


Free of Charge: Freethought, Humanism, and Freedom of Expression



Scott Douglas Jacobsen
&
Dr. Herb Silverman

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 23, 2026

Preface: Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Free of Charge: Freethought, Humanism, and Freedom of Expression is the fourth work with Dr. Herb Silverman. It represents another focal point of the professional political and activist career for him: Freethought, freedom of speech, and humanism. In opening on complex social philosophies, definitional bounds of freethought become necessary, acutely as a distinguishing factor from traditional religious frameworks grounded in faith and sometimes in faith plus logical reasoning via deduction. Herb remarks on the secular coalitions, organizations, the facts of lobbying, civic engagement, and the intersection of these with secular organizing and political advocacy. The interviews reaffirm the basic premise.

Within the interviews, Nature is treated as self-existing, without any thing on the out of it; and therefore, the supernatural is rejected as a basis for explanation. This does not mean strict materialism. The ethical stance following is a naturalist morality focused on the greater good, on the Commons, on democracy, on civil liberties, and informed by the scientific method. The interviews also frame human values and moral judgments as subject to revision in light of evidence and experience. Herb values, if framed in America, freedom of speech or, if framed internationally, freedom of expression, and associated rights including non-violence, democratic open social organization, artistic freedom, cultural freedom, and scientific freedom. The interviews distinguish robust disagreement and criticism from intimidation, threats, or violence as incompatible with open democratic life. We reference the various evolutions of the core humanist manifestos including Manifestos I, II, and III. This provides an image of the evolution of them over time.

A strict anti-authoritarian stance, whether the imposition of a theocratic religious fundamentalism running the State or political ideological dogmatism infringing on religious freedom and endorsing non-religious orthodoxy of one branch or another. The Amsterdam Declaration becomes an easy referent in this objection to the aforementioned. The Amsterdam Declaration is also used to foreground personal liberty alongside social responsibility, opposition to totalitarianism, and the importance of education free from indoctrination. Noting the historical variability of morality while critiquing sacred-text justifications for harms, the aspiration remains an improved moral judgment.

The interviews emphasize the importance of non-Western traditions, indigeneity, humanism, and the broadening of humanism in its proper universalist aspirations and neither non-Western nor non-Eastern exclusive, but both expanded and universalized. These values do not necessarily come fully in-born and require inclusion in democratic educational curricula, as we live in complex, technological societies run by the products of science plus teamwork and a lot of financing. Some necessary items include logic education, sex education, religion as philosophy in schooling (without endorsement), climate change, aspects of social privilege and responsibility, and the contexts of nationalism. The interviews treat these as civic competencies for pluralistic societies rather than as sectarian commitments.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 25, 2026

If Youth Knew, If Age Could 1 — Freethought for the 21st Century

2020/01/01

New frameworks for Secular Humanism will be required when pillars of the international community continue to enter a renewed era of besiegement. Not even necessarily directly as a consequent of the comprehension of the philosophical lifestance of Secular Humanism or of the associated philosophies related to them, where many philosophies crosslink with it, including non-theist religious.

It's a natural outgrowth or organic consequent of neglect from monocultural views of social ideologies and religious frameworks as political tools. Think of a local context news item, you will find attempts at 'regression' inasmuch as history as a directionality outside of human affair vis-à-vis human affairs.

Any net vector of human history amounts to an in-practice sum over all human choices in a manner of speaking. Which seems, on first principles, the primary summation of secular humanist, eupraxsophist, philosophy, then every other empirical fact and scientific theory become the inventory of other principles taken into account, naturalistically.

The humanist manifestos and declarations for a century or so have proclaimed issues of their generations with a sense of urgency followed by a restatement—with future adaptations—of the philosophical premises, becoming less parochial, more inclusive, and more refined.

No comprehensive analysis of the humanist manifestos seems to exist, so a conversation or a series of educational conversations seemed apt with regards to Secular Humanism. A recent text with Dr. Herb Silverman was produced with this in mind entitled **Free of Charge**.

The attempts at aforementioned regression are not new. They represent a continuance of historical inertia with increased fervour based on changes in fundamental demographics, nationally and internationally.

The observation of legislative siege against international secular human rights and scientific frameworks based on the premises of singular transcendentalist moral frameworks comes an observation of functioning on the defensive—an accurate observation.

Individual religious hierarchs observe a retreat of the laity from faiths on most levels of devotion and continue a longstanding work of putting forth a counter-wave in legislation against the desires of the majority of the population in many cases. Nothing new under the Sun, or the Moon, here.

The only novelty is the degree to which anti-dogmatic processes have freed women and the historical underclasses while buttressing notions of equality for all under a common law and representative government.

The “counter-wave” merely reflects a state of fear, not panic, on behalf of hierarchs who, in prior moments, could rely on utter lifetime devotion—from womb to tomb—to a monocultural religious or political lens.

Future adaptations of Secular Humanism and philosophies in the same epistemic and ontic relational net will merely need to envelop these counter-waves with the long view in sight, as the scientific referents and universalist ethics seem to appeal to more of the global population than not. Otherwise, or if there wasn't, there wouldn't be such strident international revolt against repression.

Free of Charge was developed with this in mind.

Free of Charge 1 – The “Free” in Freethought with Dr. Herb Silverman

2020/04/22

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]* is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism*(2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: freethought, the distinction between Christians and freethinkers, secular organizations and political lobbying; definitions of freethought; and origination of freethinking.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Freethought seems like the most appropriate terminology for a general audience. Other terms one can find in some of the formal and informal literature include atheist, agnostic, New Atheist, agnostic atheist, freethinker, non-religious, Nones, irreligious, religious, militant atheist, Firebrand Atheist, adeist, aunicornist, anti-theist, Bright, secular humanist, rationalist, skeptic, Unitarian, Unitarian Universalist, humanist, and so on, including everyone favourite evasion: spiritual but not religious. A natural outgrowth of the philosophy and the cognitive stance. Many, many terms exist, as if a Seinfeldian statement of the matter, “So, yada-yada-yada, I’m a freethinker.” There are a lot, no doubt. Not all overlap completely or even mostly, while, at the same time, many merge in a rejection of the supernatural, the magical, the mystical, as in all bound to the set of the non-real. At the same time, if I reflect on historical statements by the late Dr. Carl Sagan, I can note the ways in which he spoke to science, as a phenomenon, was more of an attitude than a methodology or the findings, which makes sense. I would merely extend the idea to skeptical, rational, naturalist inquiry in a larger sense incorporative of scientific methodology and scientific findings. Focusing on the productions by us, we covered some of the philosophical and social aspects of this in *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* and *Short Reflections on Secularism*. In this sense, our notions in the freethought community enter into the boundaries of Rationalism and science, empiricism and reason. We’re free while benefitting from the past accumulated evidence and theories to bring them together, slowly and generation by generation. For this series, I want to touch and tap into the boundaries of freethought, as to the community dynamics, in terms of the breadth of inclusion, and as to the things out of the question in the philosophy now. Some of this will be reiteration. Some of this will be new. However, a lot of this will be more in-depth in addition to recommended resources for research and reading, and becoming involved. Herb, if I may, based on the previous conversations, and with references and footnotes throughout if you can, how is freethought represented in the secular communities now?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Freethought is represented in different ways in different freethought communities. When I first became engaged with freethought communities, I learned about several national atheist and humanist organizations. I joined them all because each was involved in issues I supported. But each group was doing its own thing and ignoring like-minded organizations, while competing for funds from what they viewed as a fixed pie of donors. I knew we needed to grow the pie to benefit all these organizations and the freethought movement as a

whole. They were spending too much time arguing about labels (atheist, agnostic, humanist, freethinker, etc.) and too little time showing our strength in numbers and cooperating on issues that affect all freethinkers.

Here's an interesting distinction between Christians and freethinkers: Christians have the same unifying word but fight over theology; freethinkers have the same unifying theology, but fight over words. At least our wars are only verbal.

So in 2002, I helped form the Secular Coalition for America, whose mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints, and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government. Our 19 national member organizations cover the full spectrum of freethought.[3]

Here's what the Secular Coalition members don't do: They don't argue about labels. People in the Coalition call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, whatever. Here's what they do: They cooperate on the 95% they have in common, rather than bicker about the 5% that might set them apart. All the organizations are good without any gods, though some emphasize "good" and some "without gods."

Interestingly, four of the member organizations are classified as religious (nontheistic). They are American Ethical Union (with Ethical Culture Societies), Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, Society for Humanistic Judaism (with atheist rabbis), and UU (Unitarian Universalist) Humanists.

All the Secular Coalition member organizations have strict limits on political lobbying, so they incorporated as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of freethought Americans, finally giving freethinkers a voice in our nation's capital. But even as the Secular Coalition fights against religious privileging on the federal level, some of the most egregious violations occur at state levels (I know. I live in South Carolina). The Secular Coalition is hoping someday to have volunteer coordinators in all 50 states, working with local groups to make sure elected officials throughout the country hear our voices.

The Secular Coalition also collaborates with organizations that are neither theistic nor nontheistic, like the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. It cooperates on some issues with theistic organizations, like the Interfaith Alliance, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and Catholics for Choice. Working with diverse groups provides the additional benefit of gaining more visibility and respect for our unique perspective. Improving the public perception of freethinkers is as important to many of us as pursuing a particular political agenda.

Jacobsen: Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Dan Barker, states, "*freethinker* n. A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief. Freethinkers include atheists, agnostics and rationalists. No one can be a freethinker who demands conformity to a bible, creed, or messiah. To the freethinker, revelation and faith are invalid, and orthodoxy is no guarantee of truth" (Barker, n.d.). RationalWiki (2018) states:

Freethought, or free inquiry, is a catch-all term referring to the variety of beliefs which, in general, reject authoritarianism and revealed or fundamentalist religion in favor of science and human reason. Hence the term “free” meaning “free from external dogma,” implying that their beliefs came from their own thinking and research. It is the basis for rationalism, secularism, and democracy. It overlaps with atheism, agnosticism, and secular humanism, but may also according to some definitions describe some theistic beliefs such as deism.[4]

Robert G. Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic, becomes the lightning rod for great oration and writing on the subject matter of freethought within an agnostic point of view. Susan Jacoby, who more people should know (alongside Rebecca Newberger Goldstein), places the Golden Age of Freethought at its height, arguable to me, with Ingersoll and then its end at the start of the First World War. Jacoby states:

Freethinker and freethought are terms that date from the end of the 17th century. Freethinker basically meant someone who did not believe in the received word of the bible or the authority of religion. Freethinkers have often been described as people who didn't believe in God, but it's more accurate to see freethought as a kind of a broad continuum, ranging from those who really didn't believe in God at all to deists who believed in a God who set the universe in motion but afterwards didn't take an active role in the affairs of men.

By the end of the 19th century, freethinkers even included liberal Protestant denominations and Unitarians. Even though they believed in God and in some form of Christianity, they did not believe in any hierarchy of religion...

... It looks for supernatural explanations whereas science looks for natural explanations.

(BeliefNet.Com, n.d.)

Many different stances and attitudes in orbit on the central theme of capital “F” Freethought. A tendency in human activity, community, and thought to leave strictures on the mind, depart from limitations of thought, while grounded in that which corresponds to the real. Some will ground themselves in human rights and compassion first, as in Humanism. Others will, at least, garner reputations for browbeating and a certain haughty and aggressive attitude against sincere, even ordinary, religious believers, as in New Atheism with two styles reflected in Militant Atheism and Firebrand Atheism. How can we bring about change based on the knowledge about the rise and fall of freethought into a new era of it, a renewed era in which we remain in a crisis requiring precisely its arsenal?

Silverman: We can explain to some people why being a freethinker makes the most sense to us, and perhaps convince them to follow our lead. If they are interested, we can provide them with helpful freethought literature. We already know that the “nones” are the fastest-growing demographic, many of whom are freethinkers without knowing what the word means.

Whether people become freethinkers or not, what the world needs today (especially during the pandemic) is more respect for scientific viewpoints and rational thinking, and less respect for the irrational thinking found in ancient “holy” books. We can tell religious people that we may not

share their beliefs, but that we hope they are willing to incorporate scientific findings into their lives and listen to reasonable explanations about the world around them. Unlike the minority of religious fundamentalists, most religious people are willing to act this way. We can point out to theists how our behaviour is similar to theirs in many ways, and how their everyday actions have nothing to do with god beliefs. Whether we try to be good with or without a god has little to do with behaviour.

To those who might try to convince you to choose a belief in God, we can explain that belief in God is not a matter of choice. I can pretend to believe, but I can't choose to believe something for which I find not a scintilla of evidence. We can ask them if they can choose to not believe in God (it would be nice if the answer is "yes").

To help bring about change, we need to keep governments secular. This is something all freethinkers want, and we need to convince some theists why moving closer to a theocracy (even their theocracy) is bad for everybody. I've heard some politicians in both parties say, "We have freedom of religion, but not freedom from religion." What can that possibly mean? That we are allowed to worship the god of our choice, but we can't choose to be good without any gods? Politicians might think they are being tolerant when they express support for all faiths. Instead, we expect to hear them publicly express support for all faiths and none, to promote freedom of conscience for all people. Freethinkers are not asking for special rights, but we do insist on equal rights.

Our Constitution demands that the government must not favour one religion over another or religion over non-religion. Religious liberty must include the right of taxpayers to choose whether to support religion and which religion to support. Forcing taxpayers to privilege and subsidize religions they don't believe in is akin to forcing them to put money in the collection plates of churches, synagogues, or mosques.

We need to encourage more freethinkers to run for public office. I'm pleased that we now have a national Congressional Freethought Caucus to promote policy based on reason, science, and moral values. The Caucus formed in 2018 with 4 members and now has 13, with more to come. [5]

I hope to see an America where the influence of conservative religion is mainly limited to within the walls of churches, not the halls of Congress.

Jacobsen: What do you think sparked the original formal movement of freethought?

Silverman: The term "freethinker" came into use in the 17th century. It referred to people who inquired into the basis of traditional religious beliefs, and freethinker was most closely linked to secularism, atheism, agnosticism, anti-clericalism, and religious critique. It promoted the free exercise of reason in matters of religious belief, unrestrained by deference to authority.

