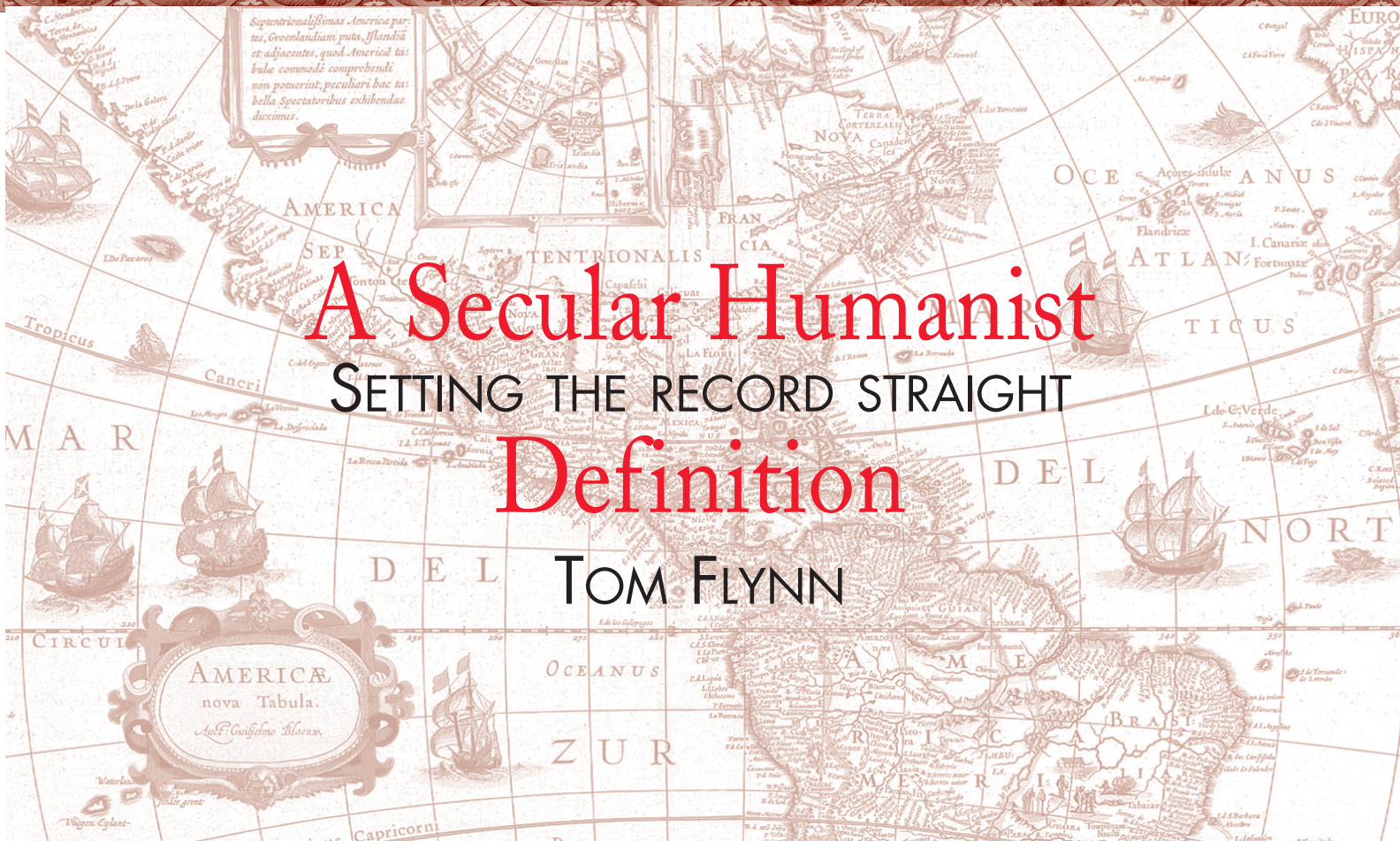

A Secular Humanist Definition

Setting the Record Straight

Tom Flynn

> [P]erhaps more than any other movement, humanism expresses the outlook and values of the modern world.[1]
>
> —Paul Kurtz

Introduction

More than twenty years ago, someone from People for the American Way quipped that "defining secular humanism is like nailing Jello to a tree." That phrase lives on, though a recent Web search reveals that "raising a teenager" has eclipsed "defining secular humanism" as the undertaking most often said to resemble nailing Jello to a tree. Undeterred, I'll attempt to define secular humanism in a way that makes clear its relationship to neighboring life stances such as atheism, agnosticism, and religious humanism—in the process, shedding light on the Council for Secular Humanism and its unique mission.

How does secular humanism differ from religious humanism—or from simple atheism? Do the differences matter? Those are perennial questions.[2] Humanism matters too much for crucial questions about its nature to go unexplored. In addition, a political problem demands attention: is there a compelling reason why more than a dozen national secular humanist, religious humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations all need to exist in the United States? Some have suggested that our movement would be better served and better respected if these groups coalesced. "Unity appeals," I wrote eleven years ago. "Still, if contemporary humanism is a house divided, it is hard to imagine what anyone might gain by using imprecise language to obscure the disjunction."[3]

Does secular humanism merit a niche, hence an organization, all its own? To ask that is to ask whether secular humanism brings something to the marketplace of ideas that other life stances fail to capture. It is to ask whether secular humanism possesses what marketers call a "unique selling proposition."

