

An Apologetic Introduction to Secular Humanism

The Closet Atheist
Apologetics 101
29 November 2017

Thesis statement:

Before we can share the good news with secular humanists, we first must delve into their worldview. To gain this understanding, we will find out what exactly “secular” and “humanism” mean and how they come together, how secular humanism operates as a freestanding worldview, and who exactly secular humanists are and how they come to be that way.

Outline:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Apologetic benefits of understanding secular humanism
- II. What is secular humanism?
 - A. What is secular?
 - B. What is humanism?
 - C. What is secular humanism?
- III. How does secular humanism operate as a worldview?
 - A. What is prime reality—the really real?
 - B. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
 - C. What is a human being?
 - D. What happens to a person at death?
 - E. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
 - F. How do we know what is right or wrong?
 - G. What is the meaning of human history?
 - H. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?
- IV. Who are the secular humanists and why?
 - A. Where do they come from?
 - B. Who is likely to be a secular humanist?
 - C. How popular is secular humanism in the United States?
- V. Conclusion
 - A. Knowing this, how would you approach a secular humanist apologetically?

For the Christian apologist, the world can seem like a daunting place. There appear to be so many lost people who haven't found Christ, and we can only reach the hearts of so many of them. Where can we begin? It can be a daunting task to take on, but in order to get others to understand our take on the world through the lens of the Christian faith, we must learn the best way to minister to them. One group that is quickly rising the United States today is the secular humanists. These unbelievers are often accused of rejecting the Word of God, hypocritically claiming to have no faith, and leading our country to moral chaos. But is this really the case? Before we can share the good news with secular humanists, we first must delve into their worldview. To gain this understanding, we will find out what exactly "secular" and "humanism" mean and how they come together, how secular humanism operates as a freestanding worldview, and who exactly secular humanists are and how they come to be that way.

As a worldview without a doctrine or any set of laws, secular humanism is far from having rigid, unchanging components. Unlike a religion, secular humanism does not operate from any singular text or set of beliefs. This can lead to several ways of interpreting what it can actually mean to be a secular humanist, although pinpointing what it means to hold any worldview, belief system, or religion is difficult. It is often said that there are as many interpretations of a belief as there are people who follow it.

Secular humanism, although it is not a religion, is still more complex than one statement of belief or disbelief. It is common among religious sects to view secular humanism as a synonym for atheism but without the negative connotation. While secular humanism is closely tied to atheism and agnosticism, it transcends both of them. Both atheism and agnosticism make simple statements regarding belief and knowledge, and in this sense, they are not complex at all and are not nearly rich enough to qualify as a worldview. Atheism refers to a mere lack of belief

in a god or gods, and agnosticism is a statement of knowledge; agnostics claim that knowledge of the existence of a god is simply unattainable. To be secular doesn't necessarily carry a direct tie to a statement of belief in or knowledge of God; rather, it denotes a specific way of life.

Humanism on its own can be secular or religious,¹ although secularity is a distinctive feature of the secular humanist worldview, as it specifies that its adherents are not religious.^{2 3} Because of this, secular humanists are almost always agnostics and atheists. They don't believe in God or Satan, Heaven or Hell, or any supernatural entities such as angels, demons, or ghosts. This does not mean, however, that secularists are against religion in their society. A further extrapolation of the meaning of secular takes it from being irreligious in nature to taking a neutral stance toward religion, specifically in the public square. In a truly secular society, "religious people [would] feel just as much at home as can [secular] humanists."⁴

While secular denotes a negative definition by telling us that it is *not religious*, humanism positively tells us what secular humanism *is*. Once it has been determined that the secular humanist does not build a life based around the worship, laws, or history of a god or religion, humanism fills in what may be perceived as a gap in lifestyle parameters. "Who are the secular humanists?" once mused the father of secular humanism, Paul Kurtz, "Perhaps everyone who believes in the principles of free inquiry, ethics based upon reason, and a commitment to science, democracy, and freedom. Perhaps even you."⁵ On its own, anyone who believes in those principles can be considered a humanist, whether they are religious or secular.⁶ In other words, a

¹ Webber, Robert E. *Secular Humanism: Threat and Challenge*, (Zondervan, 1982), 20.