I like to promote British mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford from the 19th century, who, in his essay, *The Ethics of Belief*, said, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." The essay became a rallying cry for freethinkers, and has been described as a point when freethinkers grabbed the moral high ground.

Clifford organized freethought gatherings and was the driving force behind the Congress of Liberal Thinkers.[6]

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Herb.

Silverman: Thank you.

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Appendix I: Footnotes

[1] Founder, Secular Coalition for America.

[2] Individual Publication Date: April 22, 2020: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/silverman-one>; Full Issue Publication Date: May 1, 2020: <https://in-sightjournal.com/insight-issues/>.

[3] See Secular Coalition for America (2020).

[4] Some “Advocacy Groups,” according to RationalWiki:

- *Conway Hall Ethical Society established in 1793 making it the oldest in the world.*
- *Center for Inquiry (should not be confused with its affiliate, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry)*
- *Council for Secular Humanism, which publishes Free Inquiry magazine*
- *Freedom From Religion Foundation, which publishes Freethought Today*
- *The Freethinker, the world’s oldest surviving freethought publication.*

See RationalWiki (2018).

[5] See Congressional Freethought Caucus (2020).

[6] See Wikipedia (2020).

Free of Charge 2 – Free to Think and Free to Speak

2020/05/22

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* or the UDHR, and Article 19 of the UDHR as recognized by the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR); *American Convention on Human Rights*; and First Amendment to the American Constitution.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Several documents governing international law and international human rights give endowments to human beings based on the premise of a global rights-based order and particular conceptualizations of the constituents of a human being and, therefore, human nature with the need for freedom of expression as a fundamental part of human life. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* or the UDHR states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (United Nations, 1948)

On the international law rather than the international right side, Article 19 of the UDHR is recognized by the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR):

1. *Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.*
2. *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.*
3. *The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:*
 - (a) *For respect of the rights or reputations of others;*
 - (b) *For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.* (UN General Assembly, 1966)

Indeed, this continues into the national level of the stipulation of rights and laws. The international community not only supports the freedom of speech, but goes much farther than the United States of America in the permission for the widest possible definition of freedom in the

transmission of communication between two operators or citizens with the “Freedom of Expression” as opposed to the “Freedom of Speech” enshrined at a national level for America. Why are these international rights *and* laws important for the protection of individual Americans who may, for example, take a knee in protest of brutality against black Americans in front of the Vice President of the United States?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I think you are asking, in part, about the distinction between freedom of expression and freedom of speech. In the broad sense, I view “expression” as a form of “speech,” non-verbal communication. Taking a knee during the playing of the National Anthem is a non-verbal form of protest. Though it may be offensive to many, I support such a perfectly legitimate expression of dissent.

I also support the free-speech rights of those whose actions appall me. Many did not want to allow the Ku Klux Klan to march in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, some years ago. I felt the Klan does a thousand bad things, and I didn’t want to deny them the right to do the one good thing they do—exercise their free-speech right to march. I also disagreed with a local school board that prevented a student from wearing a Confederate flag shirt to school.

The question of free speech often arises in the context of how offensive you are permitted to be, and the extent to which you may be harming others. I support the right of the American Nazi Party to march, even though it might lead to violence. For the same reason, I supported civil rights marchers in the South, which did lead to violence.

However, I am not a free speech absolutist. I agree with the old cliché that you can’t yell “Fire!” in a crowded theater. I don’t support the right of anyone to purposely incite violence. Anti-abortion activists should not be allowed to publish addresses of doctors who perform abortions, with pictures of targets on their heads.

I don’t think any specific words should be censored. I was appalled when several schools banned the great American novel *Huckleberry Finn* because one of Mark Twain’s characters was “Nigger” Jim. Of course, the novel was anti-slavery. In one important scene, Huckleberry Finn helps free Nigger Jim from slavery, and says, “All right then, I’ll go to hell,” referring to the belief he was taught about the biblical correctness of owning slaves.

Interestingly, it’s considered OK for African Americans to use the word “nigger” when talking to other African Americans, but it is not considered OK for whites to use the N word. Similarly, it’s acceptable for Jews like me to tell anti-Semitic jokes to fellow Jews, but it is considered wrong for Gentiles to do so. Here is one of my favorite anti-Semitic jokes:

Two Jews see a sign in front of a church that says “\$100 to convert.” One of the Jews asks, “Why not? It’s an easy way to make a quick buck,” and enters the church. The other Jew waits outside to see what happens. After forty-five minutes the first Jew comes out and the second Jew asks, “Well, did you get the \$100?” The first responds, “Is that all you Jews ever think about, money?”

Jacobsen: The relevant regional documents – less commonly known – express many of the similar rights and values for the broad base of communication rights with the freedom of expression include the *American Convention on Human Rights*. A document for which, especially for a country so often ranting and raving about “freedom of speech,” the United States

of America only signed and did not ratify (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2020). Article 13 states:

1. *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought and expression. This right includes freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, in print, in the form of art, or through any other medium of one's choice.*
2. *The exercise of the right provided for in the foregoing paragraph shall not be subject to prior censorship but shall be subject to subsequent imposition of liability, which shall be expressly established by law to the extent necessary to ensure:*
3. *respect for the rights or reputations of others; or*
4. *the protection of national security, public order, or public health or morals.*
5. *The right of expression may not be restricted by indirect methods or means, such as the abuse of government or private controls over newsprint, radio broadcasting frequencies, or equipment used in the dissemination of information, or by any other means tending to impede the communication and circulation of ideas and opinions.*
6. *Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph 2 above, public entertainments may be subject by law to prior censorship for the sole purpose of regulating access to them for the moral protection of childhood and adolescence.*
7. *Any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitute incitements to lawless violence or to any other similar action against any person or group of persons on any grounds including those of race, color, religion, language, or national origin shall be considered as offenses punishable by law.*[Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1969]

How can Americans when “ranting and raving” about freedom of speech keep in mind the right of other Member States[3] to protest state violence against them by the United States without violent interference in this right to communication?

Silverman: Ranting and raving is protected speech in the United States, including ranting and raving against official U.S. policies. I’ve been known to rant and rave during protests about entering wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and other countries. Many supporters of Donald Trump rant and rave about a so-called “deep state” in America, and something Trump calls “Obamagate,” about which he fails to define or provide evidence. As we can see, ranters and ravers are often misguided and wrong—depending on your point of view.

I also support non-violent civil disobedience (breaking the law) as long as participants are willing to take the consequences of their lawbreaking while trying to change bad laws.

How should the United States engage with other countries? I would like human rights to be a core value, which, unfortunately, it is not under the present administration. We ignore human rights violations when dealing with so-called friends in countries like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and North Korea, blatant abusers of human rights. We should look for ways to encourage countries

we deal with to protect its citizens and treat them fairly. Through the Internet or by other means, we should try to give people in some countries valuable information about basic human rights they deserve. We should also work with our allies on issues like climate change and other science-based information to help make the world a better place.

Jacobsen: The First Amendment to the American Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (Cornell Law School, 2020). A right to freedom from the abridgement of speech – an interesting framing – and the prevention of the creation of a religion by the state while not prohibiting religion at large. What do most Americans forget about this First Amendment regarding rights for speech? What do they always remember, and also forget, about the right to the establishment of religion and the separation of church and state?

Silverman: What many Americans forget about free speech in the First Amendment is that it is there to protect unpopular speech. Popular speech does not need protection.

As far as freedom of religion, many people don’t understand that you can’t have freedom of religion without also having freedom from religion. You are not free if you are forced to choose a deity to worship. Some people don’t understand that we have a secular Constitution with no mention of any gods. Its first three words are “We the People,” not “Thou the Deity.” Many Christian conservatives incorrectly claim that the United States was formed as a Christian nation. They also say that our country now discriminates against Christians, and favors Muslims and atheists. Losing some of the Christian privilege they once had does not constitute discrimination against Christians. Citizens must be treated the same, regardless of their religious beliefs or disbeliefs.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Herb.

Silverman: Thank you.

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Free of Charge 3 – “Humanist Manifesto I” and the Path of Freethought

2020/09/01

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: *Humanist Manifesto I*; freedom of speech; religious humanism; consistent parts over time; and freedom of speech or freedom of expression.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The original documentation of the humanist movements began with the *Humanist Manifesto I* from 1933 with an opening descriptive quotation by Raymond B. Bragg:

The Manifesto is a product of many minds. It was designed to represent a developing point of view, not a new creed. The individuals whose signatures appear would, had they been writing individual statements, have stated the propositions in differing terms. The importance of the document is that more than thirty men have come to general agreement on matters of final concern and that these men are undoubtedly representative of a large number who are forging a new philosophy out of the materials of the modern world.
(American Humanist Association, 1933)

The obvious values delineated within an evolutionary perspective on a worldview, a collective effort for this worldview as presented, the bias of the times inherent in the language of “men,” while working against or in contradistinction to the views of the past or old philosophies with its replacement in this “new philosophy out of the materials of the modern world.” In much of the old world, religion reigned supreme; critics, doubters, unbelievers, and dissenters were shunned, banished, and killed. In this “new philosophy,” these “critics, doubters, unbelievers, and dissenters”^[1] came together as “men” to ‘forge a new philosophy.’ In review of the fundamental tenets proposed in the outdated and historical document, the formal foundations of modern or American Humanism, i.e., “religious humanism,”^[2] none of the speak to freedom of speech, free speech, free expression, or freedom of expression. In turn, they focus more on the proposition of a paradigm shift into a continual evolution paradigm in which change becomes inevitable without dogma and an emphasis on Humanism as a religious philosophy bound to a natural self-existent armature entitled “the Universe.” First question, why was freedom of expression^[3] in general not emphasized at the time?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1].[2]: To me, freedom of expression must include freedom of speech, as well as freedom of the press and the right to peaceably assemble. So my answer to this question will include my answer to your second question about freedom of speech.

Perhaps freedom of expression was assumed because it is included in the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) is so-called because it was the first attempt to describe a formal humanist philosophy without any gods. The writers knew there would be additional manifestos as we increased our knowledge and cultural attitudes changed. The document speaks of social justice and scientific optimism. It refers to “socialized and cooperative economic order” and “equitable distribution of the means of life.” Though it wasn’t explicit, it seemed to favor socialism. There was no mention of racism, sexism, minority rights, or environmentalism.

Humanist Manifesto II (1973) promotes democracy, civil liberties, human freedoms, separation of church and state, and elimination of discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age, or national origin. It also refers to ecological damage and overpopulation.

I was on the American Humanist Association Board in 2003 when we approved *Humanist Manifesto III*. We defined Humanism as a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. (I hoped to get “atheism” into the definition, but had to be satisfied by “without supernaturalism.”) This document also says that humanists are guided by reason and inspired by compassion. It adds that humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change and that ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

Jacobsen: Second question, why was freedom of speech^[4], in particular, excluded, too?

Silverman: See answer above.

Jacobsen: What did this document provide for the foundations of modern Humanism through its “religious humanism”?

Silverman: “Religious Humanism” was an integral part of *Humanist Manifesto I*. The phrase is still used today by some freethinkers, though it is not without controversy. Ethical Culture societies as well as many Unitarian Universalist congregations describe themselves as religious humanists. There seems to be no difference in worldviews between secular humanists and religious humanists. Secular humanists see their worldview as a philosophy, while religious humanists see it as a religion.

But that depends on your definition of religion. Secular humanists think of religion as theistic. Religious humanists say that religion is that which serves the personal and social needs of a group of people sharing the same philosophical worldview. They say religious humanism offers a basis for moral values, an inspiring set of ideals, methods for dealing with life’s harsher realities, a rationale for living life joyously, and an overall sense of purpose.

When I first became a board member of the American Humanist Association, I discovered it called itself religious, for tax advantages, I argued for abandoning its religious designation, and it eventually did. One of its affiliates to which I belong, Humanist Society, is religious, because that helps members in some states be allowed to perform weddings. I am a humanist celebrant who, in South Carolina, has performed several weddings, none of which were religious.

Jacobsen: What parts have the humanist movements kept as consistent parts over time because of the value of the principles?

Silverman: The movements have always had an evolutionary, atheistic worldview, though often with different terminology. What I said about *Humanist Manifesto III* in my first answer is a summary of what I think has always been the essence of humanism. We defined Humanism as a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

Jacobsen: Do freedom of speech or freedom of expression seem like fundamentally humanist values?

Silverman: They are fundamental humanist values, as well as fundamental values in any democratic society.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

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Appendix I: Footnotes

[1] Founder, Secular Coalition for America.

[2] Individual Publication Date: September 1, 2020: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/free-of-charge-3>; Full Issue Publication Date: May 1, 2020: <https://in-sightjournal.com/insight-issues/>.

[3] In this context, a “Member State” refers to a nation, country, or state with approved and formal status within the United Nations.

[3] The signatories to the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) as follows:

See American Humanist Association (1933).

[4] Ibid.

[5] In international rights, in Canadian law and the constitution, in regional rights stipulations, in the European Union, in the U.K., and in many other nation-states, the rights stipulations continually reference the right to “freedom of expression” as opposed to the more particular “freedom of speech.” The Americans emphasize “freedom of speech”; whereas, most others place more import on the generic and general “freedom of expression.”

[6] See Cornell Law School (n.d.).

Free of Charge 4 – “Humanist Manifesto II,” Kurtz and Wilson, Moral Devotion, Creative Imagination, and Free Speech

2020/09/15

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: the course of a Jewish life, of a secular humanist life; Kurtz and Wilson in the opening; the varieties of referenced humanisms; “moral devotion and creative imagination”; freedom of speech and freedom of the press connected in a humanistic framework; opposition to governmental policies; and “freedom of association, and artistic, scientific, and cultural freedom.”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) provided a much bleaker reflection, at its outset, on human nature than *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933). *Humanist Manifesto II* started with a joint statement by Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson:

*It is forty years since **Humanist Manifesto I** (1933) appeared. Events since then make that earlier statement seem far too optimistic. Nazism has shown the depths of brutality of which humanity is capable. Other totalitarian regimes have suppressed human rights without ending poverty. Science has sometimes brought evil as well as good. Recent decades have shown that inhuman wars can be made in the name of peace. The beginnings of police states, even in democratic societies, widespread government espionage, and other abuses of power by military, political, and industrial elites, and the continuance of unyielding racism, all present a different and difficult social outlook. In various societies, the demands of women and minority groups for equal rights effectively challenge our generation.*

As we approach the twenty-first century, however, an affirmative and hopeful vision is needed. Faith, commensurate with advancing knowledge, is also necessary. In the choice between despair and hope, humanists respond in this Humanist Manifesto II with a positive declaration for times of uncertainty.

