God, man came into existence via evolution, man is his own ethical and moral authority and that man should be humane. Unlike its predecessors, Manifesto III states nothing about science, socialism, capitalism, ecology, theology, theistic religions and one-world government. Rather it is purely focused upon the individual person – he is his own god, setting his own rules to achieve utopia in his own life.

Humanism is essentially a brand of atheism that has become filled with pride. The atheist simply says he does not believe in any gods, especially the supernatural. The humanist says there is no supernatural God, but also states “I am my own god!”

Although humanists point back to the fourth century B.C. for their roots, God indicated its presence in Israel about 1100 BC, “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Further, since that time “free thought, atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, deism, rationalism, ethical culture, and liberal theistic religion all claim to be heir to the humanist tradition.” That of course is a logical statement considering that man is the originator of all of these philosophies (implicit in God’s declaration during the days of the Judges). Each of us needs ask ourselves, how much humanism has influenced how we think, how we see God, our attitude toward the Bible and how we live so we will not be like ancient Israel.