² Zuckerman, Phil. *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*, (New York University Press, 2008), 95.

³ Law, Stephen. *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 93. Very Short Introductions.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵ Council for Secular Humanism, editor. "What is Secular Humanism?" *Council for Secular Humanism*, secularhumanism.org/index.php/3260. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.

⁶ Law, *Humanism*, p. 1.

humanist is "someone who believes that human values, experience, and imagination are the best tools we have for living a good life and making sense of the world in which we live."⁷

Now that what it means to be secular and what it means to be a humanist have been determined, what is the final product when they concatenate to become the worldview of secular humanism? Christian theologian and Wheaton College professor Robert E. Webber laid out the most highly regarded values of secular humanism as being free inquiry, separation of church and state, freedom, critical intelligence, moral education, religious skepticism, science and technology, knowledge through reason, understanding of human evolution, and education.⁸ To get a holistic image of how secular humanism can play out in one's life, it is best to see how it holds up against the questions that any fulfilling worldview must answer.

According to Christian author and philosophy professor James W. Sire, a comprehensive worldview should be able to provide answers to eight fundamental questions.⁹ Worldviews such as Christianity or Judaism, which double as religions, tend to be more specifically cut out in terms of what its followers must confess. As a life stance which is not religious and doesn't follow any creed or require a statement of belief, different secular humanists may have different answers to Sire's questions that define a worldview. Their core views and values, however, follow a similar path which can be represented by the following responses to James Sire's eight worldview questions as expressed in *The Universe Next Door*:

1. What is prime reality--the really real? Although secular humanism doesn't explicitly reject the possible existence of any supernatural entities, the nature of its scientific inquiry lends itself to only mechanical, physical knowledge which leads to a methodologically and, in turn,

⁷ Vernon, Mark. *Understand Humanism*, 2nd ed., (McGraw-Hill Companies, 2010), x. Teach Yourself.

⁸ Webber, *Secular Humanism*, 39.

⁹ Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 22-23.

philosophically naturalistic outlook. Humanism greatly emphasizes skepticism, inquiry, and a search for knowledge through "observation, experimentation, and rational analysis."¹⁰ Because it values discovery through the scientific method and is a branch of philosophical naturalism, secular humanism "holds that nature is all there is."¹¹ In other words, prime reality for a secular humanist would be the physical cosmos.

2. *What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?* While the first question deals with what is real, this second question asks us: how does it work? When dealing with the prime reality and function of the cosmos in conjunction with a secular humanist worldview, the answer for the majority of humanists will be equivalent to the answer provided by philosophical naturalism. Sire found that within naturalism is the concept that the cosmos is one (possibly infinite) closed system. This means that there is no interference by any supernatural or transcendent being or beings. Sire takes a particularly mechanical view of naturalism, seeing its reality almost as if the universe, the earth, and humans are one complex machine.¹² Although it may be disenchanting to see reality as an independent operation rather than a divine conception, secular humanists find this intellectually objective and straightforward view of nature to be freeing in its candor.

3. *What is a human being?* Humans are the focal point of the entire humanistic worldview, and as humanists don't believe in any higher power to create matter, assign meaning, or answer ethical dilemmas, they believe that it is up to us to take all responsibility for our own fate, ethics, planet, and well-being. According to secular humanism, humans are one of many animal species which evolved over millions of years to become what they are today. Secular

¹⁰ American Humanist Association, editor. "Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III." *American Humanist Association*, 2003, americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.

¹¹ Council for Secular Humanism, "What Is Secular Humanism?"

¹² Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 70-74.

humanists differ on whether or not they agree with James Sire's idea that the natural human is reducible to a complex machine composed of chemical and physical properties and reactions¹³ or if our self-awareness and moral capacity raises us to something more. Either way, human beings are the paramount element of secular humanism, and our quest for knowledge, freedom, and independence is of utmost regard within secular humanism.

