Humanism as a Belief System

Summary: *Enlightenment principles and liberal religious movements shaped the Humanist worldview which prioritizes reason, scientific critique, civil freedoms, compassion, and pragmatic ethics. These non-religious guiding values form the center of a belief system that rejects the supernatural, reaffirms universal human dignity, and places trust in the ability of cooperative human effort to create a better future.*

> *"Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."*
> *– Humanist Manifesto III, 2003*

The divine, in various forms, has played a central role in many cultures throughout human history. Human cultures across time have wondered how to find the divine, how to know the divine, and how to please the divine. Humanists reject this focus. Placing human beings firmly in the center of their worldview, Humanists ask: "How, in this one life we have, might we make the most of our time here for ourselves and for others?" For Humanists, human concerns come first; they trump tradition, dogma, or creed. Humanists seek to discover what best promotes human flourishing while leaving behind those beliefs and practices that would prevent humanity from achieving its full potential.

This drive to improve human life can be expressed in three core values: reason, compassion, and hope. Humanists value reason, or the use of the intellect and practices like the sciences and philosophy, as the best way to generate accurate knowledge about the world we inhabit. They reject supernatural explanations for phenomena. They are driven by compassion, or the idea that all people—regardless of nationality, ethnicity, race, creed, sexual identity or other characteristic—are fundamentally of equal moral worth. Humanists also look to the future in hope, believing that human beings, if working together, can build a better world.

Many tributaries flow into the mainstream of Humanist thought, but two are particularly significant. Much of modern Humanism is inspired by the principles that animated the Enlightenment: a commitment to reason as a mechanism to change society and a commitment to science as the best way

of learning about the world. The journals, salons, debating societies, and learned academies of the Enlightenment paved the way for the "marketplace of ideas," a concept that characterizes modern culture and that Humanists embrace wholeheartedly. The staunch rationalism that pervades Humanism today is inspired by the spirit of these times. Humanists believe that people should be free to think and discuss any thought, regardless of the sacred truths that may be questioned by doing so.

The second major contributing influence comes from liberal religious movements, including liberal Christian and Jewish movements, Transcendentalism, and Unitarian Universalism. Over time such movements have tended to significantly deemphasize the role of God and the supernatural, moving closer to a position of outright Humanism. In fact, many of the signatories of the first Humanist Manifesto were religious liberals who found that their questioning of God's role in the cosmos led them to Humanism. Humanistic Unitarian Universalist congregations continue to this day. It is largely from these religious traditions that the Humanist concern for the worth and dignity of all people is derived.

Like any ethical tradition, the full range of values and ideals central to Humanism is difficult to capture in a short statement. The task is made even more challenging in the case of Humanism because Humanism is non-dogmatic by design; there are no required creeds in which Humanists must believe, no holy book of Humanism that lays out what Humanists should or should not do. This is appropriate for a tradition which has no single founder, admits no ultimate authority, and believes that ethics is an ever-changing field of human practice which must alter to fit the context and the times. The closest Humanists come to creedal documents is a set of Humanist Manifestos which seek to record a consensus view of what Humanists believe at a particular time, with the understanding that the answers given may need to be revised when circumstances change. Three such manifestos have so far been written, each altering the last to respond to changed circumstances and new ideas, all evidence that Humanism does not stand still.

Humanism has a complex relationship with traditional religions. Humanism is not inherently "anti-religious" in the sense that it asserts all aspects of religious practice are by nature harmful and inhumane. At the same time, Humanism is not inherently "pro-religion" since it does not claim all elements of religious practice are positive and valuable either. Rather, Humanists seek to eliminate aspects of religious practice found to be inhumane and dehumanizing, while reconstituting those that affirm and promote human flourishing.

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The willingness of Humanists to critique that which religious traditions consider sacred often puts Humanists at odds with religious communities that, in Humanists' view, may continue certain practices for no good reason. While Humanists condemn dogma and irrationalism, they do not indiscriminately condemn all expressions of religious culture. Since Humanists see religions and religious practices as human-created, they seek to ensure that those religions that do exist do so to serve human ends rather than dictate them.

Some people consider Humanism to be a religion, while others do not. Generally the term Humanism, when used today without qualifier, references a nonreligious life-stance, that is, a set of *values*, not *how* those values are expressed or practiced. Some distinguish between "Secular Humanism" and "Religious Humanism." "Religious Humanists" might express their Humanism in ways more common to traditionally religious individuals, for example meeting together to discuss values and celebrate certain ceremonies. Some like to maintain a connection to the cultural elements of a religious tradition they have experienced and may continue to participate in religious culture while maintaining strictly Humanist beliefs and values. "Religious Humanists" are still Humanists—they are atheists (or agnostic, skeptics etc.), they are secularists, and they reject the supernatural. If there is a difference between "secular" and "religious" Humanists it is in how they express and practice their Humanist life-stance, but the life-stance is the same in both cases.

Humanists seek inspiration from many sources. The boundless beauty of the cosmos filled Humanist scientist Carl Sagan with reverential awe. Philosopher Bertrand Russell found the rigors of geometry "dazzling as first love." Ernestine Rose, a social reformer and activist, found her work to promote women's suffrage and abolitionism to be deeply satisfying. Margaret Sanger sought to change attitudes regarding reproductive rights, founding Planned Parenthood. And Gene Roddenberry, creator of *Star Trek*, expressed his Humanism with a hopeful vision of human life among the stars.
Wherever human beings reach out to better understand the universe and our role within it, wherever human concerns are placed above the will of a God or the needs of a tradition, wherever people believe that a better world is possible in this life, Humanism lives.

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