

# Report from

SUB-SAHARAN HUMANISTS CONVENE IN AN HISTORIC MEETING

## Nigeria

Norm R. Allen, Jr.

T

he Nigerian Humanist Movement hosted the first international humanist conference in Sub-Saharan Africa from October 8–10, 2001.

Eighty-six humanist scholars, writers, academics, and activists from Nigeria, Uganda, and the United States gathered at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier university.

The scholarly presentations were impressive, thought-provoking, and controversial. They often sparked heated debates during the question-and-answer sessions. In "Combating Superstition in Artificial Human Reproduction," philosopher Peter F. Omonzelele of the University of Benin (Nigeria) argued that the Catholic Church opposes artificial means of reproduction largely due to its prohibitions against masturbation and adultery and its opposition to unmarried women giving birth. Omonzelele argued that because most religionists do not oppose life-improving procedures such as blood transfusions, they should not be opposed to procedures such as artificial insemination. He further argued that married and single women should have the right to decide how they are to become pregnant.

Dr. Sanya Olutogun presented a paper titled "Biotechnology and the Fight against Hunger in Africa." He argued in favor of genetically modified foods to eradicate hunger throughout the continent. His presentation and many others showed that African humanists often differ with their Western counterparts on some issues. In the West, many environmentalists and humanists are opposed to what they call "Frankenfoods." In Africa, however, many scholars are more apt to argue that the concerns raised by many environmentalists in the West are not backed by good science. Olutogun, for example, believes that biotechnology holds great promise for combating hunger and starvation in Africa.

Sheila Solarin, the matron of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and the widow of the late humanitarian freethinker Tai Solarin, gave an excellent presentation on the importance of humanism. She noted that human beings should do away with the God of the gaps, to whom is ascribed whatever is not popularly understood. Africans used to believe in the rain god and the god of thunder, she noted. But after we learned more about the weather, such gods became obsolete. Similarly, in the past we wanted to increase the world's population, and we believed in fertility goddesses. But today, we want smaller families. We do not, however, worship *infertility* goddesses. "We have Planned Parenthood," she wryly noted.

Humanist leaders gave reports on the state of humanism

*Norm Allen, Jr., is executive director of African Americans for Humanism and deputy editor of FREE INQUIRY.*

in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Black America. Gebregeorgis Yohannes is the founder of the Ethiopian Humanist Organization. He noted that "It takes a great deal of courage to go against established beliefs and superstitions in Africa." He discussed the danger involved in trying to popularize humanist ideals in cultures where there is no tradition of freedom of dissent. He called for bravery and tact among African humanist leaders.

Yohannes and another Ethiopian humanist produced a ten-page humanist brochure detailing humanist principles and how they pertain to Ethiopian life. Yohannes is developing a Web site for the African Humanist Alliance (AHAL) with the support of the Council for Secular Humanism's African Americans for Humanism. It will be utilized as a resource for information and communication among humanists with an interest in African affairs.

Nsajigwa I-G Mwasokwa has established a group called "Sisi Kwa Sisi" (Swahili for "all of us" or "together as one"). The Tanzanian group is in its infancy, but it is growing. According to Mwasokwa, Christianity did not enter Tanzania until 1884–1885. The colonial government branded indigenous African religions as "primitive" and "polytheistic."

Arabs and Persians brought Islam to Tanzania between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, long before the advent of Christianity. Though the Muslims also looked down upon indigenous African religions, they saw similarities between the Muslim faith and African traditions. Mwasokwa says that traditional African culture embraced patriarchy, polygamy, and community-oriented principles. It was therefore easier for Muslims to gradually attract Tanzanians to Islam, rather than



Many conference participants pose for a photo after the second plenary session.



A painting with a humanist theme was presented to Norm R. Allen, Jr., (right) from Dr. Olusgun Oladipo (left).

trying to convert them as Christians did.