Secular Humanism's Proposition

Coined four decades ago by advertising executive Rosser Reeves, "unique selling proposition" means a distinctive and meaningful characteristic that only one among a cluster of competitors exhibits.[4] It's the thing that makes your message or product different from any other. If secular humanism exhibits such a characteristic, then that would almost certainly justify its existence as an independent life stance—and demonstrate the need for a dedicated organization to be its advocate.

Tom Flynn is the editor of Free Inquiry.

We believe that it is possible to bring about a more humane world, one based upon the methods of reason and the principles of tolerance, compromise, and the negotiation of differences. — "A Secular Humanist Declaration" (1980)

To me, secular humanism's unique selling proposition is rooted in the balance it strikes between cognitive and emotional/affective commitments. Paul Kurtz captures this when he identifies knowledge (cognitive) and courage and caring (affective) as "key humanist virtues."[5] Christopher Hitchens makes the same point more obliquely when he contrasts "those who believe that god favors thuggish, tribal human designs, and those who don't believe in god and who oppose thuggery and tribalism on principle" (emphasis added).[6]

Secular humanism's cognitive thrust lies in its naturalistic worldview; its emotional or affective thrust lies in its positive ethical outlook. Each element is equally essential to secular humanism; neither stands alone. I submit that this meaningfully differentiates secular humanism from religious humanism, and from simple atheism as well. Continuing with Hitchens's language, secular humanists necessarily disbelieve in god (naturalism) and just as necessarily oppose thuggery and tribalism on principle (an outgrowth of ethics). Of course, many atheists, agnostics, and religious humanists do the same. But when atheists and agnostics adopt positive ethics, they do so for reasons independent of their atheism or agnosticism. When religious humanists defend naturalism, they do so for reasons outside the boundaries of their religious humanism. Only for the secular humanist do both commitments arise organically within his or her life stance.

Drawing Clear Boundaries: Pencil Sketch

Unlike religious humanism, secular humanism eschews transcendentalism in any and all forms. Depending on the context, transcendentalism can mean outright mysticism, the "spiritual" (itself a term with many meanings), or simply a rush toward emotional closure disproportionate to the knowable data. However defined, transcendentalism is rejected by secular humanists in favor of a rigorous philosophical naturalism: "naturalists maintain that there is insufficient scientific evidence for spiritual interpretations of reality and the postulation of occult causes."[7]

How about atheism? When people ask me whether I'm an atheist, I say, "Yes, but that's just the beginning." Unlike simple atheism, secular humanism affirms an ethical system that is:

- rooted in the world of experience;
- objective; and
- equally accessible to every human who cares to inquire into value issues.

I make this point cautiously, since religionists often falsely accuse atheists of having no values. Most atheists I know have strong value systems. In fact, some of my favorite atheists are secular humanists without knowing it. But atheism is only a position on the existence of God, not a comprehensive life stance. Nothing about atheism as such compels atheists to adopt any particular value system. British author Jeaneane Fowler noted that "while atheism is a ubiquitous characteristic of secular humanism, the most that can be said of an atheist is that he or she does not have belief in any kind of deity; the majority of atheists have no connection" with secular humanism.[8]

The same is true for agnostics (who doubt God's existence on epistemological grounds) and freethinkers (who engage in systematic, rational criticism of religious doctrines). Like atheism, these stances are not morally self-sufficient. Freethinkers who call it unfair of God to condemn his creations to hell must reach outside of freethought to construct a concept of fairness. Secular humanism is unique among these life stances in that it contains within itself all the raw materials needed to construct inspiring value systems that are both realistic and humane.

"While atheism is a necessary condition for secular humanism, it is not a sufficient one."

What Are Secular Humanist Ethics?

Secular humanism propounds a rational ethics based on human experience. It is consequentialist: ethical choices are judged by their results. Secular humanist ethics appeals to science, reason, and experience to justify its ethical principles. Observers can evaluate the real-world consequences of moral decisions and intersubjectively affirm their conclusions. Kurtz and other secular humanists argue that all human societies, even deeply religious ones, invariably construct consensus moralities on consequentialist principles. Millennia of human experience have given rise to a core of "common moral decencies" shared by almost all.[9]

Human happiness and social justice are the larger goals of secular humanist ethics. For Owen Flanagan, "[e]thics . . . is systematic inquiry into the conditions (of the world, of individual persons, and of groups of persons) that permit humans to flourish."[10] These conditions include freedom from want and fear, freedom of conscience, freedom to inquire, freedom to self-govern, and so on. Undergirding all of these is a keen commitment to individualism. Secular humanism takes upon itself the Enlightenment project of emancipating individuals from illicit controls of every type: the political control of repressive regimes; the ecclesiastical control of organized religion; even

the social controls of societal and family expectations, conventional morality, and the tyranny of the village. This does not mean that anything goes, but rather that social and political limits on human freedom must be justified by the individual and social benefits they confer.

Secular humanism affirms the values of both creative and individual self-realization and cosmopolitanism. Therefore, secular humanists sometimes defy ideals of the Left as well as the Right. FREE INQUIRY has opposed political and religious correctness, defending the right to criticize any teaching, even teachings revered by religious or ethnic communities. We support social and cultural fluidity, for example, championing intermarriage and assimilation when liberal opinion has sought to preserve static ethnic and religious identities.

