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# The Religion of Secular Humanism

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## David A. Noebel

*Religion: (1.) A worldview i.e., any set of beliefs or system of thought that contains a theology, philosophy, ethics, biology, psychology, sociology, economics, politics, law and history.*—Noebel (2.) “Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others.”—U.S. Supreme Court (1961) (3.) “Any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values . . . [e.g.], humanism as a religion.”—Webster’s New World Dictionary (4.) “A system of thought shared by a group that gives members an object of devotion [God, the state, man, nature], a code of ethics and a frame of reference relating individuals to their group and the universe.”—Columbia Encyclopedia (5.) “Secularism . . . is the name for an ideology, a new closed worldview which functions very much like a new religion.”—Harvey Cox (6.) “Over the years, men and women who embrace the philosophy or faith known as Humanism have contributed significantly toward improving the condition of life for all.”—American Humanist Association (7.) “Pure religion . . . is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”—James (1:27)

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**“Secular Humanism is a religion. It is a religion because it contains, as all worldviews contain, a theology.”**

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worldviews contain, a theology. When Paul Kurtz says in the 1973 *Humanist Manifesto* that “no deity will save us, we must save ourselves” he speaks the language of religion. Salvation is a religious experience and concept. While the Christian worldview insists that God (or Jesus Christ) alone can save our souls (regeneration) and bodies (resurrection), the secular humanist worldview insists that reason and science can save humanity through progressive governmental and liberal educational programs.

It is a religion because it possesses and promotes a religious symbol—a fish with feet and the name Darwin enscribed. The religious symbol of the Christian worldview is either the cross or the fish with the name Jesus enscribed.

But even more specific is Kurtz’s own declaration in his preface to the *Humanist Manifestos I and II* that, “Humanism is a philosophical, religious and moral point of view.” FREE INQUIRY Senior Editor Gerald A. Larue says that humanism is, “a religion to meet the psychological

needs of our time,” and Edwin H. Wilson, the 1979 Humanist of the Year and former editor of *The Humanist*, says that, “Humanism in a naturalistic frame is validly a religion.”

While I argue in *Understanding The Times: The Religious Worldviews of Our Day and the Search for Truth* that secular humanism is a comprehensive worldview that consists of a theology (atheism), philosophy (metaphysical naturalism), ethics (moral relativism), biology (spontaneous generation/evolution), psychology (self-actualization), sociology (feminism/homosexuality), law (positivism), politics (globalism), economics (socialism), and history (French Enlightenment II), Kurtz acknowledges the three main pillars of any worldview viz., theology, philosophy, and ethics.

One of the early voices of Secular Humanism was Charles Francis Potter. Potter signed the *Humanist Manifesto* (1933) along with John Dewey and Roy Wood Sellars. Potter was a Baptist minister for eleven years and a Unitarian minister for eleven more years before founding the first Humanist church in New York City in 1929. In Potter’s 1930 book *Humanism: A New Religion* he states, “Humanism is not simply another denomination of Protestant Christianity; it is not a creed; nor is it a cult. It is a new type of religion altogether.”

It is, as Roy Wood Sellars, author of the 1933 *Humanist Manifesto*, says, “A religion founded on realities in a religion coming of age.” Sellars said this in his ground-breaking work *Religion Coming of Age* (1928).

Indeed, nearly all the early secular humanists admitted that secular humanism was a religion. John Dewey, for example, in his *A Common Faith* concluded his book by stating, “Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant.”

While the Humanist movement has made the faith explicit, the American educational establishment has made it militant. The religion of Secular Humanism is the only worldview allowed in the public schools. All other competing worldviews

have been declared illegal by the U.S. Supreme Court and effectively eliminated bit by bit—1962 (prayer), 1963 (the Bible), 1980 (Ten Commandments), and 1987 (God).

Curtis W. Reese edited numerous volumes entitled *Humanist Sermons* and in 1931 wrote a work for the MacMillan publishing company entitled *Humanist Religion*. Reese had no problem with the notion that Secular Humanism was a religion. That problem came later when the Paul Kurtzes of the world began to realize that secular humanism was in danger of having to withdraw from the public education square under the same interpretation of the separation doctrine that Humanists cleverly used to eradicate Christianity from the public schools.

But that was yesterday. What about now? Basically nothing has changed. In fact, the evidence is stronger today that Secular Humanism is a religion than seventy-five years ago.

