

# Is Humanism a Religion?

**By Samuel L. Blumenfeld**

The question we ask is important. For humanism is the world view of our educational leaders, of the textbooks they write, of the psychologists who counsel our youngsters on values, sex and death. In short, it is the world view of the curricula used in the public schools. In fact, humanism forms the philosophical basis of what passes for teacher education in our state colleges and universities.

## **Establishments of Religion**

Thus, if humanism is indeed a religion, then what we have in our public schools and state colleges and universities are government-supported establishments of religion, which are patently unconstitutional and therefore illegal.

In fact, it should be pointed out that on March 4, 1987, U.S. District Judge W. Brevard Hand, in *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, Ala.*, ruled that secular humanism is a religion. The 172-page ruling defines religion and concludes, after reviewing the relevant aspects of humanism, that “For purposes of the First Amendment, secular humanism is a religious belief system, entitled to the protections of, and subject to the prohibitions of, the religious clauses.”

## **Three Key Documents**

Judge Hand wrote:

“The entire body of thought has three key documents that furnish the text upon which the belief system rests as a platform: *Humanist Manifesto I*, *Humanist Manifesto II*, and the *Secular Humanist Declaration*.

“These factors ... demonstrate the institutional character of secular humanism. They are evidence that this belief system is similar to groups traditionally afforded protection by the First Amendment religion clauses.”

The judge then went on to demonstrate that 44 textbooks being used in the public schools of Alabama were written from the humanist point of view and thereby constituted an illegal establishment of religion. The judge ordered the books removed from the schools.

## **Judge Hand's Order Reversed**

On August 26, 1987, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court reversed Judge Hand's order banning the 44 textbooks. The higher court did not address the question of whether secular humanism is a religion for First Amendment purposes, but asserted that it was not being promoted in

the textbooks that were banned. Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. wrote:

“Use of the challenged textbooks has the primary effect of conveying information that is essentially neutral in its religious content to the school children who utilize the books; none of these books convey a message of government approval of secular humanism. ...

“There simply is nothing in the record to indicate that omission of certain facts regarding religion from these textbooks of itself constituted an advancement of secular humanism or an active hostility towards theistic religion.”

And so the books were put back in the schools.

### **The Wrong Question**

But the question is not whether the textbooks were humanistic or not, but whether the entire government education system is an establishment of the humanist religion. All of the rationales used to remove Bibles and other manifestations of the Judeo-Christian theistic world view from classrooms are based on the First Amendment's prohibition against government establishments of religion.

But if it can be shown that the entire government system of education -- from elementary schools to the state colleges and universities -- are establishments of the humanist religion, the courts would have no choice but to order the closing down of these institutions.

There can be no government establishment of religion in the United States, whether it be in the form of a house of worship or of a school system embracing a religious dogma.

### **From Nonsectarianism to Secularism**

When the public schools were first established, the courts ruled that the schools had to be nonsectarian, that is, not favoring any particular Protestant denomination. That they were essentially Protestant in character was generally acknowledged. In fact, the reason why Catholics established their own private parochial school system was because they recognized the Protestant character of the government schools.

After the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, as humanist progressives took control of the government schools, no sectarianism gradually gave way to secularism. Secularists hold that any government institution that promotes or supports belief in the existence of a supernatural being is an establishment of religion.

As more and more judges adopted the secularist point of view, order after order was handed down stripping the public schools of the last vestiges of nonsectarian Christianity. Curricula were revised, new textbooks written, new programs instituted so that today's public schools not only no longer reflect the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage but now constitute the most powerful educational machine for the propagation of humanism

among the American people.

### **Filling the Vacuum**

The secularists had no intention of creating a neutral, nontheistic vacuum in our schools. Their plan always was to get rid of Judeo-Christian values and replace them with their own. In this way, the government schools have become, beyond a shadow of a doubt, establishments of the humanist religion.

Today, humanist beliefs are inculcated through such programs and concepts as values clarification, sensitivity training, situational ethics, evolution, multiculturalism, globalism, transcendental meditation, sex education, death education, humanistic and behavioral psychology, etc. All of these programs are marbleized throughout the curriculum -- in reading, language arts, math, social studies, health education, psychology, art, biology, and other subjects. It is impossible for a student in a government school to avoid or escape the all-pervasive influence of humanist ideas and beliefs which confront and accost him daily every which way he turns.