THE HERITAGE OF SECULAR HUMANISM

Though different from atheism and religious humanism, secular humanism owes a great deal to both traditions. In fact, secular humanism is best understood as a synthesis of atheism and freethought, from which it derives its cognitive component, and religious humanism, from which it derives its emotional/affective component.

Atheism and freethought trace their roots to ancient Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on rational inquiry and curiosity about the workings of nature. Other sources included early Chinese Confucianism, ancient Indian materialists, and Roman Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics. Submerged during the Dark Ages, freethought re-emerged in the Renaissance. With the Enlightenment, rationalist and empiricist thinkers laid foundations for the modern scientific outlook. Utilitarians emancipated morality from religion, foreshadowing consequentialism. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ushered in a golden age for freethought. With the turn of the twentieth century, this flame flickered, but an abiding tradition remained that decades later would emerge as secular humanism.

Religious humanism also began with Greek philosophy and its hope of achieving the good life through human agency. Rome's Epicureans and Stoics offered early human-centered value systems. Renaissance humanism, a literary and philosophical movement, assigned prime importance to earthly happiness. Ironically, even the Reformation left its stamp on religious humanism, infusing the notion of the primacy of individual conscience. Liberal religion would be religious humanism's immediate ancestor. Universalism, originally a Christian denial of eternal damnation, was founded in 1780. Unitarianism, which renounced the Trinity, formed its first American congregation in 1785 and organized as a church in 1819. In 1876, Ethical Culture was founded by Felix Adler; it continues as today's American Ethical Union.

Secular humanism lacks any reliance on (or acceptance of) the transcendent.

Religious humanism budded from liberal religion in the early twentieth century. Humanist Manifesto I (1933) crystallized a movement among Unitarians that was already two decades old. Drafted by philosopher Roy Wood Sellars, Unitarian minister Raymond Bragg, and others, the unfortunately named Manifesto was signed by thirty-three Unitarian ministers and also philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952).

The principal religious humanist organization is the American Humanist Association (AHA), founded in 1941.

"Therefore, people who hold no transcendent beliefs but don the "religious humanist" label are being dishonest—either with the public, or with themselves."

(While AHA's aims extend beyond religious humanism and include naturalistic humanism, it serves as "home organization" for a great many religious humanists.) Founded as an educational organization, it was granted religious status by the Internal Revenue Service in 1968 (see the second sidebar, "Having It Both Ways"). Other religious humanist organizations include the American Ethical Union, the North American Committee for Humanism, the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, the former Friends of Religious Humanism, now calling itself "HUUmanists," and the Humanist Society of Friends. The latter two organizations are now included within the AHA. Religious humanism defends its identity vigorously. For instance, in 2001, an Austin, Texas, Ethical Culture society sued the state of Texas, winning recognition as religious for tax purposes although it asserts no belief in a deity.[11]

Though the term secular humanism appeared prior to 1961, no organization existed specifically to advocate it until Paul Kurtz and others formed the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH) in 1980. The name expressed opposition to totalitarian nontheisms such as those in the communist world. CODESH issued A Secular Humanist Declaration, the successor to Humanist Manifesto II (1973). FREE INQUIRY was launched late in 1980, publishing the full text of the Declaration in its inaugural issue. In 1996 CODESH shortened its name to the Council for Secular Humanism, the fall of communism having rendered the modifier "democratic" unnecessary. In 1999 the Council issued Humanist Manifesto 2000, the most recent restatement of the secular humanist position.

SECULARISM, RELIGION, AND CONFUSION

We come to the crux: Is secular humanism a religion? An orientation document on the Council for Secular Humanism Web site says no: "Secular humanism lacks essential characteristics of a religion."[12] Everyday parlance assumes that religion has to do with a god or gods, life eternal, and similar supernatural claims. Yet thinkers as varied as John Dewey, Paul Tillich (1886–1965), and A.H. Maslow (1908–1970) sought to extend the definition of the words religion or religious so as to encompass "ultimate concerns" with or without transcendental content. In A Common Faith, Dewey chose to define religion and

Watching Our Language

Much of the debate over religious and secular humanism turns on the meanings of words. Here are sample definitions of essential terms:

Secular. "4) Pertaining to the world or to things not spiritual or sacred; relating to or connected with worldly things; disassociated from religious teachings or principles; not devoted to sacred or religious use. . . ."[1]

Secularism. Coined in 1841 by English freethinker George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906), who defined it as "the extension of freethought in ethics."[2] Plainly Holyoake intended something very like the synthesis of unbelief and rational ethics seen today in secular humanism.

"a variety of utilitarian social ethic which seeks human improvement without reference to religion and exclusively by means of human reason, science, and social organization."—Robert Worth Frank, 1945[3]

A narrower dictionary definition: "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations."[4]

Humanism. "2. Any system of thought or action concerned with the interest and ideals of people.

4. . . . the intellectual and cultural movement . . . characterized by an emphasis on human interests rather than on the natural world or religion."[5]

"Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality."—Minimum Statement adopted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, 1996

Atheism. "from Gr. atheos, without a god: a (priv.) and theos (god)."[6] Atheism is popularly supposed to demand the active denial of God's existence, or even a faith in God's nonexistence as unbending—and irrational—as the faith of believers. This is untrue; all atheism requires is the lack of belief in God.

