

CAN A *Humanist* BE A Political Conservative?

by Roy Speckhardt

Humanists generally abhor the idea of a political litmus test for professed Humanists because it smacks of exclusion, which goes squarely against Humanism's standard of fair consideration of all ideas. So the very notion that Humanism might not be compatible with conservatism is to some extent illicit. Nonetheless, a strong case can be made that Humanists can't be political conservatives.

It is no coincidence that, according to recent poll data, less than 3 percent of American Humanist Association (AHA) members consider themselves conservative. And despite their high profile in discussions, less than 1 percent of AHA members define themselves as libertarian. Such poll results aren't surprising because the political positions held by the progressive majority come directly from core Humanist principles. Therefore, of the very few Humanists who consider themselves politically conservative, most misuse the term, some hold irreconcilably conflicted views, and a very small number simply don't accept key Humanist ideas.

Looking at common usage, political conservatives aren't merely people who subscribe to one or two conservative positions; they are those who follow conservatism as a general rule. A single conservative position—such as an anti-gun control stance—doesn't make someone a political conservative any more than believing in gun control would make an otherwise politically conservative person a liberal. *Merriam-Webster* defines *liberal* as “favoring proposals for reform, open to new ideas for progress, and tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others; broad-minded.”

What then are the positions that define a conservative ideology? They're consistent with the popular dictionary definition, which says that conservatism “favors traditional views and values; tending to oppose change.” Polling random politically conservative people (not just so-called Humanist conservatives) would probably reveal the following defining opinions:

- Abortion is wrong and should be outlawed in almost all circumstances in order to protect the sanctity of life.
- The United States has been a godly nation since its founding and the government should actively make sure it stays that way.
- Homosexuality is unnatural, so there's no reason to grant gays and lesbians the same rights and benefits as heterosexuals.
- What is good for business is also necessarily good for the United States and its people.
- Men and women, like other definable groups, have dissimilar aptitudes, which is probably why males are so successful in this society.
- Retribution is an acceptable motive for the punishment of crime and for becoming involved in global conflict.

Though such positions sound extreme to the mild-mannered Humanist, they are mainstream conservatism summed up. These statements form the basis for much of the official Republican Party platform plank referred to as “Renewing Family and Community.” They also match up seamlessly with the declared positions of the American Conservative

Union (ACU), the leading conservative organization. Not an extreme group by conservative standards, the ACU sponsors the well-known Conservative Political Action Conference and was recently touted by President George W. Bush as “an invaluable partner in advancing our compassionate conservative agenda.”

Some Humanists and other nontheists who call themselves politically conservative wouldn’t be so defined by the wider community—especially by “real” conservatives. A few try to qualify their position by saying secular political conservatives believe differently from their religious kindred. But such qualifications just underscore the fact that the conservative label doesn’t fit and won’t be understood without copious explanation.

While the AHA has issued dozens of position statements that strongly oppose the outlined conservative viewpoints, no solitary position truly bars one from being a Humanist. Nonetheless, someone who agrees with all the base conservative statements might do well to consider a different philosophical home—because Humanism simply isn’t compatible with such a set of positions. Conservative viewpoints go counter to the principles outlined in *Humanist Manifesto III*, a document signed in 2003 by leaders of every Humanist organization in the United States and most worldwide. This is because Humanists base their ideas and actions on the scientific method, compassion, and equality, not dogma and outdated convention.

There may be a sizable number of nontheistic people who refuse to part from their conservative doctrines but they aren’t properly labeled Humanists. By definition, Humanists are nontheistic and, for the purpose of self-preservation if nothing else, nontheists must support the separation of religion and government. But simply being a nontheist, rejecting the supernatural, and supporting the First Amendment doesn’t make one a Humanist because Humanism means more than a common reference point in nontheism.

Three core principles underlie Humanism’s progressive outlook: the scientific method, compassion, and egalitarianism.

First is an unflinching dedication to the scientific method, relied upon because experience has proven it reliable. For the Humanist, the method for deriving answers is paramount. Believing that knowledge of the world is derived through observation, experimentation, and rational analysis auto-

matically discards many possible conclusions, so it isn’t surprising that the scientific method is prominent in all three Humanist manifestos (1933, 1973, and 2003).

To understand complex realities it is necessary to consistently use the scientific method of reasoning and regularly compare current experiences with an accumulating body of knowledge. Because of this approach, Humanists tend to reject failed doctrines, simplistic or uselessly abstract concepts of right and wrong, and stereotyped or conspiratorial notions of good and evil.

Humanism’s very nontheism derives primarily from this commitment to the scientific method. Humanists don’t simply disbelieve religious explanations; rather, they find that such explanations don’t stand up to reasonable scientific scrutiny.

