

Humanism and Interfaith Dialogue

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[This draft document is a work in progress and will hopefully change and improve based on Humanist and non-Humanist input. It also represents a summary of what would need to be a much more complete discussion of the wide range of topics included.]

Introduction

“Interfaith dialogue” is any effort to network theologically different groups of people together here in the United States and elsewhere. Views differ about the goal of such work, but I tend to see it as the process of coming to grips with the reality and logistics of coexisting. In the U.S., very different types of people live in close proximity to each other and must do a lot of sharing: sharing of schools, public areas, broadcast airwaves, laws, elected officials, tax revenues, and so on. Sharing does not come easy to us, so we do what everyone who shares must do: we negotiate. We give and get, struggling through our disagreements while breathing sighs of relief over our agreements. However, unlike formal negotiations, interfaith dialogue is much more organic, occurring in everyone’s daily life as we interact and speak with each other.

Humanists play an important role in that process, and—just like every other constituency—we come to this cumulative conversation with our own unique needs, grievances, and internal failings. It is important for Humanists to discuss what our negotiables and non-negotiables are and reflect upon others’ (sometimes quite legitimate) grievances against us.

What Is Humanism?

As Humanists participate in interfaith dialogue, we should begin by defining ourselves. The term “humanism” has various meanings and usages, and Humanism as a distinct grouping of people is different from sub-constituencies bearing the same name (for instance, “Christian humanism” sometimes refers to certain types of Christians).

Humanism, when used to refer to a freestanding group of people, is at its essence a belief in humanity’s own centrality when exploring questions of prime importance. Humanists do not depend on the supernatural/paranormal for guidance but rather on humanity’s own ability to gather wisdom and knowledge. As a result, Humanism really is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of beliefs and practices. What the various wings of Humanism share is a common methodology for seeking knowledge, a few key principles of which are as follows:

Reason and rationality. Through discipline and study, people have the power to observe the world around them and make meaningful and useful conclusions about reality. It is humanity’s own collective observation and analysis that is our primary source of truth.

Self-evident truth. Any person anywhere – whether a scientist in an advanced country or a person living primitively and remotely – has an equal ability to observe reality and thus an equal access to basic truth. Supernatural revelation that exists in a particular place and time, either as a manifestation of the supernatural or a message through a prophet, is not necessary for a functional life.

Freethinking. Personal beliefs are important and should be derived from a process of self-exploration and reflection. Humanists generally reject faith (when the term “faith” is used in the sense of either unquestioning trust or a belief derived from gut instinct without accompanying rationale). Instead study, research, education, and discourse are preferred means of learning. As a result, Humanists generally have high regard for the Academy as a collective institution (universities, research facilities, etc.).

Given that common framework, the actual theology of Humanists varies substantially. There are various Humanist belief systems that may either identify as Humanist or simply as their own subgroup. Some of the major ones are:

*Deism*¹. This belief system had some popularity in Europe during the Enlightenment and had a significant impact on the United States during its formative years in the 18th Century. Deism is a monotheistic belief and arose as a reaction against Abrahamic monotheism’s teaching that God was known, at least in part, through his specific interactions with humanity through prophets, miracles, or incarnation. Deism instead teaches that God is known through nature itself via exploration of both physical and ethical natural laws. One could learn enough about the creator simply by observing creation. As a result, Deism is a scientific belief system in the sense that one of its own key tenants is pursuit of supernatural knowledge through scientific inquiry. The opening line of the Declaration of Independence (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”) is a quintessentially Deistic statement: the evidence given

¹ I understand that I am using a different meaning of Humanism than what is in Humanist Manifesto III, which I find is sometimes cited as the authoritative definition. However, I consider that document to be more of a joint definition of Atheism and U.S. political liberalism. By affirming the nonexistence of the afterlife (“finding wonder and awe... even in the inevitability and finality of death”) and at least suggesting a rejection of paranormal beings (“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life... without supernaturalism”), Humanist Manifesto III brushes aside (I presume intentionally) the rich contributions of Agnosticism and the great historical influence of Deism, creating the rather strange outcome that great Humanist-influenced documents like the Declaration of Independence (“the laws of nature and of nature’s God”; “they are endowed by their Creator”) actually are not Humanist. My view is that rather than have the division between Humanist and non-Humanist rest on a rejection of a god or gods (which the definitions of Atheist and non-Atheist render redundant anyway), we should stick with seeing a Humanist’s unique characteristic as being a non-affirmation (not necessarily a rejection) of paranormal intervention. Thus Humanists do not affirm avatars, prophets, codified scriptures, or other revelatory/gnostic sources.

for God and God's actions is not revelation but merely a statement that such conclusions are "self-evident," presumably through simple observation by anyone.

