What Is Humanism?

By Fred Edwords

The sort of answer you get to the question "What is humanism?" depends on the sort of humanist you ask!

The word "humanism" has a number of meanings. And because authors and speakers often don’t clarify which meaning they intend, those trying to explain humanism can easily become a source of confusion. Fortunately, each meaning of the word constitutes a different type of humanism—the different types being easily separated and defined by the use of appropriate adjectives. So it is relatively easy to summarize the varieties of humanism in this way.

**Literary Humanism** is a devotion to the humanities or literary culture.

**Resaissance Humanism** is the spirit of learning that developed at the end of the middle ages with the revival of classical letters and a renewed confidence in the ability of human beings to determine for themselves truth and falsehood.

**Western Cultural Humanism** is a good name for the rational and empirical tradition that originated largely in ancient Greece and Rome, evolved throughout European history, and now constitutes a basic part of the Western approach to science, political theory, ethics, and law.

**Philosophical Humanism** is any outlook or way of life centered on human need and interest. Sub-categories of this type include Christian Humanism and Modern Humanism.

**Christian Humanism** is defined by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* as "a philosophy advocating the self-fulfillment of man within the framework of Christian principles." This more human-oriented faith is largely a product of the Renaissance and is a part of what made up Renaissance humanism.

**Modern Humanism**, also called Naturalistic Humanism, Scientific Humanism, Ethical Humanism, and Democratic Humanism, is defined by one of its leading proponents, Corliss Lamont, as "a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion." Modern Humanism has a dual origin, both secular and religious, and these constitute its sub-categories.

**Secular Humanism** is an outgrowth of eighteenth century enlightenment rationalism and nineteenth century freethought. Many secular groups, such as the Council for Secular Humanism and the American Rationalist Federation, and many otherwise unaffiliated academic philosophers and scientists, advocate this philosophy.

**Religious Humanism** largely emerged out of Ethical Culture, Unitarianism, and Universalism. Today, many Unitarian Universalist congregations and all Ethical Culture societies describe themselves as humanist in the modern sense.

The most critical irony in dealing with Modern Humanism is the tendency for its advocates to disagree on whether or not this worldview is religious. Those who see it as philosophy are the Secular Humanists while those who see it as religion are Religious Humanists. This dispute has been going on since the beginning of the twentieth century when the secular and religious traditions converged and brought Modern Humanism into existence.

Secular and Religious Humanists both share the same worldview and the same basic principles. This is made evident by the fact that both Secular and Religious Humanists were among the signers of Humanist Manifesto I in 1933, Humanist Manifesto II in 1973, and Humanist Manifesto III in 2003. From the standpoint of philosophy alone, there is no difference between the two. It is only in the definition of religion and in the practice of the philosophy that Religious and Secular Humanists effectively disagree.

The definition of religion used by Religious Humanists is often a functional one. Religion is that which serves the personal and social needs of a group of people sharing the same philosophical worldview.
To serve personal needs, Religious Humanism offers a basis for moral values, an inspiring set of ideals, methods for dealing with life's harsher realities, a rationale for living life joyously, and an overall sense of purpose.

To serve social needs humanist religious communities (such as Ethical Culture societies and many Unitarian Universalist churches) offer a sense of belonging, an institutional setting for the moral education of children, special holidays shared with like-minded people, a unique ceremonial life, the performance of ideologically consistent rites of passage (weddings, child welcomings, coming-of-age celebrations, memorials, and so forth), an opportunity for affirmation of one's philosophy of life, and a historical context for one's ideas.

Religious Humanists often maintain that most human beings have personal and social needs that can only be met by religion (taken in the functional sense just detailed). They do not feel that one should have to make a choice between meeting these needs in a traditional faith context versus not meeting them at all. Individuals who cannot feel at home in traditional religion should be able to find a home in non-traditional religion.

I was once asked by a reporter if this functional definition of religion didn't amount to taking away the substance and leaving only the superficial trappings. My answer was that the true substance of religion is the role it plays in the lives of individuals and the life of the community. Doctrines may differ from denomination to denomination, and new doctrines may replace old ones, but the purpose religion serves for people remains the same. If we define the substance of a thing as that which is most lasting and universal, then the function of religion is the core of it.

Religious Humanists, in realizing this, make sure that doctrine is never allowed to subvert the higher purpose of meeting human needs in the here and now. This is why humanist child welcoming ceremonies are geared to the community and humanist wedding services are tailored to the specialized needs of the wedding couple and their families. This is why humanist memorial services focus, not on saving the soul of the dear departed but on serving the survivors by giving them a memorable experience related to how the deceased was in life. This is why humanists don't proselytize people on their death beds. They find it better to allow them to die as they have lived, undisturbed by the agendas of others.