Religion. Defining religion is a minefield. Geddes MacGregor managed to compile an entire Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy that skipped the word and its cognates altogether![7] In The Idea of the Holy (1917), Rudolf Otto pictured religion "in terms of the presence of an awareness of the sacred or the holy."[8] Mircea Eliade also found "the unique and irreducible essence of all religious experience" in "sacredness"; see his The Sacred and the Profane (1951).[9] Winston L. King summarized the conventional view of "religion as a set of beliefs and practices that are different from surrounding beliefs and practices and that embody a special relationship to deity, that transcendent other."[10]

Many twentieth-century thinkers tried to break religion's ties to the supernatural. Friedrich Schleiermacher called religion "a feeling of absolute dependence"; Tillich famously called God "the ground of all being." Dewey proposed independent meanings for religion and religious, maintaining a transcendental definition of religion but a more abstract one for religious. Julian Huxley called for an "evolutionary and humanist religion," holding that the word could encompass nontheism.[11] Abraham Maslow yearned to tear "'religious' out of its narrow context of the supernatural, churches, rituals, dogmas, professional clergymen etc., and distribute it in principle throughout the whole of life."[12] Writing in Mircea Eliade's 1995 Encyclopedia of Religion, Winston King settled on this bafflingly vague definition: religion is "the attempt to order individual and social life in terms of culturally perceived ultimate priorities."

The "how not to" award goes to Verglius Ferm, editor of An Encyclopedia of Religion (1945). Despairing of defining religion at all, Ferm elected to define only religious: "to be religious is to effect in some way and in some measure a vital adjustment (however tentative and incomplete) to whatever is reacted to or regarded implicity or explicity as worthy of serious and ulterior concern."[13]

My own preferred definition: religion is "a life stance that includes at minimum a belief in the existence and fundamental importance of a realm transcending that of ordinary experience."

I'll close this survey with wisdom from the late anthropologist and Humanist Laureate, Sir Raymond Firth: "Religion is a name for some of man's most audacious attempts to give meaning to his world, by giving his constructions a symbolic transcendental referent."[14] Hear, hear.

Notes

1. Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary.
2. Gordon Stein, "Secularism," in Stein, ed., The Encyclopedia of Unbelief, p. 613.
3. Robert Worth Frank, "Secularism," in Vergilius Ferm, ed., An Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 700.
4. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary.
5. Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary.
6. Ibid.
7. Geddes MacGregor, Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
8. Winston L. King, "Religion," in Mircea Eliade, ed.-in-chief, The Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), v. 12, p. 284.
9. King, in Eliade, ed., p. 284–85.
10. Ibid., p. 283.
11. Jeaneane Fowler, Humanism: Beliefs and Practices (Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) p. 31.
12. Abraham Maslow, "Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences," in W.A. Sadler Jr., ed., Personality and Religion (London: SCM, 1970), p. 70.
13. Verligius Ferm, "Religion, the Problem of Definition," in Ferm, ed., p. 647.
14. Raymond Firth, Religion: A Humanist Interpretation (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 70.

religious dissimilarly. Religion retained its common association with the transcendent or supernatural while religious was held to subsume any commitment of deep significance.[13] (See the first sidebar, "Watching Our Language," for etymological profiles of words important to this controversy.)

Still, common—that is, pre-Deweyan—usage holds that the genuinely religious necessarily involves the supernatural or transcendent. Common usage has its advantages, not least that it sustains discrete meanings for terms like philosophy and ethics. I still stand by a definition of religion I offered in these pages in 1996: Religion is a "life stance that includes at minimum a belief in the existence and fundamental importance of a realm transcending that of ordinary experience."[14]

From this definition, it follows that in order to be a genuine religious humanist, one must believe in something that is unprovable in this world. One needn't believe in a deity or a spiritual substance (though some religious humanists do)—one might simply cling to some historical or social proposition in which one's faith outruns the available evidence. For example, Teilhardian or Tiplerian optimists who believe in the inevitable perfectibility or triumph of humankind would qualify as religious humanists. So would dedicated Marxists, ironically enough. And of course, there are human-centered thinkers who nonetheless believe in a fairly literal kind of spirit, in the human soul or elan vital, or in a disembodied system of karma: their claim to the term religious humanist is uncontroversial.

On the other hand, if my definition of religion is correct, then a great many self-declared religious humanists . . . just aren't. I suspect that three principal processes make religious humanism seem a more popular option than it actually is.

The first process is improperly ascribing the word religious to a secularized "spirituality" from which all transcendence has been wrung. In our previous issue, Matt Young and Malcolm D. Wise wrote eloquently that they had abandoned transcendentalism.[15] For Young, religion had been reduced essentially to an ethnic and social heritage. Wise argued that a wholly this-worldly awe in the face of nature's wonders served as "spirituality" for him. Based on my definition of religion, I respectfully disagree. If you have journeyed beyond the possibility of belief in any literal transcendence, congratulations—but please find another label. You are not religious, and "religious humanist" misstates your position.

The second process is less edifying and requires little comment. No doubt some who claim the label "religious humanists" simply find it a useful way to avoid having to admit their unbelief.