But Humanists carry their questioning attitude beyond religious inquiry and are often skeptical of any unproven claims—frequently exposing falsehoods from get-rich-quick schemes to medical quackery. Humanists are also generally skeptical of large concentrations of power, be they religious, governmental, or economic. This is one reason why Humanists are always among the first to raise concerns about government’s suspension of liberties, government secrecy, private profiteering, and similar encroachments.

This enthusiastic willingness to question a wide range of authorities is a major source of the progressive politics espoused by many Humanists. And this is contrary to those forms of conservatism which side with corporatism.

Humanism’s second core principle is a deep-seated compassion for humankind and the world at large because benefiting society maximizes individual happiness and raises the potential of humanity. Indeed, for Humanists, the primary purpose of the scientific method is to pursue compassionate goals, improving the world through the quest for knowledge and using that knowledge to benefit society and the environment. Humanists are almost alone in contemporary society in recognizing that only reason, observation, and experience provide truly reliable tools for realizing compassionate ends. Unlike their progressive religious friends, Humanists don’t accept supernaturally based reasons for hope. They must create their own hopes and aspirations through the active use of intellect and effort.

Humanists recognize the reality, value, and virtue of altruistic inclinations. It is completely

contrary to this principle of Humanism to reject altruism as a legitimate moral force and instead, after the fashion of objectivists and libertarians, embrace a monolithic rational selfishness.

Given such compassion, Humanists are driven to embrace social policies that are inclusive, spread the benefits of wealth, diffuse social and political empowerment, and promote reasonable levels of self-determination. This is the source of the Humanist embrace of democracy and individual, social, and human rights.

Such a commitment to compassion might have only a modest effect on Humanists' political positions were it not for their accompanying commitment to egalitarianism. This third principle is the conviction that humans are basically equal and that each person should be treated as having inherent worth. While early Hindu society may have been filled with compassionate aims, its caste system, in denigrating whole segments of society to lesser than human status, prevented it from realizing its compassionate aims. Acceptance of group inequality is insupportable through Humanist reasoning.

A combination of the rational analysis that rigorously challenges bogus claims of group superiority, together with the compassionate openness to empathize with other humans, make up the Humanist assumption of equality from which many progressive positions flow. Unlike mainstream conservatives, Humanists recognize the ethical responsibility of individuals and society to treat each other equally with respect to social, political, and economic rights and privileges.

It isn't difficult to see how political positions emanate from Humanism's core principles. The Humanist orientation toward reason immediately discounts many arguments against gay marriage, for example, as they originate in religious belief. The egalitarian principle points to the conclusion that gays and lesbians need not be treated differently from heterosexuals; indeed, supporting humanity's basic equality but refusing equal rights to gays and lesbians is inherently incompatible. The Humanist commitment to compassion dictates, then, that discrimination against same-sex commitments isn't only an unsupported position but is morally wrong.

Another example is the Humanist view of the role of women in society. Despite the refusal of conservatives to give up the idea that a woman's rightful place is in the home, science has failed to demonstrate any significant differences in the

intellectual aptitudes of men and women. And, of course, such conservative thinking is neither egalitarian nor particularly compassionate. Humanists, therefore, see women and men as equal in society.

It is thus obvious that the core principles of Humanism support liberal ideals. So it isn't surprising that over 90 percent of Humanists support reproductive rights, assisted suicide, and uncensored freedom of speech—an extraordinary level of agreement. Despite mainline churches' authoritarian structure and rigidly defined positions, most simply don't see that kind of unanimity. Humanism is unique because this nontheistic lifeforce holds strong ethical positions on a variety of issues that are drawn from that very philosophy. Nonetheless, Humanists must continue to welcome diverse views. Not only is this liberal open-mindedness characteristic of Humanism, it is necessary for any group that so relies on disagreement and discourse to further its philosophy.

Furthermore, there is plenty of room for disagreement on methods for achieving progressive goals. Many complex issues benefit from debates that don't require either side to depart from core principles. Some Humanists, for instance, see benevolent individualism and the free market as the best means for creating more wealth and power to benefit all. Others see a more government-managed social and economic arrangement as the best way to benefit society. Instead of grounds for exclusion, knowledge of overwhelming political unanimity should help Humanists unite.

Some think that for Humanists to address political positions at all will narrow the movement's potential for growth. But this simply isn't the case. In the last two years, much more frequently than in years past, the AHA has spoken publicly on social justice issues—and has watched membership numbers rise to a new historic high while reporters and opinion leaders begin to take notice. Feedback overwhelmingly indicates that AHA members are pleased with the organization's efforts to speak out on issues of concern. If Humanists refuse to address difficult subjects, the resulting blandness will diminish the movement's potential—both in terms of numbers and effectiveness. ☐

Roy Speckhardt is director of membership and programs for the American Humanist Association.