Atheism. The Greek word for God is "theos," and the prefix "a-" indicates an opposite, like "non-" or "un-" do. Thus the term "Atheism" is the opposite of a belief in God. Although the exact nuance of this varies from usage to usage, the term often refers to a belief system that positively affirms the nonexistence of (or at least the nonexistence of any grounds for believing in) God and the supernatural. (Sometimes, however, the usage simply implies the absence of a belief in God and is thus more similar to Agnosticism as discussed below.) Many Humanists self-identify as Atheists, and explicitly Atheistic organizations, groups, and websites exist. The term Secular Humanism, which is a distinct subgroup of Humanism and not Humanism itself, is generally synonymous with Atheism.

Agnosticism. This term shares with Atheism the same negative prefix ("a-") but refers instead to the Greek word "gnosis" (knowledge of the supernatural). Thus Agnostics believe that they do not possess knowledge of God or the supernatural. Here too, the nuance of the term varies depending on the user. Some Agnostics (in a belief sometimes categorized as "Strong Agnosticism") believe that humanity is by its nature incapable of knowing whether the supernatural exists and, if it does, what its nature is. Other Agnostics affirm a view (sometimes called "Soft Agnosticism") that they currently cannot know whether the supernatural exists but that additional information could theoretically be acquired at a different time or could already be possessed by other people. For still others, Agnosticism is used in a more neo-Deistic sense: these Agnostics believe it is likely that there is a creative agency driving the Universe's existence but that almost nothing can be specifically ascertained about it. Like Atheism, Agnosticism is also a popular term of self-identification among Humanists today, and distinctly Agnostic groups also exist.

Concessions that Humanists Should Make in Interfaith Dialogue

As part of the give and take of coexistence, we need to listen to non-Humanists' concerns and change our behavior and practices when doing so is appropriate. I propose five areas in which we should do this. I lay them out below very briefly.

1. *Recognize the December holiday.* The month of December is a special time in the United States and is a wonderful opportunity for the community to come together irrespective of the fact that a portion of these activities are Christian. All Humanists should wholeheartedly participate in the non-Christian aspects of the holiday as a way of building friendships and community ties.

2. *Promote student rights.* A number of non-Humanist constituencies are concerned about the treatment in public schools of youth who follow their respective beliefs and practices, and, whether true or not, Humanists are also sometimes seen as playing a

negative role in this process.² To counter this, and to prove that we are not trying to teach children Humanism in public schools, we should be very active in promoting student rights, including the establishment of theological student clubs, school policies that reasonably accommodate student theological practices, and the preservation of schools as a home for the marketplace of ideas, including theological ones.

3. *Reject vulgar Humanist entertainment.* I suspect that for too many Americans, their main source of information about Humanism comes from Humanist entertainers like Seth MacFarlane (creator of *Family Guy*) and Bill Maher. Their expression of (often very laudable) Humanist values through deeply crass methods does tremendous harm to our role in interfaith dialogue. We should distance ourselves from such expressions of Humanism, be willing to defend non-Humanists unjustly maligned as a result, and seek to expand Humanism through more wholesome means.

4. *Not charge non-Humanists with theocratic motives.* This point cannot be properly developed in this short space, but in essence, Humanists must exercise much more restraint when accusing our non-Humanists friends of trying to expand through use of the government. All in all, Humanists enjoy almost unprecedented liberty, and we should keep our concerns in perspective. This also means that Humanists should not collectively get tied into political movements or public policy questions. We must recognize that our laws have no collective impact on Humanists unless they very specifically curtail the civil rights of Humanists. Doing so would greatly improve interfaith dialogue since accusations of theocratic motive invariably accompany broader feelings of paranoia toward others.

5. *Abandon methodological naturalism.* This is a technical point that cannot be fully explained here, but in essence “methodological naturalism” is the belief and practice that certain academic disciplines should not consider either (depending on the

² To give an extreme example, in 2009 a Christian-leaning legal advocacy organization intervened in the case of “Jalen Cromwell, a second grader at Lowell M. Maxham School in Taunton, Mass., was taken to the principal's office where he was questioned without the presence of, or even notification to, his parents regarding a drawing he had made earlier that day depicting a stick figure Jesus on the cross with X's over his eyes. The drawing reflected Jalen's impressions about a recent family trip to the Christmas lighting festival at LaSalette. However, Jalen's parents were later informed that, in keeping with school policy, he would not be permitted to return to school until he had undergone a psychological evaluation. Jalen has since informed his parents that he no longer trusts his teachers and does not want to continue attending the school due to the anxiety caused by this incident, a sentiment shared by his parents” (the Rutherford Institute, “The Rutherford Institute Defends Second Grader Forced by School Officials to Undergo Psych Evaluation for Drawing Crucified Jesus,” 16 December, 2009 (online, available: <http://www.rutherford.org/articles_db/press_release.asp?article_id=803>, 4 December, 2010)). Regardless of the factual accuracy of this claim, this type of incident can have a pronounced negative impact on interfaith dialogue, especially when the school administration is perceived as having acted out of Humanist motives. For examples of allegations of schools mistreating youth who believe in Islam, see Cristi Hegranes, “Suffer the Little Muslims,” 17 August, 2005 (online, available: <<http://ing.org/about/islampage.asp?num=42>>, 18 December, 2010). In my view, these are just tips of a disturbing iceberg involving many non-Humanist constituencies.

discipline) paranormal causation or any agency causation when studying certain events and phenomena. It has had the effect of hindering interfaith dialogue among various technical experts. Humanists should instead support full-fledged research regardless of whether the issue is normal or paranormal.³

Concessions that Humanists Should Seek in Interfaith Dialogue

Of course, by making accommodations for others, we must also assert our own prerogatives and needs. Below is a brief introduction to five areas that I believe we should consider non-negotiable.

