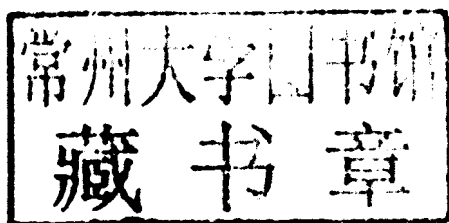
The background of the entire image is a deep blue night sky filled with numerous stars of varying brightness. A prominent, bright light source, possibly a lighthouse or a distant star, is positioned on the left side of the horizon, casting a sharp, horizontal beam of light across the sky. The foreground shows the dark, silhouetted outline of a rocky coastline or cliff. The title text is centered in the upper half of the image, rendered in a white, serif font.

# What is HUMANISM and Why Does it Matter?

Edited by  
Anthony B. Pinn

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ACUMEN

*Dedicated to Larry Jones*

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## WHAT IS HUMANISM, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

## STUDIES IN HUMANIST THOUGHT AND PRAXIS

**Series Editor** Anthony B. Pinn

*Institute of Humanist Studies, Washington, DC*

At this point in the twenty-first century, humanism encounters a unique historical moment, one full of creative possibilities to bring the benefits of humanist thinking and practice to bear on the challenges facing humanity. The *Studies in Humanist Thought and Praxis* series explores the pressing sociopolitical, economic and cultural issues we face.

## PREFACE

In significant ways Europe has provided a model of public humanism; many people in other areas of the world mark the humanism of places like the Netherlands as a highpoint of possibility for a rational and logic-driven world. This is not to say that all nations within Europe have the same relationship toward humanism; however, it appears that humanism is more integrated into the fabric of public and private life in Europe than it is in other locations such as the United States, if for no other reason than a somewhat different perception of and reception of secularization. My point in making these comments, however, is not to debate the secular nature of European societies, but instead simply to point to the manner in which the simple perception of a more humanism-friendly environment in Europe has motivated certain developments elsewhere in the world. For instance, things are changing in the United States, despite its public discourse saturated with religious vocabulary and grammar. Within the context of the United States, a push for humanist sensibilities within the public arena of debate over political policy, socioeconomic arrangements, and cultural worldviews is gaining energy. In fact, current political and cultural developments have resulted in new opportunities for and altered attitudes towards humanists and humanism-based enterprises. A clear symbol of this shift is captured by the inclusion of non-theistic orientations in President Obama's inaugural speech. Through his brief but positive comment concerning "non-belief" new openness to a fuller scope of thought and practice in the United States became a subject of public conversation and debate in ways extending beyond the typical discourse of stigmatized difference. Some years after this initial moment of inclusion, the aim for humanists (of all types) is now to foster open and honest reflection on and attention to the nature and meaning of humanism. By so doing, humanism is brought more fully into the public arena and better known for its ability to provide significant insight and strategies for transformation that is much needed at this point in human history.<sup>1</sup>



There are still misperceptions and uninformed questions concerning humanism—is it anti-American to the extent it is anti-God? Is it possible to be moral and ethical *and* humanist?—that prevent its full participation in the life and workings of the United States within the context of the global community. Nonetheless, at this point in the twenty-first century, humanists encounter a unique historical moment, one full of creative possibilities to address this problem of perception and to bring the benefits of humanist thinking and practice to bear on the challenges facing humanity.