4. *What happens to a person at death?* Possibly the greatest chasm of difference between secular humanism and Christianity lies within their answers to the question of the afterlife. Secular humanists, like naturalists, tend to see death as the ultimate end to one's existence and personality. With naturalism tends to come monism, or the idea that the mind and body are resolutely tethered and can in no circumstances be separated. The second Humanist Manifesto states that "as far as we know. . . There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body."¹⁴ This somber understanding can take the secular humanist away from a fear of where or how they will dwell eternally, as they believe there will be no awareness of ourselves or of our universe once our bodies stop operating. Secular humanists are forced to take a more selfless and less individualistic view of the events that will occur after one's death: although the world may have eternally ended for one person, they keep in mind what they are leaving behind for their children and others who inherit the planet in future generations.

5. *Why is it possible to know anything at all?* It has been established that secular humanists put a great amount of emphasis on logic and the scientific method in order to attempt to satisfy our perpetually inquiring minds. One point of contention that many Christians take with secular humanism, however, is this process of how we gain the knowledge that we have.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kurtz, Paul, and Edwin H. Wilson. "Humanist Manifesto II." *American Humanist Association*, 1973, americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.

Christians' unwavering faith in God is often seen by unbelievers as a claim made exclusively on trust, but in turn, secular humanists are often accused of operating on a different kind of faith: faith in our own perception and reasoning and in the physical uniformity of the cosmos.

The primary difference between these types of faith—faith in the Word of God and faith in reason and science—is whether it can be demonstrated that the object of faith is trustworthy. Secular humanists are extremely skeptical and cautious when looking to gain knowledge about the cosmos in the interest of getting the most accurate results possible. Any time a claim is made, be it by a holy book or by a scientific paper, scientists continue to ask questions and scrutinize even their own work. When a claim is made that can't be proven true or false and has no physical evidence, secular humanists see it as highly questionable and often disregard it until it can be further examined and evaluated via avenues such as continuous testing and peer reviews.

6. How do we know what is right or wrong? Ethics is one of the areas in which humanism rises above and beyond strict philosophical naturalism, which makes no lifestyle claims. The question of moral basis seems at first like it can be a great dilemma for the secular humanist, but that is indeed not the case. In fact, "morality that is not God-based need not be antisocial, subjective, or promiscuous, nor need it lead to the breakdown of moral standards."¹⁵ The most universally accepted moral system employed by secular humanists is called consequentialism: right and wrong are to be "judged by results." Secular humanists "seek to develop and improve their ethical principles by examining the results they yield in the lives of real men and women."¹⁶

It is freeing and reassuring to know that as humanist norms are not concrete and unchanging, they can cater to the needs of the zeitgeist of any particular culture; for example, secular humanism does not bind its constituents to the cultural norms of other people or places if

¹⁵ Council for Secular Humanism, "What Is Secular Humanism?"

¹⁶ Ibid.

those norms are no longer acceptable in the current day and age. While humanists are opposed to absolutist morality, the continual emergence of objective standards is clear and allows them to lead full, ethical, happy lives without any delegation of unfounded or unquestionable laws.¹⁷

7. *What is the meaning of human history?* Worldviews that are also religions, such as Christianity, put a great emphasis on the role of human history in determining their values, such as the belief that morality began because of the events that took place in the Garden of Eden, we achieve forgiveness today because of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross thousands of years ago, and so forth. Secular humanism does not find any rigid basis for its belief in any historical narrative such as these, but it does apply lessons learned as well as discoveries made throughout history to the living of daily life. As secular humanism tends to look towards the future more than the present, it is invaluable that we can use the past to create a better world for our children.

8. *What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?*

Secular humanism is a life stance with no set laws or creeds that its adherents are required to live by. In principle though, in order to be a secular humanist, one would have to be both areligious and devoted to the well-being of the human race. If one does not fall under these qualifications, one would not be considered a secular humanist, although with the freedom to live on one's own terms comes with the freedom to deny secular humanism with no punishment or social repudiation. Secular humanism keeps society's best interests in mind, encouraging a lifestyle of skepticism, religious independence, education, social meaningfulness, reason, morality, political secularism, and autonomy. In the words of secular humanist Paul Kurtz, "life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals."¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ American Humanist Association, "Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III."

Even with the overwhelming emphasis that secular humanism places on mankind's best interest and the pursuit of knowledge, it has yet to become a widely accepted worldview in the United States. That is not to say that secular humanism isn't gaining traction, but even as it grows, it remains a minority. In order to gain a grounded and unbiased understanding of secular humanists, it is best to understand their influence in American society.

