# Humanism vs. Its Detractors

F. David Sanders

A person in the academic world would have to have been stranded on a desert island, buried without newspapers, popular periodicals, television, or radio in the basement of some forgotten library, or ensconced in an ultra-liberal, private small school in the Northeast (a reference to a specific acquaintance of mine) not to be aware that during the past eight or nine years humanist-bashing by groups from the Religious Right has become quite fashionable and that these groups have effectively used the courts and the media to try to rid their/our world of what they call "godless humansim."

(I do not mean to imply that the Religious Right is the only group attacking humanism, even though my argument here is with that group. Some scientists and environmentalists attack the excesses of environment management as a humanist venture [See David Ehrenfeld. *The Arrogance of Humanism.* New York: Oxford UP, 1978]. (Post-Modernist literary criticism contends that the humanist view of the writer as oracular is outdated and confining; [also see Catherine Belsey. *Critical Practice.* London: Metheun, 1980].)

Meanwhile, the thousands of people who through reading, training, and inclination have always considered themselves to be lay-humanists (of a vaguely humanistic bent but without formal commitment, rigorous study, or research) feel they have been put on the defensive, without really knowing why. Have those televangelists (whom we have always suspected of being anti-intellectual and self-serving anyway) been using their millions of other people's hard-earned dollars to broadcast their ignorance of humanism? Or has the good old "golden thread" of the humanities really been twisted so violently since we read the classics of our Western tradition in college? In reality, the answer to both these questions is a partial "Yes." And yet a third, perhaps more telling reason needs to be factored into the equation to explain the current situation.

**The Attack**

"Humanism is a religion with mankind as God," writes Dr. David Webber, pastor of the Southwest Radio Church (D. Webber 4). It has become "the Most Dangerous Religion in America," according to a subtitle by Homer Duncan. "Humanism denies and rejects God, theism, deism, faith, all divine purpose or Providence, all religions which 'place God above human needs,' the existence of life after death, a supernatural, heaven and hell, 'traditional religious morality,' religious attitudes about sex, 'national sovereignty,' and a 'profit-motivated society'" (Schlafly 6). "Humanism, with its emphasis on moral relativism and amorality, challenges every principle on which America was founded" (Falwell 6). "Today's wave of crime and violence in our streets, promiscuity, divorce, shattered dreams, and broken hearts can be laid right at the door of secular humanism.... It will lead to anarchy, and our culture will be destroyed" (LaHaye 26). "Humanism always leads to chaos" (Schaeffer 29). "No humanist is qualified to hold any governmental office," according to Tim LaHave (Quoted in Jerry Falwell's Crusade, 527).

The inflated and flammatory rhetoric of these quotations reflects, if not the actual beliefs of the leaders of the Religous Right, what these leaders want the lay people among their followers to believe is true of humanism: that it is unqualifiedly atheistic, replacing God with man as an object of worship; it is diametrically opposed not only to Christianity but also to the traditions of American liberty; it has insidiously infiltrated American education, the media, the government, and religion and is all by itself responsible for all the ills of current society; it is the basis of "a well-coordinated, orderly movement" (D. Webber 8) to take over America, destroy all we hold dear in our cultural heritage, and ultimately make what we now call America into an anonymous part of a great humanist world utopian scheme.

The leaders of the Religious Right have not only spoken and written; they have mobilized their followers to fight what they see as a clear and present danger. They have waged campaigns against numerous politicians they accuse of being humanists (including former North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt, Walter Mondale, and Jimmy Carter). Through such self-appointed censors as Mel and Norma Gabler of Texas, they have kept textbooks they consider offensive from being adopted

**F. David Sanders is Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.**

for use in the schools of several states; fought and sometimes won lawsuits against dozens of texts in other states; and generally intimidated authors, publishers, and school boards responsible for generating the texts to be used. Either by ignorance of intellectual and cultural history or by deliberate and purposeful distortion, they have succeeded in coloring the attitude of a whole American generation on the topic of humanism.

