Defining Humanism: The Battle Continues

Introduction: Beyond Religion

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The question "Is secular humanism a religion?" has been debated for years. It continues to be of special significance today because religious fundamentalists vociferously insist that "secular humanism is a religion." Thus, they seek to impose creationism in the schools, maintaining that evolution is a "theory" and an expression of the "religion of secular humanism," and they advocate a voucher system, which would provide public funding for private schools, including religious schools. To support their thesis, they maintain that the Supreme Court (whose verdicts on abortion they reject) has declared secular humanism to be a religion. This litany is repeated ad nauseam.

Long-time readers of FREE INQUIRY are familiar with this controversy. Indeed, the Council for Secular and Democratic Humanism (now the Council for Secular Humanism) was established in 1980 in order to respond to these unfounded charges. At that time we issued a "Secular Humanist Declaration," in which we argued that America is a pluralistic secular republic, and that it is possible to be a good citizen, lead a moral life, and live meaningfully without religion. Indeed, millions of men and women in the United States and throughout the world are content to live without benefit of clergy or deity, and they do not characterize their philosophical, scientific, or ethical life stance as "religious."

We are revisiting this debate in these pages, because the misrepresentations of humanism are again mounting. They come from several different quarters; we must respond to them.

It is especially important that we deal with the charges of the right-wing religious critics, particularly since the Christian Coalition has an enormous influence in the Republican Party. Should it gain power now or in the future there are bound to be dire political repercussions. Alas, Democrats such as Bill Clinton and Albert Gore vie with Robert Dole and Jack Kemp in professions of religious piety, which in America is often considered to be synonymous with patriotism. The recent Republican political convention seemed like a revivalist prayer meetings, with pronouncements of "God bless America!" in overabundance.

David Noebel, a strong fundamentalist critic of humanism, presents the case in an article below that humanism, including secular humanism, is a religion. He maintains that humanism is a religion because several prominent humanists have held that it is so in the past. It is no secret that humanists differ sharply on this key point, and that many humanists, representing the old-line humanist organizations, believe that humanism is religious. This is based in part on John Dewey's distinction between the words religion (a creed, a set of institutional beliefs and practices) and religious (the quality of being committed to a set of ideal ends) (A Common Faith, 1933). No doubt, the fact that humanism in America at its inception in the 1930s and 1940s was closely related to Unitarianism, and that Humanist Manifesto I, which was issued in 1933, was endorsed by many liberal Unitarian ministers, is the primary reason for its emphasis on religiosity. This form of religious humanism, of course, rejects the God of traditional theism, and it tries to create a humanistic religion amenable to the scientific outlook. Although such liberal religious humanists do not believe in God, they nonetheless wish to adopt the label of being religious.

Noebel quotes several humanist authors to make the case that humanism is a religion. Indeed, he quotes from my preface to Humanist Manifesto I and Humanist Manifesto II (which I drafted in 1973), in which I noted that "humanism is a philosophical, religious, and moral point of view as old as human civilization itself." Now, it is true that I did once hold that humanism could be interpreted as a religious point of view (not a religion). By "religious" I meant a moral commitment to a set of ideals. But I have long since changed my views and have made my new position abundantly clear, arguing for almost two decades now that it was an error to consider humanism "religious." That is why I adopted the term...
secular humanism, so as to make it clear that this form of humanism was not religious. Surely, people should be allowed to change their minds. St. Paul was at one time a foe of Christianity. Would it be responsible to quote from the days in which he attacked Christianity, knowing that he eventually became a Christian? Noébel knows full well that my views have been modified, for I have published these extensively; yet he chooses to ignore them in his article. Today, a preponderant number of secular humanists reject the view that they are religious.

In any case, I submit that secular humanism is not a religion, nor is it religious. It does not contain a theology, but bases its views of reality on scientific evidence. It does not have a ministry or chaplains. It emphasizes secularity, the autonomous character of humanistic ethics, and the need for human beings to solve their own problems by using the best methods of reason and science.

We may ask, What is religious humanism which some humanists have espoused? In order to clarify this issue, we are pleased to publish an article by Mason Olds, former editor of Religious Humanism, defining what he means by religious humanism. Clearly, there is much that religious humanists share in common with secular humanists. Our chief dissent with religious humanists (like fundamentalists) is the meaning of the adjective "religious" and the effort of critics to derive a "religion" from it. If we are to consider humanism "religious" because of its devotion to a set of ideals, then why is not any and everything that a person is devoted to "religious"; and may his or her set of beliefs be labeled as a "religion"?

For example, if a person is committed to libertarianism, environmentalism, feminism, or vegetarianism, might we say that he or she is religious and has a religion? If any intensive devotion to a cause is religious, then no one, not even atheists, can deny being called religious. If Miss Jones is pious and devout, prays daily, and attends Mass every Sunday, we may say she is "religious." If Miss Jones rejects belief in God, never goes to Mass, and claims she is an atheist, is she likewise "religious"? If so, then words lose all meaning and Humpty Dumpty has prevailed; for he can make up to be down and down appear up as he so chooses. What a topsy-turvy linguistic thicket.

One may ask, why do religious humanists wish to argue that humanism is religious? Possibly because many religious humanists consider it to be anathema to attack religion in America. Atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists who do so are considered to be acting in bad taste. So many religious humanists seem to be saying, "Look, we are religious like everyone; please don't accuse us of irreligious." Another possible point of difference that has recently emerged among humanists—particularly in The Netherlands—concerns the important role that reason and the methods of science holds for secular humanists in testing truth claims and solving problems. Some religious humanists seem prepared to reject the scientific outlook and are sympathetic to a kind of postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment.

