

# Nontheistic Humanism

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Foto: Anthony B. Pinn

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**By nontheistic humanism, I mean to differentiate this modality of humanism as a philosophy of life without supernatural inclinations and claims, but instead limited to a sense of human responsibility without cosmic safeguards and presuppositions. It, then, is a philosophy of life that centers on human workings within the context of history and that seeks to promote the well being of life – in its various forms – as a matter of secular accountability and work.<sup>1</sup>**

## Framing the Discussion

While present in the North American context for a long period, non-theistic humanism was under siege during the Great Awakening revivals between the mid-1700s and the early 1800s, when the misery of life generated for some the assumption that better connection to God through personal salvation would alter the condition of their land. In a word, the harshness of existential conditions was met during the Great Awakenings through a turn to revelation as the basis for a sustainable sense of humanity's proper place in the world. However, the countervailing idea of the centrality of humanity was never completely wiped out. Humanist sentiments continued to grow as a visible response to deep questions of life meaning.<sup>2</sup> Moving through the 19th century, into the twentieth century and now the twenty-first century, the impact of non-theistic thinking and practice persists and is undeniable.

For instance, according to recent studies, the 1990s marked a watershed period for the growth in non-theistic sensibilities in the United States, with an increase of more than one million adults each year until 2001. However, even after this period of significant increase subsided, the percentage of the US population categorized as "Nones" has remained significant, creeping up on twenty percent.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, "1 in 6 Americans is presently of No Religion, while in terms of Belief and Behavior the ratio is higher around 1 in 4. And what is more, for 68 percent of 'Nones' surveyed, this position involves a movement away from earlier belief patterns in that only 32 percent indicate being 'non-religious' as a pre-teen, and class as well as racial background are playing a declining factor in the 'look' of

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- 1 This is a modified version of "Humanism as a Guide to Life Meaning," published in Anthony B. Pinn, editor: *What Is Humanism and Why Does It Matter?* (London: Acumen, 2013).
  - 2 Much of the above material on the history of humanism summarizes ideas presented in Anthony B. Pinn, "Anybody There? Reflections on African American Humanism," in *Religious Humanism*, Volume 31, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer/Fall 1997): 61-78; and Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
  - 3 "American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population," A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008, Trinity College.

this category of American.<sup>4</sup> It remains the case that this group – “Nones” – is difficult to classify accurately. It is not a movement and it isn’t easily defined by Atheism. While it is not fully accurate to label all “Nones” humanists (7 percent are atheists and ‘hard/soft’ agnostics are 35%), the significance of this category of Americans does lay in the inability to understand them in terms of traditional theistic belief structures and patterns.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, according to a recent study, “...Nones, in general, are substantially more likely to self-identify as atheist or agnostic than are adults in the U.S. population generally.”<sup>6</sup>

## On Humanism

Humanism is, according to philosopher Corliss Lamont, a basic philosophy of life available to any and all. It provides a non-supernatural means by which to assess life options and perspectives on proper actions and thought.<sup>7</sup> Lamont, who offered me one of my first examples of a systematic effort to define humanism, is concerned to outline basic components of humanism and, in this way, remove some of the ambiguity surrounding the term and the way of life it entails.

Whether one further distinguishes humanism as scientific, secular naturalistic, democratic, etc., the following characteristics are present and are of fundamental significance. Lamont argues humanism is grounded in the aesthetically rich natural world, its evolving nature and observable laws. Furthermore, humanity is understood as an inseparable component of nature, one ending its existence with death; and although human life is fraught with hardships, humanity is capable of addressing its problem with appeal to reason and the scientific method.<sup>8</sup> In this way, humans create and fulfill their own personal and collective well being without the intervention of divine forces. Humanism, then, is committed to the development, through continually self-reflection and critique, of a healthy world based upon democratic principles. Humanism, in keeping with Lamont’s perceptions, does not allow for (or at least is opposed to) the good of the individual at the expense of the collective community. Although humanism, like any other way of life, at times falls short of its objectives – e.g., racism, classism and gender-bias within humanist movements – it nonetheless pushes toward the welfare of others as paramount.<sup>9</sup>