To begin an honors seminar on humanism last year, I asked students to interview ten people at random for answers to these questions: 1) Do you believe humanism is a threat to the American way of life? 2) Who is one person you would identify as a humanist? 3) How would you define humanism? The responses were revealing. Although eighty-eight percent of the two hundred people interviewed had a definite idea on whether humanism was or was not a threat (twenty-eight percent believing it was), only about twenty percent (none of those answering yes to question 1) could identify a person who could reasonably be called a humanist, and only nine percent (most of them faculty) gave even one characteristic of humanism as a definition.

**Humanism in a Historical Perspective**

It must be admitted that humanism is difficult to isolate and define. Particularly in our time, the term has been appropriated by many groups with vastly different aims. To be most strictly honest, we have to use the term in the plural rather than the singular. There are dozens of kinds of *humanisms* depending on the time, the place, the emphasis, the aims. It is necessary to differentiate between classical, Eastern, Renaissance (Italian, Neo-Platonic, Northern, German, English, rhetorical, French, and others), Western, Enlightenment, Christian, theistic, non-theistic, secular, ethical, cultural, educational, Marxist, and other humanisms.

The contemporary marketplace and academia have fostered the concepts of humanist psychology, scientific humanism, and humanist literary criticism. Indeed, there are probably as many varieties of humanism as there are of Christianity, and for the Religious Right to speak of humanism in monolithic terms, assuming that everyone who uses the term means the same thing by it, is as unfair as assuming that a medieval monk believed in the efficacy of snake handling or that the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan perform the unselfish acts of Saint Teresa.

There has also always been a great difference between humanism in terms of "hard core" movements and humanism as a general attitude towards humankind and priorities in human life and society. In the total picture, the movements have traditionally been small, rather academic, and ineffectual, but the influence of the ideas has been broad and long lasting though soft in focus.

On the other hand, it is the nature of propagandistic preaching and writing to sharpen the soft focus by isolating certain characteristics in neglect of others and to create one great monolithic enemy against which the troops are to do battle. Having a single cause for all ills forces a war-time coalition of groups whose doctrinal differences would ordinarily keep them at war with each other. For the purposes of mobilization, subtleties and shades of difference dilute the intended effect, so propaganda pushes grey areas into either black or white, "them" or "us." As a result, humanism is reputed to be not the adversary just of Fundamentalism but of all Christianity, and, in contrast, the United States is portrayed as one big happy Christian (i.e., Fundamentalist) nation. One hears of the Founding Fathers' intentions of setting up a theocracy (the Declaration, the Constitution, the prevalence of Deism, and the comments of Jefferson, Paine, and Washington to the contrary notwithstanding); the inscription "In God we trust" is offered as evidence (despite the fact that the inscription first appeared on the two-cent piece in 1864, not in 1789); and the phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance is repeated as proof (when in reality the pledge itself, sponsored by a boys' magazine, was not adopted until 1924 and the phrase "under God" was added by President Eisenhower in 1954). Conversely, the leaders of the Religious Right would have us believe that Fundamentalism played a major role in structuring our country. In fact, Christian Fundamentalism was a nineteenth century creation and it had little impact on the United States until the 1920s when it seemed to offer some escape from the frustration, depression, and social turmoil in the wake of World War II (Sandeen xii).

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The seeds of humanism were sown by classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Socrates, Protagoras, Democritus, Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle who, in their remarkable discourses on all things human, asked the questions that helped establish the constructs of much of Western thought on reason, ethics, self-consciousness,

morality and responsibility, the good life, politics, and literature. Important thought was also developed in India and Confucian China, but this thought had little direct impact on the early Western tradition. Likewise, the ideas of the classics received scant attention during the Middle Ages because this period was largely devoted to the concepts of Christianity. Works by the Greeks, particularly, were little read except for those of Aristotle, whose methods of disputation provided the logical underpinning of Christian scholasticism. Libraries were the property of the church and works written for the use of monks and theologians were largely theological, stressing the sinful nature of humankind and minimizing the importance of individual accomplishment.