As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to live and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.

Those who sign Humanist Manifesto II disclaim that they are setting forth a binding credo; their individual views would be stated in widely varying ways. This statement is,

however, reaching for vision in a time that needs direction. It is social analysis in an effort at consensus. New statements should be developed to supersede this, but for today it is our conviction that humanism offers an alternative that can serve present-day needs and guide humankind toward the future. (American Humanist Association, 1973)

Smart men, Kurtz and Wilson, however, as with personal sensibilities for me, I take early enthusiasm with some salting and other flavouring to the stew of Humanism as an evolving ethical philosophy in which the prior “earlier statement” or early enthusiasm seemed “far too optimistic.”

In their case, “Nazism has shown the depths of brutality of which humanity is capable,” as well as “other totalitarian regimes.” In fact, even the perennial issue fought for now, “In various societies, the demands of women and minority groups for equal rights effectively challenge our generation” with the ever-present issue of “traditional theism” or the “outmoded faith” seen in “Salvationism.” Humanism as part – ahem – salvation from these “false hopes” or “false ‘theologies of hope’ and messianic theologies.” Freedom of expression is tapped here some more with some emphasis on “creativity.” It comes in many forms throughout the world as a tendency in human thought, “Many kinds of humanism exist in the contemporary world. The varieties and emphases of naturalistic humanism include ‘scientific,’ ‘ethical,’ ‘democratic,’ ‘religious,’ and ‘Marxist’ humanism. Free thought, atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, deism, rationalism, ethical culture, and liberal religion all claim to be heir to the humanist tradition.” They spoke astutely to “cultivation of moral devotion and creative imagination” as “an expression of genuine ‘spiritual’ experience and aspiration” in which the spirit of freedom of expression is, well, expressed or well expressed. More directly, they speak to “freedom of speech and the press... the legal right of opposition to governmental policies... freedom of association, and artistic, scientific, and cultural freedom...” as well as the need to “safeguard, extend, and implement the principles of human freedom evolved from the Magna Carta to the Bill of Rights, the Rights of Man, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” To humanists, in regards to freedom of expression, in spite of the tempered Humanism in *Humanist Manifesto II* – in the opinions of Kurtz and Wilson (and myself, and likely many others) – compared to *Humanist Manifesto I*, these represent ‘sacred’ values of a kind. Over the course of a Jewish life, of a secular humanist life in particular, how has the individualized Humanism changed for you?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: You asked how my Jewish life and secular humanist life have changed. I grew up in an Orthodox community and had an Orthodox Bar Mitzvah in 1955 when I was 13. My family mainly instilled in me that I shouldn’t trust *goyim* (gentiles) because of what they did to us in the Holocaust, and that I should marry a nice Jewish girl. (My wife, Sharon Fratepietro, is not Jewish.)

In Hebrew school, my rabbi refused to answer my question, “Who created God?” He told me the question was inappropriate, but I assumed he just had no answer. One of my best teachers in Hebrew school asked, “Why does the Torah (Hebrew Bible) say ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,’ instead of the more concise ‘God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?’” His explanation was that each had a different god, and we must search for and find our own god. I took his statement seriously and my search, beginning at age 12, led me to a god who did not

exist. I decided to follow all the things in the Torah that made sense to me, like performing mitzvahs (good deeds), but I stopped doing things like fasting on Yom Kippur, the day that God allegedly determines who shall live and who shall die in the coming year. Perhaps that is when I became a humanist without having even heard the term.

As an adult, I first learned about Humanism from the *American Humanist Association*, and later became a board member of that organization. I still considered myself a Jew because there is no requirement for a Jew to believe in God. I eventually found a proper home for myself in Judaism when I learned about and joined the *Society for Humanistic Judaism* (<https://shj.org>), with its atheist rabbis. SHJ is a member organization of the *Secular Coalition for America* and has an active social justice program known as *Jews for a Secular Democracy*.

Jacobsen: Do you agree with Kurtz and Wilson in the opening, as an aside?

Silverman: I agree with them that *Humanist Manifesto I* was too optimistic about what the state of the world would be like after 1933, and that we need a more realistic vision. One sentence I was uncomfortable with was “Faith, commensurate with advancing knowledge, is also necessary.” I prefer to leave the word “faith” to theists. The authors correctly add that traditional theism, especially faith in a prayer-hearing God, makes no sense. It was wise of them to say, “New statements should be developed to supersede this,” one of which is known as *Humanist Manifesto III*. We should note that these manifestos are written on paper by humans, not written on stone tablets by an alleged deity, and no humanist is obliged to follow all of their assertions.

Jacobsen: How are the varieties of referenced humanisms connected via the idea of freedom of expression?

Silverman: I think all these referenced humanisms include freedom of expression, whether stated explicitly or implicitly. The humanists I know all think everybody has the right to express ideas and opinions freely, though we should try to avoid making false or misleading statements. Some people consider themselves theistic humanists, and might wish to silence those in their flock who have problems believing in the type of god they espouse. My idea of humanism precludes supernaturalism.

Jacobsen: What is this “moral devotion and creative imagination” inherent in the idea of freedom of expression as played out in the lives of freer human beings?

Silverman: I think we have a moral obligation to speak out against injustices, and it helps to imagine what kinds of injustices are suffered by people who are viewed as different from us in artificial ways. Unfortunately, some people use their imagination to develop “fake news” and consider this to be an appropriate form of freedom of expression. The moral problem with such freedom of expression is that fake news can unfairly hurt innocent people. One example is known as “Pizzagate.” This was a baseless rumor circulated in 2016 that Hillary Clinton and other Democrats were heading up a child sex-trafficking ring out of a specific Washington pizzeria. Based on such rumors and hate speech, a gunman with an assault rifle opened fire at the pizzeria, hoping to save the alleged abused children.

Jacobsen: How are freedom of speech and freedom of the press connected in a humanistic framework? How are they being attacked in the United States today?

Silverman: Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Humanists support this right to speak out verbally, in writing, and by action. Some Americans want to take away the right to burn the American flag, which thankfully the US Supreme Court ruled was constitutionally protected speech. There are also attempts to censor works of art that touch on sensitive issues like religion or sexuality. I think it is fine for people to attack verbally or in writing what someone else says. The problem occurs when someone thinks he has the right to use intimidation, threats, or violence. The way to attack bad speech is with good speech. I still believe the saying I learned as a child: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Jacobsen: How is opposition to governmental policies being prevented in America today?

Silverman: Opposition to government policies is not being prevented. Many individuals and media have spoken against President Trump’s policies (or lack thereof) on the pandemic, healthcare, climate change, international alliances, and countless social justice issues. Unfortunately, from my perspective, the Republican-controlled US Senate gives Trump whatever he wants. So, opposition to government policies can best be achieved by Americans voting in the upcoming election.

Jacobsen: Regarding “freedom of association, and artistic, scientific, and cultural freedom,” what brings these together in one bundle so as to unite them under a banner of common expansion of freedom for more humanistic societies?

Silverman: Humanistic societies recognize that humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment for the greater good of humanity. Humanism promotes democracy, civil liberties, human freedoms, separation of religion and government, and elimination of discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age, or national origin. Humanists respect the scientific method and recognize that we are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change, and that ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: You’re most welcome.

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Free of Charge 5 – “Humanist Manifesto III,” Humanism, Humaneness, and Meaning

2020/12/08

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: Humanist Manifesto III; a “progressive philosophy of life”; negating consideration of the supernatural; the core principles of Humanism; “consensus of what we do believe” as part of the orientation of the document; a “critical intelligence”; “nature as self-existing”; limiting human ethics to human experience; and our life is “ours and ours alone.”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: *Humanist Manifesto III* (2003) provided a succinct manifestation of modern Humanism. In turn, this both represents a more well-understood philosophical stance and a more concise statement as to the core of the concept “Humanism.” In this interview, I want to cover some of the modern conceptualizations of modern Humanism, as an evolution from 1933 to 2003. What was the inspiration for this updated document?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: The updated third document was expected, as was the updated second document, without knowing in advance what dates they would come. The first Manifesto was written in 1933, the second in 1973, and the third in 2003. Similarly, the founders who wrote the US Constitution understood that their document was not perfect and allowed for future amendments. As we learn more about the world and best practices for humans, we update manifestos. After all, these manifestos are written on paper by humans, not written on stone tablets by an alleged deity. There undoubtedly will be a fourth manifesto, but I can't say when.

Jacobsen: What does “without supernaturalism” mean in the context of a “progressive philosophy of life”?

Silverman: “Without supernaturalism” means no belief in any gods. It also includes no belief in reincarnation or magic crystals, not fearing black cats crossing your path or dread of Friday the 13th or the number 666. A rabbit's foot or knocking on wood does not bring good luck. In other words, no superstitious beliefs of any kind. So we need a philosophy of life without superstition. One can have such a philosophy without being a progressive, but the humanist philosophy incorporates progressivism. It is based on the idea of progress, incorporating advances in science and technology, and advocating for social reforms and social organizations, all vital to improve the human condition.

Jacobsen: How does negating consideration of the supernatural change thinking about “our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity”?

Silverman: Most people want to lead ethical lives, but folks disagree about how best to do it. Some rely on so-called “holy” books written during the Bronze Age by scientifically ignorant men. Their ideas of ethics might include discriminating against gays, beating disobedient children, not allowing women to have responsible positions, punishing blasphemers and heretics, and advocating for holy wars to capture land promised by “God.” Being free of the supernatural, we can use available evidence to help decide what actions might be for the greater good of humanity.

Jacobsen: Why are the core principles of Humanism reason, compassion, and experience? Why is non-dogmatism, as in “values and ideals... subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance,” a key distinction from most religious stances?

Silverman: As with most people, humanists appreciate the ability to reason. Part of what we want to do with our reason is learn how to help make the world a better place. This entails empathizing with others and showing compassion toward those less fortunate than ourselves. We learn from our mistakes and, hopefully, improve on how best to act. When tied to a never changing, dogmatic, religious book, principles become more difficult to change or improve.

Jacobsen: It stipulates “consensus of what we do believe” as part of the orientation of the document. How does this universality differ from the other ethics devoted to the transcendent? How does this universality still permit individual deviance of expression?

Silverman: Humanists are not all *required* to believe the same thing, which explains individual deviance of expression. However, there does seem to be a consensus about certain things that most humanists agree on. They include these beliefs: Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis; humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change; ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience; working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

“Transcendent” usually refers to religion, where a transcendent god has powers independent of the material universe and outside of nature. Some people feel they have experienced transcendence by overcoming the limitations of physical existence through things like prayer, meditation, psychedelics, and paranormal visions. Such transcendent experiences, which can’t be measured, do bring some comfort to many people.

Jacobsen: Why is science “the best method for determining this knowledge as well as for solving problems and developing beneficial technologies”? What is a “critical intelligence” in this sense? How does freedom of thought work better, or more freely rather, in this humanistic framework?

Silverman: Science is empirical, meaning based on observations of nature, and it is potentially falsifiable by new observations of nature. In other words, new evidence can lead us to revise scientific theories. We know how to distinguish good scientific ideas from bad ones. Science relies on experimentation, testing, and skepticism. It thrives on disagreement and on a

willingness to question assumptions critically, while we search for evidence until a consensus is reached. That's why scientific truths are the same in Pakistan, the United States, Israel, or India, though their citizens may have very different religious beliefs. And scientists will change their views when the evidence warrants. To me, critical intelligence means we should carefully and critically examine our reasoning and our conclusions to eliminate errors. We should be free to pose any questions, regardless of how counter they are to what others might think, and then try to provide answers based on evidence.

Jacobsen: Why do humanists posit “nature as self-existing” rather than existing contingent on some transcendent object or metaphysical being?

Silverman: There is absolutely no evidence for a transcendent object or metaphysical being, and we have a pretty good understanding of nature through Darwin's theory of evolution. We know how nature can exist without the need of a transcendent object or metaphysical being

Jacobsen: How does limiting human ethics to human experience help simplify and clarify a humane ethic in Humanism? Why are “peace, justice, and opportunity for all,” more attainable by this methodology, of ethics, than their transcendentalist counterparts? Does this include an opportunity for all to speak their mind or write down their thoughts?

Silverman: Basing human ethics on what we know from experience, rather than on what we don't know, certainly makes more sense. Applying certain transcendent or religious precepts to everyone is too limiting, since we have no objective way to test if we have the one “true” religion. We learn through human experience and the efforts of thoughtful people throughout history how to work toward the ideals we hope to achieve. We also know that some of our values might change as our knowledge and understandings advance.

Jacobsen: Ultimately, why does this mean our life is “ours and ours alone,” our mind's ability for freethought of thought?

Silverman: No one else, certainly no transcendent being, is responsible for our life. We must take personal responsibility for how we live, not give credit to an imagined deity for our good fortune or blame satanic forces when we behave poorly. We are free to think about whatever comes into our mind, but we are not necessarily free to act out all our thoughts. We can choose our actions as long as they don't infringe on the freedoms of others. As the saying goes, your freedom to swing your fist ends at my nose.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

Free of Charge 6 – “Amsterdam Declaration” (1952), Unifying the Front, Religious Fundamentalism, and State Totalitarianism

2021/02/08

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: the development of empirical philosophies; a larger contingent of secular voices; post-WWII ideological reflections; the *Amsterdam Declaration* (1952); and democracy, creative uses of science and not destructive uses of science, Humanism as ethics, personal liberty above tied to social responsibility, and cultivating ethical and creative living.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The *Amsterdam Declaration* (1952) was another huge stepping stone in the development of Humanism within the earlier discourse of modern secular freethought. Before asking those main questions, I had a side question important to this educational series, actually two. You seem like a great person to ask these questions because of the longevity of leadership in the movement and the efforts at collaboration and unification of efforts through the Secular Coalition for America. First, how much does the development of empirical philosophies create a basis for modern formulations of Humanism, instead of a straightforward focus on *eudaimonia*, the humanities, moral education, and the like? I understand Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK and the President of Humanists International, has spoken on the spotted nature of Humanism in the historical record akin to the manner in which Professor Noam Chomsky speaks of Anarchism as a philosophical trend in the history of human thought and action. As in, no one owns them, as they, Humanism or Anarchism, amount to facets of human nature (to one degree or another) and, therefore, express themselves without regard to the culture or the geography, merely transforming superficially while manifesting the same fundamentals.