That the plan of the humanists was to supplant traditional theistic religion with a new secular man-centered religion of their own can be proven by simply quoting the humanists themselves. The best source of these quotes is *The Humanist* magazine.

### **The Humanists Organize**

The forerunner of *The Humanist* was *The New Humanist* which first appeared in 1928 as a monthly bulletin of the Humanist Fellowship, an organization formed by Unitarian students from the University of Chicago and its related theological schools. Its early editors -- Harold Buschman, Edwin H. Wilson, and Raymond B. Bragg -- were young Unitarian ministers. It was on the initiatives of Bragg that the drafting of *A Humanist Manifesto* (1933) was begun. Professor Roy Wood Sellars wrote the first draft. The Manifesto appeared in the April 1933 issue of *The New Humanist*.

The Manifesto was more than just an affirmation of the humanist world view, it was also a declaration of war against orthodox, traditional religion. The Manifesto's views toward religion can be summed up as follows:

1. The purpose of man's life is "the complete realization of human personality."  
"[T]he quest for the good life is ... the central task for man."
2. The humanist's religious emotions are expressed in "social passion," in a "heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being."
3. Humanists believe that "all associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life." Therefore, "the intelligent evaluation, transformation, control, and direction of such associations and institutions ... is the purpose and program of humanism."

In other words, the humanist must take over society's associations and institutions in order to transform them into instruments of humanist purpose. This includes the institutions of traditional religion.

The Manifesto states: "Certainly religious institutions, their ritualistic forms, ecclesiastical methods, and communal activities must be reconstituted as rapidly as experience allows, in order to function effectively in the modern world."

### **A Messianic Mission**

In other words, the messianic mission of the humanists is not to build new institutions of their own, but to subvert and appropriate the institutions of others. This is not a new idea among humanists. The Unitarians subverted Harvard and took it from the orthodox followers of its Calvinist founders. Religious liberals have appropriated Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth and other institutions founded by the orthodox.

The loss of these institutions, incidentally, has forced conservative Christians to create new institutions of their own: Liberty University, Regent University, Bob Jones University, Pensacola Christian College, Patrick Henry College, and others. The rise of these new institutions has dismayed the humanists who believed that once the major institutions of traditional religion were subverted and taken over, the influence of theistic religion would fade forever. The hopeful demise of traditional theistic religion is a theme frequently expressed by humanist writers.

### **Humanism as Religion**

Roy Wood Sellars, who drafted *Humanist Manifesto I*, wrote in *The Humanist* (Vol. I, 1941, p. 5), an article "Humanism as a Religion," in which he stated:

"Undeniably there is something imaginative and daring in bringing together in one phrase two such profoundly symbolic words as humanism and religion. An intimate union is foreshadowed in which religion will become humanistic and humanism religious. And I believe that such a synthesis is imperative if humanity is ever to achieve a firm and adequate understanding of itself and its cosmic situation....

"Religious humanism rests upon the bedrock of a decision that it is, in the long run, saner and wiser to face facts than to live in a world of fable."

### **The Worship of Humanity**

Oliver L. Reiser, a signer of the Manifesto, writing in the same issue of *The Humanist*, states:

"The one great hope for democracy lies in the development of a non-supernaturalistic religion which, unlike other intellectual movements, will be non-academic in its appeal to

all civilized individuals. This new foundation for a coming world-order must be the emergent outcome of the thought-content of a universalized culture....

“The god of this coming world-religion, that is, the object of reverence of scientific humanism, is the spirit of humanity in its upward striving.”

Another signer of the Manifesto, William Floyd, wrote in *The Humanist* (Vol. 2, 1942, p. 2):

“The religious philosophy of humanism as a substitute for metaphysical theology will enable men to realize the highest value in life without surrendering their minds to any final dogma or any alleged revelation of the supernatural....

“To fill the need for a modern conception of religious foundations the *Humanist Manifesto* was issued in 1933.”