The European Renaissance rediscovered the classics and, particularly with the invention of the printing press, disseminated the thoughts and rhetoric of the Greek and Roman thinkers. In fourteenth century Italy, fifteenth century Germany and France, and sixteenth century England, the availabilty and study of the classics reinforced what the Europeans needed to hear about the possibilities of humankind and inspired them in their own thinking, writing, and art. Many of the great monuments of Western civilization, of course, were created during the Renaissance including those by Petrarch, Boccaccio, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Holbein, Rabelais, Cornielle, Montaigne, Moliere, Sidney, Spenser, Marlow, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Bacon, Cervantes, and thousands of others. The Renaissance was the age of literature and art, of exploration, discovery, and trade (with the known land mass of the earth doubling and America being discovered), of the foundations of science (including early scientific method, Copernicus' discovery of the heliocentricity of our universe, Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood), of the beginnings of the age of mass production and capitalism, of the Reformation and Protestantism.

At the quiet heart of this age of accomplishments were the people we have come to call humanists. Indeed sometimes (perhaps too gradiosely) the Renaissance is referred to as the Age of Humanism. Beginning with Petrarch and Boccaccio, the Italian humanists developed the sense of a culture outside their own, to admire the value placed on the individual and human life, and to recognize their own place in the scheme of things. It is difficult to avoid sharing the exhilaration of the student of theology Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) in his "Oration: On the Dignity of Man" when it dawns on him that, rather than consigning human beings forever to the status of a worm, God created human beings in his own image and gave them free will to become whatever they could be:

> ...After we have been born into this condition we become what we will ourselves to be. And so we should take the greatest care that it should not ever be said against us that, being in an honorable position, we did not acknowledge it and turned instead into the images of brutes .... (69)

It is Pico's vision that, with this God-given free will, "a certain sacred striving should seize the soul so that, not content with the indifferent and middling, we may pant after the highest ..." (69). Pico's "Oration" is rightly called the essence of Italian humanism; its legacy was a change in the image of man to a moral agent with personal and civic responsibilities. Many Churchmen attacked Pico's ideas as heretical, but many students of intellectual history today see humanism as the natural elaboration of the basic Christian concept of redemption. Redemption meant a rebirth of man's true humanity, a transformation of unregenerate people into "new creatures" who could live on a higher level and take advantage of all the excellences God and the world allowed them (Ullman 7). The humanists conceived of themselves as alerting the regenerate human beings to the wondrously rich and fruitful opportunities

they faced—new Adams and Eves, becoming aware that "the World was all before them."

German humanists like Johannes Reuchlin and Philipp Melanchthon picked up on the ideas of Italian humanists, stressed the sense of individualism and the importance of Christian education as an antidote to barbarism, and broadened the university curricula to include not only theology but also *studia humanitas*—the secular subjects, particularly classicial literature and language study—as a balance to the sacred. The humanities became the center of a liberal education, and university curricula began to employ new critical methods for studying and translating the Bible: they returned to the original Greek and Hebrew texts in their study of the New Testament instead of relying on the Latin of the Medieval Vulgate, and they attempted to rid their translations of the assumptions of scholasticism. The importance of Erasmus of Rotterdam in this effort can hardly be overstated. Erasmus preached that the "philosophy of Christ" alive in the hearts of Christians was of more consequence than the laws and disputes of theological deductions, that truth does not come from a single source, that Christianity and the moral lessons of the classics were not incompatible, that better reasoning and better understanding of the Bible and other literature produced greater Christians, and that all individuals were capable of dealing with these ideas—the Catholic clergy was not a special class. Erasmus' Latin translation of the New Testament employed the methods of new textual criticism, and his ideas, together with those of the German humanists, were immensely influential on a young professor at Wittenberg, Martin Luther, who, though not himself a humanist, used all his humanist training and tools to effect the Protestant Reformation. To say that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched" is certainly to exaggerate, but the relevance of humanism to Protestantism must not be overlooked.