## ORGANIZING THOUGHT ABOUT HUMANISM

With sensitivity to the manner in which European humanism and secularization have served as a heuristic of sorts in the United States, this volume notes that, while humanism's presence in the United States is as old as the country itself, it is only within the past several decades that the posture and tone of humanist thought and praxis have marked out robust defiance in a consistent, popular imagination-grabbing, and democratic manner. By the term "democratic" I am not referencing anything more than a general process by which large-scale and informed participation determines and maps out the logic and approach of various humanist organizations to the life challenges facing a diversity of communities. There have always been larger-than-life figures representing the aims of humanisms, and such figures continue. Nonetheless, there is something about recent developments—including the impressive growth in the population of "Nones" (people who claim to have no religion)—that points to a more egalitarian turn. In a word, the contemporary "Humanist Movement" is not simply a matter of a few elite players determining the guiding rationale and direction of humanism. To the contrary, the structure is more mosaic in form because within this movement is an array of individuals and complex organizations committed to working through agendas with awareness of and sensitivity to diversity, political shifts, alterations to the economic landscape, philosophical turns, cultural battles, and so on. One such organization—the Institute for Humanist Studies—is behind the work this particular book seeks to encourage. More to the point, the Institute provides the contextual framework and overarching set of considerations shaping this book.<sup>2</sup> *What is Humanism, and Why Does it Matter?* has grown out of the Institute's agenda. In fact, most of the chapters were initially presented at a conference (April 2011) sponsored by the Institute and intended to bring together a group of scholars and activists to generate creative and imaginative thought regarding how humanists might think about, discuss, and "do" humanism.

## THIS BOOK

The Institute is not alone in its concern to advance humanist thought and practice. It is also not the first—nor only—organization committed to the production of thought-provoking materials related to this concern. Many volumes—a good number of them referenced in this book—have been produced over the course of the past several decades, addressing various aspects of humanist thought and praxis. These include volumes providing apologetics for humanist orientation(s) as well as others offering a glimpse into the ethics of humanism. Each work has made important contributions to discourse regarding the value of humanism. Yet, meriting more attention is a basic set of questions: What is humanism? Why does it matter? And what do we do with humanism? Other volumes allude to such questions, but vital at this stage of humanism's growth and public appeal is focused attention on these questions through synergy between more academic responses and "on the ground" activist responses—as well as some combination of these positions.

This book, beginning with its title, is an effort to fill this gap by offering pieces by well-regarded figures that take seriously the need for humanists to respond in thoughtful ways to these basic questions. It is not the aim of this book to provide *a* way of defining humanism; nor is it the goal to limit the range of approaches to activism deemed suitable. To the contrary, this volume offers a variety of perspectives and opinions on the meaning and function(s) of humanism. What holds the book together, then, is not consensus on the definition and application of humanism. Rather, the contributors share recognition of the importance of humanism as well as a need to give serious and thoughtful consideration to the workings of humanism—and to do this from a variety of sociocultural angles and sociopolitical perspectives.

The contributors represent the diversity of humanism with respect to gender, race, national origin, and so on. They also constitute a variety of perspectives on humanism—from atheism to religious humanism—and take as a starting point a variety of locations for humanist thought and practice: from academia, to national organizations, to local initiatives. And these differences in orientation are acknowledged through the particular style of presentation offered by the various contributors. For example, attention is given in some cases to the weaving of personal narrative together with larger and more "objective" frameworks, and some authors work with a much more journalistic style than others as their way of suggesting a need for recognition of humanism as more than an academic exercise. These differences, however, do not constitute a problem; they do not point to inconsistencies and unevenness. No, these differences are intentional and are meant to give some representation to the diversity of presentation that marks humanism



writ large. The idea is to present the texture and tone of humanism in the very presentation of humanist thought and practice, and to do so in a way that builds, as each section is connected in a general sense to the previous one. In this way, the layered and complex nature of humanism as lived and thought takes on important and graphic detail.