It may come as a surprise that secular humanists often were not raised to be such. Of all families raising children in the United States between 1925 and 1992, the percentage who did so without a household religion rose from 4% only to 11%.¹⁹ Interestingly enough, though, a survey of over 137,000 college freshman in 2016 showed that about 31% identified as secular.²⁰ While only about 5% of children who were brought up in secular homes become religious later in life,²¹ it is becoming more and more common for people who were raised in a religious household to shed their faith in adulthood. So why is it that most secularists come from religious households? Who exactly are these new secular humanists who are on the rise in the United States?

Religion psychologist Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi defined this phenomenon of "disaffection, defection, alienation, disengagement, [and] disaffiliation from a religious group"²² as "apostasy". A study of college students found that those with high levels of educational attainment, high GPAs, a less conventional social and political outlook, low levels of ethnocentricity, and more concern for environmental protection are more likely to become apostates.²³ A more in-depth study conducted by sociologist Phil Zuckerman in which he interviewed a diverse group of ninety apostates in the United States explored why people claim to have rejected their religion.

¹⁹ Zuckerman, Phil, Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale. *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People & Societies*, (Oxford University, 2016), 91.

²⁰ Downey, Allen. "College Freshmen Are Less Religious than Ever." *Scientific American*, 25 May 2017, blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/college-freshmen-are-less-religious-than-ever. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

²¹ Zuckerman, *The Nonreligious*, 91.

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

Some common reasons that these apostates gave were skepticism gained through education, finding a lack of comfort within religion at times of misfortune, exposure to other cultures or religions, moral qualms with the personality of God and with the actions of those who claim to follow Him, and the questioning of the condemnation of various, seemingly trivial sins.²⁴

Knowing more about who exactly these secular humanists are and where they come from ultimately equips us with how we can improve our apologetic approach to them. As secular humanists have almost all been exposed to religion before, whether it be in their parents' household or in the public square, it is best to be cautious when bringing religion to their attention. More often than not, secular humanists have made the conscious choice to leave their religion, so reintroducing it to them will be a tricky task.

The most effective way to initiate an apologetic conversation with a secular humanist would be to learn about their personal history with religion and what made them decide to leave it behind. Since there is list of the most common reasons why secularists shed their faith, it would be wise to learn an easy response to each one; for example, the apologist could explain that although the secular humanist may have a negative view of Christianity because of the actions of Christians, that doesn't necessarily reflect the true teachings of Jesus, who, unlike his followers, is incapable of sin. The average secularist may or may not reject a suggestion such as this, as it is likely that they have been approached by a Christian in this way before, possibly more than once. If they resist what is presented to them, pressing on isn't in the apologist's best interest; what's done is done and the secular humanist may take it or leave it. In the end, their worldview is in God's hands, and it is not up to us to change it.

²⁴ Ibid., 97-100.

Bibliography

- American Humanist Association, editor. "Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III." *American Humanist Association*, 2003, americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.
- Council for Secular Humanism, editor. "What Is Secular Humanism?" *Council for Secular Humanism*, secularhumanism.org/index.php/3260. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.
- Downey, Allen. "College Freshmen Are Less Religious than Ever." *Scientific American*, 25 May 2017, blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/college-freshmen-are-less-religious-than-ever. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.
- Kurtz, Paul, and Edwin H. Wilson. "Humanist Manifesto II." *American Humanist Association*, 1973, americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.
- Law, Stephen. "What is Humanism?" "Humanism and Secularism." *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1, 93-94. Very Short Introductions.
- Sire, James W. "A World of Difference." "Naturalism: The Silence of Finite Space." *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 23-24, 66-86.
- Vernon, Mark. "Only Got a Minute?" *Understand Humanism*, 2nd ed., (McGraw-Hill Companies, 2010), x. Teach Yourself.
- Webber, Robert E. "What is Humanism?" "What is Secular Humanism?" *Secular Humanism: Threat and Challenge*, (Zondervan, 1982), 20, 39.
- Zuckerman, Phil. "Being Secular." *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*, (New York University Press, 2008), 95.
- , Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale. "Secularity around the World." "How and Why People Become Secular." *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People & Societies*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 32-34, 89-100.