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: As I understand the question, you are asking if I more favour empiricism or eudaimonia when it comes to Humanism. To answer, I'll first define the terms as I understand them.

Empiricism is a theory that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. Empiricism is a fundamental part of the scientific method, which requires that all hypotheses and theories must be tested against observations of the natural world, rather than resting on intuition or revelation.

Eudaimonia describes virtuous activity in accordance with reason, which gives us happiness and pleasure. To illustrate, if you're a doctor, you should excel at healing people; if you're a

philosopher, you should excel at gaining knowledge and wisdom. Of course, each person plays many roles in life, and by excelling in all of them one achieves eudaimonia.

As to whether I favor empiricism or eudaimonia, I can say confidently—that depends. If I want to look at scientific questions, empiricism is the way to go. But I don't think everything should be viewed through a scientific lens. Aesthetics, without science, makes sense to me. Different people can find different pleasures using only reason. For instance, not everyone might think like I do that my wife, Sharon, is the most wonderful person in the world.

Of course there are times that empiricism and eudaimonia work in combination. To illustrate, empiricism is used to help find a vaccine for Covid-19. Then an individual can make a rational choice to take the vaccine to safeguard his or her health, and this expresses eudaimonia.

Jacobsen: Second, I have worked to bring together some of the voices in Canadian Humanism in one voice with some group discussions, so to speak, e.g., “Humanism in Canada: Personal, Professional, and Institutional Histories (Part One)”[3]. The series incorporated the leadership voices of most of the secular organizations in Canada, i.e., at the time: Cameron Dunkin as the Acting CEO of Dying With Dignity Canada, Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso as the President of Center for Inquiry-Canada, Doug Thomas as the President of Secular Connexion Séculière, Greg Oliver as the President of Canadian Secular Alliance, Michel Virard as the President of Association humaniste du Québec, Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson as the Vice-President of Humanist Canada, and Seanna Watson as the Vice-President of Center for Inquiry-Canada. As far as I am informed on the issue, that's a first. I have been interviewing a large contingent of the ex-Muslim community. In the midst of them, in March of 2019, something occurred to me. So, I decided to write down the idea succinctly for an article for *News Intervention*. I made a proposal in “An Immodest Proposal: International Coalition of Ex-Muslims (ICEM)”[4]. I was informed by a British colleague the International Coalition of Ex-Muslims[5] was formed in early 2020, about a year after the proposal. It's hard to track the history of these things because it can be a bubbling in communities of the same ideas and then the formulation of them into a convergent creation of an organization. Also, a single proposal can be the source of the formation of these things. Nonetheless, they're there, present, and active. Why was the Secular Coalition for America a necessity to bring together a larger contingent of secular voices?

Silverman: Scott, I'm so pleased that you are working to bring the voices in Canadian Humanism together. However, I doubt that you can get them to speak with just one voice, except on selected topics. Humanists speak with many voices and have a lot of opinions on countless topics. That's one way humanists are different from some religious cults.

I do think most humanists would agree that humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment for the greater good of humanity. Humanism also promotes democracy, civil liberties, human freedoms, separation of religion and government, and elimination of discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age, or national origin. Humanists respect the scientific method and recognize that we are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change, and that ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

You asked about the importance of bringing a large contingent of voices together within the Secular Coalition for America. In 2002, I helped form the Secular Coalition for America, whose mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints, and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government.

Our 19 national member organizations cover the full spectrum of freethought. Members don't argue about labels. People in the Coalition call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, whatever. They cooperate on the 95% they have in common, rather than bicker about the 5% that might set them apart. Interestingly, four of the member organizations are classified as religious (nontheistic). They are the American Ethical Union (with Ethical Culture Societies), Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, Society for Humanistic Judaism (with atheist rabbis), and UU (Unitarian Universalists) Humanists.

All the Secular Coalition member organizations have strict limits on political lobbying, so the Secular Coalition incorporated as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of freethought Americans. The Secular Coalition also collaborates with organizations that are neither theistic nor nontheistic, like the American Civil Liberties Union, and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. It cooperates on some issues with theistic organizations, like the Interfaith Alliance, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and Catholics for Choice. Working with diverse groups provides the additional benefit of gaining more visibility and respect for our unique perspective. Improving the public perception of freethinkers is as important to many of us as pursuing a particular political agenda.

Jacobsen: To the first *Amsterdam Declaration* (1952)[6], it opens starkly on “an alternative to the religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand, and totalitarian systems on the other.” What made these post-WWII ideological reflections important on secular fundamentalism in totalitarianism and in religious revelatory fundamentalism? Something of a third alternative to the loggerheads of the aforementioned.

Silverman: We have to remember that this 1952 document was written during the Cold War, and represents an alternative to both religions based on revelation and totalitarian regimes like the atheistic Soviet Union. Not that there is anything wrong with atheism, but it should not be government-sponsored or imposed. The document promotes ethics and the right of the individual to the greatest possible freedom of development compatible with the rights of others. Such a third way opposes religious indoctrination and totalitarian regimes. It advocates the creative use of science with humanistic principles.

Jacobsen: The framers of the *Amsterdam Declaration* (1952) did not view Humanism as a sect, but as an eventuation of long traditions of thinkers leading to the scientific revolutions of the time. They continued, “Ethical humanism unites all those who cannot any longer believe the various creeds and are willing to base their conviction on respect for man as a spiritual and moral being.”[7] How does this point connect to the previous response about science, in a 20th-century understanding and development, relate to this mid-20th century stipulation?

Silverman: I think we all agree that science should play an important role in the life of an ethical humanist. Sometimes, though, there is a question about where ethics come into science. One

example is the use of nuclear power, which generates about a fifth of our nation's energy supply. Nuclear energy reduces greenhouse gas emissions and produces far less waste than conventional energy. On the other hand, nuclear fuel and waste are highly radioactive, which can pose many threats to public health and the environment. I favour the use of nuclear power, though I know many humanists who don't. I don't think scientific research should be restricted, even though certain findings might eventually cause harm. It is up to those in the field to discuss and help us decide how we can use science for good, which is not always easy.

Also, I don't like some of the terminology used in 1952, for example, respect for "man," rather than for "people." And there is confusion when we call ourselves "spiritual." I understand that some humanists define the word "spiritual" in ways that make them comfortable, but I leave that word to religious people believing in "spirits" who inhabit an unseen spiritual world.

Jacobsen: The five principles mentioned democracy, creative uses of science and not destructive uses of science, Humanism as ethics, personal liberty above tied to social responsibility, and cultivating ethical and creative living.[6] These seem, at a minimum, in part or on the whole, 69 years ahead of their time and more needed than ever. Now, we may have mentioned this before with the statements on Ethical Humanism as a faith, etc. The ways in which this was removed in later formulations of the various declarations of humanists with the most recent moving as far as a rejection of the supernatural. In fact, I would extend the previous opinion. These are still far ahead of their time in the reach and implications. The ideals of the Renaissance permitted to a small coterie of individuals could become something to relish for a not-insignificant minority of people. So, more to the point, if you reflect on these five principles, what are some cases in the end of the Trump-Pence Administration and the transition into the Biden-Harris Administration showing the greater necessity of humanist values, simply as formulated in 1952?

Silverman: I agree with eliminating the word "faith" from the definition of ethical humanism. I must confess, though, that I once had a bumper sticker that said, "I have faith in reason." There is no question that the Biden-Harris Administration is a giant leap forward in support of these humanist values. Democracy took a hit under President Trump when he failed to concede after he lost a fair election, and encouraged his supporters to riot. Trump also supported some undemocratic and authoritarian regimes, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea. Trump's actions have emboldened other countries, including Myanmar, China, Rwanda, Iran, and Turkey to violently silence campaigns, causing global democracy to backslide.

President Biden, in his short time in office, has reversed many of Trump's executive orders, which includes recommitting to the US Paris Climate Accord, rejoining the World Health Organization, and promoting racial equality in health care and other areas. Biden also signed orders to halt construction of Trump's US-Mexico border wall, reverse Trump's environmental deregulation, affirm the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival Program (DACA) that protects from deportation people brought illegally to the US as children, and create a task force to reunite migrant families separated at the border. Biden reversed Trump's 2017 travel ban that targeted primarily Muslim countries. Biden repealed a ban on transgender people serving openly in the military and he expanded protection of LGBTQ people around the world by revamping the offices at the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID),

which supports LGBTQ rights. He also re-established the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology and directed agencies to make decisions on the best available scientific evidence.

These actions of the Biden-Harris administration are consistent with the 1952 principles of ethical humanism. Though President Biden is a religious Catholic, he tries to separate religion from government. I hope he includes secular voices when he does interfaith outreach. Biden's Catholicism seems to be grounded in social justice, rather than exclusively in church doctrine, which is why he has been criticized by conservative Catholics for some of his positions, like a woman's right to choose.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman, we will cover the 2002 version of the Amsterdam Declaration in the next session.

Silverman: Thank you.

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Appendix I: Footnotes

[1] Founder, Secular Coalition for America; Founder, Secular Humanists of the Low Country; Founder, Atheist/Humanist Alliance, College of Charleston.

[2] Individual Publication Date: February 8, 2021: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/free-of-charge-6>; Full Issue Publication Date: May 1, 2021: <https://in-sightjournal.com/insight-issues/>.

[3] Jacobsen (2020).

[4] Jacobsen (2019).

[5] Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (2021).

[6] Humanists International (1952).

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Amsterdam Declaration 1952" states:

1. ***It is democratic. It aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that this is a matter of right. The democratic principle can be applied to all human relationships and is not restricted to methods of government.***

2. ***It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively.*** *It advocates a world-wide application of scientific method to problems of human welfare. Humanists believe that the tremendous problems with which mankind is faced in this age of transition can be solved. Science gives the means but science itself does not propose the ends.*
3. ***Humanism is ethical.*** *It affirms the dignity of man and the right of the individual to the greatest possible freedom of development compatible with the right of others. There is a danger in seeking to utilise scientific knowledge in a complex society individual freedom may be threatened by the very impersonal machine that has been created to save it. Ethical humanism, therefore, rejects totalitarian attempts to perfect the machine in order to obtain immediate gains at the cost of human values.*
4. ***It insists that personal liberty is an end that must be combined with social responsibility in order that it shall not be sacrificed to the improvement of material conditions.*** *Without intellectual liberty, fundamental research, on which progress must in the long run depend, would not be possible. Humanism ventures to build a world on the free person responsible to society. On behalf of individual freedom humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.*
5. ***It is a way of life, aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment, through the cultivation of ethical and creative living.*** *It can be a way of life for everyone everywhere if the individual is capable of the responses required by the changing social order. The primary task of humanism today is to make men aware in the simplest terms of what it can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising in this context and for purposes of peace the new power which science has given us, humanists have confidence that the present crisis can be surmounted. Liberated from fear the energies of man will be available for a self-realisation to which it is impossible to foresee the limit.*

Ethical humanism is thus a faith that answers the challenge of our times. We call upon all men who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this cause.

Humanists International (1952).

Free of Charge 7 – “Amsterdam Declaration” (2002), Indigeneity and Humanism, and Beyond Western-Dominant Humanism

2023-03-24

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: *Amsterdam Declaration 2002* and possibly “Amsterdam Declaration 2022”; points preliminarily brought forward for the new declaration; things to add to the potential new declaration; human intelligence and non-human intelligence rights; the environment; non-Western traditions of Humanism for formal inclusion; Indigeneity and Humanism; *Amsterdam Declaration 2002*; and the ultimate fate of religious ethics.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The philosophy of Humanism^[1] does not dictate to its adherents, as in a top-down dogma requiring thou shalt and thou shalt not on some firm, transcendentalist basis. The supernatural only gets invoked as a negation of it. Even with the organizations and the statements, these amount to individuated communities and documents with individual choice as the ultimate arbiter. It took about 50 years for an advancement of the *Amsterdam Declaration 1952* into the *Amsterdam Declaration 2002*.^[2] There has been a call by the team at Humanists International for an advancement into a third edition of the Amsterdam declarations in particular. This may move forward, or has moved forward, for requests on proper ways in which to add updated concerns to the proposed third edition of the *Amsterdam Declaration*. The most recent version from 2002 (Humanists International) has been translated into 35 languages.^[3] If an updated version proceeds in 2022, then this will be the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the organization, Humanists International, formerly the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the third version of the Amsterdam declarations. Some of the conversations ranged around sport or physical activity, non-human intelligence, the environment, and non-Western sources within the humanist tradition. Fundamentally, what is the difference in a philosophical stance representing evolutionary changes even to ethical founding documents compared to others declaring foundational texts as complete and comprehensive for all time with nothing ever capable of edit, as in Quranic theological orientations – can’t edit it – akin to the necessity of acceptance of the resurrection of Christ in Christianity? In short, what makes foundational evolution of an empirically informed ethic better than an unchanging asserted morality in centuries-old texts?

Dr. Herb Silverman^{[4],[5]*}: Evolution made it possible for us to become *Homo sapiens* (humans), though my DNA shows that I am 3% Neanderthal. Charles Darwin felt that a difference between *Homo sapiens* and other animals is our moral sense. He said that our enhanced ability to

cooperate may be the most significant distinction between us and our closest evolutionary relatives. Such cooperation, along with concern for others and a sense of fairness, may be the basis of morality in humans. Since evolution works so slowly, I don't think we can relate evolution to how moral behavior differs in humans today, often based more on philosophical or theological differences.

