

Humanism

The humanists have been blamed for the deterioration of the home, the ineffectiveness of our public school system, the violence and sexual indiscretion portrayed in media, the utter confusion which reigns in the field of biomedical ethics (abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, suicide, and genetic engineering). They have been accused of supporting fornication, adultery, pornography, and many other forms of sexual perversion. According to prominent fundamentalists, evangelicals, and others, humanists are working to undermine the religious foundation of America, striving to bring all nations under the flag of a single world government, promoting socialism or other collectivist political systems and opposing the gospel with uncompromising rigor. Are the humanists being falsely charged? Are they really the culprits many of us have pictured them to be?

Three English words — humanitarian, humane, and humanities — are often confused with humanism. The humanists would like to convince us that humanism means humanitarian. Humanists often are benevolent in their attitude and conduct, but there is nothing in their philosophy which requires them to be.

If we feed overcrowded nations which refuse to practice birth control, we are behaving in an immoral manner, although Fletcher does not bother to tell us which law we have broken. Fletcher refuses to say unequivocally, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Humanists may have an interest in the humanities, but humanism does not mean devotion to the humanities. The term “humanities” refers to the study of classical art, architecture, and literature. All colleges teach courses in the humanities. In spite of Christians’ concern for the classics, art, and good music, Paul Kurtz criticizes conservative religious people for being anti-intellectual. He quotes the former commissioner of baseball, A. Bartlett Giamatti, as saying “that the attack on the humanities is a kind of know-nothing attack on learning.” Paul Kurtz muddies the waters by such unfounded charges.

Webster’s dictionary defines humane as “marked by compassion, sympathy, or consideration for other human beings or animals.” Are humanists being humane when they refuse to feed the hungry and care for the homeless unless the needy will agree to medical sterilization? Some humanists advocate withholding help from countries like India and Pakistan until those countries agree to limit their population. Are humanists being humane when they endorse the brutal attacks on millions of unborn babies, physically handicapped children, and non-productive elderly people? Are the humanists leading us in the ways of Nazi Germany? Protagoras, a fifth century B. C. orator and philosopher, gave a precise definition of humanism: “Man is the measure of all things.” Webster’s Dictionary defines humanism as a philosophy that rejects supernaturalism, regards man as a natural object, and asserts the essential dignity and worth of man and his capacity to achieve self-realization through the use of reason and the scientific method. Let’s examine the humanist’s teaching on these very important subjects and see if there is ground for the bold assertions which are made against them.

Atheism

According to Webster's definition of humanism, the humanists reject the supernatural. Humanist Manifestos 1 and 2 leave no doubt about the humanists' denial of God's existence. "We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural ... As nontheists we begin with humans not God, nature not deity." The humanists assert that man really does stand alone. Radical feminists are often humanists and agree wholeheartedly with the atheism of humanism. Gloria Steinem, former editor of Ms. Magazine and a member of the National Organization for Women, expressed the hope that "by the year 2000 we will ... raise our children to believe in human potential, not God." Mary Daly rejects the Bible's use of masculine terms in referring to God and argues that the women's movement will probably become "the greatest single challenge to the major religions, both Western and Eastern."

Evolutionism

The theory of organic evolution is a logical corollary of atheism. If God does not exist that leaves only one explanation for the origin of the universe and of man: the theory of organic evolution. "Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existent and not created ... Man is a part of nature and ... has emerged as a result of a continuous process." Based on their belief in evolution — that man has developed from the lower animals and has made enormous progress since his first appearance on earth — humanists have theorized that man can enjoy unlimited potential. Anyone who has the audacity to argue for a self-existent universe should never criticize religious men and women for believing in divine creation. Are space shuttles, the guidance systems of airliners, and the great skyscrapers in New York self-existent? Our universe is so much more complicated than rockets or airliners or any other human creation. If man-made objects could not be self-existent, how can we imagine that the human body could be self-existent?

Nihilism

The doctrine of nihilism denies any meaning for human existence. In the words of Albert Ellis, a signer of Humanist Manifesto 2, "You came into this world for no special reason, and the universe does not care whether you live or die, achieve great pleasure or pain." What are the implications of this depressing belief? Corliss Lamont sketches for us what denying God's existence and the hope of eternal life means to human beings. Lamont obviously had been thinking about the hopelessness of humanism and wrote a book to comfort his fellow humanists as they approached the end of their earthly lives. According to Lamont — a former director of the American Civil Liberties Union and an influential humanist — "the humanist view rejects the idea of personal immortality and interprets death as the final end of the individual conscious personality."

What could possibly make life more meaningless for man than to know that his trials, troubles, and temptations will be rewarded with nothingness? Lamont attempts to avoid the implications of his morbid view of life by saying that "a new relationship of memory alone must be established." If humanism's view of man is correct, why must we do

anything? Why do not the living just forget those who have died? They certainly would not know the difference. But the humanist's view should not discourage anyone, Lamont says. In fact, the humanists' belief about death should elevate us to greater achievement. Because these bodies must perish we are greater than we know. Therefore, in the larger view, death as such is not an evil and is not to be feared by reasoning men. Could there be a greater contrast between the words of Corliss Lamont and words of Jesus Christ in John 14:1-3? The apostle Paul expressed this firm belief in eternal life in 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Situationism

If man did not originate with God and if life has no meaning, what moral values ought we to follow? Words like "ought," "should," "duty," and "responsibility" have no meaning in humanism. The humanists recognize the unreasonableness of using these terms, but they have not yet figured out what to do about it. They have even held conferences for the purpose of finding some kind of philosophic basis for their moral values, but they have not been able to achieve their goal. Will Durant concedes that humanists "shall find it no easy task to mold a natural ethic strong enough to maintain moral restraint and social order without the support of supernatural consolations, hopes, and fears." Durant underestimates the difficulty of discovering a firm basis for humanist ethics.

The humanist bible, Humanist Manifestos 1 and 2, gives a brief statement of humanist ethical beliefs. "We affirm that moral values derive their source from experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational." Numerous questions need to be raised about this brief excerpt. Whose experience should serve as standards for the human family? Hitler's? If our ethical values are autonomous, what will prevent us from doing what we want (cp. Judges 17:6)? Man simply becomes a law to himself and nobody has a right to forbid his doing whatever he chooses.

The word "situational" means that nothing is wrong or right within itself. Is it wrong to commit adultery, to lie, to steal, to murder? It depends on the situation. If one commits adultery and does not hurt either himself or his partner or someone else, it is not wrong. But who has the wisdom to know whether or not any act will hurt the perpetrator or his partner or someone else? The one who knows said a long time ago, "Thou shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Only divine revelation can give us the moral values that will serve our needs in all situations. The humanists cannot do so — nor can anyone else.

Humanism has adversely affected virtually every phase of our lives. It has encouraged and supported every evil one can imagine. Christians have the responsibility to be familiar with its meaning, history, and goals. We also have the obligation to stand against it (Ephesians 6:18-19).

Adapted from Winford Claiborne