Lamont’s defining of humanism continues to intrigue me: its relative clarity and expansive nature are intriguing in that it affords a centering of one’s thinking and carves out a ‘place’ for humanism, but I also find fascinating the manner in which his work suggests gaps to fill and interesting questions to address. That is to say, although his work is a somewhat comprehensive treatment, it points to the difficulties associated with defining the term humanism in a way that can remain stable despite socio-economic, political and cultural shifts over time and that can account for diversity within the groupings of citizens who claim (or reject) the ‘label’. His is a defining of humanism in light of mid-century concerns such as World War II and the accompanying angst generated by questions of human advances in the sciences over against the preservation of life’s integrity. It is a definition tied to a particular socio-political ethos. In addition to Lamont’s work, various incarnations of a humanist manifesto have been tied to similar assumptions concerning the nature of the nation/state as a basic framing of human interactions and ‘belonging’ – a backdrop of sorts for the structuring of humanism as life philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as will become clear in what remains of this essay, I am troubled by the hyper-optimism I sense in Lamont’s definition. There is a sense of hopefulness undergirding his thought, that assumes hard and reasonable work will generate results. I see no good reason to make this assumption; instead, I concentrate one effort, on struggle, as opposed to assuming in particular outcomes of this effort. In this way, I am indebted to the thought of Albert Camus.

Lamont’s thought and my correctives serve to generate a range of questions, including this: is the term *humanism* plastic enough to cover the meaning of life and thought with a quickly changing world? The situation is messy, but efforts to define evolving realities always are. There are just too many “moving parts,” too many nuances, and ideological shifts for the situation to be otherwise. For example, many who would embrace the principles Lamont outlines (Who would reject an interest in harmony and world health?) are opposed to the label of humanism; and others are opposed to any label at all out of principle. This term, humanism, as is the case for any conceptual paradigm or explanatory category, has been stereotyped, stretched, and those who embrace it have experienced many difficulties based on the shifting nature of its meaning. Others who claim the label of humanist are opposed to any hint that humanism is a religious orientation as opposed to a philosophical stance or ‘secular’ worldview. Some of those in this latter grouping are opposed to religious labels be-

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 14-15.

7 Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1949).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 The American Humanist Association website contains links to Humanist Manifesto I-III: [http://www.americanhumanist.org/search\\_results?cx=017655126507170182716%3Ak2dauqhf9ho&cof=FORID%3A10&ie=UTF-8&q=humanist+manifestos&x=0&y=0#848](http://www.americanhumanist.org/search_results?cx=017655126507170182716%3Ak2dauqhf9ho&cof=FORID%3A10&ie=UTF-8&q=humanist+manifestos&x=0&y=0#848).

cause of what they consider the failure and harm done by organized religion. The world's most graphic tragedies stem from the workings and teachings of religion, and theology encourages a rejection of reason and logic – replacing both with faith and metaphor, the argument goes. Yet others are careful to consider humanism a religious orientation, not as a reaction to Christians' fears and not as an appeasement to the loud and aggressive religious right, etc., but because of the way humanism provides, to borrow from theologian Paul Tillich, a synergy between one's ultimate orientation and ultimate concern.<sup>11</sup>

In that regard I am not offering a compromised sense of humanism meant to simply appease its most vocal opponents and thereby to safeguard 'space' – as compromised and cramped as it might be – for humanism within a decidedly theistic society. I want more than that for humanism. Put another way, my aim is not to simply value humanism to the extent it mirrors organized theistic traditions. I aim to point out the manner in which humanism, like theistic traditions through their own means, seeks to provide a way of thinking and behaving in the world. It, like those things we recognize easily as religious traditions, seeks to provide a systemic approach to life. Or, more to the point, it replaces god-based ways of making (life) meaning. Thereby it allows its adherents to wrestle with the looming questions of our humanity – the "who, what, why, when, and where we are" as self-aware human questions.