You ask why our empirically informed ethic today is better than an unchanging, asserted morality in centuries-old texts. Science is empirical and thrives on disagreement and on a willingness to question assumptions critically, while we search for evidence until a consensus is reached. Centuries-old texts, often called "holy" books, were written by scientifically ignorant men. Their ideas of ethics included discriminating against gays, not allowing women to have responsible positions, punishing blasphemers and heretics, and advocating for holy wars. Tying our principles to unchanging, dogmatic religious text makes no sense. Morality, to us, involves using available evidence to help decide what actions might be for the greater good of humanity. We base our ethics on what we learn from human experience, which includes the efforts of thoughtful people throughout history who have worked toward achieving their ideals. We also know that some of our values might change as our knowledge and understanding advances.

Jacobsen: For those points brought forward, "sport or physical activity, non-human intelligence, the environment, and non-Western sources within the humanist tradition," what seems like the relevance of each to the potential next edition of the declaration?

Silverman: I'll address your question of "sport or physical activity" here. The other parts (non-human intelligence, the environment, non-Western sources) are asked about in your other questions, so I will answer those later.

Regarding sport or physical activity, I think we should encourage people to remain active for as long as they can. Playing sports, preferably non-contact, can be fun and help us keep a sound mind and body. At 78, I no longer play sports, but I exercise a lot. I walk a few miles every day with my wife, Sharon. We also lift weights or swim several times a week. What I don't like to see are so many people who only watch others play sports. When a professional player on their favorite team hits a home run or scores a goal, they congratulate each other, as if they themselves deserve credit for it. Being active in sports (and in life) is beneficial; being passive is not.

Jacobsen: Would you add anything else for consideration to such a new Amsterdam declaration?

Silverman: I would add more suggestions on how humanists and others can improve their quality of life. In addition to physical activity, we could mention the importance of having a good diet (perhaps vegetarian), getting enough sleep, reducing stress (perhaps through yoga, meditation, or other relaxation techniques), and having a sense of humor with lots of laughter.

Jacobsen: What is the core of human intelligence? What seem like the prospects for non-human intelligence and the possibility for rights (and responsibilities) applied to non-human operators? Prominent humanists, e.g., Isaac Asimov, posited science fiction ideas of positronic brains, and the like, exploring ideas like these well before the current crop of humanists.^[6] These likely have been stewing since that time, potentially even more so in the Computer Age.

Silverman: Human intelligence is the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills. Intelligence has evolved in animals, perhaps many times. We must not forget that non-human animals can also be intelligent. Thinking about other intelligent animals causes some humans emotional distress because they may eat these animals or use them for neurobiology research.

When it comes to robots, perhaps one day they may be designed to have consciousness, and we will deal then with those implications. Isaac Asimov wrote science fiction stories about robots with a positron brain that functions as a central processing unit and, in some unspecified way, provides these robots with a form of consciousness recognizable to humans. I loved Asimov, who was president of the American Humanist Association from 1985 until his death in 1992. But keep in mind that his wonderful scientific fiction robot stories were still fiction. I hope one day we will have conscious robots, but I don't expect to see that come to pass in my lifetime.

Jacobsen: What makes the environment a core necessity as this time, especially with the ongoing climate crisis temporarily overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic?

Silverman: I think even now that the ongoing climate crisis should not be overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic will pass, but the climate crisis might never pass, only get worse. The scientific consensus at the moment seems to be that we need scientific breakthroughs and global cooperation to avoid a catastrophic rise in temperatures and climate disaster.

Jacobsen: Something which I consider important is the inclusion of non-Western, even Indigenous, proposals into the humanist canon formally. For example, the definition provided about indigeneity by the United Nations in "Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations" states:

Indigenous peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Despite their cultural differences, indigenous peoples from around the world share common problems related to the protection of their rights as distinct peoples.

Indigenous peoples have sought recognition of their identities, way of life and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources for years, yet throughout history, their rights have always been violated. Indigenous peoples today, are arguably among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people in the world. The international community now recognizes that special measures are required to protect their rights and maintain their distinct cultures and way of life. Find below a short history of the indigenous struggle in the international stage.^[7]

This is a good start for humanists, possibly. I have been given permission by the Aboriginal Committee, as a member (non-Aboriginal) of the committee for Humanist Canada, to submit a point of reflection via a letter to the representatives of Humanists International.^[8] As far as I know, this was a first, which was sent in March of 2020. Different regions and cultures have different flavours of Humanism and distinct difficulties against religious fundamentalism and state totalitarianism. How can proposals, such as these, provide neither a negative view on Western-based Humanism nor a rejection of the current mostly Western-based Humanism, but an expansive global Humanism inclusive of the tastes, sights, sounds, flavours, and unique

manifestations of Humanism seen around the world? Those more rounded perspectives can provide a better vision of Humanism and, in turn, a more complete and comprehensive envisioning of Humanism vis-à-vis a more comprehensive and complete imagining of human nature and potentialities.

Silverman: We tend to focus on Western culture and assume that other cultures should behave more like us. Perhaps sometimes they should, and sometimes they shouldn't. We need to learn more about these cultures and watch how they interact with others, including with us.

One of my most memorable experiences was being a Visiting Mathematics Professor for a semester in 1987 at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby. My colleagues there treated me very well. Over eight hundred languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea, reflecting the isolation of its many tribes. Not only were most students at UPNG the first in their families to go to college, they were the first to leave their village tribes. Part of our mission was to persuade students not to continue their ongoing tribal disputes at the university, avoiding the “payback” system in PNG. A tribal member at the university explained to me how the payback system worked. If a member from Tribe A killed a member from Tribe B, a designated member from Tribe B could legally kill any member from Tribe A. If he killed more than one member, “payback” would again kick in. Fortunately, the university was a payback-free zone.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Australian explorers discovered the highlands of PNG, home to roughly one million people who had never before encountered Europeans. In a video I saw of this “first contact,” one PNG woman said they thought white people were gods, but changed their minds after having sex with them. Women in PNG were treated unbelievably poorly. Village men typically resided in a house, while women and pigs (yes, pigs!) lived together in a shack behind the house. Both women and pigs were sold or used for barter, the woman/pig ratio depending on the quality of both the women and the pigs. (This, of course, does not apply to men and women at the university.)

The country was teeming with missionaries of all kinds. Most tried to improve the lives of the inhabitants, usually accompanied by attempts at religious conversion. I hope missionaries now have become more humanistic than when I was there. At the time, I asked one priest why he deplored the practice of bare-breasted women, but said nothing about wife beating, which was legal there. He told me they couldn't change everything that was wrong in the country, and bare breasts were a good place to start. Shortly thereafter, the university held a beauty pageant with five participants, four of whom were bare breasted. When I saw that the primary judge was this same missionary, I confidently predicted the winner to my colleagues. After the breast-covered woman won, my colleagues showed an undeserved respect for my powers of judging beauty.

Jacobsen: The second Amsterdam declaration (2002) or the *Amsterdam Declaration 2002* posited a number of core values.^[9] Its foci are ethics, rationality, ethical, “democracy and human rights,” “that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility,” a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion,” “values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art,” and “a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment.”^[10] Non-dogmatic principles for being in the world. These are so in line with cosmopolitan global values and positive scientific uses more than almost any other

philosophical system known to me. As our ethics advance more and more, how do the more faith-based ethics appear in comparison year-by-year?

Silverman: Assuming faith-based ethics is not an oxymoron, I think more and more people are adopting our improving humanist ethics. This is especially true of younger people, most of whom no longer believe that homosexuality is a sin, willingly accept transgender people, think men and women should be treated equally, and agree that no law should prohibit abortion under all circumstances.

Jacobsen: What is the ultimate fate of religious ethics?

Silverman: Probably there will always be people who follow what they consider to be religious ethics. I hope most of those people will have a religion that allows them the flexibility to follow their own conscience, without being restricted to following everything in a book that was written thousands of years before. I have no problem with nontheistic religions, all of which seem to be humanistic.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

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Appendix I: Footnotes

[1] Grudin (2020), Humanist Canada (2021), Humanists UK (2021), American Humanist Association (2021), and Humanists International (2021).

[2] Humanists International (2002) and Humanists International (1952).

[3] Humanists International (2002).

[4] Founder, Secular Coalition for America; Founder, Secular Humanists of the Low Country; Founder, Atheist/Humanist Alliance, College of Charleston.

[5] Individual Publication Date: March 1, 2021: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/free-of-charge-7>; Full Issue Publication Date: May 1, 2021: <https://in-sightjournal.com/insight-issues/>.

[6] Memory Alpha (2021).

[7] United Nations (n.d.).

[8] The letter in full as follows:

I send as an independent proposal and through filtration of the Aboriginal Committee of Humanist Canada. In other words, I send this based on prior correspondence alongside feedback caveats from the Aboriginal Committee of Humanist Canada, of which I am a part, in addition to personal justifications and qualifications before too. This amounts to the formalized presentation, numerically ordered (not by importance), of the caveats from Humanist Canada's Aboriginal Committee and myself. The document below entitled "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Formal Recognition in the Global Humanist Movement" implies global democratic Humanism before comprehensive consultation with the international Humanist indigenous and tribal peoples diaspora should:

1. not speak for indigenous or tribal peoples in general;
2. not speak for indigenous or tribal peoples who are humanist;
3. not take this draft statement as a declaration, resolution, or policy;
4. take this as a statement of reflection and consideration for the global democratic body of Humanism to seriously consider endorsing established international documents like the UNDRIP; and
5. further serious reflection on the inclusion and furtherance of consultation and dialogue with humanist groups around the world in bringing in feedback from and having consultation with the humanist indigenous and tribal people diaspora in the "over 70 countries" and beyond?

I drafted the below alone – taking full responsibility for negative and positive implications of its presentation to Humanists International – with feedback (with minor alterations) from the Aboriginal Committee of Humanist Canada:

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Formal Recognition in the Global Humanist Movement

Indigenous and tribal peoples continue to muster and garner deserved recognition in international institutional and rights documents, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) from September of 2007 and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention) from 1989, and,

by the nature of Humanism, deserve formal recognition in the global democratic Humanist movement too.

Global democratic Humanism marches forward in its greater moves towards a true representation of the vibrant fabric of the human species with more nations, peoples, and flavours of Humanist communities accepted into the international community in a formal manner in spite of the short period ebbs and flows of theocracy and secularity, authoritarianism and democracy, xenophobia and inclusivity, superstition and science, and, indeed, supernaturalism and naturalism. An oft-neglected sector of the international community comes from minorities within minorities. One such sector of the global humanist movement emerges in the context of indigenous and tribal peoples throughout the world. More than 370 million indigenous and tribal people exist in over 70 countries in the world based on estimations of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Those indigenous and tribal peoples recognized in international rights documents including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2007, and the ILO Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989). Together considered the highest standards and singularly comprehensive international instruments available to the indigenous and tribal peoples throughout the world in the defence of their most basic human rights, in particular, with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the oldest and most general. When Humanism enters into the practical applications of daily living and ordinary recognition in a global democratic movement and capacity, Humanists International performs a fundamental role in this regard, especially as its evolution incorporates previously unheard voices and unseen faces. For the full flourishing of the global Humanist movement, indigenous and tribal peoples throughout the world who adhere to the principles of Humanism deserve recognition and support at the international level. This instantiates the first formal effort as such, in the tradition of global democratic Humanism.

We recognise:

- the Preamble stipulations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) on “the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women,” “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations,” and with special emphasis on Article 1 stating “all human beings are born free and equal,” Article 2 stating “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms... without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status... [or] on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs,” Article 7, Article 15, Article 18, Article 20, Article 22, and Article 28;
- the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 or Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989) subjective and objective criteria for the inclusion as indigenous peoples or tribal peoples within an international context in Article 1, and with special emphasis on Article 2, Article 3, Article 5(a) and 5(b), Article 6(1)(a), Article 7(1), Article 27(1) and 27(2), Article 28, Article 29, Article 31, Article 34, Article 35, and Article 36;

- the Amsterdam Declaration (2002) affirms the “worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual,” “human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government,” “Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents,” and “Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment... [and] can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.”
- *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples(2007) in full.*

We support:

- *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948);*
- *the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989);*
- *the Amsterdam Declaration (2002); and*
- *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).*

Suggested academic reference

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The Reconciliation with indigenous peoples (2000-11) for Australia represented a generic and national, not international, statement.

[9] “Amsterdam Declaration 2002” states:

- **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
- **Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world’s problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
- **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
- **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is

undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

- **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
- **Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art.** Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.
- **Humanism is a lifeway aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment** through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Humanists International (2002).

[10] Ibid.

Free of Charge 8 – Possible Futures for Humanism

2021/04/22

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: some of the paths Humanism could evolve into the future; Humanism's unification; Humanism and the rejection of the supernatural versus strict atheism; democratic ideals and issues; and limits of an empirical moral philosophy.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to take an interlude session into unifying evolutionary ethical frameworks as exemplified in part, in Humanism. One widely touted claim by individuals with a leaning towards the secular and a sympathy for religious sentiments is a claim to unified moral principles or frames in every 'great' religion, as in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese traditional religions, and ethnic religions. One group of more superficial thinkers will point to a feeling or some loose intuition about religion, "All religions teach the same things." I understand what they are meaning, but what they are saying, as a matter of fact, is false. Why have different religions if so? Another group will be selective about the observations. Ignoring the parts of brutality, cruelty, bigotry, and supernatural superstition, only focusing on the Golden Rule, saying, "Oh, it's the Golden Rule. It's in all of them. All of the religions teach this as the same basic element of their ethical teachings." Generally, one can find passages. However, it seems both incredibly naïve and selective, because different formulations of the Golden Rule exist and different religions teach the Golden Rule unequally well. Still others turn into postmodernist philosophers, they ramble off into incoherency and don't make any sense, while puffed up and self-proud as a cock (rooster) on a dunghill. Humanism is an advanced 20th-century philosophy. It's about a deep dive into reflection on the depths of human depravity and reformulating, and formalizing, the positive, proactive ethics found in all periods of human history in which civilized advance society existed for those times, when naturalism and the humanities were the dominant discourse of the time. What are some of the paths Humanism could evolve into the future?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: It may be true that just about all religions have some version of the Golden Rule about treating others as you would want to be treated. And a version of this can also be found in almost every ethical tradition, with no gods necessary. In my Jewish tradition, the first century BCE Rabbi Hillel was allegedly asked by a prospective Jewish convert to teach him the entire Torah (Hebrew Bible) while standing on one leg. Hillel replied, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. The rest is commentary."

