further to recognize that definition is essentially negative, not positive. Defining and describing should make clear what something is not as well as what it is.

The issue his article raises falters because he fails to explain what a secular humanist is not. I put it to him that the proper answer is "not religious." The adjective "religious" is what we are discussing, not the noun "humanism." Some adherents among the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and all the other religious traditions can be and are humanists when the noun is defined only positively—as in Terence's phrase, "Nothing human is alien to me."

We can be sure, for example, that most of the modern popes beginning with Leo XIII would like to have been known as Christian humanists. To be a secular humanist, to thus qualify the noun, means to be a certain kind of humanist; to think, that is, about men and their problems and prospects without God or heaven or any other religious ideas and aspirations entering in.

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Pluralistic Humanism

Sidney Hook

Unfortunately, the English language "as she is spoke" is not a guide to formulating wise policy in combating the onslaughts of fundamentalists against the teaching of science and the cultivation of critical, scientific thinking in our public schools. For one thing, English "as she is spoke" is a developing thing, the norms of correct usage are historical, and sensible people infer meaning from and in context. Even oxymoron has its appropriate usage, which cannot be outlawed out of hand by declaring it merely "a contradiction in terms." For another thing, English is not the only language of human discourse, and what cannot be rightfully said according to its current rules of grammar and correct usage may find appropriate expression in another language. The furniture of heaven and earth is discovered by scientific inquiry. It is not created by semantic legislation.

In the interest of religious freedom, I am eager to protect Paul Beattie's right to speak of the religion of humanism. I believe that the prospects of religious freedom improve with the multiplication of religions, especially religions that are free of the dogma of supernaturalism. The watchdogs of fundamentalism are not going to be quieted even if humanists, Ethical Culturists, and other holders of non-theistic world-views for-swear the use of the terms religion and religious. Their goal is to limit, where they cannot bar, the study of science and the development of rational, scientific habits of thought in our schools.

So far as I know, secular humanists and religious humanists (except for Christian humanists) do not teach their distinctive beliefs as such in public schools any more than Ethical Culturists do. The fundamentalists assume that the absence of instruction in their own particular faith is tantamount to a commitment to the teaching of a non-religious or irreligious faith. This assumption is mistaken both in logic and in fact. Of course moral or character education is integral to the education of children, but the case for the teaching of the moral, intellectual, and social virtues can easily be made without reference to supernaturalism or revelation.

Anyone who reads Homer Duncan's Secular Humanism: The Most Dangerous Religion in America will see that what irks him and his supporters is that the Christian gospel is not a part of the curriculum of the public school, that the scientific theory of evolution is considered appropriate but not the biblical story of the divine creation of species. Personally, I would have no objection to stating the Anstatilian notion that species have existed from eternity and the biblical story of species creation as alternative views to the theory of evolution and considering all of them critically, but Homer Duncan would have an apoplectic fit at the prospect of any such approach. Anyone who has corresponded with him on these issues will be convinced of his helplessness in the face of reasonable objections to the dogmas he would teach by fiat.

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I am less concerned by the indeterminate meaning of religion than I am by the reference to the existence of God by individuals who no more believe in his existence than I do. Although I have never considered myself a religious person, I am accustomed to being called "religious" by writers inspired by William James or Niebuhr or Tillich, who define religion in terms of ultimate concern. To be sure, we understand what is meant when one says that money or music or love is one's religion and that he or she worships Mammon or Apollo or Priapus. But we can understand what is being said very well without the use of the term religion. Feuerbach once observed that atheism is his religion, and I suppose other atheists have similarly indicated that they can live a full, contented, and moral life without the crutch of supernatural myths.

I find the use of the term God more objectionable because in the Western world, especially, it is almost invariably identified with the God of Judeo-Christianity. I recall questioning John Dewey when I read the manuscript of his A Common Faith—in which he defined God as the union of the ideal and real—about the wisdom of the use of the term. He justified it by saying that no one had patented a meaning of it, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph was not the God of the New Testament, nor the God of Plato or Aristotle or Spinoza or Hegel or Whitehead. He wasn't a "theist," but there was a connotation of a small-town, small-minded negativism about the term atheism that he disliked. His "God" was a positive ideal that stressed the worthiness of striving to make the world a better place for mankind, and most of the people who believed in God, according to him, were making a moral commitment. I confess I was taken by surprise at the warmth of his statement, but predicted that sooner or later some clergyman was going to try to establish a connection between Dewey's God and the anthropomorphic God of the Bible. My prediction turned out to be accurate. The Reverend Wieman did claim Dewey for some kind of Christianity, and I believe Dewey had several exchanges with him in an attempt to be freed from his fraternal embrace.

Regardless of whether secular humanism is called a religion, the members of the Ethical Culture Society will call their group a religion. The strategy of combating the thrust of fundamentalism and supernaturalism—and a religion can still be supernatural even if it is not theistic—should not rely on surrendering the use of the term religion by those naturalists who wish to regard themselves as religious. We are dealing with a historical situation in the United States in which officially there has never been a separation of church and state from the time the First Amendment was adopted to the present. So long as church property is exempt from taxation there can be no absolute separation. On the other hand, in some countries like England, Scandinavia, and Israel where church and state are not separated, the state of religious freedom is as healthy as it is in the United States. Were we founding a society from scratch, secular humanists could reasonably propose policies that might not be realistic when we have to take our point of departure from historical situations that reflect the great influence of the religious past. It is the direction in which the community is moving, toward or away from secular humanism, that should be our primary concern.

On the Misuse
A Response to

Paul Kurtz

When I first read Paul Beattie's paper "Is Secular Humanism a Religion?" I was dismayed at his flagrant misuse of language at a particularly inopportune time. Right-wing and fundamentalist religious forces have been insisting for several years that secular humanism is a religion and that in order to preserve the principle of separation of church and state, it must be extirpated from the schools and from other areas of public life—the media, the universities, the courts, etc. Secular humanists, as other good citizens, are committed to upholding the First Amendment, and their opposition to the establishment of religion is well known.

I have argued for many years that secular humanism is a nonreligious humanism and that it has an appropriate role to play in public schools and in our civic life. Paul Beattie, a good friend and colleague with whom I share many beliefs and values, argues that secular humanism is a religion. This seems to me to violate the ethics of language. Like Humpty Dumpty in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, he makes words mean their opposites. I have been the leading proponent of the term secular humanism in order to distinguish it from religious humanism. Clearly religious humanism exists, and it has many adherents, especially among members of the Unitarian church of which Paul Beattie is a dedicated leader, the Ethical Culture Societies, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. I have no objection to these groups adopting the label "religious humanism." Nor do I want to engage in definition-mongering and insist on only one meaning of the term humanism. Nevertheless, words have meanings, and there is an ethic concerning the use and abuse of language. I think that Paul Beattie has violated this ethic. Why seek to impose a religious definition on all forms of humanism? In particular, to misuse the word secular as to call secular humanism a "religion"?

There is some sense in which the term religious as distinct from religion is meaningful when applied to some forms of humanism. John Dewey used the term religious to refer to the quality of experience in which we express our commitment to ends and values. Dewey was even willing to use the term