Call humanism 'religion/religious' or not, there are ways in which it works to make sense of human existence – to wrestle with the nature and meaning of life in an absurd world laced with socio-political and economic difficulties; and, it does so in a way that provides the potential for struggle. Out of a commitment to non-theistic humanism as a vital and vibrant way to address the challenges facing our collective life, my aim is to show the deep significance of non-theistic humanism as a life orientation that addresses *both* the objective and subjective dimensions of our individual and group existence. To the point, I remain convinced a non-theistic stance within the world is our best hope of producing clear thinking and robust action that might serve to address the range of life options currently available, particularly to those who suffer most in our current world community. And the growth of public advocacy for humanism in the United States and beyond points to an expanding recognition and embrace of this very commitment to non-theistic postures toward the world.

By saying humanism entails a life orientation, attention to which maps out an ultimate orientation for life, I intend

to say humanism frames a quest for life full and healthy, the making of meaning in such a way as to capture perspective on and attention to the looming questions of our very complex and layered existence. To be sure, these fundamental questions of existence are wrestled within the confines of human history, without appeal to trans-historical assistance and cosmic powers waging war on our behalf, and without any certainty regarding the outcome of our efforts. In fact, in solidarity with Camus, I argue final resolutions aren't the point. Our movement through the world sets out the geography and context for this wrestling rest within the context of human ingenuity and creativity: nothing more, and nothing less. Non-theistic humanism in this context involves an arrangement and interpretation of life with a grammar drawn from and reflective of the 'stuff' of our historically situated lives. It offers perspective on the challenges that humans face and grounds our best efforts to struggle, to through our actions, try to speak "No!" to the sufferings of life. No heaven to comfort the weary. No god(s) to side with the disadvantaged. It simply offers strategies for clear, secular, and grounded efforts to own our problems and demand of ourselves creative means by which to address them.

There is something mysterious about the human story – the nature and meaning of human life – but this does not entail the workings of a divine something. Rather, this 'mystery' is a marker of what is yet unknown to us but pursued through scientific investigation as well as the approaches to unpack human meaning found in the social sciences and humanities. In a word, non-theistic *humanism* is about human thought and action. We are fragile beings, aware of our fragility, and marked by movement in a variety of social locations simultaneously: for example one can be female, middle class, Latina, residing in the Northern United States and committed to a particular political party.

Non-theistic humanism at its best promotes modesty regarding the nature and meaning of the human – recognition of human capacity but also shortcomings. In this way hyper-optimism related to human potential (and the tragedies such arrogance can produce) is tempered through recognition of the deep impact of racism, sexism, etc., on humans and their bodies and psychological development. We do our best work when we recognize that we are capable but deeply flawed creatures. All in all, the nature and meaning of the human for non-theistic humanism as I understand it highlights the material nature of existence but, with modesty, a sense of hopefulness. To be human, it appears to me, involves an unavoidable recognition of and response to this drive and the resulting stories of our existence drawn from our working through this drive. This unfolding of human life is captured in what we say as well as what we do, and is lodged in the cultural worlds we

11 Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

construct, but without the nebulous framework of the sacred marking theistically contrived notions of the human animal. Even science, though we often fail to acknowledge as much, takes place from within the frameworks of cultural worlds. It is incumbent on social scientists and humanists to provide persistent reminders of this.

