

Secular Humanism

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Secular humanism is a worldview defined on the American Humanist Association website as “a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”¹ The adjective *secular* reflects the movement’s “non-religious interpretation of the world.”²

Founder:

None

Statistics:

Secular humanism is not an organization with membership statistics, but a cultural philosophy or worldview held by various groups and individuals.

History:

Secular humanism, “in its most fundamental expression, is man putting himself at the center of everything.”³ The Greek philosopher Protagoras (481-411 B.C.) said, “Man is the measure of all things,” a point of view embraced by secular humanists.⁴ The questioning skepticism expressed by Socrates (470/469-399 B. C.) is also valued in the secular humanist tradition. After the Reformation in sixteenth century Europe and the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reason was enthroned in culture during the eighteenth century “Age of Enlightenment.” Some Enlightenment intellectuals even rejected religion as harmful to society. Science was elevated to a position of authority. Deism, a theological position popular during the Enlightenment, affirmed the existence of God but rejected divine revelation and authority, acknowledging only a Creator who, deists believed, had distanced himself from active involvement in His creation.

The manifestos of the American Humanist Association trace developments in humanist thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Manifesto I of 1933 retained the concept of religion, but without faith in a deity, stating that “man’s larger understanding of the universe, his scientific

¹ <http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism>. “Humanism is a pattern of thought and an attitudinal perspective rather than a specific belief system that can be defined precisely.” Philip H. Lochhaas, *How to Respond to Secular Humanism* (St. Louis: CPH, 1990), 6.

² Gregory Buam, “The Churches Challenged by the Secularization of Culture” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:3 (Summer 2011): 343.

³ Anthony J. Steinbronn, *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism* (St. Louis: CPH, 2007), 28.

⁴ Lochhaas, 11.

achievements, and deeper appreciation of brotherhood, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion.”⁵ Humanism provided a “vital, fearless, and frank religion” that was “shaped for the needs of this age” and allowed the development of necessary social and personal goals.⁶ Manifesto II was composed in 1973, because world events such as rise of Nazism, world wars, police states, racism and demands for equal rights from women and minority groups made the statements of Manifesto I appear too optimistic. However, Manifesto II still presented “a vision of hope, a direction for satisfying survival,” stating that its affirmations were not “a final credo or dogma but an expression of a living and growing faith.”⁷ Manifesto III was composed in 2003 and omits references to religion, describing humanism as a philosophy of life “without supernaturalism.”⁸

Secular humanism has some religious associations in the Unitarian-Universalist movement.⁹ “Half of the signers of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto I were Unitarian Universalist ministers, as were the first four presidents of the American Humanist Association, the AHA’s first executive director, and [*The Humanist*] journal’s first editor.”¹⁰ A humanist-theist controversy troubled Unitarian-Universalism between 1918 and 1937, resulting in a move toward a more “spiritual” view of life that caused some humanists to leave the Unitarian-Universalist movement.

Texts:

There are no founding texts for secular humanism, although the three manifestos of the American Humanist Association of 1933, 1973, and 2003, define important aspects of the movement.

Beliefs and Practices:

Secular humanism begins with man and “nature” rather than God, believing that religion is unable to solve humanity’s problems. Humanists believe that trust in a God who hears prayers and cares for people, “is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter.”¹¹ Although humanists wish to preserve the best ethical teachings of various religious traditions, they believe that dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place God or creeds above human needs and experience cannot truly help humanity. Human beings are responsible for their own lives and the world in which they live: “No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”¹² Promises of salvation or damnation are regarded as harmful illusions. Humanist themes include

⁵ http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I

⁶ http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I

⁷ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

⁸ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III

⁹ See an evaluation of the Unitarian-Universalist Association from a Lutheran perspective at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=396>.

¹⁰ Edd Doerr, with *The Humanist* journal, quoted in Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 641.

