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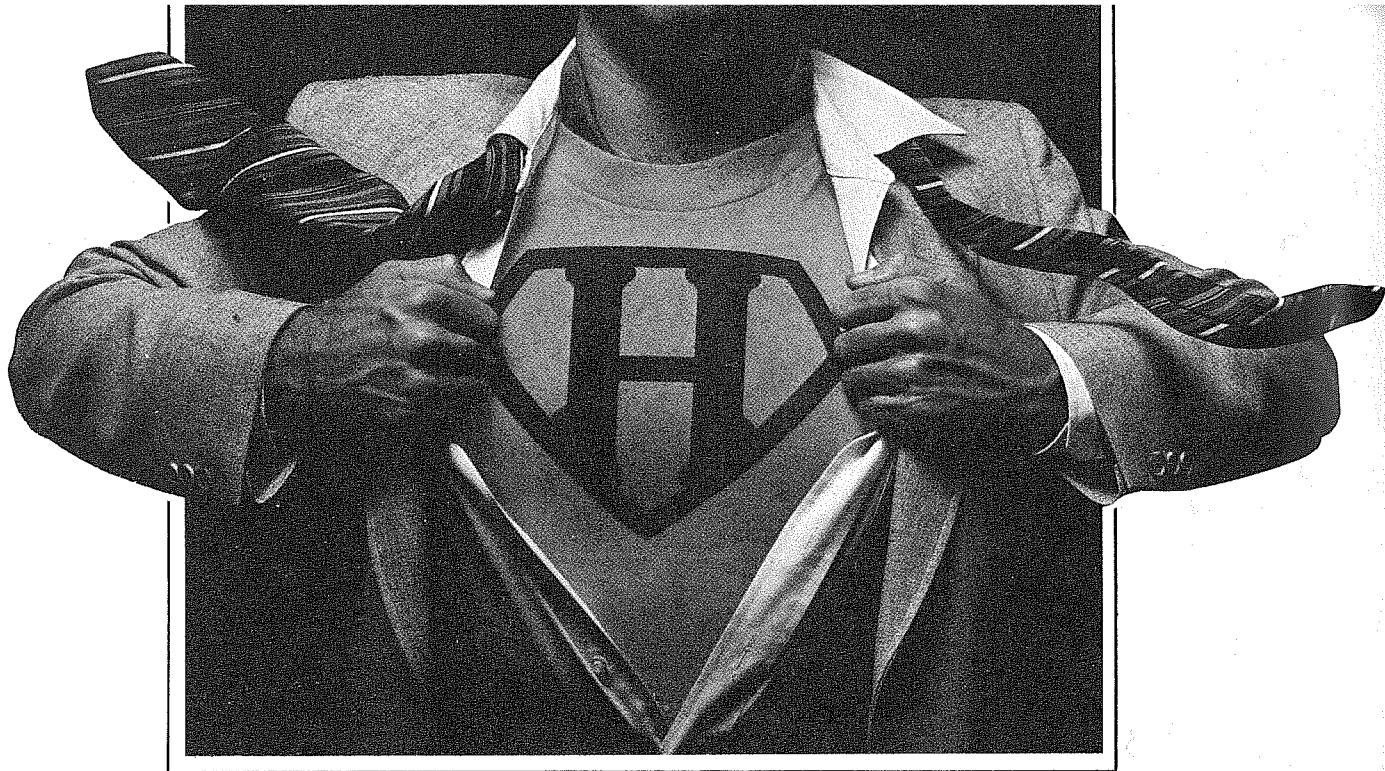
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Recommended Citation

Beck, W. David, "Secular Humanism: The Word of Man" (1982). *SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 83.

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SECULAR HUMANISM THE WORD OF MAN

by W. David Beck

For all of the talk about something called “secular humanism” these days, there is not a great deal of clarity as to just what it is—on the part of both its opponents and its supposed proponents. Some of its enemies have blamed it for every evil society has seen in the last fifty years, from socialism to anarchy, from atheism to satanism. Its advocates label it the salvation of the West, the only hope for a democratic society, and the preserver of true moral values in the face of the tyranny, intolerance, and ignorance of the resurgent new right.

If we are to give careful evaluation of this current world view, it is clear that we must first understand just what a world view is, how this one came to be, and just what the present conflict of views is all about.

What Is a World View?

Let us begin by saying what it is not. *First*, it is not an organization. Undoubtedly there are organizations that have dedicated themselves to the promulgation of certain world views. There are in this country and elsewhere a number of small but very vocal humanist associations. They have a slick and persuasively written magazine, *The Humanist*. Recently they have added a more dignified looking journal, *Free Inquiry*, aimed at the more “intellectual” audience. Nevertheless, we are still talking about a very small number of people with any sort of organizational involvement.

