

Chapter Two: Secular Humanism: The Movement from Thought to Action

by Steven F. Goldberg

A commitment to the compassionate application of reason has placed humanists at the forefront of human progress, and we count among our ranks many of the world's greatest thinkers, innovators and artists. Free from the constraints of religious dogma, secular humanists are uniquely positioned to be effective advocates for democracy, human rights, personal liberty, scientific progress, education and ethics.

Historical Perspectives on Humanist Activism

Humanism is a rational, scientific worldview that traces its heritage to the philosophers of antiquity. Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Indian philosophers initiated this tradition by seeking to understand nature and human values through observation and reason, insisting that ethics could be derived from natural, rather than divine, principles. During the European Renaissance, humanists had a profound influence on the evolution of society, emphasizing concern for fellow human beings, cultivating an interest in art, literature and scientific exploration, and calling for a moral order built on the capacity of humanity to serve itself.

It was during the Renaissance that the notion of humanist activism was born, and the passivity and ignorance of the “dark” ages was rejected in favor of balancing action and contemplation. The Italian scholar Matteo Palmieri noted, “The true merit of virtue lies in effective action,” and proposed that active engagement in society was necessary to effect important changes.

Humanist themes were expanded and reinforced during the Enlightenment, when the foundation of knowledge was viewed as empirical, and reason took precedence over dogma. These ideals were synthesized by the likes of John Locke who, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, proposed that all people had an inherent right to life and liberty, were endowed with reason, and owed obedience only to a government that respected and protected those rights.

The application of these principles, which today are recognizably humanist, formed the philosophical basis for the American Revolution. Although calling the rebellion led by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and others “activism” would be to engage in vast understatement, their translation of thought into action contributed substantially to building a world more consistent with humanist thinking.

Through the foundational documents of this new republic, and especially in the Constitution of the United States, these individuals created a wholly secular model of government that defined and preserved a set of essential human rights. Their support for the separation of religion and government, freedom of conscience, speech and association, and democratic self-governance are a model of applied humanist thought. Although the founding fathers never used the term “humanist” to describe themselves, their legacy is certainly humanist in substance.

The humanistic rejection of religious doctrine and unquestioned authority that gave birth to these societal and political changes also fostered a parallel scientific revolution – one that was, in many respects, a form of activism. Galileo was famously persecuted for his embrace of science over theology and, even today, the theories expounded by Charles Darwin, despite the overwhelming weight of scientific evidence, are routinely challenged or disregarded by large segments of the population. Although reason and science have generally triumphed over dogma and superstition, the pursuit of scientific truth has historically required continual diligence. *A Humanist Manifesto*, published in *The New*

Humanist in 1933, brought to the public's attention a movement drawing inspiration from its freethought heritage. This document explicitly rejected absolute authority and revealed knowledge in favor of democratic values and free inquiry. Guided by a commitment to scientific progress and a social order based upon individual freedom, human rights and social justice, humanism now represented a call to seek solutions through humanity's own moral and intellectual resources.

The tenets of contemporary humanism were further elaborated in *Humanist Manifesto II*, published in 1973. This document expanded on the themes of the earlier manifesto in response to the dramatic pace of social upheaval, technological progress and political change witnessed during the 20th century. Proposing that the world was embarking on a humanistic century, the second manifesto endorsed individual choice, an open and democratic society, the separation of religion and government, the elimination of distinctions based on race, color, creed, age or gender, and global government. Further, humanism now sought not merely scientific progress, but the wise and compassionate application of technology to conquer such problems as environmental pollution, resource depletion, overpopulation, public health, and poverty. In short, the mission of humanism was no less than providing for the realization and fulfillment of human potential worldwide, and for shaping a desirable future for humankind.

Subsequent public declarations, such as *A Secular Humanist Declaration* (1980), *A Declaration of Interdependence: A New Global Ethics* (1988), *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, the *Amsterdam Declaration of the International Humanist and Ethical Union* (2002) and *Humanism and its Aspirations* (2003) further refined the consensus of humanist thought.