There is admiration for the ways in which humans have discussed and explored our world and our place in it; but there is no sense of divine revelation – no salvific story granted humans by a transcendent force. If humanists don't believe in God, what keeps life from being a free-for-all? What keeps humanists in check? This question has impact because it points to *the* common denominator, the primary category of meaning – the litmus test of moral belonging. God demands action in the world, and this provides a blueprint for human activity. Other elements of belief can be altered, shifted, or ignored to some extent without tremendous difficulty, as long as the person questioned maintains a basic belief in God as the organizing principle and shaper of life. The extension of this question revolves around the ethical connotations of belief. What keeps you focused in acceptable and productive ways? For some humanists there is a form of radical individualism at work in how humanists move through the world in relationship to others. But what I propose involves the individual within the context of something more substantive. Although theistic formulations of the world are limiting, humanism does recognize the sense that individual behavior needs parameters, or guiding structures, allowing for the promotion of a good greater than that of any particular individual's will or desire.<sup>12</sup>

Humanism values gatherings of the likeminded. Yet, this sense of the collective is insufficient as an organizing 'something' that both humbles and motivates humanist thought and action. Humanism needs and has as its centering ideal something that includes socio-political, economic and cultural concerns of the like-minded; but this centering ideal also points out the deeper dimensions and motivations behind these concerns. It is because of this deeper dimension – a dimension of existence still grounded in the human in human history – humanism has something to say to the debates and passions marking human life.

Humanism involves a rather complex and compelling arrangement of thought and practice that helps a noteworthy percentage of the population move through the world. What I propose as undergirding non-theistic hu-

manism with respect to this organizing principle is a sense of community. By this I mean more than a collective of like-minded individuals motivated to shape life circumstances and options in a particular way. Whereas there are shared ideologies, values, and virtues within humanism as associated with this sense of community, it extends beyond traditional forms of the collective by omission. Some humanists understand themselves to be part of a collective under siege, a group rallied against by the theistic majority. And, while there is some truth to this concern, community as I intend it here is not simply the collective agreement on humanists as scapegoat. Community here means an organizing framework, a sought after synergy or symmetry of life that guides and modifies the thought and actions of humanists. Community so conceived points out the promise of humanism but also entails firm recognition of absence, of incompleteness not as a problem but as the nature of human *be-ing* and *living*. It is the agreed upon posture toward the world, the accepted sense of obligation that defines and shapes humanists thought and practice. It is the "more" of and out of life we seek but also there is an absence that is just as real and compelling. This sense of community points to the beauty lodged in the tangled markers of our lives as well as highlighting the significance of the uncertainties confronted and confounding us. Unlike theists, who might initially think this sense of community involves agreement with their perspective on the divine, I would note community here defined still privileges time and space – the parameters of human history – as the only 'real' context for our interactions.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas theism might lean toward the fantastic as the way to harness and understand the human in relationship to metaphysical claims, community for the non-theistic humanist appreciates the thick and unfolding nature of biology and connects this to a deep and fundamental "awe" regarding life. Community, therefore, involves comfort with the uncertainty or blind spots of our existence, without attempting to fill them with gods and other supernatural things. According to non-theistic humanism, one cannot gain perspective by looking beyond human history, beyond the stories of human movement and meaning. There are no hidden codes left behind for us by something greater than us. There is no cosmic salvation for the humanist, no escape button that allows distance from the trauma of human existence. Yes, humanists seek a better world; but that is not a different state or *form* of life. Rather, humanism promotes a desire for wholeness or fullness of life made possible through the limited resources of human ingenuity, commitment and creativity.

12 A portion of material in this chapter related to the deconstruction of the idea of God is drawn from "God of Restraint: An African American Humanist Interpretation of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel," in Anthony B. Pinn and Allen Callahan, editors. *African American Religious Life and the Story of Nimrod* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 27-34.

