

Humanism: An Introduction

Erich H. Sievert

The present century has been proclaimed as the Humanist Century. Though we would hesitate to label it thus, Humanism, though it has been spooking around in this world of ours for centuries, has never enjoyed the popularity which it seems to enjoy in this our day. There are those who would trace it back to the Greeks. Others consider it a product of the Renaissance. Some would credit Confucius for its origins. I, myself, would date it back to that moment in the Garden of Eden when Eve literally made "man the measure of all things," looked upon the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as a Tree good for food, a Tree pleasant to the eyes, a tree to be desired to make one wise and took of the fruit thereof and did eat and gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat. Thus man became a law unto himself, placing his destiny into his own hands. Humanism thus experienced its earliest beginnings.

Humanism has its historic roots in human civilization. It has a long history behind it. For us, it has come to the fore in this twentieth century. Using powerful critical tools of science and logical analysis, modern man would find no special significance in the universe, no special human meaning or purpose, that he is not a special product of creation. Humanistic man now believes that he is responsible in a large measure for his own destiny. Living on a minor planet on the edge of a small galaxy in a vast universe, the Humanist believes that he cannot look outside himself for salvation. His future, if he has any, is within his own control. Science, he asserts, has emancipated man from the bondage of dogmatic religious mythology and has provided him with the instruments for remaking and re-ordering his life, improving and enhancing it immeasurably.

There are supposedly many kinds of Humanism. The term is widely used. There are the terms "ethical Humanism", "scientific Humanism," "religious Humanism," "naturalistic Humanism," "liberal Humanism," Humanistic psychology and the life. Even Marxism has been viewed as a type of Humanism. Its adherents in these categories include primarily philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, ethical and religious leaders.

A wide diversity of Humanist viewpoints is prevalent in our society. In spite of this diversity, certain commonalities can be discerned. Humanists share a common point of view about man and his place in the universe. They are critical of supernaturalistic religion and authoritarian dogma. They have a full commitment to free thought, to the fulfillment of human potentialities and the democratic ideals of humanity as a whole. If there is a common thread running the gamut of Humanistic thought, it is the conviction that reason, man's intelligence, is the chief means of solving problems and the belief that through its proper use mankind can survive and humans can enjoy a significant life of their own making. "Man is the measure of all things." Man has potentially the intelligence, the good will and the cooperative skills necessary to survive on this planet earth, to explore space, to provide security and an opportunity for growth, adventure, meaning and fulfillment for all men.

Paul Kurtz in his *The Humanist Alternative* takes the position that Humanism is not a dogma nor a creed. Rather than define Humanism explicitly, he offers the following characteristics which he feels contemporary Humanists emphasize. "First, Humanists have some confidence in man and they believe the only bases for morality are human experience and human needs. Second, many or most Humanists are opposed to all forms of supernaturalistic and authoritarian religion. Third, many Humanists believe that scientific intelligence and critical reason can assist in reconstructing our moral values. And fourth, Humanism is humanitarian in that it is concerned with the good life and social justice as moral ideals."

It is the Humanistic viewpoint about moral values which troubles us greatly. Humanists assert that moral values must be removed from the mantle of theological dogma and they espouse the conviction that our moral ideals must be constantly re-examined and revised in the light of present needs and social demands. We very well know that the present era in which we live is a revolutionary one, involving the questioning of basic foundations, structures, beliefs and values. Kurtz associates revolution with Humanism, especially with its critique of religious, ideological, and moralistic philosophies that tend to deny the most genuine qualities of man's existence. Kurtz feels such a reappraisal and modification is long overdue and finally informs us, "The dam has burst and the old moral mythology is now being lampooned."

The basic assumption in all this is the conviction that the good life is achieved when we realize the human potential. In short, we ought to reject all creeds and dogmas that impede human fulfillment or impose external authoritarian rules upon human beings. The God-given moral commandments are repressive of man's human needs. Human individuality is not to be smothered nor human autonomy restricted. A good life which fuses pleasure and creative self-realization is possible, says the Humanist, and men can discover ways of enriching experience, actualizing potentialities, and achieving happiness.

The new morality espoused by the Humanists fosters moral liberation and freedom. This then is part of the libertarian ethic with roots deep in the tradition of Locke, Paine and Jefferson. A just society is one that ought to allow people to satisfy their tastes, fulfill their moral and aesthetic visions and guide their destinies as they see fit, without, undue social pressure or governmental restriction.

This viewpoint expresses itself in many ways. Evidence of its effects on life today abounds in abundant measure. There is today a more tolerant attitude toward sexual freedom and a demand that law against abortion and birth control be repealed. There is a change in public attitude about pornography and obscenity, an increased acceptance of nudity on stage and in the cinema and in a conviction that society should not impose narrow standards of censorship on human kind. Sexual relations between consenting adults should be beyond the range of the law. Modification is sought in severe penalties against possession and use of drugs. Mature persons should tolerate divergent lifestyles even though they may not always approve of them.

