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### What's Wrong with Humanist Ethics?

By Tal Davis

In 1933, The American Humanist Association (AHA) published The Humanist Manifesto. Humanism can be defined several ways. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary has three main definitions for Humanism.

1. a: devotion to the humanities: literary culture b: the revival of classical letters, individualistic and critical spirit, and emphasis on secular concerns characteristic of the Renaissance
2. devotion to human welfare: HUMANITARIANISM
3. a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason: SECULAR HUMANISM (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>)

Notice the first definition above actually has two parts. It defines humanism in relation to ancient humanities and classicalism as revived in the Middle Ages during the Renaissance period of art and science. The second definition is a practical one defining it in terms of concern for human welfare or humanitarianism. That is to say, the desire and efforts by some to better the lives of all people in the world.

It is the third of these definitions about which we will concern ourselves in this article. This is specified as Secular Humanism. This definition has direct implication for how one perceives the world, i.e.: one's worldview. Let's break it down so that we can clearly understand what each phrase says and its full implication for how it impacts human thought and behavior.

First it states it is "a doctrine." We understand a doctrine to be a specific system of thought that is taught and promulgated, often dogmatically. We usually associate doctrines with religious texts, movements, or organizations. In the case of Secular Humanism that is certainly true as

we will see. It definitely has doctrine and is well organized.

It also says it is an "attitude." In this sense it means humanism has an almost arrogant focus on humanity while ignoring or rebuffing any and all kinds of supernatural phenomena. In other words, anything that does not have a naturalistic explanation is to be summarily rejected. This is demonstrated practically as "a way of life centered on human interests or values."

The next phrase exposes the basic philosophical underpinnings of Secular Humanism. It "usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason." But here is where humanism has its fatal flaw. The worldview root of Secular Humanism, like all other naturalistic belief systems, is atheistic. That is, humanists deny that there is anything beyond the physical universe of time, space, matter, and energy.

Consider the following five statements from *The 1938 Humanist Manifesto*.

"FIRST: Religious humanists (now Secular Humanists) regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

SECOND: Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.

THIRD: Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.

FOURTH: Humanism recognizes that man's religious culture and civilization, as clearly depicted by anthropology and history, are the product of a gradual development due to his interaction with his natural environment and with his

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social heritage. The individual born into a particular culture is largely molded by that culture.

FIFTH: Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.” (To read the entire 1938 manifesto, click here: <http://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/%2>)

By the way, almost all the 1938 signees of The Humanist Manifesto were ordained ministers of the Unitarian Church (now the Unitarian-Universalist Association [UUA]). That shows how far that religious group had moved from its origins. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Unitarianism was basically a theistic or deistic non-trinitarian form of Christianity that used the Bible as its foundation. By the 20th century it had completely jettisoned Scripture as a guide for doctrine and practice. Today the UUA has no formal theology or scriptural canon of any kind.

But this leads us to the major issue of this article. How do we determine what is right and wrong or good and bad? As Theists and Christians, our source of moral authority is derived from two sources, human conscience and (more importantly) Divine Revelation (i.e., Scripture and Jesus Himself). Humanism declares that in the modern world of science, traditional religious values are inadequate. Consider this sentence from statement number five above from The Humanist Manifesto. “Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.”

It is clear that Secular Humanism’s foundation for morals and ethics begins and ends with human reason. Truth can

only be derived by scientific inquiry using the scientific method. The difficulty is that as science makes new discoveries, what is believed to be true at one time is discarded later. Objective absolute truth can never be attained. The universe is regarded as a closed system with no external input from any supernatural source of revelatory truth. Thus, without a divine lawgiver it is therefore up to mankind to derive its own concepts of right and wrong. The problem, of course, is that humans are so diverse culturally and religiously that finding any consensus is virtually impossible.

The bigger problem is that without God there can be no objective basis for ethics and morals. They will all be established and maintained by whoever holds the power to enforce them. They will also be relative to whatever the temporal situation and culture may be. It will be impossible to declare that one set of moral values is superior to any other, or that any specific act is morally wrong no matter how egregious it may seem.

Humanists proclaim lofty ideals of world peace, universal justice, tolerance, ending hunger, etc., all in the name of humanity. They also work for social justice and racial equality. Those are commendable goals. However, those same humanists often see no moral contradiction with such practices as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, or even government controlled social systems and economies. When mankind becomes its own determiner for morality, then there are no boundaries to what it will or will not allow. Laws and ethics can be determined or changed by whoever has the political or military power. The best examples of this was Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Right and wrong were what the Nazi Party and the Communist Party said it was. Thus killing Jews or handicapped people was good. Eliminating all capitalists was the moral thing to do. This ethical philosophy is still true in China and North Korea.

You might say, what has that got to do with us? Practically everything. The most influential philosophy now present in America is Secular Humanism. Most

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people follow it but are totally unaware. It is the guiding principle of nearly every American major academic institution and has been since the 1950s. Even some mainline Christian denominations have abandoned biblical standards for humanistic principles. The only exceptions are those relatively few colleges and universities and evangelical churches that are explicitly biblical in orientation. This humanist hegemony is one reason many once prominent universities have become centers of moral chaos. The outbreaks of antisemitism on some campuses over the last couple of years is indicative of this moral disparity. Also, the confusion over gender identity and sexual morality are symptoms of humanist relativism.

As Secular Humanism has slowly eroded the once solid foundation of western Judeo-Christian ethics, it is now starting to crumble beneath our feet. Somehow Christian and theistic philosophical and moral principles have got to make their way back into the American marketplace of ideas. Unfortunately, the majority of the media excludes most serious input by Christians voices. And sadly, the "Christian media" is taken up by less than scrupulous hucksters whose only real concern is to get donations. They barely make any impact on society as a whole. So what is needed? Some Christian think political change will make a difference. Perhaps to some extent. But what is really needed is a genuine heartfelt revival of faith in America. It can only start in our own hearts and as we share our faith with those around us.

Here are a couple suggestions I have for pastors to address this problem.

First, preach a sermon, or series of sermons, on the influence of Secular Humanism in society and why it is incompatible with biblical Christianity. Most Christians in the pews have no idea of what is happening intellectually in the culture or how to look for signs of unbiblical ideas. They need to be awakened, especially those with school children or those heading for college. For resource information go to our website at <https://www.marketfaith.org/non-christian-worldviews/the-gospel-according-to-carl-sagan-secular-humanism/> and <https://www.marketfaith.org/?s=humanism&id=29>

Likewise, preach a sermon or sermons on the biblical foundations of Christian ethics. Again most Christians really do not understand why we hold the ethical standards we do or how to teach them to their children. It is difficult because increasingly what they are learning at school or in the media are at odds with biblical standards. Go here for resources: <https://www.marketfaith.org/?s=ethics&id=29>

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