13 This sense of community is more fully developed in Pinn, *The End of God-Talk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

This humanism pushes for a type of balance to life, again, allowing for recognition of human potential within the context of human limitations. Such entails both the push toward fulfillment of material potential but also involves effort to understand and recognize fundamental structures of life, and the deep consistencies that mark these structures. In short, the outcome of life at its best – the life humanism seeks to promote – involves the enhancement of human engagement with self, others, and the larger world; and promotes the beauty of existence over against its trauma and absurdity. That is to say, to make life dynamic and as saturated with meaning as possible. But this statement requires qualification: The success is in the trying not in outcomes of this struggle for justice and other markers of meaning.<sup>14</sup>

### Why Humanism?

Why does non-theistic humanism matter? I want to approach this question by simply and briefly highlighting some of the creative ways in which humanism advances efforts to live life meaningfully and within the context of nurturing relationships. Without engaging in a crude and unnecessary effort to close churches and destroy 'organized' theisms such as Christianity and Islam, one can reasonably claim non-theistic humanism as having great potential to meet the needs of a growing population of "Nones" and others who find theistic orientations less than satisfying.

First a point of clarification: for some atheists and humanists, attention needs to be given to arguing against theism as a way of converting and bringing some out of the damaging environments called churches. While some might find these arguments convincing enough to leave their churches, mosques and synagogues – there are anecdotal claims to this effect – I would argue theism's deep reliance on faith claims does not in general fall prey to rationale argumentation. Theistic doctrines, creeds, and theology exist precisely where human reason seems most inadequate. These three are the theist's effort to fill gaps – to make sense of the world and our place in it without reliance on strict human capacity to figure things out. Theology resolves the "I don't know" moments and topics with metaphysical claims and pronouncements; and, they position these in such a way as to short-circuit critique as marker of disbelief and a general weak connection to God. For many theists the attack by atheists only affirms their commitment to the faith. It wouldn't be uncommon for their reasoning to be this: "I must really be serving God, because the devil is out to get me."

There is something in the significant growth of non-denominational churches and a prosperity ministry in the United States and elsewhere that flies in the face of claims that one can argue theists out of churches. Some may leave, but those might be the very theists who were simply hiding out in those churches for non-theological reasons. Sure, there are some of those and aggressive atheism and humanism might get them. But is that enough? And, what about all those who are non-believers looking for a "soft place to land" after leaving theistic communities? What about our attack on theists speaks in meaningful ways to them? They have already rejected what we argue against, but we haven't provided them with a positive message regarding the significance and impact of humanist thought and action. Why not concentrate on that growing percentage of the population? In a more focused response to this approach, one might also wonder how many Latino/as and African Americans – who represent a growing percentage of US "Nones" – have left churches because of aggressive atheism? There are those who will (and have) disagree with me on this point. So be it. There's plenty of space for all, and there is a need for multiple approaches (as well as civil conversation concerning differences in strategy). However, with respect to why non-theistic humanism matters, I tend to privilege its ability to address the needs and wants of a growing number of non-believers. Let the hardcore theists (and atheists) stay where they are.

While some humanists hide out in churches, mosques, and so on for a variety of pragmatic reasons, there are numerous others actively seeking an alternative. The growing number of US citizens who do not claim a traditional and theistic religious tradition need a way of focusing their questions and interests, a way of naming and shaping their life practices and perspectives. Humanism can meet this need in that it promotes a posture toward the world and a way of acting in the world that holds the safeguarding of life over against ethical action based on personal reward and personal aggrandizement as being of primary importance. That is to say, humanism positions us in the world in ways that help us see (as a fundamental responsibility and as a clear marker of our best selves) full confrontation with the pressing issues of our time – sexism, homophobia, class warfare and so on. Non-theistic humanism helps those who embrace it make the promotion of healthy existence of all life their starting point and end point, their *raison d'être*. And, I argue, they do so with attention to at least these underlying claims:

1. Humanity is fully and solely accountable and responsible for the human condition and the correction of humanity's plight;
2. Rejection of traditional theism and an embrace of reason and the materiality of life;

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

3. There is a commitment to individual and societal transformation;
4. There is a controlled optimism that recognizes both human potential and human destructive activities.<sup>15</sup>

Non-theistic humanism in this way entails a stance of mindfulness and recognition of the weight of our existence – noting our promise and our problems, our abilities and our shortcomings. It notes the fragility and tender nature of life, celebrates it, and seeks to work toward its integrity.