1. *Insist upon our right to market.* This is a crucial point, and a defeat here could be the greatest threat to Humanism today. On the issue of bringing in new members (which is variously called “evangelizing,” “sharing,” “proselytizing,” and so forth, but which I prefer to call by the contemporarily more accurate and widely-used term “marketing”), there are two main schools of thought within interfaith dialogue today. One recognizes people as individuals who have both the responsibility and also opportunity to select a theological group. This tends to be the Humanist position.⁴ The other view sees affiliation in ethnic terms with theology functioning as a manifestation of ethnic culture. There is a disturbingly sizable movement afoot among proponents of this second view to end marketing and instead have everyone stay within some sort of (generally quite ill-defined) ethnically-categorized theological affiliation.⁵ Humanists must not yield ground in opposing this gross abrogation of individuality.

2. *Assert our numerical strength.* We are the second largest theological constituency in the United States and should not be afraid of acting as such and reminding other groups that we deserve a full voice at the table.⁶ I find that too often, our non-Humanist friends

³ Widely-read atheist Richard Dawkins makes this point more eloquently than I: “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other... God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favor” (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008) 72-3).

⁴ It tends to be the Christian position too, which introduces an important point of strategic common interest that Humanists are by and large failing to exploit.

⁵ The Dalai Lama is a particularly prominent proponent of the ethnic view: “Whether Hindu or Muslim or Christian, whoever tries to convert, it’s wrong, not good... I always believe it’s safer and better and reasonable to keep one’s own tradition or belief” (Neelesh Misra, “Dalai Lama Criticizes Proselytizing” (online, available: <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=81617&page=1>>, 18 December, 2010)). This of course raises the question of how a person got assigned “one’s own” affiliation in the first place and why a change of heart is automatically less legitimate, especially when a subsequent choice is made at a later and more-experienced age.

⁶ Actual numbers can vary significantly based on survey methodology. However, a study by the Pew Forum asked people to self-identify an affiliation. Humanism itself was not offered as an answer option, but the study did show that 2.4% identified themselves as Agnostic and 1.6% as Atheist. Another 0.7% identified under the category “Unitarian and other liberal faiths,” which would likely include some Humanists. If these numbers are generally accurate, then they include about one in twenty Americans. Deists were not listed, and, if properly defined to the respondents, probably would have driven the

prefer to interface with more revelation-based/gnostic constituencies than with us. As a result, some of our numerically very small friends like Baha'i, Jains, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians are welcomed more easily into dialogue. We must seek to counteract this tendency.

3. *Cement concessions made by believers in intelligent design (ID).* One of the greatest current areas of tension in interfaith dialogue is over how to teach biology in public schools, and Humanists must not be shy in asserting our views on the matter. However, we need to be tactful too: in my view, it has gone too unnoticed that those who believe in paranormally-caused biology have been shifting their approach, with some moving from "creationism" to belief in ID. While there is debate over the exact extent to which these two views are different, Humanists seem to have received some major concessions in this transition. ID appears generally to side with us on some of our deepest concerns, such as Adam and Eve, Noah, and the general phenomenon of natural selection. We must continue to seek clarification from ID proponents that these concessions have in fact been made so that, together, we can productively study the outstanding issues (sub-cellular design, cosmic origins, etc.) without the specter of these more problematic questions.

4. *Counteract the tendency to see "faith" as a virtue.* Too often, efforts to bring peace between different constituencies devolves into statements that there is common ground among those who fit within the clichéd phrase "people of faith." This is just a celebration of gnosticism in general. Although we should be happy that this may be a catalyst for much-needed reconciliation among some of our non-Humanist friends, we must be firm in asserting that we do not hold that common ground to be virtuous in and of itself and that, more importantly, we should not be excluded from dialogue if we do not share that common ground.

5. *Stand for our property rights.* One area of common interest among theological constituencies is that because all constituencies tend to meet, they also tend to own properties where they can meet. Thus property rights are an important issue not just for Humanists but also for our non-Humanist friends too. In the aftermath of controversy this year over construction near Ground Zero in New York City, doubt now exists about whether everyone still has that full range of rights. To the extent that Humanists do own real estate, we should affirm our rights to use it without suffering subject matter discrimination.

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number up quite a bit more. (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," February, 2008 (online, available: <<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>>, 18 December, 2010) 10-2.)