

Humanists need to reassess values often

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Within most religious belief, it is held that ethical principles originate from God. Religion usually affirms that God has planned and created the universe. God has planned the world so that humans who follow God's plans will be happier, their lives more fulfilled, and after death, they will be united with God in heavenly bliss. Of course, this is a simplified version of how religious believers accept ethical principles, but it is more or less the account that many religious believers hold.

Some religious humanists and nearly all secular humanists think that ethical values originate in the minds and everyday human experiences of people who think about meanings and values. Of course, those who don't believe in God are not likely to expect God to hand out ready-made ethics. But conscientious secular humanists are required to think about where their beliefs and ethics originate. Does this mean humanists are more intelligent than their religious counter-parts? No, it doesn't mean that at all, but it may mean that humanists are more likely to constantly need to assess, and reassess, which ethical principles are more workable in everyday situations. They are less likely to accept what they have been told from early childhood to be the right set of values or to stick steadfastly to that which has been presented as unchangeable ethical codes.

For humanists, the core of ethical values resides in all things human. That is, in humanity, humaneness, humanitarianism, human rights, human well-being, and the humanities (as in early Greek and Roman studies of philosophy and literature in search of human values). As social beings, humanists seek to act with compassion towards their fellow humans and to make life better for all human-kind. This is a tall order and one that is taken seriously both by religious humanists and by secular humanists.

Do ethical values change from time to time? Yes, whether people stick to strict religious dogma or to more humanistic thought. Many opinions are now accepted

in religions that were once regarded as unacceptable moral codes, and the converse is also true.

People no longer expect that women ought to wear hats in church services. Nor do we expect stores to remain closed on Sundays. We have gradually shifted our thinking about polluting our air or water, stem cell research, the use of anesthetics in medical operations, acceptance of racial diversity, inter-racial marriages, acceptance of cremation, and variations in sexual orientation. These, and many more shifts in ethical codes have come about, not because there are more humanists today than previously, but because both religious and non-religious values gradually shift in spite of efforts of many religions to keep them constant and unchanging.

One of the frequent criticisms of humanist ethical principles is that they are relativistic. That is, they change from culture to culture and from time to time depending upon current situations. What may be viewed as ethical at one time or place may later be seen as without ethical value in another place and time. But it is also true that religious thinking is subject to ongoing changes according to cultural shifts.

Consider for a moment the varieties of religious thought throughout the history of the world. There are currently about twenty-one major religions. Examples are Christianity, Muslims, Judaism, Hindus, etc. But each of these twenty-one major religions subdivides into many branches. In fact, there are so many subdivisions that some estimates range from approximately 5000 upwards to figures much higher. This large number is evidence of a great variety of religious interpretations of God's ethical codes and religions' relativistic sifts.

Fortunately, one of the cohesive beliefs of this multitude of religious choices is that many, but not all, are united in their care for humanity. Today's respected heroes such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, were united in their quest for concepts of human equality and dignity rather than for their diverse theological beliefs. Their humanistic principles of fairness and caring for their fellow humans, is what sets them apart as ethical giants. Each suffered hardships in bringing about improvement through their ethical concepts

and in making conditions better for human-kind. They were practical leaders who worked within the times and resources and the ethical challenges they encountered.