Second, a world view is not a religion. It is true that, for legal purposes, those who preach the non-existence of God have to be considered as promoting religion, just as those who preach His existence. But in general, world views and religions are two very different things. Christianity is a practical outworking of a particular world view, but it is not in itself one.

Just what is a world view, then? It is a system of beliefs. By this is meant two things: A world view is what people believe to be true. But, of course, not just any old arrangement of beliefs is a world view. Rather, a world view is ideally a fabric of beliefs. I say ideally because all too often we are not consistent in our beliefs. In fact, some world views — including secular humanism — are inherently inconsistent.

The beliefs that make up a world view are those most general and defining beliefs that control what we do with the facts of our daily experience. For example, one's definition or concept of what a human being is, is an important part of a world view. And if one holds that we are simply physical organisms, then abortion is simply a matter of getting rid of unwanted tissue. It has little more, if any, moral significance than trimming your fingernails or mowing your lawn.

The vast majority of people are largely unaware of their actual world view. This is because the world view of a society is often equal to the "common sense" of that society. Beliefs about knowledge are, for example, an important component of any world view. And certainly our society considers it just common sense that anything which science cannot investigate simply is not there.

This *third* feature of world views — that they are held unconsciously — is, of course, not always true. Not only are there many who have reflected on the matter and made conscious decisions regarding world view beliefs, but for some it has even taken on the level of an ideological cause to which they have devoted their lives. But they are clearly the exception.

Fourth, world views are decidable. By that is meant that one can make rational choices between world views on the basis of evidence and argument. This is certainly not always easy and

often a great deal of time and careful examination elapses before it becomes clear that certain ideas must be wrong.

It is important to emphasize this feature of world views since it has become popular today to say just the opposite. Many, in their desire to be tolerant and "pluralistic," are telling us that world views are just choices one makes in order to find satisfaction and meaning in life. But history, as will be demonstrated later, clearly defeats such a view.

In summary, a world view is a pattern of beliefs which dominates a segment or the whole of a society, often unconsciously for many and controls its interpretations of the facts. As such, world views are to an extent dependent on facts. Sometimes the facts just cannot be forced into a mold, and then it becomes clear that a world view, in part or as a whole, must change.



The Development of Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is a curious combination of two older world views, humanism and naturalism, which has come to be a vocal force in our society. If we are to understand, we must go back to another age when world views were also in conflict.

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries brought about a revolution in our knowledge of ourselves and our universe. Anatomy became a developed science, the circulatory system was discovered, and, perhaps most importantly, the functions of the brain and nervous system were uncovered. Man turned out to be a highly complex machine.

This conclusion, however, was diametrically opposed to the spirit of the seventeenth century. The aftermath of the Reformation and Renaissance was producing a society for which "liberty" was the key word. Man was the free individual.

The solution to the apparent contradiction adopted by the seventeenth century was to split man into two totally different sorts of things. On the one hand there is a physical, material body, subject to the scientific laws. On the other there is a spirited, non-material soul or mind, subject to none of the laws of science, but rather the laws of logic. It is not long until a whole world

view develops and becomes a powerful force in Europe and eventually America. It will take many forms and names over the next 200 years — deism, rationalism, "free-thinkers," liberalism, and more. The world view they all partake of is commonly called humanism.

In outline, humanism is a system in which the individual human being is the central notion. While he may have a mechanical body, he is essentially a mind, radically free and inherently logical or rational. This must mean that God, while still the Creator, is neither the Controller of the universe nor the Savior of man. The universe runs by mechanical laws, it has no further need of God, and there are no miracles, just as a watch, once it is wound, has no further need of the watchmaker. Nor does man need a Savior. He is a rational human being, capable of knowing and doing what is good. He needs no God, nor other persons. He will choose his values freely and rationally and eventually bring about a utopian society.

This idealistic optimism is perhaps the most persistent trait of humanism, though it was occasionally dulled by the aftermath of the French Revolution and revivals and awakenings in America. But curiously it produced its own poison. By the middle of the nineteenth century the notion of "evolution" began to take hold of all the sciences, but eventually biology — thanks, in part, to Darwin — as well as geology and social anthropology. This, in turn, produced a devastating result from which humanism has never recovered.

If evolution is correct, no matter how complex humans are, no matter what functions we have attained — including what we call reason — we are just machines after all. World War I seemed to deal the final blow to the grand optimism of humanism.