The 1994 Humanists of the Year, Lloyd and Mary Morain, co-authored a work in 1954 titled *Humanism as the Next Step: An Introduction for Liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews*. Chapter One was "The Fourth Faith." The Morains sincerely believe, as did Sellars, that secular humanism is the historically logical and rationally based religion to follow in the wake of the other three religions. Indeed, there are few differences between liberal or liberated Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and Humanism! All speak and understand the language of theological creativity, ethical situationism, biological evolution, political correctness, sexual experimentation, and the "gospel" of tolerance and broadmindedness (except for Eastern Orthodox and Evangelicals).

The U.S. Supreme Court noted in *Torcasco v. Watkins* (1961) that secular humanism was indeed a religion in the same vein as other world religions like Buddhism and Taoism. When the U.S. Supreme Court identified secular humanism as a religion it did so, according to James Davison Hunter, by expanding the meaning of religion. At one time the Court used the term *religion* in its substantive form, e.g. *Davis v. Bacon* (1890) and *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* (1892), but beginning in 1943 (*United States v. Kauten*) the Court began using a

functional definition of religion in order to include non-Christian and non-theistic religions. Secular humanism, for better or worse, falls under this nontheistic functional definition of religion. It is, in reality, a nontheistic, natural religion, with a naturalistic deity viz., natural selection.

Secular humanist lawyer Leo Pfeffer wrote in a 1977 issue of the *Journal of Church & State* that secular humanism would triumph over three religions—Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. His article "The Triumph of Secular Humanism" makes it clear that Humanism is not merely a philosophical or political movement. Only religions triumph over other religions. Only faiths triumph over other faiths.

Paul Kurtz, writing in the Winter 1986/87 issue of *FREE INQUIRY*, admits that the organized humanist movement is put in a quandry over the question of religion. Why? Because the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, the American Ethical Union, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the American Humanist Association "all consider themselves to be religious." Indeed, Kurtz laments the fact that the American Humanist Association has "a religious tax exemption" (p. 5). [This has since changed.—EDS.]

In a follow-up article on the same subject (*FREE INQUIRY*, Fall 1991) Kurtz states that the American Humanist Association "still retains its religious exemption . . . [and] continues to emphasize that its Counselor program is religious and performs 'pastoral' and 'ministerial' duties" (p. 5).

Secular humanist groups on our nation's campuses are routinely placed in the religious sections of student directories. For example, in the Auburn University student and faculty directory for 1985/86 under "Auburn Pastors and Campus Ministries" one finds the Humanists listed with Dr. Delos McKown as "Humanist Counselor." McKown, a contributing editor for *FREE INQUIRY* magazine, wears two hats at Auburn—philosophy professor and humanist priest.

In the University of Arizona student handbook for 1990/91, the "Humanists" are listed alongside of Ambassadors for Christ, American Baptist Campus Ministry, Baptist Student Union, Campus Crusade for Christ, etc. At the University

of Minnesota the "U of M Atheists and Humanists" are identified under "Student Organizations—Religious." Listed with "U of M Atheists and Humanists" are such groups as the Buddhist Association, Baptist Student Union, Campus Crusade for Christ, Catholic Student Association, Muslim Student Association, University Unitarian Universalists, and Women of Virtue.

Writing in the August 1991 issue of *Commentary* magazine, Irving Kristol identifies secular humanism as the "new religious impulse" that stands in contrast to "the traditional biblical religions that formed the framework of Western civilization." Kristol argues that this new religious impulse "is more than science" since it makes all kinds of inferences about the human condition and human possibilities. He insists that this religion of secular humanism is "the orthodox metaphysical-theological basis of the two modern political philosophies, socialism and liberalism."

But let me conclude with an example from Harvard. The *Harvard University Gazette* (July 9, 1993) contained a front-page article by Debra Bradley Ruder entitled, "Humanist Chaplain Serves Ethical 'Nonbelievers.'" The chaplain, Thomas Ferrick, is one of thirty-four full- and part-time chaplains at Harvard and Radcliffe, and serves as executive director of the Humanist Association of Massachusetts. Ferrick, a former Roman Catholic priest, left the priesthood over the issues of evolution and homosexuality, to take up the Humanist chaplaincy at Harvard.