The English humanists Sir Thomas Elyot, Roger Ascham, John Colet, and Sir Thomas More saw the relevance of classical humanism to culture, education, ethics, and rhetoric. Although less important to literature themselves than they hoped to be, their influence filtered through the education system to affect a whole generation of writers from Shakespeare to Milton. Their shadow was longer yet: multitudes of lay-humanists, though never consciously classifying themselves as humanists, built a literary tradition that still survives in 1987. Indeed, it is as difficult to imagine a teacher of literature who can be rid of humanistic thinking in teaching English or American literature as it is to imagine a teacher ignoring the impact of Christianity on literature. The two traditions go hand in hand, balancing each other in a necessary tension that reflects the human experience.

The wedge the Religious Right tries to drive between Christianity and humanism is particularly ironic in view of the influence humanism had on the Protestant Reformation in Germany and the translation of the Bible in Europe and England. Renaissance humanists were far from being antagonistic to Christianity. In fact, they were inspired almost exclusively by religious motives (Ullman 3). It is only natural that their aims, methods, and ideas reflect Christianity. The literary achievement of the Renaissance which was to have the longest lasting and most universal impact was the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible. It was authorized by King James I of England as a result of the Hampton Court conference (1604) in an attempt to provide a text acceptable to all Protestant Churches (an ecumenical, humanistic aim). The committee of some fifty-four translators included no Catholics or Jews, but it did gather scholars from various shades of Protestantism, many of whom were either prelates or professors of Greek, Hebrew, and theology at British universities, and most of whom were profoundly influenced by humanism through training, inclination, and attitude (Daiches 136, 166). Like all modern translations of the Bible, the Authorized Version relies on the methods, principles, and insights that were developed by humanists (Bentley 3) and is evidence of the humanistic aim of free inquiry. With all its humanistic associations, the version has been almost as much of a rock for Fundamentalism as St. Peter has been to Catholicism.

The conflict Fundamentalists see between humanism and the American tradition is equally ironic. Much of the thinking and many of the writings of our founding fathers were based on the humanistic thought of eighteenth century English Enlightenment writers John Locke, David Hartley, and Joseph Priestley, who stressed the importance of reason and indivdiualism. The Declaration of Independence reflects Thomas Jefferson's optimistic and humanistic concepts (shared by James Madison, Ben Franklin, and many others) that human beings can govern themselves as reasonable moral agents, that inherent in human nature as an inalienable right is the desire for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," which will lead to freedom and progress.

As secularization has come gradually to every institution, particularly in the twentieth century,

secularization has become dominant among humanists. In 1933, a group of thirty-four humanists (including Paul Kurtz, John Dewey, and R. Lester Mondale) drafted *Humanist Manifesto I*, which is to my mind a rather unfortunate and strident document dispensing with traditional religion, positing their own brand of "secular" humanism in its place, and proposing a humanistic world community. In 1973 a larger group of 114 individuals (including Kurtz, Mondale, Isaac Asimov, Albert Ellis, and Sidney Hook), admitting that intervening events like Nazism, Communism, racism, and developments in science had made *Humanist Manifesto I* outdated, sketched their agenda for the twenty-first century in *Humanist Manifesto II.* Their advocacy of situation ethics, a world community, environmental management, and "a recognition of an individual's right to die with dignity, euthanasia, and the right to suicide" (Kurtz 19) is today well known. In 1980 Kurtz drafted "A Secular Humanist Declaration" (SHS 3-6), a less strident and more reasonable (though still radical) response to the Fundamentalisms of Christianity, Moslemism, and Judaism—a statement to which the Religious Right has paid less attention than either *Humanist Manifesto I* or *Humanist Manifesto II.*

The attempts by the Religious Right to categorize all humanists as atheistic secular humanists is an unfair tactic of mobilization. Far from being the Old and New Testaments of a bible for humanists (LaHaye 85), the *Humanist Manifesto I*, *Humanist Manifesto II*, and "A Secular Humanist Declaration" are merely position papers of the constituents who drafted and/or signed them at that time. The thought that all humanists would subscribe to them (or live their lives by them) is at least as remote as thinking that Jim Bakker would subscribe to vows of chastity. By treating the documents as dogma, the Religious Right reveals its ignorance of the most basic values of humanism: free inquiry and independent thought. Certain humanists have indeed talked in terms of "religious humanism" because they believe that man "alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams" (Kurtz HMI 10). They do not speak of man *as* god, as charged, but humans *instead* of God (Kurtz HMII 16). The infamous footnote to the 1965 Supreme Court decision in *Torasco vs. Watkins* was intended merely to broaden the basis for conscientious objection, admitting that people could be opposed to war who were not members of a formal, recognized theistic religion like Christianity—for example, Buddhists, Taoists, Ethical Culturalists, Secular Humanists, and others.