Core Humanist Principles

From these public declarations of contemporary humanist thought we may derive a set of core principles that forms the basis for all humanist activism. While individual secular humanists do not necessarily subscribe to all of these tenets in every situation, together they represent a broad consensus of opinion. Among these core principles of secular humanism are:

- Commitment to reason, critical thought and application of the scientific method as the most reliable means of obtaining knowledge;
- An affirmation of the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual, including freedom of thought, conscience, association, speech and religion;
- Commitment to democratic forms of government as the best means of ensuring self-determination;
- Support for the separation of religion and government, and for the freedom of, and from, religion;
- Acceptance of morality as an intrinsic part of human nature and societal evolution, independent of external forces or divine mandate;
- An obligation to act responsibly toward one another, future generations, and the natural world;
- A recognition of the importance of art, literature and music as a means of personal enrichment and self-expression;
- A belief that the humanist philosophy transcends geographic or political boundaries;

These core principles demonstrate that secular humanism is defined not merely by its rejection of theistic religion and arbitrary authority, but by its embrace of a positive

worldview. Humanists seek to positively influence the progress of humanity in all spheres of life. Thus, the application of humanist ethics - humanist activism - encompasses a wide range of issues.

Despite the broad constellation of issues of importance to humanists, it is considerably more difficult to articulate a universally acceptable humanist stance with respect to a specific issue. Thoughtful people may disagree on any number of issues, and humanists are at least as prone to internal disagreement as any other group. The philosophy of humanism will seldom compel a particular position on issues of great complexity, such as domestic economic policy or the decision to employ military force. Because humanism transcends political ideology, individual humanists may view mutually exclusive solutions as entirely reasonable. Thus, the universe of humanist causes is somewhat constrained by this practical concern, and tends to be focused on matters that involve one or more of our core principals.

It should be recognized, too, that with the exception of increasing public awareness of humanism and protecting the rights of fellow humanists, there are no uniquely humanist causes. Many people, both religious and non-religious, share our concerns for human rights, cultural enrichment, science, and democracy; in fact, despite the ongoing struggle between modernity and religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world, humanistic views predominate in many spheres of public life.

Applied Humanist Ethics

Whether called activism, outreach, advocacy or education, humanist activism focuses on the development of actions that facilitate 1) advocacy for humanist principles, 2) protection for humanist rights, and 3) increased awareness and understanding of humanism by the general public. These endeavors are distinguished from the other activities of contemporary humanist organizations – providing a

community for those who find meaning and value in life outside a traditional religious framework, the evaluation of various systems of ethics and philosophy with respect to the present human condition, and the examination of social, scientific and political issues and trends – by their outward focus. They are attempts not merely to discuss issues within the humanist community, but to influence opinion, policy and action in the larger world.

Many groups work to translate humanist aspirations into practical action by explicitly engaging in activism. This practical humanist activism encompasses such diverse goals as advocating the separation of religion and government, supporting charitable, social and community enrichment programs, increasing scientific literacy, and defending civil rights. It may take such forms as public demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, political lobbying, educational forums, information dissemination, or a commitment of human and financial resources to programs run by other organizations.

Advocacy for Humanist Principles

Advocacy for our core principles has broad appeal and utility, and is worthy of considerable effort on the part of humanist organizations. Such efforts will promote a healthier, more just, and more progressive world. Some of the contemporary issues on which humanists may commonly seek to apply their philosophy are described below.

Reason and the Scientific Method: Humanist support for critical thought and application of the scientific method puts us on the front lines of the long-standing battle between science and religion. This conflict is often part of the larger struggle between modernity and fundamentalism, in which religious zealots seek to discredit scientifically-derived knowledge – sometimes resulting in the outright and unjustified rejection of potentially valuable technologies. Some of these difficulties arise because of the seeming

linkage between advanced technology and the problems of modern society, while others are the result of the dissonance between scientific evidence and religious dogma.