Finally, Religious Humanism is "faith in action." In his essay "The Faith of a Humanist," UU Minister Kenneth Phifer declares -

Humanism teaches us that it is immoral to wait for God to act for us. We must act to stop the wars and the crimes and the brutality of this and future ages. We have powers of a remarkable kind. We have a high degree of freedom in choosing what we will do. Humanism tells us that whatever our philosophy of the universe may be, ultimately the responsibility for the kind of world in which we live rests with us.

Now, while Secular Humanists may agree with much of what Religious Humanists do, they deny that this activity is properly called "religious." This isn't a mere semantic debate. Secular Humanists maintain that there is so much in religion deserving of criticism that the good name of humanism should not be tainted by connection with it.

Secular Humanists often refer to Unitarian Universalists as "humanists not yet out of the church habit." But Unitarian Universalists sometimes counter that a Secular Humanist is simply an "unchurched Unitarian."

Probably the most popular exemplar of the Secular Humanist world view in recent years was the controversial author Salman Rushdie. Here is what he said on ABC's Nightline on February 13, 1989, in regard to his novel The Satanic Verses.

[My book says] that there is an old, old conflict between the secular view of the world and the religious view of the world, and particularly between texts which claim to be divinely inspired and texts which are imaginatively inspired. . . . I distrust people who claim to know the whole truth and who seek to orchestrate the world in line with that one true truth. I think that's a very dangerous position in the world. It needs to be challenged. It needs to be challenged constantly in all sorts of ways, and that's what I tried to do.

In the March 2, 1989, edition of the New York Review, he explained that, in The Satanic Verses he -

tried to give a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great world religion. For this, apparently, I should be tried. . . . "Battle lines are being drawn today," one of my characters remarks. "Secular versus religious, the light verses the dark. Better you choose which side you are on."
The Secular Humanist tradition is in part a tradition of defiance, a tradition that dates back to ancient Greece. One can see, even in Greek mythology, humanist themes that are rarely, if ever, manifested in the mythologies of other cultures. And they certainly have not been repeated by modern religions. The best example here is the character Prometheus.

Prometheus stands out because he was admired by ancient Greeks as the one who defied Zeus. He stole the fire of the gods and brought it down to earth. For this he was punished. And yet he continued his defiance amid his tortures. This is one source of the humanist challenge to authority.

The next time we see a truly heroic Prometheus character in mythology it is Lucifer in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. But now he is the Devil. He is evil. Whoever would defy God must be wickedness personified. That seems to be a given of traditional religion. But the ancient Greeks didn't agree. To them, Zeus, for all his power, could still be mistaken.

Imagine how shocked a friend of mine was when I told her my view of "God's moral standards." I said, "If there were such a god, and these were indeed his ideal moral principles, I would be tolerant. After all, God is entitled to his own opinions!"

Only a humanist is inclined to speak this way. Only a humanist can suggest that, even if there be a god, it is OK to disagree with him, her, or it. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates shows that God is not necessarily the source of good, or even good himself. Socrates asks if something is good because God ordains it, or if God ordains it because it is already good. Yet, since the time of the ancient Greeks, no mainstream religion has permitted such questioning of God's will or made a hero out of a disobedient character. It is humanists who claim this tradition.

After all, much of human progress has been in defiance of religion or of the apparent natural order. When we deflect lightning or evacuate a town before a tornado strikes, we lessen the effects of so called "acts of God." When we land on the Moon we defy the Earth's gravitational pull. When we seek a solution to the AIDS crisis, we, as the late Reverend Jerry Falwell argued, thwart "God's punishment of homosexuals."

Politically, the defiance of religious and secular authority has led to democracy, human rights, and the protection of the environment. Humanists make no apologies for this. Humanists twist no biblical doctrine to justify such actions. They recognize the Prometheus defiance of their response and take pride in it. For this is part of the tradition.

Another aspect of the Secular Humanist tradition is skepticism. Skepticism's historical exemplar is Socrates. Why Socrates? Because after all this time he still stands alone among all the famous saints and sages from antiquity to the present. Every religion has its sage. Judaism has Moses, Zoroastrianism has Zarathustra, Buddhism has the Buddha, Christianity has Jesus, Islam has Mohammad, Mormonism has Joseph Smith, and Bahai has Baha-u-lah. Every one of these individuals claimed to know the absolute truth. It is Socrates, alone among famous sages, who claimed to know nothing. Each devised a set of rules or laws, save Socrates. Instead, Socrates gave us a method—a method of questioning the rules of others, of cross-examination. And Socrates didn't die for truth, he died for rights and the rule of law. For these reasons Socrates is the quintessential skeptical humanist. He stands as a symbol, both of Greek rationalism and the humanist tradition that grew out of it. And no equally recognized saint or sage has joined his company since his death.