¹¹ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

¹² http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

happiness, the fulfillment of human needs and desires, and a striving “for the good life, here and now.”¹³

Although the secular humanist worldview extends beyond the American Humanist Association, an important humanist goal is summarized in the AHA motto: “Good without a God.” In a children’s book about humanism, a teacher tells students: “If something is good, it is good whether there is a God or not. It does not become good simply because God says so. If we murder someone, isn’t that bad? Do we need God to tell us that we would not like to be murdered ourselves... We can learn by experience what is the good and right thing to do.”¹⁴ Moral values develop through human experience. Ethical decisions are situational and grow out of human needs and interests: “The hallmark of secular humanism... is pragmatism, which is the practice of doing what seems to work without regard for fixed principles of right and wrong. Human actions and behavior, then, are not right and wrong in themselves but only because of the results they produce, and the good feelings they engender or express.”¹⁵ The concepts of sin and guilt are rejected because ethical choices are based on individual decisions, apart from any moral standard. Without universal standards, the majority may eventually decide moral questions, as one group determines for others the boundaries of acceptable behavior, boundaries that may then become law.

Because ethical values are derived from human needs and interests, secular humanists “are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.”¹⁶ They express concern for the welfare of the elderly and those who are ill, for the mentally handicapped, the abandoned or abused, prisoners, addicts and others neglected by society. Secular humanists reject what they view as the intolerant attitudes of orthodox religion. Humanists encourage democracy, freedom of speech and the press, religious liberty, artistic, scientific and cultural freedom, and the legal right to oppose government policies. They support the practices of euthanasia and suicide, believing in the “individual’s right to die with dignity.”¹⁷ Secular humanists believe that individuals have the right to birth control, abortion and divorce, and while they do not approve of exploitive forms of sexual expression, sexual behavior between consenting adults is acceptable. Humanists oppose discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age or national origin. Ethnic pride is encouraged, but not to the point that groups of people are set against each other. According to the manifesto of 1973, “a civilized society should be a tolerant one.”¹⁸

Working toward a tolerant society, secular humanists hope that governments will encourage freedom for varying moral, political, religious, and social values. Church and state must be separate. War and the use of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are considered obsolete. Humanists want to end world poverty and the unfair distribution of wealth; economic systems should increase the well-being of all individuals and groups. Technology is important to progress

¹³ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

¹⁴ Helen Bennett, *Humanism, What’s That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 19.
¹⁵ Steinbronn, 118.

¹⁶ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III

¹⁷ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

¹⁸ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

but must not be destructive or harmful. The manifesto of 1973 states: “Ecological damage, resource depletion, and excessive population growth must be checked by international concord... [the] conservation of nature is a moral value.”¹⁹ Secular humanists work for an open, secular society, believing that “humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.”²⁰

A Lutheran Response:

As Lutheran Christians, we begin—and end—not with man, but with God, who is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last” (Rev. 22:13) and who, “in the beginning” created all things (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-3). God created human beings, male and female, in His image and crowned them “with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5), but they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). From Eve to Adam and “through them to all generations [Satan’s] lie was told: *Independence from the Creator is the glory of man. Disobeying God brings happiness and fulfillment.*”²¹

Fallen human beings can, to a certain extent, do “good without a God,” as secular humanists believe (Rom. 2:14-16; Matt. 5:46-47). The Augsburg Confession teaches that “a human being has some measure of free will, so as to live an externally honorable life and to choose among the things reason comprehends.”²² People may choose, for example, to deal honestly in business or to help others. However, apart from Christ no one is righteous in the eyes of God (Rom. 3:10; Gen. 8:21; Matt. 15:19) and, without “the grace, help, and operation of the Holy Spirit a human being cannot become pleasing to God, fear or believe in God with the whole heart, or expel innate evil lusts from the heart. Instead, this happens through the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God.”²³ Secular humanists reject the concepts of sin and grace, but as Christians we know that we receive forgiveness and life by God’s grace through faith in Christ, who suffered and died on the cross for our sins and rose on the third day. We serve others in the name of Jesus Christ, who humbled Himself to serve and save us.

Secular humanists reject the idea of universal moral standards, but Holy Scripture testifies that the law of God is written on the hearts of all people (Rom. 2:14-16), including the hearts of humanists! These moral principles, even if suppressed or denied “will always influence, to some degree, every moral system. The law written on the heart is consistent, even though man’s heart, corrupted by sin, is not.”²⁴ In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis comments that this law written on the heart “is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is

¹⁹ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

²⁰ http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III

²¹ Lochhaas, 12 (italics in the original).