Thus, in the early twentieth century a new world view began to take hold, at least in certain segments of our society. C.S. Lewis, in *Miracles*, called it "naturalism," an apt name since the defining concept is that the natural, material universe is all that there is. Mental abilities are just highly evolved physical behaviors. Even our sense of morality must be regarded as a natural acquisition. There are two options

here. Values are seen as acquired either by the sheer biological evolution of certain behavior patterns, or else they are acquired habits, forced on us by the drive for survival. B.F. Skinner, the Harvard psychologist, has long championed the latter option, which he made popular in his 1971 best-seller *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Here he unabashedly draws the final conclusions which evolutionary naturalism must draw, namely that human beings are not free, make no choices, and deserve therefore no rewards or punishments. We are simply computers which occasionally need reprogramming.

Naturalism, of course, has no need for a god. There is only the chance evolution of material things. Carl Sagan begins his popular PBS television series and best-selling book *Cosmos* with the statement that "the Cosmos is all there is." It is the Cosmos itself which "created" man, which produced all the present complexity, including man's self-awareness. In fact, it is noteworthy that while Sagan denies God, his "Cosmos" functions exactly like one. It is curious that even the naturalist cannot escape Romans 1:18-19. There is inevitable logic to the universe that demands the existence of God — and all men know it. Robert Jastrow, for example, Columbia University astronomer and geologist and founder of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies, now admits that science, while it is one avenue of truth, "is not the only one" (*Christianity Today*, August 6, 1982, p. 15). Questions about the origin and meaning of the universe are not available to science, but must be answered.

However, the one aspect of naturalism that has continued to prove most unpalatable to contemporary Americans in particular is its denial of freedom and the reality of choice. Skinner's "behaviorism" has certainly been influential, especially in psychology and to a lesser degree in education. But for the most part our society has not been willing to accept it. And thus we have seen over the last two decades or so the development of a rather strange combination called "secular humanism." If one reads the statements of its proponents, it is largely naturalistic. That is, until they begin to talk about man. At that point suddenly they insist on rationality, morality and freedom.

Paul Kurtz editor of *The Humanist*, and author of the "Secular Humanist Manifesto," provides us in the latter with a typical example of this patchwork world view. It denies any divine purpose or action in the universe and affirms "the universe to be a dynamic scene of natural forces that are most effectively understood by scientific inquiry" (paragraph 6). It goes on to reject creation and insist on evolution and limit the study of man to "biology and the social and behavioral sciences" (paragraph 8). Thus far this is consistent naturalism. But along with it is a recurring insistence on freedom. At one point we read: "As democratic secularists, we consistently defend the ideal of freedom" (paragraph 3). We are told that reason alone is sufficient to determine ethical choices. This, of

course, is traditional humanism.

Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* is similar in its selectivity. Again, its view of the universe and man's origin and nature is pure naturalism. Yet at the end of the first segment we are exhorted to save the future. Where things will go from here is left up to us — to our choice, we are told.

This then, is the system of beliefs that is commonly called secular humanism. We must now take a critical look at it.



Responding to Secular Humanism

It is essential to remember that world views are decidable in the sense explained above. The reason why a pattern of beliefs is created, becomes popular, and even dominates, then eventually declines and perhaps disappears, is always a matter

Ideas change because men make them change. It is critical, then, that we face the ideas commonly called secular humanism, head on.

of good arguments and evidence. Sometimes the evidence takes the form of historical events. Nothing did more to crush the optimism and the idealism concerning man's glorious abilities that held sway during the second half of the nineteenth century than the debacle of the "Great War." In fact, a careful look at history shows that rather frequently prevalent ideas have changed as the result of unexpected events. At other times the evidence has taken the form of scientific discoveries or trends. We have already noted the role played by the theory of evolution in the last century.

Most importantly, however, ideas change because men make them change. That is precisely why Scripture commands us to "persuade," to "give a reason," and to "witness." Paul says that we "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

It is critical, then, that we face the ideas commonly called secular humanism, head on. In fact, this world view is riddled with contradictions and inadequacies, and we must force our society to see that, if we want to gain a real hearing. Secular humanism may not be an organization, but it is quite clear that for many it has ceased to be just a world view and has gained the status of a cause. It is obvious that Carl Sagan and Paul Kurtz, for example, are not dispassionate investigators searching for truth. They are preachers committed to communicating a message and convincing us of its truth. And they have doubtless been quite successful. But they have no case. There are at least four fatal flaws in this odd fabric of beliefs.