The third process by which I believe the prevalence of religious humanism is exaggerated is also the most interesting. Some wholly naturalistic humanists call themselves "religious" because their practice of humanism retains certain forms that echo congregational life. I have come to see this as a misnomer. Humanists vary in their enthusiasm for rites of passage, ceremonies, and similar communal symbolic activities. One could arrange us along a spectrum, from crusty freethinkers who disdain ritual in any form to enthusiasts who find humanist ceremonies deeply satisfying. It's tempting verbal shorthand to say that the curmudgeons are "more secular," the ceremonialists "more religious." The analogy seems to ring so true: the curmudgeons reject everything "churchly,"

> The first principle of democratic secular humanism is its commitment to free inquiry. —"A Secular Humanist Declaration" (1980)

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some of which the ceremonialists preserve. But this is profoundly misleading. After all, nothing prevents a thorough-going naturalist—by our definition, an irreligious person—from cherishing humanist ceremonies.[16] The split between humanists who embrace humanist ceremonial and those who scorn it is not a split between religious and secular humanism; it belongs on some other spectrum. When we confuse genuine religiosity—that is, transcendentalism—with the mere taste for ceremonial, we misrepresent both. And we run the risk that secular humanists holding solidly naturalistic worldviews will mislocate themselves in the religious humanist camp solely because they relish ritual.[17]

I'll conclude my "pencil sketch" phase by offering two blunt conclusions:

1. People who hold no transcendent beliefs but don the "religious humanist" label are being dishonest—either with the public, or with themselves.

2. Because it lacks any reliance on (or acceptance of) the transcendent, secular humanism is not—and cannot be—a religion.

Humanism, Religion, and the Prayer Warriors

Our denials aside, Christian Right activists ceaselessly make the case that secular humanism is a religion. In 1980, Religious Right activist Phyllis Schlafly charged: "Secular Humanism has become the established religion of the U.S. public school system . . . and the various rationales that have caused public schools to eliminate prayer, moral training, and the teaching of basics."[18]

Fifteen years later, little had changed. In 1995, Pat Buchanan thundered: "We see the God of the Bible expelled from our public schools and replaced by all the false gods of secular humanism."[19]

Most recently, fundamentalists Tim LaHaye and David Noebel are still pounding that drum. In Mind Siege, their bestselling polemic endorsed by many powerful leaders on the Religious Right, they inveigh: "Until the American people realize that humanism is a religion, not simply a naïve philosophy or modern educational theory, the humanists will continue their siege on the minds of our children."[20]

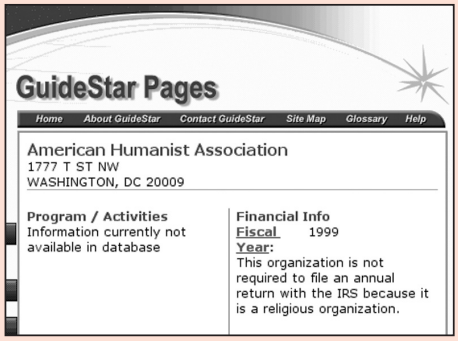
By calling secular humanism a religion, Christian Right activists hope to bar modern science, evolutionary theory, sex education, nonbiblical values, and pedagogical innovation from public schools. In other words, "secular humanism has to be

Having It Both Ways

The humanist organization to which the Council for Secular Humanism is most often compared is the American Humanist Association (AHA), based in Washington, D.C. Though embracing religious and secular humanists, AHA operates as a religious organization. This may surprise members and other observers who believed that AHA had abandoned its religious exemption in the early 1990s.

First, some background. Tax-exempt status for nonprofit organizations is established in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. The section defines several types of nonprofits, including educational, scientific, fraternal, and religious. All are exempt from federal income tax; most, but not all, file Form 990 annually in lieu of a tax return. Completing an accurate 990 entails about as much bookkeeping, preparation effort, and public financial disclosure as a corporate tax return, the difference being that no tax is paid.

Religious organizations, and only religious organizations, are not required to file Form 990. Nonprofits that enjoy a religious exemption thus receive benefits unavailable to nonprofits of other kinds: lower accounting costs and reduced financial disclosure requirements.



AHA was founded in 1941 by Edwin Wilson, a Unitarian minister and religious humanist. In 1946, it received its first IRS exemption as an educational organization. In 1968, it applied for an additional exemption as a religious organization in order that counselors attached to AHA's Division of Humanist Counseling (DHC) could enjoy privileges of clergy, including the power to perform legally binding marriages. AHA thereafter operated as a religious organization, and properly ceased filing Form 990s.

By 1989, many AHA members recognized that their group's religious status abetted Christian Right activists who considered humanism a religion. "Most AHA members want the AHA to be a secular organization," declared then-board chairperson Edd Doerr.[1] But if AHA gave up its religious exemption, its counselors would lose their clergy powers. In November 1989, the AHA board voted to absorb the Humanist Society of Friends (HSOF), a fifty-year-old Quaker religious humanist organization, into "the AHA's family of corporations." Transferring AHA's counseling arm to HSOF would keep counselors' clergy privileges secure as AHA transitioned to educational status. In its membership newsletter, AHA announced plans to relinquish its religious exemption. Henceforth, it said, it "will use its long-standing educational designation."[2]

The Division of Humanist Counseling remains under HSOF to this day. Many observers—including, to my knowledge, at least one mid-1990s AHA board member—simply assumed that AHA had relinquished its religious exemption.