Another principle pivotal in today's Humanist moral revolution is the demand for equal rights, the search for community if you will. We do not object when equal rights demands are made in certain areas such as greater toleration and more humane treatment of minority groups such as Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans. We wonder where demands for equal rights in all areas of life even for the homosexually "gay" people will take us.

Yet another principle of the Humanistic moral revolution is its insistence-on participatory democracy. According to this belief, individuals ought to have some decision over their lives. "Power to the people" is a slogan not only to be applied to the political arena but to the school, the church, and organizations of all kinds. We are grateful that the Humanist recognizes that the demand for participation needs to be balanced against the need to maintain standards of excellence.

One final paragraph relative to the results of such moral revolution is in place. David Tribe in his essay "Our Freethought Heritage: The Humanist and Ethical Movement" says, "Humanists do not accept the culpability pronouncements of Christians in sexual fields. People are infinitely varied in their natures and their needs.... Some people are heterosexual, some homosexual. So long as harmful social consequences, notably venereal disease and unwanted children, are avoided and personal integrity and respect for others is sustained, it is of little ethical consequence what an individual's sexual behavior might be. Stable unions seem to be in the best interests of offspring, but if a mistake is made and dependents are looked after, divorce should be readily available. In any case, illegitimate children should not suffer for their parents' actions. Euthanasia, abortion, family planning, and suicide are other matters that should be left to the individual conscience." By now the flavor of Humanism should be coming through quite strong, and so let's get back to the problem of precise definition. The logic of definitions is quite complex, however. Sometimes definitions cause more problems than they solve. This is true also for definitions of Humanism. One danger lies in defining Humanism so broadly that it includes many who have defended monstrous crimes against man's freedom. Here the Humanist refers to defenders and professional apologists of Stalin's terroristic regime including the Moscow Purge Trials. Others embrace regimes such as that of Franco of Spain in the name of humanitarianism.

Other Humanists are fearful that Humanism be defined too narrowly. They feel individuals such as theologians who are comrades of their cause might be eliminated. Individuals with whom they feel a strong kinship might thus be eliminated as a fellow-traveler

A definition considered to be too broad is one given in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. It reads, "Humanism is a philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things or somehow takes human nature, its limits or its interests as its theme." The objection lies in the belief

that such a Definition could include almost everyone, even those who would deny the value of man. On the other hand, atheistic Humanists such as Bertrand Russel would be eliminated because the proposition that “man is the measure of all things” was to him “anathema”, definitely unacceptable.

Webster's dictionary offers the following definition: “A contemporary cult or belief calling itself religious and substituting faith in man for faith in God.” Sidney Hook sought to clarify what he thought Humanism was by stressing the negative. He stated, “I do not regard as Humanists any individuals or groups:

- 1) who believe or support doctrines or practices that, would impose one pattern of culture, language and life-style on all members of a-group or community;
- 2) who believe in an established Church or Churches, or that they have been vouchsafed revelations about their special character, justifying privileges and rights denied to other human beings;
- 3) who believe in or support through their own voluntary activities, dictatorships or minority political parties no matter whether they be called ‘organic’, ‘directed’, ‘higher’, or ‘socialist’ democracies;
- 4) who deny community responsibility for the elimination of human hunger and for the progressive realization of civilized standards, health, welfare, and education;
- 5) who denigrate the use of intelligence, justify violence in human affairs as the most effective method of achieving social reform, substitute lynch law for judicial process, who oppose opportunities for racial integration.

If I had to propose a short positive definition on the basis of these negations, I would say that a Humanist today is one who relies on the arts of intelligence to defend, enlarge and enhance the areas of freedom in the world. To the problems of everyday life they bring the judge of its own efficacy--human intelligence. Humanism is a concept of man which espouses a sensitive regard for each man as his own end and for man as responsible for man. Man is his own rule and his own end. Human life is in human hands. The strategy of living is to adopt and adapt and not to obey and conform.”

Van Praag takes the following position: “Humanism is a moral conviction. Therefore it is more suited for a clarifying description than for an unambiguous definition.” He would seek to define Humanism by formulating its basic starting points. Van Praag offers the following as basic to Humanism:

- “1) Equality. Men are similar in biological and mental structure. Men live principally in a common world.
- 2) Secularity. Men spring from a world of which they are a natural part. As intentional beings they shape their world.
- 3) Liberty. Men must shape their lives by deciding in freedom. Freedom means freedom of choice.
- 4) Fraternity. Men are designated for community. The community shapes the individual. Self-determination in community provides for the meaning of human life and a standard for moral judgment.
- 5) Evaluation. Men are evaluating beings. Reason is rationally applied to evaluations.
- 6) Experience. The world can be experienced by identification and observation. These provide knowledge of value.
- 7) Existence. Men and world are interdependent. The world is a human world and men secular.
- 8) Completeness. The world is complete. It is not dependent on a Creator nor is there an empty space left vacant by an absent Creator.
- 9) Evolution. The world is dynamic in its evolutionary and causal structure. It is conceived as developing in lawful coherence.