The volume is divided into three parts, the first of which takes on the question “What is humanism?” It is composed of three chapters offering overlapping but distinct opinions on the definition(s) of humanism. In Chapter 1, Howard B. Radest traces various philosophical perspectives and opinions on the question before settling on a sense of humanism as “a puzzle,” difficult to capture in significant ways in isolation from “reflection and organization.” While Radest’s take on the question is heavily philosophical in nature and draws from the wealth of insight and influence represented by the Enlightenment, Anthony B. Pinn responds in Chapter 2 in a manner guided by cultural studies and religious studies. Pinn suggests that humanism is a method for the making of meaning—a means by which to wrestle with the large and pressing existential and ontological questions of human existence. He argues for a need to recognize the manner in which the racial discourse of difference has impacted—for good or ill—the growth and naming of humanism. Enlarging the scope of concern to an international context, Peter Derkx recognizes similar challenges to those presented by Radest and Pinn, but he concludes in Chapter 3 that humanism is a “meaning frame,” with deep implications for human health and aging. Taken as a whole, the three chapters in the first part of the book suggest that the most useful thinking about the nature and meaning of humanism involves recognition that it is a system—however difficult to capture fully—for fostering the shape and content of human life. It is not a fixed or reified conceptual framework, but rather it is an organic and evolving response to human questions and concerns. With this in mind, the chapters in this section hint at the reasonable nature of much of the debate over what humanism is or isn’t, but instead of simply languishing in the quagmire of incomplete definitions, the authors suggest an ongoing need to connect any definition of humanism with practice. That is to say, humanism is best understood in connection to the naming available through the process of “doing.”

The second part of the book moves beyond the question of humanism’s nature and meaning, and addresses the next logical question: “Why does humanism matter?” In response, Sharon D. Welch (Chapter 4) argues that humanism offers a mode of social ethics equipped to address pressing sociopolitical issues on the national level and the global level through thoughtful public policy and a discourse that values the integrity of life and privileges the positive impact of creativity on our circumstances. Monica R. Miller’s response in Chapter 5 uses hip hop and youth culture as a way of

siphoning out the importance of humanism as a means by which to address the absurdities of human relationships and encounters in their most graphic form. Through this investigation, Miller suggests the importance of scoping out the ways in which humanism grows organically in unlikely places, and the creative means by which diversity of expression might serve to provide the intellectual and cultural tools required to transform social arrangements. In both cases, humanism matters not simply because it provides an alternative way of naming experience and, as a result, provides new ways of thinking about human life. No, both Miller and Welch connect the importance of humanism to its ability to “do work.” Yet, as with the chapters on defining humanism, room is left for creativity and expansion of humanism. All the chapters in the first two parts appreciate the plasticity of humanism and acknowledge the manner in which fluidity and flexibility with respect to the nature and meaning of humanism afford greater opportunity for it to make a difference in the world.

Having given attention to both the meaning of humanism and why it matters, the final part of the book provides attention to concrete moments of application in line with a third question: “What do we do with humanism?” It begins with Sikivu Hutchinson’s call in Chapter 6 for the use of culturally sensitive humanism as a way to address gender discrimination, racism, and classism embedded in the culture of the United States in general and the infrastructure of the humanist movement in particular. In this way, Hutchinson encourages humanists to embrace both an internal and external critique as a way of promoting healthier life options for all. By making this argument, Hutchinson calls for recognition of both humanism’s promise and its problems as the best way of advancing a transformative humanist agenda. Chapter 7 follows, with attention to the application of humanism on the level of individual relationships and encounters with the world. In this case, for Dale McGowan, humanism affords a means by which to tackle the trauma and reality of life in the form of death. The last chapter of the book, written by Maggie Ardiente and Roy Speckhardt, gives clear attention to the means by which humanism serves as tool for policy development and for restructuring negative opinions concerning humanists. In this way, they promote three steps or approaches for advancing a humanist agenda as a means by which to transform societies consistent with humanism’s historical *and* secular framing.

As these chapters show, over the course of time, some have worked to articulate individual and collective visions of thought and practice based on humanist posture(s) toward the world. Often prompted by large shifts in the sociopolitical and economic conditions of life in the United States and the larger global community, these vision statements have typically taken the form of manifestos meant to capture the potential of humanist thinking for

## PREFACE

individual and collective human existence. Because these manifestos provide useful context for the perspectives on humanism provided in this volume, several have been included in an appendix for consideration. These are Humanist Manifestos I–III, and a more recent pronouncement offered by Paul Kurtz. These materials range historically from the fourth decade of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century, and respond to a range of world conditions as well as alterations within the humanist community.