But it hadn't. AHA remains for tax purposes a religious organization. In fact, the IRS seems to have forgotten that AHA ever had an educational exemption. When I called the Cincinnati IRS office that handles issues regarding tax-exempt nonprofits, an agent looked in the database and cheerily informed me that "the American Humanist Association is a church."

What happened?

In the early 1990s, AHA's project of renouncing its religious exemption was quietly abandoned. This was done for a variety of reasons. Operating as an educational organization would entail added costs for bookkeeping and filing those 990s. There was also concern that by surrendering its religious exemption, AHA might prompt the IRS to review AHA's long-unused educational exemption, adding cost and delay.[3] "The reason for moving DHC [the Division of Humanist Counseling] under the HSOF was eventually to move AHA to being a purely educational organization," said current AHA executive director Tony Hileman in a telephone interview. "The decision not to proceed was based in pure pragmatism."[4]

This decision to retain the religious exemption was not well publicized. Only with the debut of GuideStar.org, which publishes government filings of every U.S. nonprofit, did many in the movement discover that AHA still operated under its religious exemption.

Check for yourself. Log onto www.GuideStar.org. In the search field, enter "American Humanist Association." Scroll down until you find the one in Washington, D.C., the national headquarters. Click through and you will see the statement, "This organization is not required to file an annual return with the IRS because it is a religious organization."

If AHA's organizational status confuses you, relax. Apparently it also confuses people at AHA. The AHA Web site offers model bylaws for prospective chapters. Would-be AHA chapters are encouraged to adopt language that identifies them as chapters "of the American Humanist Association, a secular nonprofit educational organization (emphasis added)."[5] That's seriously inaccurate. The use of educational is defensible in view of AHA's original, if now unused, educational exemption. But secular? That word is at best curious, at worst misleading, when applied to a religious organization. Perhaps it indicates how deeply some within AHA still wish it were secular.

As this issue went to press, we learned that AHA may finally abandon its religious exemption—albeit more that a decade later than many of its supporters thought. AHA members received a summer ballot asking them to approve a restatement of AHA's Articles of Incorporation. If approved, the new articles would define the AHA as an educational organization, effectively reversing its 1968 transition to religious status and ending an embarrassing vulnerability within our movement.

Tony Hileman said nothing about the pending change when I interviewed him on June 3, though it had already been approved by AHA's board. Speaking of the religious-to-educational transition that was shelved in the early 1990s, he clearly assumed that AHA's original 1948 educational exemption remained in place and would come into effect at whatever time the religious exemption was relinquished.

Our research suggests that the IRS has lost its record of the 1948 exemption and now views AHA solely as a religious organization. If AHA members approve this long-overdue change, it will be intriguing to see how it is implemented—especially if it means that AHA must reapply for an educational exemption it thought was already in hand.

Notes

1. Edd Doerr, "Chairperson of the AHA Board Responds," Free Mind [AHA newsletter], March-April 1990, p. 11.
2. "Major Actions by the AHA Board of Directors," Free Mind January-February 1990, p. 4.
3. In fact, AHA's original educational exemption may no longer exist.
4. Telephone interview with Tony Hileman, June 3, 2002.
5. http://www.americanhumanist.org/chapters/samplebylaws.html, downloaded 6/7/02.

extirpated."[21] Large campaigns have been mounted to achieve this. In 1986, 624 parents aided by then-Governor George Wallace sued Alabama, alleging that forty-four public school textbooks unconstitutionally promoted the "religion of secular humanism." The case, heard initially by a sympathetic federal judge, W. Brevard Hand, became a media circus. Subpoenaed to the trial, Paul Kurtz was cross-examined for ten hours about whether secular humanism was or was not religious.[22] (Judge Hand's ruling in favor of the plaintiffs was overturned on appeal.[23])

Those who paint secular humanism as a religion often—and incorrectly—claim the authority of the U.S. Supreme Court. In a footnote to Torcaso v. Watkins (1961), Justice Hugo L. Black wrote: "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." Justice Black just had his facts wrong. More important, personal footnotes, or dicta, are not considered part of Supreme Court decisions and carry no weight as legal precedent. That didn't keep then-Justice Antonin Scalia and then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist from citing the footnote in their pro-creationist dissent to 1987's Edwards v. Aguilard.

In Peloza v. Capistrano Unified School District, a 1994 ruling that never faced appeal, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals explicitly denied that the Torcaso footnote constituted a legal finding that secular humanism is a religion. "Neither the Supreme Court, nor this circuit, has ever held that evolutionism or secular humanism are 'religions' for Establishment Clause purposes," said the court. "Indeed, both the dictionary definition of religion and the clear weight of the case law are to the contrary."[24]

"Through no fault of its own—simply by existing—religious humanism gives aid and comfort to the prayer warriors."

After years of Religious Right activism, overt religious expression is more prevalent in public schools than at any time since 1962. Is the charge that secular humanism is a religion still potent? As we've seen, Christian activists go on playing the "religion of secular humanism" card. I conclude that we are wise to scent danger if secular humanism and religion are further conflated in the public mind.

Complicating our task is the undeniable presence of humanists and humanist organizations that are outspokenly religious. John Dunphy's op-ed in this issue, "No Milk-and-Water Faith Indeed," showcases the nineteen years of trouble that followed one humanist's bombastic use of religious language. Through no fault of its own, simply by existing, religious humanism gives aid and comfort to the prayer warriors.