For example, ongoing efforts on the part of fundamentalist Christians to introduce biblical literalism (i.e. "Creationism" or its newest incarnation, "Intelligent Design Theory") into public science curricula as a supplement to, or replacement of, the teaching of such sound scientific principles as the theory of biological evolution, are cause for concern among humanists. This is a problem exacerbated by parallel attempts on the part of the U. S. government to divert taxpayer funds from the public education system to private, parochial and religion-based schools. Such maneuvers give rise to the frightening prospect of creating generations of Americans ignorant of essential scientific theories, and serve to increase the already unacceptably high level of scientific illiteracy.

The line between sound science and official policy, though, is not drawn strictly along religious lines. Lack of understanding likewise affects public discourse on such important questions as, for example, the safety of transgenic agricultural products, environmental damage assessment, research employing human embryos, and the prospect of heritable germ-line genetic manipulation. These debates may be easily subverted by irrational (and/or religious) claims offered in lieu of sound scientific evidence. In an era when the pace of scientific progress frequently overwhelms our ability to assimilate and adjust social norms and public policy, reasoned deliberation is of critical importance. Humanists can foster rational debate and the application of an enlightened, and compassionate, ethic, ensuring that scientific progress is not embraced or rejected simply on the basis of emotional appeal, political expediency, religious dogma, or misunderstanding.

This scientific viewpoint also mandates consideration for our planetary environment. As humanists, we have an obligation to confront the difficult challenges posed by over-

population, pollution, ecological damage, and global warming so that we can ensure the continued habitability of this planet for future generations.

Some would argue, too, that a humanist / naturalist philosophy – absent any divine distinction between “man and beast” – compels support for animal welfare and animal rights. In fact, as genetic manipulation becomes reality and, as some argue, we enter a “trans-human” period of evolution, the scientific rationale for inter-species distinctions largely fades from view. While the core principles of humanism may not directly answer such questions, it is important that they be addressed on a rational basis.

By stripping away dogmatic arguments, humanists are able to bring to bear the relevant facts at the juncture of science and policy. Humanists must not blindly support scientific progress, though, and should seek responsible use of the technologies being developed, rational allocation of natural resources, and enhanced scientific literacy. As in much of humanist activism, a significant commitment to public education may yield the highest returns.

Human Rights: A central tenet of the humanist philosophy is respect for individual autonomy and human rights. This principle is codified in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is premised on the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family. This document explicitly recognizes such rights as life, liberty, freedom of religion, freedom from servitude, freedom from torture and degrading punishment, a right to peacefully assemble and associate, democratic or representative governance, and free, public education.

From the explicit rights listed in the *Universal Declaration* we can further extrapolate a number of other rights, many of which remain contentious even in countries where basic human rights are respected. Thus, a more expansive list might also include reproductive freedom and access to birth control, humane and rational attitudes toward abortion, gender equality, civil liberties, rights to privacy,

and consensual sexual relationships between adults. Less clear applications may deal with capital punishment, euthanasia, and assisted suicide.

Humanist activists in the United States, then, might press the government to embrace a foreign policy that furthers the cause of human rights. They might lobby for the ratification of the *United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, which has been ratified by some 170 nations – but not the United States of America (putting us in the questionable company of such nations as Iran, Syria, Sudan and Somalia). They might also support programs in areas overseas that are directly affected by human rights violations, or where there is great need for the educational, health, and social services provided by humanist organizations. And humanists the world over may play a role in protecting civil liberties, supporting free public education, and continually advocating for the universal application of these essential human rights.

Democratic Governance: Among the clauses of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and entirely consistent with core humanist principles, is the support for the right (and obligation) of self-governance, either directly or through duly elected representatives. Despite the presence of a large, international consensus for democratic government, much of the world languishes under authoritarian or totalitarian control.