Secular humanists are fed up with the me-too-ism pabulum expressions of religious piety, which are often a mask for hypocrisy, injustice, and intolerance. Secular humanists maintain that the traditional claims of religion based on the Bible (Talmud or Koran) are outdated, more appropriate to nomadic-agricultural societies than to a post-postmodern age. And they believe that we should state this point clearly, even though it may not be popular at the moment. Religious theists are surely not reticent in their attacks on secular humanism and/or atheism; why should we hold back in an effort to be polite? If we don't believe in God and His alleged Commandments as interpreted by latter-day disciples, why not say so loud and clear? Why mute our irreligion or our criticisms of the sacred cows? Why not forthrightly defend the viability of living without religion? Clearly, we wish to defend the positive reaches of humanism, but this can only begin with criticisms of other-worldly religious creeds of salvation.

There is today still a third critique of nonreligious secular humanism on the current scene. The distinguished liberal "quasi" theologian and philosopher Professor John Smith maintains in an article that follows that humanism is what he calls a "quasi-religion." Even if secular humanists deny that they are religious, he affirms, secular humanism performs functions similar to those of religion. To make his case, Smith quotes extensively from the
book that I edited in 1973, The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism (London: Pemberton Books; Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books). This book presents the views of some thirty leading humanists (including B. F. Skinner, Sidney Hook, Antony Flew, among others), in which they propose a wide range of definitions about the meaning of humanism. Professor Smith quotes from those articles that seem to support his claims that humanism is a "quasi-religion," but he does not refer to the two dozen or more humanists who do not agree with this thesis. The fact that secular humanism expresses a scientific, philosophical, and educational outlook, and that it entails a set of moral ideals and values as an alternative to traditional religion, does not make it "quasi-religious." Many philosophers have espoused ethical and social values (for example, Hobbes and Kant); but this does not mean that they are espousing quasi-religions. Because secular humanists, like theists, are concerned with the meaning of life and seek to provide some moral guidance does not ipso facto convert secular humanists into quasi-religionists.

Is this all merely a linguistic quibble about the terms religion and religious? I think not. For the battle about terms is not what they have meant, but what they ought to mean. This it is not a descriptive question so much as it is a prescriptive and normative one. "Definition-mongering" often masks deeper political, moral, and ideological agendas and interests. This is what happened earlier in this century about the meaning of the term democracy, with both believers in democracy as we now define it and their totalitarian opponents attempting to preempt its use. For a variety of ulterior motives, critics and foes, defenders and enemies, have sought to make secular humanism into a religion—though no doubt for different reasons. David Noebel's article is not offered in the interest of philosophical linguistic discussion, but has powerful ideological implications; for right-wing critics of humanism on the basis of it would seek to limit or ban the role of secular humanism in American public life by claiming that it is a religion and that it thus violates the Establishment Clause.

In order to resolve this issue, I proposed in FREE INQUIRY ("Living Without Religion: The Ethics of Humanism" Spring 1989) and later in my book, Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion (Prometheus Books, 1989) that secular humanists adopt a new term, which I labeled "eupraxophy." Surprisingly, a great deal of opposition to it came from our own humanist readers, who thought that it was a neologism, that they couldn't pronounce it easily, and they didn't see the need for it. In my argument I maintained that humanism is not a religion in the common meaning of that term. The term "religion," I maintained, has been applied to belief in the sacred, in some deity, or transcendental power who is the creative source and ground of the universe and to which human beings owe allegiance, piety, and prayer. The existence of such a being for the secular humanist is highly questionable, for there doesn't appear to be adequate empirical or rational foundations for the claim.

The term eupraxophy suggests that we can develop a set of good moral principles (eut) and that we can apply these to the practical life (praxis). Moreover, we can develop some wisdom (sophia), based on science and philosophy, about the nature of the universe and the place of the human species within it, which is naturalistic. Accordingly, eupraxophy means "good practical wisdom." Thus secular humanists are not religious; they reject belief in God, yet they are committed to an ethical, scientific, and philosophical outlook. If religious humanists still wish to maintain that they are religious, they surely have every right to do so, but at least secular humanists are not.

Is it a mistake for us to continue to insist that secular humanists are not religious? What are we to say today, given the recent poll commissioned by FREE INQUIRY, which shows a high level of religiosity existing in the United States, and the fact that perhaps only eight to nine percent of the population are religious unbelievers (see "Religious Belief in America: A New Poll," FI, Summer 1996)? I realize that some doubts have been raised about the adequacy of the poll, but if its results are somewhat accurate, should we, too, adopt a religious stance strategically, to gain more adherents? Is it unwise to continue to resist the label, and should we, like so many other Americans, accept religion along with motherhood and apple pie? In my view, such professions of piety, even if naturalized and demythologized, are disingenuous and dishonest for they undermine our commitment to truth. On the contrary, we need to defend our right as dissenters to be heard and we should not weaken our right to criticize claims that are unsubstantiated by the evidence—in spite of the risk of offending religionists who often have a holier-than-thou belief in the truth and moral rectitude of their faith.

The puzzle that we face is why the United States during the reign of Pax Americana exudes the old-time religions while large sectors of the world have abandoned them. Many countries in Western Europe have taken a humanistic direction. Religious belief has declined. In England, for example, less than 10 percent of the people attend the various churches, temples, and mosques. Similarly for Norway, The Netherlands, and other countries where humanist belief has increased. Why is America the superpower an anomaly in the democratic world?

That is a good question, which I will not address here. Suffice it to say that we should continue to insist that the land of the free and the home of the brave should extend to its citizens who are irreligious the same rights enjoyed by others. We have a right not to be religious, nor to espouse a religion, and to declare forthrightly that we have a viable and meaningful alternative life stance that we are prepared to defend.

We invite our readers to enter into the debate, and welcome your letters.