Because of the strong Secular Humanist identity with the images of Prometheus and Socrates, and equally strong rejection of traditional religion, the Secular Humanist actually agrees with Tertullian—who said: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"

That is, Secular Humanists identify more closely with the rational heritage symbolized by ancient Athens than with the faith heritage epitomized by ancient Jerusalem.

But don't assume from this that Secular Humanism is only negative. The positive side is liberation, best expressed in these words of American agnostic Robert G. Ingersoll:

> When I became convinced that the universe is natural, that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell. The dungeon was flooded with light and all the bolts and bars and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf, or a slave. There was for me no master in all the wide world, not even in infinite space. I was free-free to think, to express my thoughts-free to live my own ideal, free to live for myself and those I loved, free
to use all my faculties, all my senses, free to spread imagination's wings, free to investigate, to guess and dream and
hope, free to judge and determine for myself… I was free! I stood erect and fearlessly, joyously faced all worlds.

Enough to make a Secular Humanist shout "hallelujah!"

The fact that humanism can at once be both religious and secular presents a paradox of course, but not the only such
paradox. Another is that both Religious and Secular Humanism place reason above faith, usually to the point of
eschewing faith altogether. The dichotomy between reason and faith is often given emphasis in humanism, with
humanists taking their stand on the side of reason. Because of this, Religious Humanism should not be seen as an
alternative faith, but rather as an alternative way of being religious.

These paradoxical features not only require a unique treatment of Religious Humanism in the study of world religions
but also help explain the continuing disagreement, both inside and outside the humanist movement, over whether
humanism is a religion at all.

The paradoxes don't end here. Religious Humanism is without a god, without a belief in the supernatural, without a
belief in an afterlife, and without a belief in a "higher" source of moral values. Some adherents would even go so far
as to suggest that it is a religion without "belief" of any kind—knowledge based on evidence being considered
preferable. Furthermore, the common notion of "religious knowledge" as knowledge gathered through nonscientific
means is not accepted in Religious Humanist epistemology.

Because both Religious and Secular Humanism are identified so closely with Cultural Humanism, they readily
embrace modern science, democratic principles, human rights, and free inquiry. Humanism's rejection of the notions
of sin and guilt, especially in relation to sexual ethics, puts it in harmony with contemporary sexology and sex
education as well as aspects of humanistic psychology. And humanism's historic advocacy of the secular state makes
it another voice in the defense of church-state separation.

All these features led to the old charge that people are teaching "the religion of secular humanism" in the public
schools.

The most obvious point to clarify in this context is that some religions hold to doctrines that place their adherents at
odds with certain features of the modern world. Other religions do not. For example, many Evangelical Christians,
especially those filling the ranks of the "religious right," reject the theory of evolution. Therefore, they see the teaching
of evolution in a science course as an affront to their religious sensibilities. In defending their beliefs from exposure to
ideas inconsistent with them, such believers label evolution as "humanism" and maintain that exclusive teaching of it
in the science classroom constitutes a breach in the Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and state.

It is indeed true that Religious Humanists, in embracing modern science, embrace evolution in the bargain. But
individuals within mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism also embrace modern science—and hence
evolution. Evolution happens to be the state of the art in science today and is appropriately taught in science courses.
That evolution has come to be identified with Religious Humanism but not with mainline Christianity or Judaism is a
curious quirk of politics in North America. But this is a typical feature of the whole controversy over humanism in the
schools.

Other courses of study have come to be identified with humanism as well, including sex education, values education,
global education, and even creative writing. There are Christian fundamentalists who would have us believe that
"situation ethics" was invented by 1974 Humanist of the Year Joseph Fletcher. But situational considerations have
been an element of Western jurisprudence for at least 2,000 years! Again, Secular and Religious Humanists, being in
harmony with current trends, are quite comfortable with all of this, as are adherents of most major religions. There is
no justification for seeing these ideas as the exclusive legacy of humanism. Furthermore, there are independent
secular reasons why schools offer the curriculum that they do. A bias in favor of "the religion of secular humanism"
has never been a factor in their development and implementation.

The charge of humanist infiltration into the public schools seems to be the product of a confusion of Cultural
Humanism and Religious Humanism. Though Religious Humanism embraces Cultural Humanism, this is no
justification for separating out Cultural Humanism, labeling it as the exclusive legacy of a nontheistic and naturalistic
religion called Religious Humanism, and declaring it alien. To do so would be to turn one's back on a significant part
of one's culture and en throne the standards of Christian fundamentalism as the arbiter of what is and is not religious.
A deeper understanding of Western culture would go a long way in clarifying the issues surrounding the controversy
over humanism in the public schools.
Once we leave the areas of confusion, it is possible to explain, in straightforward terms, exactly what the Modern Humanist philosophy is about. It is easy to summarize the basic ideas held in common by both Religious and Secular Humanists. These ideas are as follows:

1. Humanism is one of those philosophies for people who think for themselves. There is no area of thought that a Humanist is afraid to challenge and explore.