First, it provides us explanation of the origin of our universe. Secularists like to present creation and evolution as two alternative accounts of the same thing, the former outdated and religious and the latter contemporary and scientific. We even hear from some that one can have both. If you need to talk about a god in order to feel secure, go ahead! Just don't confuse your religious beliefs with scientific truth. But this is a complete distortion of the facts.



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The truth is that naturalistic evolution has absolutely nothing whatsoever to say about origins. It is an attempt to explain how the universe got from a simple condition of perhaps just one element, say hydrogen, to its present highly complex state. On the other hand, creation, strictly speaking; tells us how anything at all came to be. To this issue secular humanists have nothing to say. They generally attempt one of three responses. Some suggest that everything began with the "big bang," but that only leaves us with a great many questions concerning the origin of the tremendous amount of energy that would have to be involved. For example, Isaac Asimov, world famous science and science fiction writer, argues in his 1981 *In the Beginning* that it all began with the explosion of the "cosmic egg." But who laid the cosmic egg? Asimov does not know. Others are content to say that matter and life itself came from elsewhere in the universe, but this is just silly. Where it came from is irrelevant. We want to know how it came to be at all. Finally, there are those who say simply that matter has just always been there. It needs no creating because there was no beginning. This is no answer either. You do not provide an account of origins by refusing to provide an account — or postponing it infinitely. Even if the universe has always been coming into existence, we still need to know how and why.

The probability of life occurring by chance is equivalent to rolling double sixes five million times in a row.

There is a *second* glaring deficiency in secular humanism. Not only does it give us no accounting for the existence of a universe, it also fails to explain the present structure of things. Now this is supposed to be the very point of evolution, so it is a particularly devastating omission. Almost invariably today's naturalists and naturalistic humanists use some version of evolutionary theory to explain how we got here from a big cloud of hydrogen. However, evolution is not even *theoretically* sound, quite apart from its failure to live up to the scientific evidence.

No matter how naturalists try to hide the fact, what they really are claiming is that everything came about by sheer chance. Sometimes you can roll two doubles in a row. But what we are talking about here is totally different. In his 1982 address to the Society of British Astronomers, Sir Frederick Hoyle suggested that the probability of life occurring by chance is equivalent to rolling double sixes five million times in a row. Even given the supposed fifteen billion years evolutionists suggest are available, there is not enough time — not nearly enough — for such an event to take place; and that is just one particle of life. The actual universe in which we live is incalculably more complex than that. Chance will not work as an explanation.

Naturalistic evolution provides no mechanism, no means, for making the transition from one stage to the next. If life-form X did develop from life-form Y, what produced or caused the change? Just what is it that keeps the process moving in such a constantly progressive fashion, from simple to complex? Again, since the only real answer a naturalist can give is that of sheer chance, their specific suggestions are little more than cover-ups. Usually one hears of mutations and "survival of the fittest" as supposed mechanisms. But these are only descriptions of *what* happened, they fail to tell us *why* or *how*. Why is it that a sequence of mutations evolved the complex eye? Why are certain life forms able to develop the ability to maintain themselves in new environments? Chance? Surely that is insufficient. It is certainly not serious science.

It is not surprising that increasingly evolutionists have begun to recognize that they need to include some "guiding hand," some driving force (maybe *The Force*), some internal intelligence to explain the order of the universe. Note, for example, Carl Sagan's key word is "Cosmos," the Greek word for rational order. But to Sagan it is a mystery just why it is so complexly ordered.

A *third* serious failure of secular humanism is its inability to provide for human morality. This is a particularly glaring problem since current humanists have so much to say about human rights. Yet they can provide no

basis for them.

Many in our society have fallen prey to the secularist's rhetoric of rights and we need to be very alert here. Christians, as theists, believe in human rights, too, but there is a crucial difference. There can be no real rights unless there is some absolute standard

Unless there is some real objective value that anchors our rights out of reach of philosophers, governments, armies, majority votes or evolutionary process, we, in fact, have no rights.

to guarantee them. The "Secular Humanist Manifesto," for example, declares the right to private property (paragraph 3). But no justification is given, although we are told later on that "philosophers have emphasized the need to cultivate an appreciation for the requirements of social justice and for an individual's objections and responsibilities toward others" (paragraph 4). So what? Philosophers have emphasized many things. That is hardly a very solid guarantee for my rights. Unless there is some real objective value that anchors our rights, out of reach of philosophers, governments, armies, majority votes or evolutionary process, we, in fact, have no rights. But the secular humanist has no such anchor to offer. All of his talk of rights is pure surface illusion. Only the theist's God, whose word and character is unalterable, truly guarantees and makes human rights possible.