There are ways in which theistic approaches to life overlook the everyday or mundane dimensions of our existence because they are preoccupied with the greater significance of transcendent concerns. There is something of substantive value in the manner in which humanism holds humans accountable and responsible for proper thought and action.<sup>16</sup>

Mindful of the above, non-theistic humanism matters because it provides a life orientation that takes seriously everyday occurrences, the ways in which the mundane nature of our existence houses something profound. It gives us reasonable insights into the world, and perspective on how to move through the world. And it does so without the pitfalls associated with theistic orientations. Drawing from Henry David Thoreau, I argue non-theistic humanism teaches the importance of living life deliberately and fostering good people who exercise their capacity to do good things.<sup>17</sup> This is to see the value, the importance, of every dimension of individual and collective lives in ways that promote a deep sensitivity and commitment to the betterment of every area of life within the context of our material world. What one gathers from Thoreau, then, is sensitivity to the weight and seriousness of both individual awareness and social engagement. Each is more than superficial encounter without effect. Both involve uneasy confrontations and delicate balance between different impressions of the world.

We are “moved” to behave in certain ways, to value certain interactions, and to disregard others through the power of our creativity and our ability to make a difference. The outcome of this process is not necessarily fantastic, nor extra-ordinary – perhaps a simple changing of a mind on an issue, a greater sensitivity to the nature of one’s relationship to self, others, and the world.<sup>18</sup> A similar approach to the world, one that is earthy and deeply

entrenched in human accountability and responsibility is also echoed in the lessons offered by figures such as novelist Alice Walker, who many humanists claim as one of their own.<sup>19</sup> She, like Thoreau before her, calls for deliberate living – moving through the world in relationship to others and entrenched in the world in ways that recognize our interconnectedness and hence deep responsibility to ourselves and to others. Such a perspective easily lends itself to socio-political activism as well as ethical conduct on the various levels of life. This perspective is also present on a localized way, by those without name recognition. My grandmother, for example, phrased ethical living in a way that might appeal to a variety of humanists, beyond this writer. “Move through the world,” she told me on many occasions, “knowing your footsteps matter.” Such rhetoric might come across as too sermonic in tone, too subjective and laced with emotion for some. Yet, there remains in these words a basic and important stance, one that has come over the years to support my sense of humanism. It, non-theistic humanism, pushes deep and multi-directional accountability and provides a way of celebrating and encouraging human initiated actions meant to enhance healthy life options within the context of improving social-political, economic and cultural relationships.

Non-theistic humanism has always played a significant role in efforts to celebrate and utilize human ingenuity and creativity. The difficulty or better yet challenge, however, has revolved around ways of promoting or making more visible and public the benefits of humanism-based thought and action. As I have noted elsewhere, a starting point for doing this might include at least the following: Partnerships with organizations (including religious organizations) that are committed to socio-political and economic advancement based on a progressive vision; Aggressive branding (to be sure, a dirty word for many) strategies. Some may find this troubling, but the future success and recognition of humanism must involve concerted effort to establish its ‘brand’ potential – to establish its uniqueness and importance; Development of continually clear and concise presentations of humanism that provide a positive and proactive stance.<sup>20</sup>

What remains to be done is the further development and demonstration of non-theistic humanism as a way to address the pressing problems of the day. Nontheistic humanism matters, but the ongoing challenge is the concrete and ‘felt’ demonstration of this statement. ■

15 Anthony B. Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 7.

16 This argument is developed more fully in Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

17 Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

18 This attention to Thoreau and being ‘good’ is drawn from and more fully developed in Pinn, *The End of God-Talk* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

19 Walker received the American Humanist Association “Humanist of the Year” Award in 1996.

20 This list is drawn from “Living Life: African Americans and Humanism,” “The Colors of Humanism,” special issue of *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, Volume 20, Number 1 (June 2012): 23-30.