These nested confusions simply underscore the urgency that secular humanism be unmistakably clear in upholding its nonreligious identity.

The secular humanist recognizes the central role of morality in human life.
— "A Secular Humanist Declaration" (1980)

Drawing Clear Boundaries: This Time, in Ink

Secular humanism occupies one point on a spectrum of reformist orientations, between atheism on the "left" and religious humanism on the "right." Drawing from all across this spectrum, it is a vigorous hybrid whose debt to its source traditions should never be forgotten.

Atheism lends a valuable critique of outmoded, regressive religious systems. We welcome its vision of a universe upon wh meaning was never i sed from above. But s lar

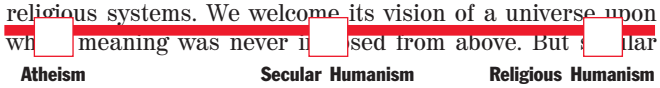


Figure 1. Nontraditional Stances on Religion: A Continuum

humanism goes further, calling on humans to develop within the universe values of their own—as it were, from below. Further, secular humanism maintains that, through a process of value inquiry informed by scientific and reflective thought, men and women can reach rough agreement concerning values, crafting ethical systems that deliver optimal results for human beings in a broad spectrum of circumstances.

At the same time, we acknowledge religious humanism's compassion and its focus on human-centered values. Nonetheless, secular humanists reject religious humanism's conviction that leaning on spiritual or transcendental moorings—even if lightly—is essential for the good life.

Secular humanism is invigorated by the best that atheism and religious humanism have to offer—thoroughly naturalistic, yet infused by an inspiring value system. It offers a nonreligious template that may one day guide much of humanity in pursuing truly humane lives. This is the fulfillment of secularism as George Jacob Holyoake imagined it (see the first sidebar): the successful quest for the good life, intellectually, ethically, emotionally rich, and without any reliance on religious faith.

A Secular Humanist Definition

We can now attempt our definition of secular humanism. Secular humanism begins with atheism (absence of belief in a deity) and agnosticism or skepticism (epistemological caution that rejects the transcendent as such due to a lack of evidence). Because no transcendent power will save us, secu-

lar humanists maintain that humans must take responsibility for themselves. While atheism is a necessary condition for secular humanism, it is not a sufficient one. Far from living in a moral vacuum, secular humanists "wish to encourage wherever possible the growth of moral awareness and the capacity for free choice and an understanding of the consequences thereof."[25]

Secular humanism emerges, then, as a comprehensive nonreligious life stance that incorporates a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system. That is the definition I offer.[26]

Secular Humanism and the Council's Unique Mission

Secular humanism indeed possesses a "unique selling proposition." Its full richness cannot be captured by an umbrella organization that encompasses the value neutrality of atheism and the epistemological neutrality of religious humanism. Atheism and freethought are distinct positions that deserve to be represented by organizations of their own. The same is true of religious humanism in its several varieties. Surely no less is true for secular humanism! As secular humanism's principal exponent and a resolute defender of its nonreligious character, the Council for Secular Humanism fills a unique niche. It champions the best the community of reason

Who's Who at Home

In the interest of full disclosure, we offer the following information about the Council for Secular Humanism and the other organizations that make their home at the Center for Inquiry–International.

The Council for Secular Humanism, Inc.

Founded 1980. Publisher of Free Inquiry. A tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational organization. In its original Certificate of Incorporation, the Council's purposes were described in part as follows:

> a) To foster interest in and encourage the growth of the traditions of democracy, secular humanism, and the principles of free inquiry in contemporary society; to revitalize, nurture and publicize the values represented by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine through written materials, convening and holding conferences and symposia; and to encourage and support . . . journals, articles, monographs and books that present a democratic secular humanistic point of view.
>
> b) To establish an organization to concern itself with free inquiry into and self expression regarding the principles of democratic secular humanism, from educational, literary, scientific or philosophic thought.

The Center for Inquiry, Inc.

Founded 1998. Operator of the network of Centers for Inquiry worldwide and provider of facilities and operational services to the Council for Secular Humanism and CSICOP. Publisher of The American Rationalist. A tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational organization. According to its mission statement, the Center's purpose is "to promote and defend reason, science, and freedom of inquiry in all areas of human endeavor."

Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), Inc.

Founded 1976. Publisher of Skeptical Inquirer magazine. According to its mission statement, CSICOP "encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues." While wholly independent of the Council for Secular Humanism, CSICOP shares with the Council in utilizing facilities, equipment, and personnel provided by the Center for Inquiry.

All of these organizations are nonreligious. They have been declared tax exempt as educational organizations. Each files Form 990 annually and bears the costs of recordkeeping, outside auditing, and other expenses associated with preparation of the Form 990.

has to offer: hard-minded scientific realism tempered by the compassionate commitment to an ethics that welcomes being judged by its results.

Speaking of results, the Council for Secular Humanism's achievements in its more than two decades existence have remarkable. Never in the nineteenth- or twentieth-century history of freethought or humanism has any American organization mustered as many readers and supporters, as many world-renowned thinkers, as large a staff, or such capable facilities in the service of rational thinking and humane ethics. As part of the international Center for Inquiry movement, the Council continues to flourish despite powerful religious and cultural forces ranged against it.