Another signer, E. Burdette Backus, wrote in Vol. VI, p. 6 of *The Humanist*:

“[Humanism] is indeed a religion, and the extent to which it is capable of eliciting the emotions of men is limited only by a degree in which those who have made it their own shall succeed in embodying its full riches.”

### **Natural vs. Supernatural Religion**

In an article, “Religion Without God, (*The Humanist*, Vol. VII, 1947, p. 9), Kenneth L. Patton wrote:

“A naturalistic religion is just as inclusive of all that is within the world we know as is the supernaturalistic or theistic religion.

“Whereas the theist pins his faith and hope in his God, the humanist and naturalist pins his faith in the natural world, and in man as a creature within it, and his faith is no less magnificent, courageous and hopeful than that of the believer in God.”

### **The Fourth Faith**

In June 1951 *The Humanist* published an article by Manifesto signer Edwin H. Wilson, “Humanism: The Fourth Faith.” He wrote:

“Today, I am suggesting that there is in the world as a present and potent faith, embraced by vast numbers, yet seldom mentioned -- a fourth faith -- namely Humanism. This fourth faith -- with rare exceptions such as some Universalist or Unitarian churches, a few independent Humanist Fellowships and the Ethical Societies -- has no church to embody it.... Theirs is a secular faith.”

According to Wilson, the other three faiths are Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.

Since many of the signers of the Manifesto were Unitarians, it is not surprising that Wilson identifies the Unitarian church as belonging to the fourth faith.

In 1952, *The Humanist* (Sept.-Oct.) published an article by Julian Huxley, "Evolutionary Humanism: The World's Next Great Religion." Mr. Huxley wrote:

"Out of the needs of our time, through the evolutionary process, a new religion is rising. By religion . . . I mean an organized system of ideas and emotions which relates man to his destiny, over and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing systems of law and social structure. . . . I believe we have nothing to lose by using the word 'religion' in the broadest sense to include nontheistic formulations and systems as well."

In the next issue of *The Humanist*, Huxley wrote:

"The next phase of history could, and should, be a Humanist phase. Let us help toward its emergence."

### **The Glorification of man**

In an article, "The Humanist Faith Today" (*The Humanist*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1954, p. 180), we read:

"Since humanism appears as a genuinely living option for many people, especially among students, teachers, and intellectuals generally, it may be appropriately studied as a religion. Indeed, it is not unfair to call it the fourth main religious option, along with Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, for thoughtful men in the contemporary Western world....

"What remains of religion when the Humanist criticism has completed its work? The Humanist replies that devotion to human and social values emerges as the essence of religion. As [Corliss] Lamont has written, the Humanist postulates that 'the chief end of thought and action is to further earthly human interests in behalf of the greater happiness and glory of man.'"

In 1959, George E. Axtelle, newly elected president of the American Humanist Association, said:

"Ours is no revealed religion. It is a religion, an intellectual and moral outlook shaped by the more sensitive and sympathetic souls of our time....Ours is a task, not a doctrine....Our fundamental goal must be to make the Humanist Way of Life a reality in our communities, our state and our nation."

### **The New Religion**

In the January-February 1962 issue of *The Humanist*, Sir Julian Huxley wrote an article,

“The Coming New Religion of Humanism.” He said:

“The beliefs of this religion of evolutionary humanism are not based on revelation in the supernatural sense, but on the revelations that science and learning have given us about man and the universe. A humanist believes with full assurance that man is not alien to nature, but a part of nature, albeit a unique one.... His true destiny is to guide the future course of evolution on earth towards greater fulfilment, so as to realize more and higher potentialities....

“A humanist religion will have the task of redefining the categories of good and evil in terms of fulfilment and of desirable or undesirable realizations of potentiality, and setting up new targets for its morality to aim at....

“Humanism also differs from all supernaturalist religions in centering its long-term aims not on the next world but on this....The humanist goal must therefore be ... The Fulfilment Society.”

### **Secularists Object**

Not all humanists agreed with Huxley. Harry Elmer Barnes and Herbert T. Rosenfeld responded with an article of their own in the July-August 1962 issue. They wrote:

“In our opinion, Sir Julian has set forth not the Humanist ideology of today, but a truly noble and eloquent Unitarian sermon. It is Unitarian doctrine, pure if not simple....