Some equate the Golden Rule with the rule about loving your neighbour as yourself. The problem arises with who we consider our neighbour. In the Hebrew Bible, neighbours were the “chosen” people, other Israelis. Jews were supposed to kill outsiders on their way to the Promised Land. Today in America, many White Christian Nationalists view only their fellow Christians as neighbours and so justify discriminating against non-white immigrants.

Another problem with the Golden Rule is that some people may not want to be treated as we want to be treated. Our values may be so different that the Golden Rule makes no sense. For instance, some fanatics have no aversion to death, so the Golden Rule might inspire them to kill others in suicide missions. For humanists to live by the Golden Rule, we must empathize with other people, including those who may be very different from us and might want to be treated differently.

When you mentioned “dunghill,” I thought of Thomas Jefferson, who in many ways (but not all ways) was a humanist. As he correctly pointed out, there are some words of wisdom in the Bible, but I agree with Jefferson when he referred to them as “diamonds in a dunghill.”

When you ask for paths where Humanism could evolve in the future, I think Humanism is a philosophy that is continually evolving. That’s why we have had three Humanist Manifestos, and will undoubtedly have additional “manifestos” as we learn more about how better to live ethical lives, along with new scientific discoveries.

Jacobsen: Continuing from the previous question, there are areas in which Humanism is a laundry list of principles rather than a unified ethical framework. Such a framework in which it can continually, dynamically evolve while maintaining its former evidentiary coherence, in fact, many of the declarations are such listings. Do you think that there are ways Humanism can be more compact, more unified, showing how its principles interact with one another to create a whole other than a simple titular stamp: “Humanism”?

Silverman: A compact way to talk about Humanism is to describe, without a laundry list, its basic principles, which serve as guidelines for how we should live. Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that also aspire to the greater good of humanity. We are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change, and ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience, along with a greater knowledge of the world. Humanists are guided by reason and inspired by compassion.

Jacobsen: Are there any parts of Humanism that you think should just go, not be there? I believe you had some qualms in earlier variations of declaration with the inclusion of supernatural versus atheist or non-theist as an appeasement to some who couldn’t quite stomach a complete rejection of the impossibility of the gods.

Silverman: I know some good people who can’t stomach a complete rejection of the existence of gods. They may act in a lot of ways like humanists, leading ethical lives and aspiring to the greater good of humanity. I just don’t like the god baggage that might go along with it. I can’t prove there are no gods. An atheist is simply someone without a belief in any gods, and I think we should not claim to be guided by imaginary beings. That’s why my brand of Humanism is

atheistic. I can't prevent the Pope from calling himself a humanist because he supports immigration, opposes wars, and accepts that humans are partially responsible for climate change.

Jacobsen: Human rights and democratic ideals feature prominently in the humanist lifestance. Are there any particular weaknesses in the claims of human rights, as said in the formal documents of human rights, or in the principle of majority rule (adult age majoritarian voting rule)?

Silverman: The notion of human rights is a modern concept from the 18th century Enlightenment, not from ancient times when the Golden Rule was first quoted. Thomas Jefferson incorporated such “inalienable rights” into the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was a milestone for its universalist language, which recognizes that all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights regardless of nationality, place of residence, gender, national or ethnic origin, colour, or religion.

I do have some problems with majority rule, especially if we have an uneducated populace, and leaders (dictators) decide who constitutes voters. After all, Adolf Hitler came to power in a democracy in 1933. Not that it is any way comparable, but democracy may not be working so well in the U.S. now, with many Republicans trying to make it difficult for some African Americans to vote. So, I must agree with Winston Churchill: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

Jacobsen: Are issues of an empirical moral philosophy found in the epistemologies informing the ethics? So, the ideas of the limitations of induction to give answers about the world – its scope and limits – and then the limitations by logical implication extended into the moral philosophy of Humanism, as in some things can never be known, others partially known now, while others known with a reliably high degree of accuracy. A sort of variation in accuracy of reality maps meaning variations in the reliability, and validity, of the application of humanistic ethics. Sometimes, there's tons of informations; other times, there's little; still others, we have, basically, none, and may never have any data to inform the ethic, which would make ethical decisions solely grounded in the lattermost equivalent to a base-level faith-based moral decision-making frame of reference (that which we try to avoid at all costs).

Silverman: When it comes to what we know and don't know with a reliable level of accuracy, I usually look to science. I recently read a wonderful new book by Jeff Hawkins called, *A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence*. It compares our old reptilian brain to our new mammalian brain (the neocortex), with implications for moral behaviour.

I've been in debates with Christians who insist that objective morality must come from God. My contention is that we don't know if there is such a thing as objective morality but, if so, we are coming closer to it by learning more about human nature and what works best for individuals. We often learn this through science or experience, not through ancient “holy” books. We need to be careful when we talk about what we know, and, even more important, about what we don't know. To quote Mark Twain: “What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so.”

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

Free of Charge 9 – All Things Ethical

2021/08/15

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: current existential risks; the humanist orientation on life; pragmatic side of the humanist ethos; a complete rejection of the existence of gods; no regard for the tenets of Christianity; understanding human behaviour; the existential risks to the American republic; the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; the American educational curricula; make American education more humanistic; Republicans working to restrict African Americans from full voting rights and privileges; and a refined universalist morality.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You made some great points about all religions, as an argument posed for the Golden Rule, having the same fundamental moral theoretic structure. They have the Golden Rule; therefore, they have the same moral philosophical base. Similarly, you stated, “And a version of this can also be found in almost every ethical tradition, with no gods necessary.” In other words, the Golden Rule exists pervasively and human beings use it, and build systems of moral philosophy on it. It can become tricky, as when the definition of the in-group leads to the Golden Rule only applying to one’s narrow ethnic and/or religious group. What can be the application of a humanist ethical orientation on the Golden Rule on current existential risks, globally? In short, how is humanist ethics, here, universal and universally applicable compared to parochial religious ethics?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: The Golden Rule can mean different things to different people. Typically we think of it as treating others as we would like to be treated. Alternatively, it says do not treat others in ways that you would not like to be treated. One problem comes with the definition of “others.” Sometimes it means only how we treat others within a certain religion. A religion might require treating “infidels” with disdain, or worse. Treating others as we want to be treated might also involve trying to convert others to the religion of the believer. Many people don’t want to be treated as some people treat themselves. Universal human ethics has nothing to do with parochial religious beliefs. It requires empathy and reciprocity. We should try to find out how different people would like to be treated and try to treat them that way as long as such treatment doesn’t cause harm to them or to others.

Jacobsen: You described a shorthand of the humanist orientation on life. Also, as a side comment, you mentioned a progressive philosophy of life without a laundry list. Is a “laundry list” a bad idea? Simply for the fact, for any example or limited rule, you can find a

counterexample to the example or the rule, because life is complex and, often, superficially contradictory.

Silverman: A laundry list is not necessarily a bad idea, depending on what we mean by such a list. Regarding humanism, we say that knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis; that humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change; that humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships; that working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness; that we are guided by reason and inspired by compassion, and so on. If this is a laundry list, so be it. On the other hand, we assert that ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. This means we continually learn new ways to improve humanism.

Jacobsen: What about individuals who say, “I don’t care,” as in they do not care about others or appear unable to feel compassion? Where do these individuals fit into the pragmatic side of the humanist ethos?

Silverman: We can try to describe how showing compassion toward others can make you feel better about yourself. Failing to succeed, pragmatically we should try to keep such people (perhaps some of them psychopaths) from hurting others.

Jacobsen: Why can’t some individuals stomach a complete rejection of the existence of gods? What reasons have come forward for you?

Silverman: I’m sometimes asked how I can go on living without a belief in God. Such people often believe that the purpose of this life is to prepare for an afterlife. They see no other purpose for human life. Such god belief might be how they overcome their fear of death. There may be no purpose OF life, but humans can and should find many purposes IN life. We have only one life to live, and we should make the best of it.

Jacobsen: Individuals in the United States, White Christian Nationalists, want, in their dying demographic gasp, a complete control of the American republic without regard, or much, for freethinkers and other non-Christian religious Americans. Why?

Silverman: It’s even stranger. Many White Christian Nationalists in the United States seem to have no regard for the tenets of Christianity. They appear to be worshiping Donald Trump, rather than Jesus. They applauded attacks by Trump on non-white immigrants, African-Americans, women, gun control, science, climate change, and other social justice issues. They seem mostly engaged with anti-abortion, about which Jesus said nothing. They hearken to the days of white privilege when they could discriminate against those of a different race and those who had non-Christian religious beliefs or no religious beliefs. They would like to turn America into their version of a Christian nation, not the secular nation we are. The good news is that many Americans are turning away from their fundamentalist religion, especially younger people, because of political stances that White Christian Nationalists have taken on. They include issues like women’s rights, abortion, immigration, LGBTQ, and other social justice issues, not to mention pedophilia. Some former or present Christians now believe that our humanist positions are more consistent with the message of Jesus than with the message of White Christian Nationalists.

Jacobsen: Furthermore, in that light, why do, indeed, ideas matter, fundamentally, to understanding human behaviour? As the brain is not a black box, but consciousness or an individual mind can appear as if a black box – so probably is, we can only peer at the outward behaviours and the descriptions of inner experience described by an individual.

Silverman: Human behavior is often irrational, so understanding it is not easy. It might be based on false rumors (think QAnon) or on wishful thinking (think religion). To understand an individual's behavior, we should communicate with that individual and learn what motivated the behavior. Even then, the individual might lie or make something up. For instance, parents can say how much they love their children, yet beat them and not mind that the child is suffering. To understand present behavior, it helps to know the past history of the individual.

Jacobsen: What are the existential risks to the American republic now? How are these existential risks for global society, given declining American semi-hegemony?

Silverman: The greatest existential risk to the American republic is also the greatest existential risk to the global society—climate change caused by humans and the need to address this danger. Fortunately nations are listening to the dire scientific predictions and coming together to cooperate with the United Nations on landmarks like the Paris Agreement and the Climate Action Summit. A national risk to Americans was the attack on our democracy on January 6, with the storming of the Capitol building by Trump supporters. Those riots for the first time made me worry about what we need to do to keep our democracy. Another serious concern is that America sometimes supports authoritarian leaders for economic gain instead of pushing for human rights.

Jacobsen: In the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, you mentioned an important and oft-overlooked part – skimmed: “nationality, place of residence, gender, national or ethnic origin, colour, or religion.” If looking to a possibly more humanist future, would you add anything into it, in spite of its strengths?

Silverman: We should take all these into account for human rights. When I spoke of “gender,” I didn't know all the implications. I would include transgender, but hadn't before heard of gender fluid, bi-gender, and other terminology. Of course, regardless of a person's pronoun, we should treat everyone with respect.

Jacobsen: What has been excluded from the American educational curricula? Those courses necessary for a more educated populace and necessary for a functioning democracy.

Silverman: I think too much time is spent trying to instill symbolic patriotism, and not enough time spent talking about some of our faults. This is incorporated in what is called “critical race theory,” which does not denigrate whites but talks about what privileges we have had over the years, and what we might do now to help those who weren't born with such privileges. People should better understand our real history, including the meaning of our godless Constitution. We should teach people how to think, not what to think. I would like to see critical thinking become part of our national curriculum, including a mandatory course on logic.

Jacobsen: What would make American education more humanistic? I read complaints about vouchers, private religious school financial and other privileges, and discrimination in hiring

against atheists and others in America, as examples of issues on some fault lines. It's unfortunate.

Silverman: Unfortunately, some private religious schools don't have to teach topics that every educated person should know, like the theory of evolution. Some of these schools rely on indoctrination rather than education. Conservative Christians are influencing many school districts by introducing legislation to bring back school-sponsored prayers and demand that sex education classes in public schools teach "abstinence only," instead of preparing teens to avoid pregnancy and disease. Some religious schools often incorrectly get to use some of our public tax dollars to support them through vouchers and other ways.

I like what one of our founders, Ben Franklin, said: "When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.

Jacobsen: The natural question: Why are Republicans working to restrict African Americans from full voting rights and privileges (e.g., easier, reasonable access)?

Silverman: This is an easy question to answer. Most African-Americans vote for candidates from the Democratic party. Of course, the right thing to do would be to make it easy for them to vote their conscience. Unfortunately, Republican politicians these days rarely seem to do the right thing. Their only interest seems to be to get elected and re-elected.

Jacobsen: If we can learn to become more accurate in ethical decisions through an approximation of objective morality through a refined universalist morality, is ethical truth, or are morally correct choices, a natural feature of the natural world if evolved critters are roaming around in it, whether or not they have the mental capacity to know and decide at a sufficiently advanced level? In short, are universalist (approximating objective) ethical truths a derivative feature of universes with evolved or engineered minds? That is, if no beings in a universe, then no ethics in a universe; if beings, then inevitably ethics.

Silverman: Many people used to equate the Bible with objective morality, but not so much anymore. Throughout history, the Bible has been quoted to justify slavery, second-class status for women, anti-Semitism, executing blasphemers and homosexuals, and burning witches and heretics. Some actions deemed moral 2000 years ago are considered immoral today. Morality evolves over time as our understanding of human needs within a culture changes. Even those who believe in biblical inerrancy interpret some passages in a different way today than in centuries past, in a manner more consistent with many humanist principles. We make judgments about which portions of a sacred text to take literally, which to take metaphorically, and which to ignore completely. We may never reach what we consider objective morality, but we are a lot closer to it than in past centuries.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Silverman: Thank you.

Free of Charge 10 – Theology Transcending Into Nothing, Various Privileges, and Points of Education

2021/09/01

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: theology; supernaturalism; "rational analysis"; maximization of happiness; an afterlife; agency of non-human animals; belief in God and fear of death; white privilege and White Christian Nationalism; white privilege, considerations; false rumours and wishful thinking; development of a humanistic outlook; American soft power waning; climate change; education in logic; Christian and private religious schools; and modern sex education.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Is theology a dead field, at this point? I mean in the sense of ethics connected directly to reality, so the natural sciences, and morality grounded in human concern. What is the point of theology at this point if any? Thousands of Th.D.s, presumably, or some ridiculously high number, must be published annually on the subject matter. To me, it looks as if an entirely farcical endeavour and an enormous waste of human time and talent. Smart people seemingly wasting their lives in fruitless considerations of the attributions of those objects so transcendental that they've transcended into nothingness.

