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The Fallacy of Humanist Ethics

By Tal Davis

"Nothing really matters.
Anyone can see.
Nothing really matters, nothing really matters to me.
Anyway the wind blows."

Bohemian Rhapsody by
Freddie Mercury and Queen

One of the most influential documents written in the 20th century was A Humanist Manifesto. It was written in 1933 by philosophers Roy Wood Sellars and Raymond Bragg. Sellars was a dedicated advocate of Naturalism. Bragg was a Unitarian minister. Both men saw humanism as a new naturalistic religion that would eventually replace Christianity and all other supernatural faiths. Thirty-four prominent philosophers and Unitarian ministers signed the document. It later became known as Humanist Manifesto I when two others were written in 1973 and 2003. Those later revisions sought to update the original and intensified the secular and anti-supernatural dogma of humanism and the Naturalist worldview.

Humanists, and most "new atheists," assert that Theism and its moral standards are hopelessly outdated in the modern scientific age. They maintain that humanity is the focus of all that ultimately matters in the world and the pilot of his own fate. The goal of all science, politics, and religion (in a non-theistic sense) is the well-being of all humanity (as they see it). They claim that morals and ethics must come from mankind's own rational thought processes and need not have any divine source. Right and wrong and good and evil are discerned entirely by the logical minds of highly intelligent wise people (i.e.: scientists and secular

philosophers, of course). The key to changing society to embrace those man-made values is through mass public education. One of the original signers of Humanist Manifesto I was John Dewey, who is regarded as the father of modern education. They argue that their ethical system is actually better than that of Christianity or any theistic system.

Granted, humanists and atheists can and do often live highly moral lives. However, that is in spite of the fallacy of their ethical worldview. There are essentially two basic and fatal flaws in the ethical system of Secular Humanism. One involves the basis of determining what is good or bad. The other problem is deciding what is regarded as right behavior or wrong behavior. In both cases, Humanism, and naturalism in general, lacks any objective basis for making those determinations. By removing any divine or transcendent foundation for ethics and morals, they become entirely subjective and relative. In other words, what is right and wrong or good and bad is determined only by one's own conscience or reasoning. Or, as is true in authoritarian and totalitarian societies, personal and societal morality is established by the state as determined by whoever has the ruling power.

So humanism, without an absolute source of what is good or bad, cannot really say what is good or bad. It all boils down to what the ruling intelligentsia or elite says it is. Inevitably, then, the standards will shift according to the whims of culture and government. Ironically, this moral relativism has led to the current post-modernist view, held by many in academia and popular culture, that no one can claim that their morality or culture is superior to any other. Thus, they would say it is wrong to tell someone else they are wrong.

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This, of course, violates the principle of non-contradiction. But, it is the only logical conclusion of atheist and humanist reasoning. They have painted themselves into a moral corner with no escape.

Though atheists and humanists rarely acknowledge it, this perspective inevitably leads to nihilism and anarchy. Some atheists and naturalists in history, such as 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and 20th century writer Jean-Paul Sartre, understood that fact. They actually had a difficult time living with their own logical conclusions that ultimately, as Freddie Mercury lamented, "nothing really matters."

The point is, without God, who is the essence what is good, and without a revelation from Him as to what is good and evil, there is no objective foundation for morals and ethics. God is the only infinite and eternal source from which an absolute foundation can be established. For historic Christianity and historic Judaism, what is right and good are determined by the perfect nature of God Himself. He is the essence of good and right. Wrong and evil are ideas and behaviors that contradict His nature. They are revealed to us in the Bible, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the living embodiment of Truth and Righteousness.

For a thousand years in Western civiliza-

tion, the Bible and Christianity were the bases for ethics, law, and justice. Biblical morality and the principle that mankind is made in the image of God were absolute standards by which society operated. In the 20th century, we saw what happens when those standards are denigrated. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and others of their ilk, had no qualms killing millions of people (mostly their own citizens) since they felt no higher moral accountability than to themselves. Their actions were the logical outcomes of their atheistic beliefs.

So, the fallacy of humanist ethics lies not so much in the practical moral behaviors they espouse (though many of them contradict biblical precepts). Rather, its ultimate flaw is in its lack of any foundation beyond the limited and changing ideas of human reasoning. Without God, there are no objective

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standards for moral principles or ethical behavior, so they will continue to blow about with the winds of cultural change. What's good today is bad tomorrow. What's wrong today is right tomorrow. Without God, it is as He warned the Israelites: "You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes." (Deut. 12:8 NASB)