Secular humanism is a balanced and fulfilling life stance. It is more than atheism, more than "unhyphenated humanism"; it offers its own significant emergent qualities. The secular humanist agenda is a full one—in my opinion, an essential agenda for contemporary civilization. Surely it is more than enough to justify the existence of an independent organization dedicated to implementing it. The Council for Secular Humanism has a compelling mission, one we will continue to pursue with determination and vigor.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Paul Kurtz, "Humanism," in Gordon Stein, ed., The Encyclopedia of Unbelief (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 329.

2. Unitarian minister Paul Beattie addressed the secular-religious humanist controversy in Free Inquiry's premier issue in 1980. See also the following, all in FI, Fall 1996: Paul Kurtz, "Beyond Religion," pp. 4–6; David Noebel, "The Religion of Secular Humanism," pp. 7–9; Skipp Porteous, "Humanism Is Not a Religion," pp. 10–11; Mason Olds, "What Is Religious Humanism?" pp. 11–14; Tom Flynn, "Why Is Religious Humanism?" pp. 15–16; John E. Smith, "Humanism as a 'Quasi'-Religion,'" pp. 17–22; Timothy J. Madigan, "Deliver Us From Religion," pp. 22–23.

3. Tom Flynn, "What a Difference a Word Makes," Free Inquiry, Spring 1991, p. 46.

4. Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising (New York: Knopf, 1961).

5. See Kurtz's The Courage to Become: The Virtues of Humanism (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

6. Christopher Hitchens, "Single Standards." The Nation, May 13, 2002, p. 9.

7. Humanist Manifesto 2000, Free Inquiry, Fall 1999, p. 9.

8. Jeaneane Fowler, Humanism: Beliefs and Practices (Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), p. 67.

9. Paul Kurtz, Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988).

10. Owen Flanagan, The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 261.

11. "Texas Court Declares Ethical Culture a Religion," Washington Ethical Action Office [American Ethical Union] Reports, February 2002, p. 1.

12. Fritz Stevens, Edward Tabash, Tom Hill, Mary Ellen Sikes, and Tom Flynn, "What Is Secular Humanism?" http://www.secularhumanism.org/intro/what.html.

13. John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).

14. Tom Flynn, "Why Is Religious Humanism?" p. 16.

15. Matt Young, "How to Find Meaning in Religion Without Believing in God," Free Inquiry, Summer 2002, pp. 44–46; Malcolm D. Wise, "Religion and Spirituality: A Humanist View," loc. cit. p. 49.

16. Count me among the curmudgeons. For reasons rooted not in my metaphysics but in my commitment to individualism, I personally disdain humanist ceremonial and broadly distrust much communal symbolic activity: see my "Humanist Ceremonies? Over My Dead Body," Secular Humanist Bulletin, vol. 9, no. 1, and "Legitimize Bastardy!" SHB vol. 12, no. 1. In those articles I suggested that humanists who spurn ritual are "more secular" than those who indulge. I now concede that I was in error. When words are carefully defined, the distinction between religious and secular humanism turns solely on whether one embraces the transcendent. If they notice, I am sure that my colleagues who embrace naturalism but esteem humanist ceremonial will be relieved to know that I am now convinced that they are still secular humanists.

17. Elsewhere in this issue, Frank Pasquale makes an intriguing case for identifying naturalists who savor ritual as "celebrant humanists."

18. Phyllis Schlafly, "What Is Humanism?," a 1980 syndicated newspaper column reprinted in Free Inquiry, Spring 1981, p. 8.

19. "Buchanan on Secular Humanism," Free Inquiry, Spring 1996, p. 11.

20. Tim LaHaye and David Noebel, Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 170.

21. Paul Kurtz, "The Two Humanisms in Conflict: Religious vs. Secular," Free Inquiry, Fall 1991, p. 50.

22. Paul Kurtz, "The New Inquisition in the Schools," Free Inquiry, Winter 1986-87, pp. 4–5. See also Ronald Lindsay, "Judge Hand Erred in Holding that Secular Humanism Is a Religion," Free Inquiry, Fall 1987, pp. 25–27.

23. Randall D. Eliason, "A Tale of Two Secular Humanisms: The Alabama Textbook Case," Free Inquiry, Spring 1988, pp. 59–62.

24. "Federal Court Rules Secular Humanism Not a Religion," Secular Humanist Bulletin, Spring 1995, p. 1. Molleen Matsumura, "New Court Decision Brings Death to a Myth," FI, Fall 1996, pp. 9–10.

25. "A Secular Humanist Declaration," Free Inquiry, Winter 1980/81, p. 5.

26. Ironically, one of the problems in defining secular humanism is that English offers no common word to label the sort of endeavor that secular humanism is. Secular humanism can be described as a scientific, philosophical, and ethical outlook—but how to express that in one word or, at most, a pithy phrase? German offers weltanschauung. British humanist Harry Stopes-Roe proposed life stance, which I have used in this article. Paul Kurtz coined eupraxophy, later eupraxsophy, a compound of Greek roots meaning "good practice and wisdom," though for aesthetic reasons the term has not won broad popularity. See Paul Kurtz, Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), reissued in 1994 as Living Without Religion: Eupraxsophy. As of today, it still remains unclear what ought to complete the sentence, "Secular humanism is not a religion, it's a _____."