Dr. Herb Silverman: I'm not opposed to theology if done right. Theology, to me, is the study of religious belief. I think it's important to learn about religious and god beliefs that have influenced our culture. Theology is often taught in academic religious studies programs. Learning about different theologies that sound ridiculous to some students often makes them think about the religion in which they were raised, and why it might sound ridiculous to an outsider. It's sometimes only a short step from thinking that their religion and god beliefs are also ridiculous. So, studying theology can create atheists.

Jacobsen: If supernatural, transcendentalist ethics can be rejected, and if theology seems like a dead field of enquiry in terms of moral truth, what would be the long-form and the short-form statement on a secular humanist Golden Rule? A comprehensive statement covering all relevant concerns mentioned before, by you.

Silverman: Supernatural ethics can certainly be rejected because we live in the natural world, and supernatural is a meaningless expression promoted by people who believe in so-called holy books. I would say a short-form statement for a secular humanist Golden Rule is that we should not treat others in ways that we would not like to be treated. This is not much different from the traditional Golden Rule as long as "others" means all other people, not just a favored tribe (as is

the case with most religions). A long-form statement about universal morality requires empathy and reciprocity. We know that humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change. Humans are social animals and find meaning in relationships, so we should work on improving our relationships. We need to learn how others would like to be treated as individuals. Since ethical values are derived from human need and interest and tested by experience, we must continually discover new ways to improve secular humanism.

Jacobsen: With “rational analysis” as part of the knowledge of the world considered in the humanist ontology, what about cognitive biases? Those anthropological truths hammering away at the idea of the “rational” individual humanist who makes the “rational analysis.”

Silverman: Cognitive bias is our tendency to listen more often to information that confirms our existing beliefs. We need to be aware of cognitive biases when we try to make rational decisions. Regardless of how rational we think we are, we are all subject to confirmation bias, probably an evolutionary characteristic. Some cognitive bias might have served our hunter-gatherer ancestors well. It likely brought about faster decision-making when speed was more valuable than accuracy.

Scientists are always concerned about confirmation bias, which is why they usually test a theory by first looking for examples that would show their theory to be false. If found, they either modify the theory or discard it. When mathematicians think they have proved a theorem, before submitting it for publication they look for a counter example that would show the proposed theorem to be false.

Religious people are particularly subject to confirmation bias, believing without evidence what their “holy” books say, listening mainly to others who hold those same beliefs, and not considering all the facts in a logical and rational manner.

Many people only pay attention to information that confirms their beliefs through selected news sources and social media. This includes opinions about issues like global warming, wearing masks during a pandemic, getting vaccines, following science, and gun control. This also happens on a governmental level. Witness the confirmation bias that the leaders of the United States have had for 20 years about Afghanistan.

Jacobsen: Why is maximization of happiness important? Is Humanism, in this sense, a branch of Utilitarian philosophy (Millian more than Benthamite)?

Silverman: Utilitarianism, as I understand it, is a philosophy that aims for the betterment of society as a whole. Where happiness applies to Humanism, I can’t improve on the quote from Robert Green Ingersoll, known as the Great Agnostic: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.”

Jacobsen: Is “afterlife” an oxymoronic phrase? It’s extremely common as both a word and a sentiment. Does this word and idea modestly annoy you, too?

Silverman: I don’t know that “afterlife” is oxymoronic, since I can’t prove there isn’t one. On the other hand, I would bet my life that there is no afterlife. In fact, I am doing so. Since we don’t delude ourselves into thinking we will have an afterlife, we ought to decide what we want to

accomplish in this, our one and only life. I am comforted in knowing that I can contribute something useful in the world. Sometimes our choices and their repercussions live longer than we do, impacting on family, friends, people we don't know, and future generations.

Jacobsen: If human beings have agency, and if non-human animals have a modicum of agency relative to human beings, should the meaning in life of other evolved critters be respected, too?

Silverman: Of course, we should show respect for other evolved critters, besides humans. That's why I'm a vegan (except for ice cream). After all, humans are just fish plus time.

Jacobsen: Is the belief in God based on a fear of death, generally? In my interview with the late James Randi, he considered this core to the whole enterprise of globally held falsehoods from religions and New Age beliefs (what he, in a neologism, termed "Newage")?

Silverman: I think belief in God is largely, but not totally, based on a fear of death. Some people want to believe they will somehow go on after they die. God is an easy, though false, answer for them. Humans are pattern-seeking animals who like to know answers. When ignorant of why something occurs, some say "God did it," which is known as the "God of the gaps." Of course science often comes up with real explanations, so the gap keeps shrinking.

Jacobsen: Why is white privilege so tied up with Christian Nationalism in the United States now?

Silverman: If I were to give a two-word answer, it would be "Donald Trump." Despite Trump's unchristian behavior and comments, white evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for him and still support him. The "white" component is partly about stopping immigration of non-whites. White Christian Nationalists would like to return to the days when whites could easily and more legally discriminate against those of a different race and those who were not Christian. That is what they mean when they say, "Make America Great Again."

Jacobsen: What parts of white privilege seem legitimate and illegitimate in the various presentations of it?

Silverman: It's hard to come up with a legitimate part of while privilege, other than to say we should not blame all whites for discrimination against non-whites. I don't favor reparation to all African-Americans regardless of status, but I do favor affirmative action programs and helping those who were deprived of a decent education. We should put more public money and quality teachers into poor schools, many of which are predominately African-American.

Jacobsen: In either false rumors or wishful thinking, are the same mental mechanisms at play?

Silverman: I see some difference in that people can often show rumors to be false by providing contrary evidence. Wishful thinking might simply be hoping for a best possible outcome in a situation. It can also be holding to a belief, like in a god or an afterlife, that can't be disproven.

Jacobsen: In personal experience, or based on research into it, what factors seem the most important in the development of a humanistic mentality and outlook on life, earlier in life rather than later? I am only part of the community for the last few years, very few in fact, but I have interviewed and talked to a lot of people, happily. I'm far more impressed with the secular

humanist community than most others, while the non-theistic Satanists seem to do the best at provocative and creative sociopolitical commentary through protest.

Silverman: I think encouraging young people to think for themselves and search for evidence to support their beliefs goes a long way leading them to secular humanism. Explaining why you accept a rational, evidence-based humanist philosophy that is guided by reason and inspired by compassion should be part of their upbringing. Though not everyone is comfortable with the name, I personally like the Satanic Temple, whose members are atheists and have no belief in Satan. They picked a catchy name to piss off the religious right and to protest against those who try to use the government to support religion.

Jacobsen: Is American soft power waning? Does this threaten the promise of increases in global democracy? I ask because America, in spite of ridiculous antics and interior flaws, represented an ideal of a largely free state of affairs for citizens in a democratic country in contrast to so many other countries.

Silverman: I hope we can get to the post-Trump America, where we support human right and democracy at home and abroad, and no longer support autocrats elsewhere. That's how we can make America great again.

Jacobsen: With climate change as another sword of Damocles to global society, what are the democratic alternatives to this state of affairs? What is being done? How can humanists cast their vote to edge the world towards constraining the runaway effects of greenhouse gases this late in the game? Many in the younger generations may not know old age because many in the younger generations may die before old age might happen for them, due to direct and derivative effects of climate change.

Silverman: This is not easy to answer. Humanists follow the science about climate change and work with other groups, humanist or not, to try to lessen the effects of climate change. I hope we have not reached the point of no return on planet Earth.

Jacobsen: Why focus on an education in logic for students?

Silverman: Learning logic is a way for students to see fallacies constructed by others, and how to create a solid argument for a position.

Jacobsen: Why have private Christian and religious schools rejected or warped the correct teaching of the theory of evolution in their classrooms? How does this hobble students with an interest in learning biology and medicine, or in simply having an accurate idea as to the origins and development of life?

Silverman: A lot of religious schools reject the theory of evolution because it conflicts with their holy books. Students in these schools who are interested in science need to learn about evolution, perhaps by talking to someone who understands that evolution is an essential component of science or by reading legitimate science books on their own.

Jacobsen: Side note, with a rejection of the teaching of modern sex education, and with the known consequences to the life outcomes of more students on average in the negative, is this another example of the high negative cost of religion in public life?

Silverman: Yes. Schools that reject the teaching of modern sex education usually have an inordinate number of teen pregnancies.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Free of Charge 11 – Interlude to the Freethought Finale

2021/12/08

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: theology and Asimov; empathy and reciprocity; creationism and reciprocity; contributing to secular humanist culture; the God of the gaps; private post-secondary religious institutions; and equity.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your orientation on theology is intriguing to me. The stance from the previous session. Where, “if done right,” theology can be seen as the study of religious belief, which differs from standard definitions as the study of God. Other than an outcome of producing atheists with, for example, reading the holy texts. The idea of rational stances as an outcome of consideration of the broad range of the religious milieu, textual and otherwise. I am reminded of Isaac Asimov, “I prefer rationalism to atheism. The question of God and other objects-of-faith are outside reason and play no part in rationalism. Thus, you don’t have to waste your time in either attacking or defending.” It is about a scholasticism in the sense of coming to a rational comprehension of human irrationality, as found in the religions old and new. Are there any other positive outcomes in the study of the world religions, especially in the most sympathetic and objective light?

Dr. Herb Silverman: As much as I respect Asimov, I disagree somewhat with his saying that objects of faith play no part in rationalism. It depends on what you mean by “rationalism.” To me, it’s about using facts and coming up with a reasonable conclusion based on those facts. For instance, a person could say the following. Fact: My goal in life to be happy. Fact: I can only be happy believing that I will have an eternity of bliss when I die, and therefore, it only makes sense for me to believe I will have an eternity of bliss. This person makes a logical and rational argument to maintain his belief. He will not suffer negative consequences in this life, nor will we be able to convince him that his afterlife belief is wrong.

When Asimov says he prefers rationalism to atheism, I would say atheism for me was a natural outcome of rationalism. I don’t think it is a waste of time to defend atheism when so many people attack it. I like to give thoughtful arguments defending my beliefs or lack thereof, and discuss with theists their beliefs and how they came to them.

In terms of positive outcomes in studying world religions, I think it’s important to learn what other people think, and why. Theists who study world religions might begin to question why their religion is correct (usually the religion in which they were raised) and all the others are wrong. As well, while studying world religions, we might also see a lot of positives in them (like

various versions of the Golden Rule), and a reason why we should treat all humans with respect, even if we think some of their beliefs are nonsense.

Jacobsen: How can empathy and reciprocity be improved in social relations at the individual level?

Silverman: It helps if we try to look at any situation from the other person's point of view. As members of a highly social and cooperative species, we can recognize that our innate sense of empathy evolved as a survival mechanism. That, along with thousands of years of experience creating and maintaining complex societies, enables us to know what sort of behaviors best keep societies functioning smoothly. I must acknowledge that "tit for tat" is one of the most effective means for survival—treating others the way they treat you. This often encourages others to be as nice to you as they want you to be nice to them.

Jacobsen: To a scrolling creationist making criticisms of reciprocity in human life, as if against principles of selection in nature, so attempting to use straw men of evolutionary thinking to country evolutionary arguments empathy and reciprocity, any response? As I am sure, you must have come across these phenomena before.

Silverman: Many creationists are not interested in what you think because they claim to be so sure that they are right. They only wish to impart their "knowledge" to you. Some of them do not want to wear masks or get vaccines because they believe their god will save them from disease, despite so much contrary evidence. If we can find common ground with creationists on some issues, we might be able to encourage them to hear our point of view.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the most valuable contribution to the secular humanist community in your life?

Silverman: In my life, it was finding out that secular humanists exist and are now out of the closet. I had been a secular humanist most of my life without having heard of the term until people like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson criticized it. So, I knew it must be a good thing. When I ran for governor of South Carolina in 1990 to challenge the provision in the SC Constitution that prohibits atheists from becoming governor, I heard from a number of atheist and secular humanist groups about all the worthwhile things they were doing. I proudly became part of that movement of people who are good without any gods.

Jacobsen: Will the gap ever completely close for God of the gaps arguments to stop?

Silverman: I doubt it. There will always be a "god of the gaps" argument because there will always be gaps in human knowledge. When science solves a problem, new questions often arise from that problem. Darwin's *Origin of Species* answered many god of the gaps questions. When gaps are filled, the remaining gaps for God keep getting smaller. We now know that lightning is an electrical buildup and discharge in the atmosphere, and that earthquakes are shifts in the plates of the Earth's crust. An interesting modern example of complete ignorance came from Bill O'Reilly on Fox News when he said that tidal movement was an unexplained phenomenon, implying that God willed the oceans to move. We have known for centuries that tides are caused by the gravitational interaction between the Earth and its moon, and we can say in advance when it will occur. One of my favorite quotes, long before the phrase "god of the gaps" was used,

comes from the physician Hippocrates: “People think that epilepsy is divine simply because they don’t have any idea what causes it. But I believe that someday we will understand what causes epilepsy, and at that moment, we will cease to believe that it’s divine. And so it is with everything in the universe.”

Jacobsen: How are private post-secondary evangelical Christian universities contributing to this culture of Trumpism or a post-Trump administration, and the sense of besiegement against white Christians in America? A personal and collective sense, amongst themselves, of losing the country. When, as a Canadian looking onwards, America is meant, or should be seen as, for every citizen of the nation, so when one group sees themselves as losing, then everyone loses, because of seeing themselves as a group apart from the whole and deindividuating into a mass, and in resentment and hostility, which seems nationally self-destructive in the long-term (if kept up).

Silverman: When Donald Trump used the phrase MAGA (Make America Great Again), he was probably hearkening back to growing up in the 1950s when Blacks “knew their place” and white Christianity was privileged and viewed by many as America’s religion. Even though our godless U.S. Constitution prohibits favoring one religion over another or religion over non-religion, it was true that the majority of citizens at that time were white Christians. Times have changed, and Christian nationalists are upset by changes that have happened to the country.