Support for democratic governance lies at the core of the humanist philosophy, and humanists view democratic forms of government as the best means for ensuring self-determination. In many respects, humanists are advocates for democratic reform in much the same way that they are proponents of human rights.

Even in nations where liberal democracy is the accepted form of government, continued reforms may be necessary to ensure fair representation and free and fair elections. Recall that even in the United States, universal suffrage did not exist until the 20th century, and the right to vote was only

extended to 18 year-olds in 1971. Liberal democracy is, by historical norms, a very recent phenomenon, and humanity is still in the early stages of this experiment. Thus, democratic systems will continually be refined.

Contemporary issues in democratic societies may include the guarantee of equal voting rights, ensuring an educated electorate, election monitoring, campaign finance reform, proportional voting, gerrymandering, or honest presentation of issues by candidates. Also, it is not enough simply to have democratic rule, and humanists may find themselves seeking protection for minorities against the tyranny of the majority.

Tolerance: Humanists, despite their rejection of traditional religious belief, are firmly committed to the principle of religious tolerance. A cornerstone of this stance is retaining a “wall” separating religion and government as the best means of ensuring religious liberty for all, and for providing freedom of, and from, religion.

Several international agreements obligate nations to respect religious freedom. Although the vast majority of the world’s governments claim to respect this right, some countries have failed to uphold these protections in practice. At the extreme end are those nations subject to totalitarian or authoritarian rule whose leaders are determined to control religious belief and practice. Those of minority beliefs, or those not practicing officially sanctioned religions, are often subject to discrimination, persecution, and hostility. Some of these governments are overtly theocratic, installing, for example, *Shari’a* (fundamental Islamic) law in preference to a secular, tolerant form of government.

Even within democratic governments, there are instances where legislation or policies have been adopted that give preference to one religion over all others. Still others, while professing tolerance, arbitrarily designate certain denominations or religions as undesirable, characterizing them as either “sects” or “cults” and denying liberties afforded other, “mainstream” religions. In predominantly Catholic countries, such as those of South and Central

America, the influence of the Catholic church over the ostensibly secular government can be significant, resulting in curtailed civil liberties, particularly as they pertain to reproductive freedoms.

The U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom periodically determines which nations have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. By virtue of these determinations, the U.S. government is obliged to oppose these egregious and systematic violations of religious liberty. The forms of religious intolerance vary in these countries, and range from active campaigns of repression against particular religions (including executions, unjustified imprisonment and torture) to government tolerance of, or complicity in, violent acts against practitioners of minority belief systems to prohibiting all non-sanctioned forms of public religious expression.

Humanist activism on behalf of religious tolerance need not be international in scope, though. Local activists can testify before state and local legislative bodies on issues of local concern, lobby their governments to address abuses overseas, and educate the public about the importance of ensuring religious liberties to all people.

Enrichment: Humanists should not discount the importance of supporting the arts and humanities in their communities as a means of personal enrichment. While not as critical as protecting essential human rights, enrichment of human life by providing access to such things has inherent value, and is a worthy goal of a humanist activist.

Protection of Humanist Rights: Those aspects of humanist activism that are uniquely, or largely, humanist include the protection of humanist rights and building public awareness and understanding of humanism. Where the humanist community may productively collaborate with others, both religious and non-religious, to advocate for human rights, democratic reform, or religious tolerance, we must look to ourselves when promoting humanism as a viable worldview.

While the triumphs of science, reason and enlightenment are numerous, many of the original proponents of these ideas were persecuted. Even today, the battle between reason and religion rages, and millions of people continue to languish in societies that could hardly be characterized as enlightened.

While it is sometimes the case that non-theists are singled out for discrimination, in many respects the protection of humanist rights is indistinguishable from ensuring religious freedom and tolerance for the whole of society. As a community, humanists must be cognizant of the significant threats to religious liberty and freedom of conscience posed by theocratic and fundamentalist governments, archaic blasphemy laws, and institutional biases against non-belief.