Ferrick's support comes from the American Humanist Association, the American Ethical Union, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, the Humanist Association of Massachusetts and Dr. Corliss Lamont. Lamont, who died last year, was the author of *The Philosophy of Humanism* and frequent writer for *The Humanist* magazine and even *FREE INQUIRY*. For Corliss Lamont, a long-time, hard-core, true Humanist believer, to financially support a Humanist chaplain at Harvard and help establish an endowment fund for such a chaplaincy speaks volumes about the true nature of Secular Humanism.

The *Gazette* article states that

there are humanists who, for whatever reason, embrace the tenets of humanism but don't want to let go of their religious feelings.

By label, I'm a Unitarian Universalist, a denomination resulting from the merger of two groups—the Unitarians, who believe in one God, not a Trinity; and the Universalists, who believe in universal salvation. A church founded today on those tenets would be on the fringes of Christianity. Many Unitarian Universalists churches have moved so far from the group's original tenets that one could ask, "Is Unitarian Universalism a religion?"

I've often been amused when visiting Unitarian Universalist churches across the country. Sometimes I can't tell if the members are religious people trying to be humanists, or humanists trying to be religious.

Now, here's a thought to consider: Could the power or force often referred to as God be a natural, but, as yet, a scientifically undiscovered force? If so, then one could believe in the existence of this life force—and even call it God—and still not be considered religious because it is belief in a *natural*, not a *supernatural* force. After all, lightning and thunder, earthquakes, meteors, and eclipses were all once considered supernatural phenomena. Just because we don't understand all the secrets of the universe is no reason to characterize them as supernatural. I'm sure there are still many natural laws yet to be discovered, and these discoveries may take thousands of years. Meanwhile, many people will fill in the gaps by belief in the supernatural. Why not call it "undiscovered natural law?"

Albert Einstein expressed awe for what he did not know. He said, "To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists . . . is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men." I don't know this for a fact, but my guess is that Einstein believed that the "impenetrable" would one day be penetrated. As some of his theories are only today being validated, I predict that science will continually unlock the keys to life, actually delving into what many call "God."

On the back of this magazine is usually found a statement called "The Affirmation

of Humanism: A Statement of Principles." Every three months when I receive FREE INQUIRY I read this affirmation. What religion could offer more? It reminds me that I am a moral person, that I have values, that I have worth.

Any nonreligious person with a love for humankind could easily embrace each of the twenty-one humanist tenets. Many

religious people could embrace them as well—as long as they believe in human worth and potential.

Is the Earth round? Not exactly. Technically, the Earth is a sphere and not quite round.

Is humanism a religion? Not exactly. Technically, humanism is a belief system that is not quite a religion. •

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## What Is Religious Humanism?

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### Mason Olds

Religions, as a component of culture, are creations of human beings. They were created so that human beings might live better. Religions then are not intrinsically good, but they have value in so far as they contribute to the living of good lives. It is possible for a particular religion to serve its useful purpose in a particular time and circumstance, and, when the situation radically changes, the religion is no longer useful and so it is discarded. It seems that this is exactly what happened to the ancient Greek religion. Of course, a new religion, Christianity, was created and invaded Greece to take over the vacancy.

The ancient Greek thinker Xenophanes understood more clearly that it was humans who created their religions and their gods than do many of our contemporaries. He noted, "The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black; and the Thracians, that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired." Xenophanes went on to speculate, "If oxen and horses and lions had hands with which to paint and make the works of art that men make, horses would paint gods resembling horses, and oxen gods resembling oxen, making the bodies of the gods just like the bodies of their own species."

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**"In traditional Western religions, it is believed that in order to be religious one must believe in God and in personal immortality.**

**However, the advocates of religious humanism maintain that one can be religious without giving intellectual assent to either of these beliefs."**

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Today it is the feeling of many in our culture that Western religions have run their courses; they have served the purposes for which they were created, and, like the ancient Greek religion before them, they are in their twilight years. The times require that poets and artists arise who will create a new religion for the living of these days. It is in this context that I wish to take on the mantle of the poet and attempt to create a rough sketch of the nature of religious humanism, gleaned from the ideas of a number of advocates.

I suggest that *the first short stanza might deal with history*. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation began in Europe. Though it had its origin in Germany with the thought of Martin Luther, it soon spread to England, giving rise to the Church of England. In the seventeenth century, Congregationalism arose out of the Puritan movement within Anglicanism. When the Puritans immigrated to New England, they established the Congregational church in many of the New England colonies. In the early nine-