We know that many religious universities do not teach subjects like evolution, which conflicts with their religious agenda. Even worse, some religious universities have political agendas, including the well-known Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Its former president, Jerry Falwell Jr., considered it immoral for evangelicals in 2020 not to support President Trump, adding that Trump could do nothing to lose his support. Falwell was later forced to resign the presidency because of a sex scandal. He hadn’t objected previously to Trump’s sex scandals.

Today, minorities are demanding and receiving some of the equal rights they deserve. We certainly are not yet where we should be, but I think we are moving in the right direction despite Trump and his followers. In the 1950s, in my home state of South Carolina, there were separate water fountains for white and black people. And black people were expected to step into the street to let a white person pass on the sidewalk.

Jacobsen: What specific programs and benefits can help poor schools attain greater equity with the rest of the nation, e.g., decent nutritional programs for kids to have energy and to be able to develop strong minds and to have clarity of mental life, etc.? I ask this as a practical example of secular humanist ethics for those who may benefit the most from it.

Silverman: No school needs to be deficient in any way—enough examples of successful schools exist throughout the country. Students and teachers need adequate resources. When state and local governments make having good schools a specific, primary goal, they allocate adequate tax funds, hire enough competent teachers for smaller-size classes, and have needed counselors. Residents of state and local communities choose what kind of schools they will have, by electing candidates who will or won’t support excellent education for all students, regardless of race or economic level. Education is the tide that lifts all boats and addresses most societal problems.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Free of Charge 12 – Foundation

2021/12/22

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019), *Short Reflections on American Secularism's History and Philosophy* (2020), and *Short Reflections on Age and Youth* (2020). He discusses: Kurtz's intention behind such a comprehensive statement of Secular Humanism; Kurtz; free inquiry; the separation of religion and state; critical intelligence; a moral education without supernaturalism; religion and supernaturalism; reason; evolutionary theory; an education broader than simply critical intelligence, moral education, and defining what is and what is not Secular Humanism; and to get right and appear to miss.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With the large number of manifestos on offer including the Humanist Manifesto I (1933), Amsterdam Declaration (1952), Humanist Manifesto II (1973), A Secular Humanist Declaration (1980), A Declaration of Interdependence (1988), Humanism: Why, What, and What For, In 882 Words (1996), IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism (1996), Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call For A New Planetary Humanism, The Promise of Manifesto 2000, Amsterdam Declaration (2002), Humanist Manifesto III/Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003), Manifeste pour un humanisme contemporain/Manifesto for a contemporary humanism (2012), I find the analysis of each by a distinguished and elder member of the community welcome, and enlightening, especially with the third Amsterdam Declaration coming from Humanists International with input from the global Humanist community. A document representative, insofar as possible within C-19 conditions, of the democratic aspirations of the practices of Secular Humanism. One of the larger documents is A Secular Humanist Declaration (1980). What was Kurtz's intention behind such a comprehensive statement of Secular Humanism?

Dr. Herb Silverman[1],[2]: Paul Kurtz's Secular Humanist Declaration (1980) described why democratic secular humanism has been a powerful force in world culture, and what we can do to fight anti-secularist trends posed by religion. Kurtz explained why the separation of religion and government is essential and why we needed to oppose the shackling of any type of free thought. He supported trust in human reason and compassion, rather than in divine guidance or untested superstitious beliefs. Kurtz promoted following the best science available.

Paul Kurtz's greatest strengths were his abilities to found and grow organizations, including the current Center for Inquiry (formerly named the Council for Secular Humanism). He will be remembered as perhaps the most significant force in the second half of the 20th century supporting secular humanism and the ability to live a good life without religion.

Jacobsen: Also, as a short aside, what was Kurtz like as a person – behind the curtain so to speak?

Silverman: I first met Paul in the early 1990s at a meeting of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), and I became a regional director of CSH. It was the only nontheistic organization I had known about, and its fine magazine *Free Inquiry* was the only publication I knew that supported living a good and reasoned life without religion. Prometheus Books, another creation of Paul Kurtz, was the only publisher I knew that was devoted to books about Freethought.

I think Paul's greatest weakness was his less than enthusiastic willingness to play well with others he saw as competitors. Kurtz became upset with me when I joined the board of the American Humanist Association (AHA). Both CSH and AHA seemed to be fine organizations worthy of my support, but I soon learned about their divisive history. Kurtz had been on the board of AHA and was the editor of *The Humanist* magazine, published by AHA. After Kurtz and the AHA parted ways in 1978, on less than friendly terms, Kurtz founded the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Center for Inquiry. When I helped found the Secular Coalition for America in 2002, Kurtz wanted no part of it. He tended to view with suspicion any organization he didn't lead or create. Shortly after Kurtz left CSH, they joined the Secular Coalition for America.

I was pleased when, in 2007, the AHA, at its annual conference, presented Kurtz with its Humanist Lifetime Achievement Award, which I think he richly deserved.

Jacobsen: One of the main emphases of American Secular Humanism has been freedom of speech. In other countries and at the United Nations, this gets labelled as freedom of expression in legal documents and human rights stipulations. The fundamental idea here seems as if the free inquiry, which is the first idea presented in A Secular Humanist Declaration – a document founded well before I was born. Why is free inquiry the first point made in such a document by a pillar of the intellectual history of Secular Humanism?

Silverman: First, *Free Inquiry* was the magazine that Paul Kurtz started, so you would expect his document to emphasize free inquiry. Commitment to free inquiry means we tolerate diversity of opinion and respect the right of individuals to express unpopular beliefs. Of course, all views should be open to critical scrutiny. The premise is that free inquiry is more likely to lead to truths with a free exchange of ideas. This applies to science, as well as to politics, economics, morality, and religion. Free inquiry also necessitates recognition of civil liberties, which include freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of and from religion. Neither states nor religions may impose a religious doctrine on people.

Jacobsen: With the Trump Administration over, another poignant point made by Kurtz was the separation of religion and state, what have been some more aggressive moves in various states in the United States of concern and hammering home the points made by Kurtz once more?

Silverman: Currently, one of the most aggressive moves against separation of religion and government is in the state of Texas, which wants to allow a woman who has an abortion or someone who performs an abortion to be charged with assault or homicide, a crime punishable by death in the state of Texas. Other states have passed bills that greatly restrict a woman's right

to an abortion. The Supreme Court is also imposing a set of religious views on the rest of the country, like insisting a fetus is a person from conception. Our courts and our democracy face a crisis of credibility.

The good news is that many Americans are abandoning organized religious institutions. The “nones,” people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular,” has risen to 29 percent in America. The Make America Great Again crowd appeals to the nostalgia of a 1950s-era White Christian America. Before he ran for president, Donald Trump favored abortion rights. He changed to get the support of White Evangelical Christians, who rely on the politics of grievance and resentment. Rather than trying to expand its base, the Republican Party is passing restrictive voting and voter suppression laws in different states, and looking for ways to allow Republican-controlled state legislatures to throw out the results of fair elections. This attempt to turn the United States into a Christian authoritarian regime is a grave threat to the secular democracy that Kurtz wrote about.

Other similar concerns include adoption and foster care service where taxpayer funding is going to some faith-based institutions that discriminate against same-sex couples. School voucher programs are funneling taxpayer money to private religious schools that can be exempt from civil rights laws protecting minority faiths, atheists, and LGBTQ students. Tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, including churches, are not allowed to endorse candidates. With Donald Trump’s “blessing,” during his administration many churches endorsed candidates with no negative consequences to the churches. Using public funds to support religiously based discrimination violates the Establishment clause of the US Constitution and the civil rights of those who are denied access to government services. To promote separation of religion and government, we need to ensure that government money is made available only to programs and institutions that provide religiously neutral services without discrimination.

Jacobsen: What is critical intelligence? How is this an important part of living an ethically good life via Secular Humanism?

Silverman: Secular humanists are much more than just atheists, those without a belief in any gods. A secular humanist generally has a positive outlook on life, the view that we can do good and make a difference in our one and only life. Secular humanists recognize that ethics was developed as a branch of human knowledge long before religionists created moral systems based on divine authority. Some early developers of ethics include Socrates, Democritus, Epicurus, Erasmus, Hume, Voltaire, and Kant. They felt that ethical judgments are independent of revealed religion, and that we can apply our intelligence, reason, and wisdom to achieve the good life. For secular humanists, ethical conduct should be judged by critical reason, and the goal is to develop autonomous and responsible individuals capable of making their own choices in life based on an understanding of human behavior.

As Bertrand Russell said, “A good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” I’ll close with two quotes from Robert Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic: “The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray.” And, “Reason, observation and experience, the Holy Trinity of science, have taught us that happiness is the only good, the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so.”

Jacobsen: What should be the contents of a moral education without supernaturalism?

Silverman: The real question is: What should be the contents of a moral education *with* supernaturalism? I see no realistic answer. We live in a natural, not a supernatural, world. We can make up the supernatural, and somehow bring morality into it. But that is just a fantasy, and people have a wide variety of supernatural beliefs.

Moral development should be promoted in children and young adults by public schools dealing with these values independent of religion. Children should learn about the history of religious moral practices, but they should not be indoctrinated in a faith before they are mature enough to evaluate the merits for themselves. A moral education makes use of the scientific method, which is the most reliable way of understanding the world. Science and technology have improved the human condition. They have had a positive effect on reducing poverty, suffering, and disease in various parts of the world, in extending longevity, and in making the good life possible for more and more people. And while technology can be good, we should not accept what we see on the Internet without evaluating it critically.

In comparing religious and secular morality, we should ask whether it is right to stone homosexuals and disobedient children to death or whether it's okay to beat people you own as property. If you don't think it's moral to do these things, then your moral principles do not come from holy books.

Jacobsen: Kurtz synonymizes religion and supernaturalism in the point about religious skepticism. How are they the same? Are they different? If so, how so?

Silverman: Religion and supernaturalism have much in common. Most religious people believe in a supernatural deity. However, not all religions believe in the supernatural. I belong to three different religions: American Ethical Union, with Ethical Culture Societies; Society for Humanistic Judaism, with atheist rabbis; and the UU Humanists. All three religions are nontheistic and active participants in the Secular Coalition for America. I've also met people who claim not to be religious, but believe in supernatural things like astrology, psychics, and crystals.

Jacobsen: What is reason, properly defined, in a secular humanist philosophy?

Silverman: Reason, for secular humanists, is the use of the rational methods of inquiry, logic, and evidence to develop knowledge and test truth claims. Since humans are prone to err, future corrections sometime need to be made. There are no dogmas in secular humanism. Though our reasoning isn't infallible, we think reason and science make major contributions to human knowledge and intelligence. Reason has led to the emancipation of hundreds of millions of people from a blind faith in religion and has contributed to their education and the enrichment of their lives.

Jacobsen: How does evolutionary theory present a robust support for a secular humanist philosophy and ethic compared to religious ethics based on interpretations of holy scriptures or holy books?

Silverman: The theory of evolution is under attack by religious fundamentalists, who would like to see creationism taught in schools. A scientific theory like evolution or gravity is a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that is acquired through observation and experimentation. From Darwin on, countless peer-reviewed scientific papers have supported evolution. We wouldn't have expected scientifically ignorant writers of so-called holy books who lived thousands of years ago to have described the theory of evolution, DNA, or any discovery of modern science, and they didn't. Evolution is controversial, but the controversy is religious and political, not scientific. Some religions feel threatened by evolution because it contradicts the creation story in Genesis. Even though there is a Flat Earth Society, we don't teach the flat/round controversy in science class. Creationism should no more be taught as an alternative to the theory of natural selection than "stork theory" should be taught as an alternative to sexual reproduction. Creationism is an alternative to Zeus or Krishna, not Darwin.

As secular humanists, we recognize that we are a highly social and cooperative species. We have evolved to have an innate sense of empathy as a survival mechanism, coupled with thousands of years of experience creating and maintaining complex societies. We have learned what behaviors are best at keeping our species functioning smoothly.

Jacobsen: What might an education broader than simply critical intelligence, moral education, and defining what is and what is not Secular Humanism, to encapsulate Kurtz's ideas of a "melioristic" form of educational mindset?

Silverman: Meliorism is the belief that the human condition can be improved through concerted effort, and that we have an inherent tendency toward progress. This fits in well with Kurtz's view on democratic secular humanism, where we look forward with hope rather than backward with despair. We are committed to extending the ideals of reason, freedom, individual and collective opportunity, and democracy throughout the world. The problems we will face in the future, as in the past, will be complex and difficult. Secular humanism places trust in human intelligence rather than in divine guidance. Secular humanists approach the human situation in realistic terms, holding human beings responsible for their own destinies. We believe it is possible to bring about a more humane world based on reason, tolerance, compromise, and negotiations of difference.

Jacobsen: What does this 1980 document seem to get right and appear to miss?

Silverman: I agree with just about everything in the document, possibly with one minor exception: "This declaration defends only that form of secular humanism which is explicitly committed to democracy." While I certainly favor democracy, I can picture a country with a benevolent dictator who is a secular humanist and supports human rights. Since secular humanism continues to evolve with new information and evidence, an update to the 1980 document should probably address climate change, racism, sexism, and LGBTQ rights. I would also add suggestions on how secular humanists can improve the quality of their personal life, which includes physical activity, a good diet (perhaps vegetarian), getting enough sleep, reducing stress, and having a sense of humor with lots of laughter.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

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Author Biography



Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These

interviews include scientists and philosophers, activists and public intellectuals, addressing themes such as secular ethics, freedom of expression, evidence-based policymaking, and the global defence of human rights. His work appears regularly in peer-recognized outlets, including *The Good Men Project*, *International Policy Digest* (ISSN: 2332-9416), *The Humanist* (Print: ISSN 0018-7399; Online: ISSN 2163-3576), Basic Income Earth Network (UK Registered Charity 1177066), *A Further Inquiry*, Canadian Humanist Publications (CA Registered Charity 118833284 RR 0001), *Uncommon Ground Media* (UK Registration 11836548), The New Enlightenment Project, *News Intervention*, *Canadian Atheist*, Trusted Clothes (CN: 9562184; BN: 791402928RC0001), among dozens of others.

Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought. Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