- 10) Contingency. The world does not by itself contribute meaning. Man contributes meaning to his existence by his interpretation of reality.”

Here we have a statement of the common basis of Humanist thinking and acting.

John Herman Randall Jr. would define Humanism as a certain religious temper, a certain set of values which involves an attitude toward and an appraisal of the nature and the possibilities of man and his essential needs. This Humanist temper holds that men should place their faith in man himself, in his infinite possibilities. In a word, faith in intelligence and in man is Humanism. Three major factors according to Randall comprise the Humanist temper. “There is, in the first place, an emphasis on the power and dignity of man, on the worth of the human personality. There is, secondly, an emphasis on the obligation to respect and cultivate the dignity and worth of oneself and in others. Thirdly, there is an emphasis on responsibility, on self-control, on self-direction towards integrity and wholeness as the foundation on which the others rest. Of these three factors, the underlying one, responsibility, implies that in some meaningful human sense man is free. This means of course that man is free only insofar as what used to be called reason and now is called intelligence is free to discover truth--especially truth about what is good.”

The Humanist in religion tells us that “humanism is man’s effort to free religious faith and dogma from the dogma of theistic theology and supernatural.” He usually rejects the existence of God and all theories of world purpose. “Religion should be abolished because it is fraudulent. Science and critical scholarship must be marshalled in dealing with ancient documents including the Bible in order to arrive at the authentic in religion.”

Algernon Black would define Humanism as “that philosophy of life which calls men to shed the dogmas and the divisions of traditional religion, to reject revealed religion.”

Marvin Zimmerman asks the question, “Aren’t Humanists really atheists?” He goes on to say, “Though they do not coincide, their postures toward religion overlap significantly.” Of the Humanists, and in particular the religious Humanists, he informs us that they have usually given up on supernatural theology and morality. “They repudiate the belief in a perfect, omnipotent and benevolent Creator who performs miracles, responds to prayer and proclaims a fundamental set of eternal moral principles. If there is a deity, he would either be a devil or insane.”

Humanism has had its influence on psychology. In fact a Humanist psychology is finding its way into our textbooks on psychology. We prefer to leave this matter until later. Let it be said that an effort has been made to relate it to behaviorism as espoused by Skinner. Let Skinner speak for himself and you be the judge whether he is a true Humanist.” I would define a Humanist as one of those who, because of the environment to which he has been exposed, is concerned for the future of mankind. A movement called Humanistic psychology takes a different line. It has been described as a third force to distinguish it from behaviorism and psychoanalysis; but the “third” should not be taken to mean more advanced, nor should “force” suggest power. Since behaviorism and psychoanalysis both view human behavior as a determined system, Humanistic psychologists have emphasize a contrast by defending the autonomy of the individual. They have insisted that a person can transcend his environment, that he is more than a causal stage between behavior and environment, that he determines what environmental forces will act upon him - in a word he has a “free choice,” an idea if it could be interpreted that he has a will, has more merit than behaviorism which is deterministic to say the least. Skinner makes bold to state the Humanistic strategy way have had beneficial results, but it has led to an excessive aggrandizement of the individual which may lead in turn either to new forms of tyranny or to utter chaos, “The age old mistake is to look for salvation in the character of autonomous men and women rather than in the social environments that have appeared in the evolution of cultures and that can now be explicitly designed.”

We could continue with other definitions, expositions, declared viewpoints and beliefs. Let us now move on and examine documents which set forth the viewpoints of the Humanist for the era in which we now live. Let us examine “A Humanist Manifesto” I and "Humanist Manifesto I." The former was developed by Roy Wood Sellars. He tells us how it came into being. “During the 1930's I was invited by a small group of people, teachers and ministers, to give a talk at the University of Chicago on the situation in religion. The outcome was

that I was asked to formulate basic principles along Humanistic lines. I called my formulations “A Humanist Manifesto.” I sent it back and received suggestions, some of which I incorporated in the “Manifesto.” It was then published with the signatures of many outstanding persons in the religious field and is now called an historical document.”

While it expresses the viewpoint of the religious Humanist, it does help us understand the basic of Humanism in general.

The second document we would examine is called “Humanist Manifesto II.” It appeared forty years after “Manifesto.” It speaks out in the following areas: religion, ethics, the individual, democratic society, world community and humanity as a whole. Its authors hope that “Manifesto II” can offer an affirmative and hopeful vision needed as we approach the twenty-first century, one that can serve present-day needs and guide humankind toward the future.