“It was, of course, frequently argued in earlier decades of our century that Humanism is a secular religion, but in the light of the history of thought and culture, the terms ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ are, in our view, mutually exclusive....If there is any one thing which characterizes and justifies Humanism it is complete and undeviating secularism....

“If Humanism is identical with the latter [Unitarianism] in its ideology, we see little basis for a separate Humanist movement or organization.”

Unitarian minister Edwin H. Wilson, one of the founders of the humanist movement, responded to the Barnes-Rosenfeld article in the Nov.-Dec. 1962 issue. He told of how the magazine was founded by Unitarian theological students. He went on:

“The American Humanist Association itself was organized soon thereafter by a group composed primarily of liberal ministers and professors who were predominantly Unitarians and considered themselves as religious humanists. At the time of its incorporation in 1941, the decision was made not to try to establish humanist churches but to function as an educational movement among humanists wherever they were found.

“The early literature of the movement was devoted chiefly to the development of Humanism as a distinctly religious position....

“Of the 34 persons who signed the *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933, all but four can be readily identified as ‘religious humanists’ who considered Humanism as the development of a better and truer religion and as the next step ahead for those who sought it....

“My conviction is that a probe into what is actually believed would show that the ‘liberal Unitarian position’ and what is generally presented as Humanism -- whether as a religion or as a philosophy -- differ very little....

“One minister who belongs to the A.H.A. said: ‘We Unitarians in my church have no ideological conflict with the American Humanist Association. Naturalistic Humanism is our position.’

“Barnes and Rosenfeld question whether a secular religion is possible. Not to make any one word too important, one could argue that today’s Unitarian Universalism is a secular religion....

“Now for expediency. In the Torcaso case the court recognized Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture and Secular Humanism as religions existing in the United States which do not teach what is traditionally considered belief in God. We should at least ask ourselves whether there are not practical advantages to be had by accepting this decision.”

And so, to Wilson, and many other humanists, “secular religion” was not a contradiction in terms. The words defined a nontheistic faith. Comments by readers of the articles appeared in the January-February 1963 issue. Opinion was divided. The hard-core atheists objected to the use of the word “religion,” while the Unitarians agreed with Wilson.

## **Humanist Manifesto II**

In 1973 the humanists produced *Humanist Manifesto II*, an affirmation of the earlier document with updated views on the world’s social problems. The new Manifesto was as hostile to traditional theistic religion as the earlier one. It said:

“As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival....

“We believe...that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species....We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of the supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of the survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity....



“[We] can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”

### **Ethics and Sexuality**

Manifesto II also spelled out the social and political agendas for humanists:

“We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction....We strive for the good life, here and now....

“In the area of sexuality, we believe that intolerant attitudes, often cultivated by orthodox religions and puritanical cultures, unduly repress sexual conduct. The right to birth control, abortion, and divorce should be recognized....Short of harming others or compelling them to do likewise, individuals should be permitted to express their sexual proclivities and pursue their life-styles as they desire.”

### **World Government**

The humanists again committed themselves to the goal of World Government. Manifesto II states:

“We deplore the division of humankind on nationalistic grounds. We have reached a turning point in human history where the best option is to transcend the limits of national sovereignty and to move toward the building of a world community in which all sectors of the human family can participate. Thus we look to the development of a system of world law and a world order based upon transnational federal government.”

Anyone who bothers to study the curriculum of American public education will find in virtually every course and program the tremendous influence of humanist philosophy. It almost seems as if the public schools have become the parochial schools of humanism wherein American youngsters are aggressively indoctrinated in humanist values and ideas.

In fact, humanist editor Joe R. Burnett suggested as much in the Nov.-Dec. 1961 issue of *The Humanist* (p. 347) when arguing in favor of federal aid to education. He said:

“Humanists obviously have a vital interest in the passage of a strong bill for federal aid to public education. Without wanting to push the analogy too far, one might say that public education is the parochial education for scientific humanism.”

If that was the case in 1961, it is even moreso today. In short: Public education today is a government-supported establishment of the humanist religion.