**To many Christians, Christian humanism, indeed, seems preferable to the Christian barbarism that has characterized too many periods of history and that is still possible today.**

In reaction to what they consider an unfair blanket appropriation of the term humanism by the secularists, groups of various Christian viewpoints have tried to retrieve the term and restore a Christian balance to humanism. The more literal Christian groups have never seen a conflict between Christianity and what they consider "true" humanism. Nor have most contemporary Roman Catholics. Pope John Paul II has urged a reincarnation of the values of Christian humanism ("Anyone for Humanism?" 260). Pope Paul VI write in *Populorum Progressio* that "by reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to a new fulfillment of himself, to a transcendent humanism which gives him the greatest possible perfection. This is the highest goal of personal development" (260). Even conservative and evangelical Christians have tried to stress the harmony between the two concepts. Robert E. Webber has defined "an authentic Christian humanism" (79); *Eternity* magazine has drafted "A Christian Humanist Manifesto" ("A Christian" 23ff); and Martin E. Marty, of *Christian Century* has written numerous articles defending the right of Christian humanism to exist. To many Christians, Christian humanism, indeed, seems perferable to the Christian barbarism that has characterized too many periods of history and that is still possible today.

### Characteristic Humanistic Thoughts

Humanism has changed and adapted according to the times and the people who have professed it. It is an attitude toward humankind and human life, not a systematic philosophy. It holds to no dogmas or sets of absolutes. Most humanists believe there is room in the world for a variety of perspectives and that the world is better for the variety. Without trying to set up my own definition of humanism, let me say that I think most humanists, of whatever stripe, would see the following as "self-evident truths":

- that both humankind in general and the human individual in particular have worth and dignity and should be so respected;

- that the human being's capacity to reason and the attempts of groups to "reason together" are the best means of solving humankind's problems and making experience meaningful;
- that human beings are more important than things or ideas and should not be sacrifced for creeds, doctrines, or prejudices of society;
- that human beings are moral agents responsible for their own behavior, obligated to pay the consequences for their acts, and responsible for their own destiny;
- that truth comes from a multitude of sources, not any single one; each person's experience is unique and experience is what human beings depend on as a test of what is valid;
- that the methods of science—experiment, observation, testing—are among mankind's surest means of discovering truths;
- that no subject is closed to examination; that free inquiry is necessary;
- that education—including the liberal arts and humanities—is the surest means of disciplining the mind and sharpening the moral sense;
- that (particularly in this country) no one religious group ought to be able to force its opinions on other people whose experience and values have led them in a different direction;
- that the end of human development on earth is a fully realized human being who has a sense of worth, dignity, and meaning, and with freedom to pursue life, liberty, and happiness;
- that we need to put behind us our narrow perspectives and divisions of family, race, sexuality, nationality, and religion in order to work together to keep from obliterating each other;
- that we must believe that some progress towards our human goals is possible on a larger scale as well as on a personal one; otherwise, everything in which we engage is meaningless.

### A Larger Threat than Humanism

I alluded in my introduction to a third factor that might need to be taken into account in an explanation of the conflict between the humanists and the Religious Right. Jerry Falwell has endorsed a series of books called the *Biblical Blueprint Series*, edited by Gary North, who is one of the theoreticians behind a group called Christian Reconstructionists. If an article in the February 20, 1987, issue of *Christianity Today*—hardly a liberal humanist journal—has any credence (and in the succeeding months none of the principals has called into question anything of substance in the article), the Christian Reconstructionists are called the "think tank of the Relgious Right" (Clapp 17). Through organs such as their Chalcedon Foundation, *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, *Christianity and Culture*, and dozens of books, writers like North, R.J. Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Geroge Grant "anticipate a day when Christians will govern, using the Old Testament as their lawbook" (19). They believe that "apart from the Bible, there is 'no knowledge at all—only chance and universal death'." (18) Consequently, they favor the abolition of democracy and the institution of Christianity in America before the coming of Christ.