2. Humanism is a philosophy focused upon human means for comprehending reality. Humanists make no claims to possess or have access to supposed transcendent knowledge.

3. Humanism is a philosophy of reason and science in the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, when it comes to the question of the most valid means for acquiring knowledge of the world, Humanists reject arbitrary faith, authority, revelation, and altered states of consciousness.

4. Humanism is a philosophy of imagination. Humanists recognize that intuitive feelings, hunches, speculation, flashes of inspiration, emotion, altered states of consciousness, and even religious experience, while not valid means to acquire knowledge, remain useful sources of ideas that can lead us to new ways of looking at the world. These ideas, after they have been assessed rationally for their usefulness, can then be put to work, often as alternative approaches for solving problems.

5. Humanism is a philosophy for the here and now. Humanists regard human values as making sense only in the context of human life rather than in the promise of a supposed life after death.

6. Humanism is a philosophy of compassion. Humanist ethics is solely concerned with meeting human needs and answering human problems-for both the individual and society-and devotes no attention to the satisfaction of the desires of supposed theological entities.

7. Humanism is a realistic philosophy. Humanists recognize the existence of moral dilemmas and the need for careful consideration of immediate and future consequences in moral decision making.

8. Humanism is in tune with the science of today. Humanists therefore recognize that we live in a natural universe of great size and age, that we evolved on this planet over a long period of time, that there is no compelling evidence for a separable "soul," and that human beings have certain built-in needs that effectively form the basis for any human-oriented value system.

9. Humanism is in tune with today's enlightened social thought. Humanists are committed to civil liberties, human rights, church-state separation, the extension of participatory democracy not only in government but in the workplace and education, an expansion of global consciousness and exchange of products and ideas internationally, and an open-ended approach to solving social problems, an approach that allows for the testing of new alternatives.

10. Humanism is in tune with new technological developments. Humanists are willing to take part in emerging scientific and technological discoveries in order to exercise their moral influence on these revolutions as they come about, especially in the interest of protecting the environment.

11. Humanism is, in sum, a philosophy for those in love with life. Humanists take responsibility for their own lives and relish the adventure of being part of new discoveries, seeking new knowledge, exploring new options. Instead of finding solace in prefabricated answers to the great questions of life, humanists enjoy the open-endedness of a quest and the freedom of discovery that this entails.

Though there are some who would suggest that this philosophy has always had a limited and eccentric following, the facts of history show otherwise. Among the modern adherents of humanism have been Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood and 1957 Humanist of the Year of the American Humanist Association; humanistic psychology pioneers Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, also Humanists of the Year; Albert Einstein, who identified with humanism in the 1930's; Bertrand Russell, who joined the American Humanist Association in the 1960s; civil rights pioneer A. Philip Randoph, who was the 1970 Humanist of the Year; and futurist R. Buckminister Fuller, Humanist of the Year in 1969.

The United Nations is a specific example of humanism at work. The first Director General of UNESCO, the UN organization promoting education, science, and culture, was the 1962 Humanist of the Year Julian Huxley, who practically drafted UNESCO'S charter by himself. The first Director-General of the World Health Organization was the
1959 Humanist of the Year Brock Chisholm. One of this organization’s greatest accomplishments has been the wiping of smallpox from the face of the earth. And the first Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organization was British Humanist John Boyd Orr.

Meanwhile, humanists like 1980 Humanist of the Year Andrei Sakharov stood up for human rights wherever such rights were suppressed. Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem fought for women's rights, Mathilde Krim battled the AIDS epidemic, and Margaret Atwood remains one of the world's most outspoken advocates of literary freedom—humanists all.

The list of scientists is legion: Stephen Jay Gould, Donald Johanson, Richard Leakey, E.O. Wilson, Francis Crick, Jonas Salk, Steven Weinberg, Carolyn Porco, and many others—all members of the American Humanist Association, whose president in the 1980s was the late scientist and author Isaac Asimov.

The membership lists of humanist organizations, both religious and secular, read like Who's Who. Through these people, and many more of less reknown, the humanist philosophy has an impact on our world far out of proportion to the number of its adherents. That tells us something about the power of ideas that work.

It may have been what led philosopher George Santayana to declare humanism to be “an accomplishment, not a doctrine.”

So, with modern humanism one finds a lifestance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights.

So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist?

You needn't answer "yes" or "no." For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours—to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs.

It's up to you.