Anthony B. Pinn

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally, I must also express gratitude to the American Humanist Association and to Paul Kurtz for permission to reprint the materials found in the appendix: Humanist Manifestos I–III (American Humanist Association website: [www.americanhumanist.org](http://www.americanhumanist.org)), reprinted by permission of the American Humanist Association; “Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values: Personal, Progressive, and Planetary” (<http://paulkurtz.net>), reprinted by permission of Paul Kurtz.

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## PART I. WHAT IS HUMANISM?

# 1. HUMANISM AS EXPERIENCE

Howard B. Radest

Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that [or "how"] they are, and of things that are not, that [or "how"] they are not. —Protagoras

I am a man, nothing human is alien to me. —Terence

## WHAT IS HUMANISM?

When visiting with humanists in their varied habitats,<sup>1</sup> I often hear arguments about world-shaking ideas. I see little of the acts that ought to follow from them in personal and social life. Perhaps all this talk is a search for stability in a chaotic world; perhaps it is inevitable, given our roots in the academy and the pulpit. But still I am haunted by these repetitions of "meta-physical" arguments like the being or non-being of the deity, or institutional arguments like whether humanism is secular or religious. There is, too, a less than critical liberal politics most of us share that at times borders on self-righteousness.

I know that reason easily turns into rationalism and that acts are more elusive than words. Nor is humanism immune to the Platonic temptation, the escape to the "heaven beyond the heavens." Of course, I take pleasure in words and word-games—I am a philosopher by training after all! At the same time, I am a pragmatist. So I ask: What difference to the world we live in does our talk make? What practical consequences does it have for me and for others? Soon enough, my humanism becomes uncomfortable.

To be sure, there is something about us that enjoys the *word*. The Talmudist and the Scholastic among our more traditional brothers and sisters testify to this. We humanists are not alone. Nevertheless, our frequent inattention to justification by results prevails despite the fact that modern humanism takes its being from participatory democracy and from the sciences. Thus:

The basic idea is presented ... scientific theories are *instruments* or *tools* for coping with reality ... What is essential is that theories pay their way in the long run—that they can be relied upon time and again to solve pressing problems and to clear up significant difficulties confronting inquirers ... though we must always allow for the

possibility that it will eventually have to be replaced by some theory that works even better.<sup>2</sup>

Words can be powerful, stirring passions like those that played no minor part in the American and French revolutions. They were inspired by the Enlightenment with its salons and pamphlets, its arts and literature, and not least of all its *philosophes* and Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. In the nineteenth century, although he denied the humanist label, Felix Adler established Ethical Culture, a non-creedal reformist religious movement that surely deserves the adjective, *humanist*. A charismatic speaker, Adler condemned the self-satisfied churches and temples of his day and called instead for a religion of the "deed." Thus, in resigning the presidency of the Free Religious Association in 1882, he said

What has Boston done for the honor of our principles? What great charitable Movement has found its source here among those who maintain the principle of the freedom of religion? What living thing for the good of mankind, for the perfecting of morality among yourselves and others emanated within the last twenty years from the Free Religious circles of this city? I say to you friends ... these annual meetings will not answer.<sup>3</sup>

Adler and the Ethical Culture societies followed with a dramatic record of achievements in education, housing, law, business, politics, health care, settlement houses, and so on. He and his colleagues created a legacy of the act that still motivates his successors nearly 150 years later.

Adler had company. Unitarian radicals in the first half of the twentieth century, ministers like Curtis Reese, formerly a Southern Baptist preacher, John Dietrich, formerly a minister in the Reformed Church, and Charles Potter, formerly a Baptist minister, led the way to institutional and organizational change. The move—and not just among Unitarians—toward ethical and naturalist religion gained momentum here and abroad. With that move, the market place and the laboratory joined the academy and the pulpit as the scene of religious reform. From that move in religion and philosophy emerged consequences for person and society, and, indeed, for inquiry itself. For example, Dietrich wrote:

There are two theories of the world—the theistic view, which holds that the world is under the control of a supernatural being ... and that without his will nothing can be done. The other is the Humanistic view, which teaches that everything that is done in this world is done by man in accordance with the laws of nature