**(Humanism) is an attitude toward humankind and human life, not a systematic philosophy.**

Basing their political agenda solely on Old Testament law, they propose a dissolution of the federal government; the return to the patriarchal family without equality; the reinstitution of a "biblical" form of slavery; the end of the thirty-year mortgage and the tax system; and capital punishment for homosexuality, sodomy, Sabbath breaking, apostasy, witchcraft, blasphemy, and incorrigibility in children (passim). Although the leaders of the movement expect that the plan will be effected without violent revolution as "Christians ... take over gradually, sphere by sphere: education, the arts, communications, law, and so on" (20), at least one adherent expects the democratic system to begin crumbling before 1992 (23). The Christian Reconstructionists apparently have had widest acceptance among charismatics and some independent Baptist churches (21). Evangelists D. James Kennedy and Presidential aspirant Pat Robertson have expressed admiration for some of the teachings (21). Christian Reconstructionism may indeed provide the plat-


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form for mobilizing the Religous Right to do battle with humanism and with all the traditions of Western civilization.

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 1985

# RATIFIED BILL

CHAPTER 486
HOUSE BILL 724

*An act relating to confidentiality of library user records.*
The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

Section 1. This act may be cited as the Library Privacy Act.

Section 2. Chapter 125 of the General Statutes is amended by adding a new Article to read:

"Article 3.

"Library Records.

"§ 125-18. *Definitions.* — As used in this Article, unless the context requires otherwise:

(1) 'Library' means a library established by the State; a county, city, township, village, school district, or other local unit of government or authority or combination of local units of governments and authorities; a community college or university; or any private library open to the public.

(2) 'Library record' means a document, record, or other method of storing information retained by a library that identifies a person as having requested or obtained specific information or materials from a library. 'Library record' does not include nonidentifying material that may be retained for the purpose of studying or evaluating the circulation of library materials in general.

"§ 125-19. *Confidentiality of library user records.* — (a) Disclosure. A library shall not disclose any library record that identifies a person as having requested or obtained specific materials, information, or services, or as otherwise having used the library, except as provided for in subsection (b).

(b) Exceptions. Library records may be disclosed in the following instances:

(1) When necessary for the reasonable operation of the library;
(2) Upon written consent of the user; or
(3) Pursuant to subpoena, court order, or where otherwise required by law."

Section 3. This act shall become effective October 1, 1985.
In the General Assembly read three times and ratified, this the 27th day of June, 1985.

*Robert B. Jordan III*
President of the Senate

*Liston B. Ramsey*
Speaker of the House of Representatives

## SUGGESTED PROCEDURES FOR IMPLEMENTING POLICY ON CONFIDENTIALITY OF LIBRARY RECORDS

1. The library staff member receiving the request to examine or obtain information relating to circulation or registration records will immediately refer the person making the request to the responsible officer of the institution, who shall explain the confidentiality policy.

2. The director, upon receipt of such process, order, or subpoena, shall consult with the appropriate legal officer assigned to the institution to determine if such process, order, or subpoena is in good form and if there is a showing of good cause for its issuance.

3. If the process, order, or subpoena is not in proper form or if good cause has not been shown, insistence shall be made that such defects be cured before any records are released. (The legal process requiring the production of circulation records shall ordinarily be in the form of subpoena *"duces tecum"* [bring your records] requiring the responsible officer to attend court or the taking of his/her deposition and may require him/her to bring along certain designated circulation records.)

4. Any threats or unauthorized demands (i.e., those not supported by a process, order, or subpoena) concerning circulation or registration records shall be reported to the appropriate legal officer of the institution.

5. Any problems relating to the privacy of circulation and registration records which are not provided for above shall be referred to the responsible officer.

*Adopted by the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, January 9, 1983.*