Mwasokwa says that humanism presents the new “way forward.” He says that the humanist life stance is badly needed to combat dogmas, harmful traditions, irrational fears, authoritarianism, and intolerance. He believes that critical thinking will help Africans break the shackles of modern slavery in all of its forms.

Ssekitooleko Deogratiasi is the founder of the Ugandan Humanists Association. His organization has been involved in efforts to rid Africa of land mines and to ban corporal punishment from Ugandan schools. He believes that, for humanism to prosper, the movement must gain political power. In light of the attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, he believes that humanism is particularly crucial in the fight against terrorism and religious extremism.

Norm R. Allen, Jr., the executive director of African Americans for Humanism, discussed the profound impact that humanist ideals have had upon the substantive development of Black intellectualism, activism, and culture in the Unit-

ed States. He added, however, that according to a recent ABC News/Beliefnet.com poll, only 3 percent of African Americans are nontheists. He said that this does not have to always be the case, but that in any event, the influence of Black humanists will continue to far exceed their numbers.

Allen gave special thanks to Emmanuel Kofi Mensah, who founded the first major humanist group in Nigeria, Action for Humanism. At the International Humanist and Ethical Union Congress in Amsterdam in 1992, Mensah promised that Africa would one day host a large humanist conference. His vision has been realized, and Africa stands poised to make great contributions to organized humanism in the near future.

Most Nigerian humanists expressed strong concern about the violence between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria. Though Nigeria’s constitution asserts that it is a secular nation, there is a constitutional provision allowing Nigerian states to institute religious governments. For this reason, at least a dozen Nigerian states in the north have instituted Sharia (Muslim) legal systems. As a result, tensions have risen: angry religionists have burnt mosques and churches, and hundreds have been killed. Some Nigerian humanists believe that humanism is the only answer. Others believe that religion will never disappear in Africa, and that the best hope lies in trying to make religions more humanistic.

The conference attracted great media attention. A national television station aired parts of some speeches made by humanist spokespersons at the conference. Radio Nigeria aired remarks from some speakers, and major newspapers in Nigeria ran news of the conference.

The entertainment provided at the inaugural session was exceptional. Sheila Solarin heads the Mayflower School, the leading senior secondary school in Nigeria and Nigeria’s

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## Bringing Secular Humanism to Africa

There have been massive efforts by missionaries to convert large sectors of humanity throughout history, especially in recent years. Africa has especially suffered wave after wave of evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, and fundamentalist Muslims attempting to convert people. Nigeria is one of the crossroads of these efforts, for the northern part of the country is Muslim and the southern part Christian—and there have been riots and bloodshed between contending religious factions on the frontier.

It is with this missionary effort in the background that the recent efforts of the Council for Secular Humanism must be viewed as significant. Under the leadership of Norm Allen, executive director of African Americans for Humanism, the Council has played a seminal role in making an all-African conference possible. Bilateral projects have been going on for over a decade. The Council has sent ambassadors to Nigeria and Ghana, and secular humanists from Africa have visited the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York, and at conferences of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Religions often insist upon submission to the “will of God”; they preach that salvation is in the next life. Africa has suffered at their hands, with poverty and disease (especially AIDS) plaguing these nations. Secular humanists believe that reason, science, and the virtues of individual liberty, self-help, and self-reliance are pivotal if Africa is to grow and develop. The Council has focused on scientific literacy and critical thinking in its educational programs, and it has consistently defended democracy and human rights. This is spelled out clearly in *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, which advocates planetary humanism.

The Council has contributed funding—however modest—to promote secular humanism across Africa. It has also provided books and publications. We are pleased that there are now humanist groups in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Senegal, and South Africa.

The Council’s work in Africa, we believe, will allow rational alternatives to be presented. Plans are moving ahead for future conferences in Africa. Readers who wish to support this unique effort may make contributions directly to African Americans for Humanism, PO Box 664, Amherst, N.Y. 14226.