²² Augsburg Confession, Article 28, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 50.

²³ Augsburg Confession, Article 28, *The Book of Concord*, 50.

²⁴ Matthew E. Cochran, “A Way Forward? Continuing Conversations on Natural Law,” in *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal* (St. Louis: CPH, 2011), 274.

retained.”²⁵ Lewis also warns of those who, without universal moral principles, decide moral questions for others: “For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what *they* please.”²⁶

Human beings have dignity and worth because they were created in the image of God, because Christ took on human nature in the incarnation and because Christ has redeemed every human being by His blood. Euthanasia, suicide and abortion are not matters of individual freedom or choice because life is a gift that, even as it is shared with us, remains in the hands of its Creator and Author (Gen. 2:7; Gen. 9:5-6; Acts 3:15). Walking in love as Christ walked (Eph. 5:2), Christians are concerned for the welfare of others, including the ill, the elderly and the unborn. In serving even “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40), we are serving the King who gave His life for us all.

Although secular humanists claim to be tolerant, they may be intolerant of those who reject or oppose their beliefs. Such intolerance betrays the presence of the law written on their hearts: “Human beings were created for moral objectivity; that we cannot stop condemning one another and rationalizing our actions prove this...Even those who deny an objective moral standard invariably act as though such a standard exists and that everyone ought to know it.”²⁷ As Christians we reject discrimination and seek to witness to God’s love in Christ, treating others with respect even if they do not share our beliefs (1 Pet. 3:15). However, we also proclaim the truth of God’s inspired Word, faithfully opposing beliefs or behaviors that contradict His will (Acts 5:29).

Humanists hope that governments will create cultures of peace, freedom and tolerance for their people. As Christians, we believe that governments are instituted by God to serve people and restrain evil (Rom. 13:1-7), even as we acknowledge the fact that rulers may not always serve and protect their people in a godly manner. We continue to pray for God’s guidance and wisdom for those in authority and, as Christian citizens, encourage our elected leaders to make God-pleasing decisions.

Secular humanists believe that “humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals.”²⁸ Humanity’s self-centered ideals were first expressed in Eden in the eating of forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-7) and given concrete (or brick) expression at Babel, where fallen human beings planned a self-serving project: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). Recognizing that they were one people, had all one language, and that the tower was “only the beginning” of what they would do, the Lord went down and confused their language, scattering them across the earth (Gen. 11:6-8). Mercifully ending Babel’s prideful act of rebellion, God promised to bless “all the families of the earth” through Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:3). Contrary to secular humanist belief, we cannot save ourselves: “There

²⁵C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 1974), 43.

²⁶ Lewis, 59.

²⁷ Cochran, 268.

²⁸ See footnote 20.

is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The name of our salvation is Jesus, the descendant of Abraham and promised blessing for the nations (Gal. 3:16; Acts 2:39). Through faith in Jesus we have peace with God and the hope and promise of an eternal city and a new name for ourselves, a name not of our own making (Rev. 3:12).

For Further Reading:

Alles, Brad. *Starting at the End: Worldview, God’s Word, and Your Future*. St. Louis: CPH, 2013.

Althaus, Paul. *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.

Baker, Robert C. and Roland Cap Ehlke, eds. *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. St. Louis: CPH, 2011.

Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: HarperOne, 1974.

Lochhaas, Philip H. *How to Respond to Secular Humanism*. St. Louis: CPH, 1990.

Steinbronn, Anthony J. *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. St. Louis: CPH, 2007.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *Modern Fascism: The Threat to the Judeo-Christian Worldview*. St. Louis: CPH, 1993.

Links and Websites:

In Christ All Things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science and Christian Theology (2015 Report of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=3469>

The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Christian Witness (2013 Report of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2431>

Evaluation of the Unitarian-Universalist Association from a Lutheran Perspective

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=396>

Website of the American Humanist Association

www.americanhumanist.org