Finally, apart from all of its omissions, secular humanism is faulted by a serious internal contradiction. It holds on the one hand that this is a natural universe, entirely open to scientific investigation, hence the word "secular." There is no spiritual, non-material realm. Therefore, human beings are simply biological organisms, the products of a long sequence of evolution out of simple chemical elements. Yet it also holds that those same human beings are free to make their own choices. In fact, they have made a veritable fetish out of the word *choice*. How is this possible? If we really make choices that change or affect the natural universe then we are not just part of it.

Mechanical objects, chemical organisms, make no choices. They simply carry out their evolutionary destiny. B. F. Skinner is quite right. If we are products of evolution then we are "beyond freedom and dignity." We are not free to choose, we simply act out our conditioning.

Here again secular humanism proves itself to be a cruel hoax. Not only can it provide no basis for supposed rights, it even deprives us of any meaning in life. For after all, if there are no absolute values and if we make no choices, then nothing is more valuable than anything else and we can do nothing to alter our lives in any way.



An Agenda

In the preceding discussion we have ignored what has undoubtedly been the majority world view in the West at least since Christianity became its dominant religion during the first millennium. That view is generally referred to as *theism*. If naturalism is a world view which defines and derives every concept by means of nature, and humanism by means of man, theism is a world view in which God is seen as the central and defining concept. But despite its position, theism has grown lazy and overconfident — and quiet.

Secular humanism is not only an illusion but a serious danger and must be opposed because it makes the gospel unintelligible.

In Colossians 2:6-8 we are admonished to be so well informed and educated — "built up" — that we will not be taken in by philosophies centered on either human traditions (or authority) or on the elements of the "cosmos." While Paul certainly had specific reference to views quite different from those facing our society, the parallel is surely obvious. Texts such as this and others we have mentioned leave us with a threefold responsibility to understand, as well as to demonstrate the fallacy of secular humanism, and to prove the superiority and truth of theism.

Lest there be any doubt about the necessity of acting on this agenda it will be best to conclude by briefly enumerating why I am convinced of the real dangers of secular humanism.

First, we face a real danger because secular humanism is not just an academic curiosity, it has become a true cause. That demands that it be countered whenever its advocates attempt to argue their case: in the media, in education, in politics and courts of law. Fundamentalists will have to get into the arena. The distinguished American philosopher Roderick Chisholm, of Brown University, commented in an interview in *Time* (April 7, 1980) that atheists have triumphed in the academic world, because "they were the brightest people." We can no longer afford that. We never could.

Second, secular humanism has tended more and more toward consistent naturalism. This shows itself most prominently in the increasing subjectivity of morals in public expressions. The key word in our society has become *feeling*. We are told by every television show to "do what feels right." As a popular song put it, "if it feels so right it can't be wrong."

This is, of course, a purely natural standard for ethics that denies the divinely ordered values of the theist as well as the free rational choices of the true humanist.

The ultimate danger of this view is well exemplified in B.F. Skinner's novel *Walden Two*. Once human behavior is viewed as naturally caused there can be no talk of responsibility. Criminals are unfortunate or sick. Homosexuality is just an alternate lifestyle. Misbehaving children are hyperactive or deprived: they need "behavior modification." I do not think a democratic society can survive such a notion. It removes all restraints and requires a police state.

Third, secular humanism, even with its present view of morality, is not only an illusion but a serious danger. If a naturalistic ethic necessitates the "Big Brother" state of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the secular humanists' ethic must, by their own admission, lead to socialism in which all rights are sacrificed. It is especially on this point that secular humanists are simply deceptive, as we have seen. There is no justification here for values and rights and therefore no basis for a real democracy based on constitutional law.

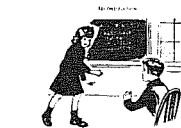
Finally, and of ultimate importance, secular humanism is dangerous and must be opposed because it makes the gospel unintelligible. How can the message of God's revelation make sense if man is good and rational; does not need God and owes Him nothing; if miracles, including the resurrection, can by definition not occur; and revelation itself is unthinkable and an insult to man's autonomy?

Our final responsibility is always to bring the good news of Christ to all men. But increasingly we face people whose world view makes God's truth into a lie. We can no longer afford to sit idly by. We must regain the media, the courts, the universities and the grade schools, not by force or censorship, but by the persistent conviction of sound argument and reason. We have no cause to hide from the truth, but must pursue it and expose it in every corner. For after all, all truth is God's truth. □

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