Still, even in pluralistic, democratic societies, humanists (and, in fact, all non-theists and freethinkers) face unique forms of discrimination and intolerance. In the United States, for example, a significant percentage of voting age adults would refuse to vote for a political candidate solely on the basis of his or her non-belief. It is difficult to imagine such prejudice and intolerance being so readily admitted against any other minority group. Thus, protection of humanist rights brings about a unique set of challenges.

In addition to overt discrimination against humanists, there are often subtle means used to denigrate the humanist philosophy and oppose its application. During the latter years of the 20th century, humanists in the United States were subjected to a concerted and organized attack by the religious right. Organizations and individuals with substantial financial resources and ready access to the media attempted to redefine and demonize humanism, especially secular humanism.

In books such as *Mind Siege*, *The Battle for the Mind*, and *Clergy in the Classroom: The Religion of Secular Humanism*, authors Tim LaHaye and David Noebel portrayed humanism as an amoral philosophy whose followers were intent upon dominating all facets of

American society. Their assertion that the humanist perspective pervades, and dominates, popular culture, public education, the media, and the judiciary is valid only to the extent that they confuse humanism with secular society, scientific progress, and modernity. Insofar as humanists embrace pluralism, tolerance, and personal liberty – manifestations of modernity and enlightenment – their claim may appear valid; however, other core principles of humanism, such as democratic government and human rights are never so denigrated.

Among the absurd results of such misinformation is the attempt by some groups on the religious right to remove the teaching of biological evolution from the public schools. Evolution, they claim, is part of the “humanist religion” and thus inappropriate in a religiously neutral environment. Of more consequence, though, is the backlash of religious fundamentalism that makes an expression of faith an informal, yet important, prerequisite for holding positions of responsibility. Thus, although statistics tell us that many of our political and social leaders, being highly intelligent and well-educated, are likely to embrace a secular, humanistic worldview, these views are closeted for fear of repercussion. As in the most extreme Islamic theocracy, persistent attack on religious dissent can take its toll.

Where a particular religious belief is prerequisite to holding elected office, joining social organizations, or obtaining employment, humanists have cause to seek redress. Where a stigma continues to be associated with non-belief, or with humanism, humanists must speak up.

Increased Public Understanding of Humanism

Humanism often seems synonymous with scientific progress, democratic reform, and increased human rights. Indeed, in many advanced societies humanism has become the predominant worldview, in fact if not in name. Yet, relatively few people identify themselves as humanists, and

those who do are often misunderstood and denigrated by the traditionally religious societies in which they function.

Surveys and polls continue to demonstrate that non-theists are viewed with suspicion and mistrust, despite sharing many values with their religious compatriots. Therefore, humanists must overcome the supposition that all morality derives from religion and that, conversely, lack of theistic belief implies lack of moral grounding. Through greater understanding, humanists can begin to bridge the perceived gap between “us and them.”

In fact, morality is a wholly human construct; valid arguments can be made that humanists, by virtue of their lack of a bible or other simplistic guidebook, spend a greater amount of time evaluating the ethics of their decisions, and may be, in many respects, more consciously moral than their religious brethren. Humanists must establish their moral status on a par with those practicing traditional religions, and have their opinions and concerns given equal consideration in matters of morality, ethics, and social progress.

Similarly, efforts must be undertaken to counter the mischaracterization of humanism by its opponents. By educating the public about the nature of humanism – about our core values – it can be portrayed in a positive light. With the sole exception of our rejection of theistic religion, many, if not most, of the other tenets of humanism are sure to be embraced by those of liberal religious persuasions. It would be difficult, in fact, to find significant groups of people who would not agree with our emphasis on human rights, democratic government, and reason. Again, by demonstrating these positive attributes of humanism we may gain increased acceptance among the public.