—Paul Kurtz

## September 11 Fallout Hits Secularists

**C**hurch-State Update tracks continuing developments in important federal, state, and local church-state issues. Each item is preceded by an up arrow (↑) or a down arrow (↓), based on the story's implications for separation of church and state and the rights of the nonreligious.

**↓ After 9/11, Religious Outbursts Trample Liberties.** More than the Twin Towers collapsed on September 11. Across the country, religious liberty protections that non-Christians have relied on for more than four decades are being swept away.

When the Roxbury, New Jersey, school district forbade grade schools to display “God Bless America” posters to show respect for non-Christian students, public backlash forced the superintendent to rescind the order. By a vote of 404–0, the U.S. House of Representatives encouraged public schools to ignore diversity concerns and post the exclusionary slogan. North Carolina passed a law allowing public schools to

*Tom Flynn is Editor of FREE INQUIRY and former coordinator of the First Amendment Task Force.*

post the Ten Commandments unaccompanied by other documents.

School prayer is also on the comeback trail. By a 297–125 vote the House passed another nonbinding resolution, urging public schools to set aside time for prayer. Texas Governor Rick Perry orchestrated a public middle-school rally featuring minister-led Christian prayer. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee declared October “Student Religious Liberty Month”; the Greenbrier, Arkansas, school district responded by approving recitation of the Lord’s Prayer over the loudspeaker system at football games. Florida’s lower house passed a law permitting student-led prayer in schools.

Representative Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) announced his third effort to pass a constitutional amendment letting government-sponsored religion in public places.

Target groups got the message. The secular humanist group Red River Freethinkers (Fargo, North Dakota) abandoned plans to seek removal of a Ten Commandments marker from a public plaza.

This torrent of bigotry against non-Christians threatens to reverse more than forty years of church-state

progress—and make non-Christian Americans into second-class citizens again, just when their numbers are at all-time highs.

**↓ City Must Aid Prayer Rally.** In an unsigned order, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed an appeals court ruling upholding the city of Tucson, Arizona’s denial of municipal equipment and services to Christian sponsors of a Day of Prayer rally at a city park. The city had refused to provide Prayer-day organizers with free public services that the city offered to sponsors of secular events.

Apparently the current Court has decided to jettison the principle that government must not appear to endorse religion over irreligion, or one religion over others. Stay tuned; soon the Court may defend this startling position in a formal ruling, further licensing Christian bigots (as though they needed it) to oppress non-Christians of every stripe in the public square with government’s, um, blessing.

**↓ Faith-Based Initiative Loses Steam.** The White House has backed down on its controversial faith-based initiative. As early as midsummer, George W. Bush’s plan to channel public money to religious groups faced growing opposition. In the wake of September 11, look for Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), and the White House to field a drastically reduced “Armies of Compassion” bill that loosens rules for charitable deductions but does not permit religious discrimination by federally supported charities. 

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oldest secular school. The Mayflower Students Choral Group sang to the delight of the audience. Afterward, the Cultural Ensemble, Osogbo, thrilled the crowd with traditional/modern dance routines.

Leo Igwe, the secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and the main organizer of the conference, believes that humanist leaders should be assertive in their efforts to foster humanist ideals. Rather than waiting for like-minded individuals to discover humanism, humanist leaders must take their messages to the people, Igwe says. He plans to do more traveling throughout Africa to plant the seeds of humanism with literature and human contact. He has outlined a plan for establishing sub-regional African humanist networks—West Africa, East and Central

Africa, North Africa, and Southern Africa. He says: “This Action Plan should also provide for the organization of a regional conference at least once every three years. These conferences will be rotated among the different sub-regional networks so that, by 2011, at least one regional humanist conference must have been held in all the sub-regions in the continent.”

It is clear that Africa—the cradle of humanity—will play a vital role in the development of international humanism. Humanists worldwide should embrace Igwe’s exclamations, “Long live the African Humanist Movement! Long live the International Humanist Movement!”