Lastly, it is important that humanism be perceived as a universally applicable worldview, accessible to the general population, and of some concrete benefit to the community. Humanism must be brought down from the ivory towers of academia and portrayed as a real, practicable outlook, accessible to those who may not be well studied in the areas

of philosophy, logic, theology, history, and science. We must present humanism as a viable alternative to the stifling, counter-productive ideologies of irrationality, persecution, subjugation and fear and articulate a vision for our communities that is consistent with the principles of humanism. Such activism is by its nature educational, and in many respects a question of employing the strategies of marketing and public relations.

In this respect, too, humanist service may be an effective means of activism. When humanists take part in intrinsically worthwhile activities that advance humanist values, we serve as ambassadors for humanism. By being seen doing good works in the name of humanism, the perception of humanists as anything other than compassionate, mainstream citizens of the world will quickly dissolve.

The Imperative for Humanist Activism

As the beneficiaries of a rich legacy, it is incumbent upon contemporary humanists to continue translating philosophy into solution, and thought into action. Without action, humanism, despite its strong philosophical underpinnings and enduring intellectual appeal, will be rendered irrelevant in an increasingly complex world.

Prerequisite to affecting public policy and influencing the social and political evolution of our communities is for humanists to secure a place in the public arena and engage our government and society in a productive and ongoing dialogue. This can only occur if we break our silence, refuse to accept being relegated to the fringe of society, and demand inclusion in important public debates.

Although the United States continues, despite some setbacks, to become increasingly secular, and as science becomes the de facto “religion” of our society, those who consider themselves humanists comprise but a small minority of the population. A substantial number of people are sympathetic to the humanist viewpoint in many respects,

but do not perceive the very real threats posed by the religious right, for example, as warranting immediate concern. Thus, while we may be witnessing the increasing secularization of our society, it is incumbent on humanists to remain diligent.

That the number of declared humanists may be comparatively small should not preclude making our voices heard. We can learn from outstanding examples of other minorities who have successfully asserted their rights and educated the public on issues they considered important – even exerting influence at levels disproportionate to their numbers.

As a small minority, humanist activists must continue to focus on the protection of humanist rights. Even in a democratic nation such as this, where secularism is the official public stance, humanists continue to be viewed with suspicion and distrust, and are sometimes deprived of essential rights. Although the situation is obviously worse in nations where the government is expressly theocratic or the population uniformly religious, humanists must be aggressive advocates for religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

Even where humanists do not face overt persecution or discrimination, the dominant religious groups are often able to obscure and distort our message. Thus, even those members of society who might otherwise be receptive to humanism and its tenets seldom gain a true understanding of this worldview, and can neither accept nor reject it on an informed basis. We must not permit humanism to be defined by its detractors, nor should we permit it to be defined solely on the basis of our criticism of other belief systems.

It is, therefore, imperative that humanists make a proactive commitment to educate the public about our philosophy. When there is a stigma attached to atheism and humanism, we must defend this worldview through humanist service, public education, and advocacy, and counter the presumption that religion is a prerequisite to being patriotic citizens and

good, moral people. Until we are viewed in a more positive light our stands on contemporary issues will be easily disregarded, and our activist efforts unfruitful.

Conclusion

When secular humanists cease “preaching to the choir” we may find that many people are receptive to our views, and may in fact grow to consider themselves humanists. We cannot reserve humanism as a private retreat, nor can we permit religious extremists to define our position. Humanist activism, at its best, is a means of public education – whether in the form of a forum, a rally, a media campaign, a protest, political lobbying, or litigation – and a substantial goal should be to build awareness and understanding for our views.

In short, humanists need to find creative methods for becoming effective advocates for their principles, to encourage the ideals of tolerance and dissent, and to seek the resolution of differences through rational means. We need to act both as individuals and collectively, finding new models for becoming activist, and for leveraging our resources for the betterment of our world. We must make our voices heard, our thoughts known, and demonstrate our capacity as leaders in our communities.

Steven F. Goldberg has a longstanding interest in promoting the humanist viewpoint through effective outreach and activism, and has held leadership positions in several local and national humanist organizations.