

Humanists announce formation of new institute dedicated to ethics

Brandishing a statement of "Neo-Humanist" values, a group of leaders in the humanist movement has established a new non-profit aiming to re-humanize secularism.

"We aim to be inclusive and to work with religious and non-religious groups to help solve common problems facing the Planetary community," Paul Kurtz, chairman of the new Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV), said.

Kurtz also said the group will promote scientific inquiry and critical thinking in evaluating claims and "develop values that are naturalistic and humanistic in character and appropriate to the 21st century." He said religion is often at the root of society's ethical values, and that ISHV wants to reevaluate them on rational grounds.

"We're going to enlist the brightest scientists and scholars, and not just in the United States but everywhere there are humanists," Kurtz said. "We want to find out how to better develop the common moral virtues that we share as human beings."

Kurtz is an emeritus professor of philosophy and has been involved in humanist, skeptical, and secularist movements for more than 30 years. In 1991 he brought together two organizations, one focused on skepticism and the other on humanism, to form the Center for Inquiry (CFI). Kurtz resigned from CFI's board in May of this year.

"The secularist garden doesn't necessarily produce humanist blooms," Kurtz said. "The questions we want to answer are, how do you develop among secularists a personal morality? How does one develop empathy? How can we motivate morality? It's a common belief that morality can only come from religion. Well, I have known scores of excellent human beings who behave very morally and yet do not subscribe to religious belief systems."

Kurtz, with input from other prominent humanists, has composed a "Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values" that will help guide the new organization's activities. It is the latest public declaration of a humanist movement that has been punctuated by similar documents in 1933, 1973, and 2003. The Statement is signed by more than 100 prominent Humanists including Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, former Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, and writer Ann Druyan, wife of the late Carl Sagan.

The Statement lays out 16 "recommendations" that emphasize the development of a positive ethical system in order to help the humanist movement better understand and express what it is for.

"We've never had a problem expressing what we're against," Kurtz said. "Humanists have always been critical of theism. But as our movement matures politically and socially, it will be beneficial to express our positive values, like ethical values based on reason and support for critical thinking as a way to solve public problems."

The Statement also includes some decidedly liberal ideas, including support for the rights of "women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities," and for "education, health care, gainful employment, and other social benefits."

Other recommendations support democracy, a "green economy," population restraint, and "progressive positions on the economy."

Toni Van Pelt, former director of CFI's lobbying arm the Office of Public Policy, said that humanism had significant accomplishments petitioning Congress over the last several years.

"We had great success, to the point where several members accepted our Science and Reason award and even spoke in our D.C. office, which was just a short walk from the Capitol," Van Pelt said.

Van Pelt, who signed the new Statement, said part of ISHV's mission would be to fill the lobbying gap left by the effective closure of CFI's Office of Public Policy.

Retired NASA astrophysicist Stuart Jordan is also among ISHV's organizers. He said ethics would take priority in ISHV's activities. "Science and reason are the means to achieving the ethical goals, which were and are the ultimate goals of the Enlightenment that helped jump start our country," he said. "The overriding goal was and still is a better world for all humanity."

Kurtz said what he sees as a crisis in secularism prompted him to form the ISHV. "It is becoming obvious to an increasing number of secularists that to be disaffected from religion doesn't bestow moral or ethical superiority," he said. "For example, Ayn Rand and her ideological heirs promote freedom, but don't consider the virtue in selflessness and cooperation. We want to investigate whether there is a moral framework reinforced by reason that non-theists can embrace."

Paul Kurtz is the author of more than 50 books and is a Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York at Buffalo. To schedule an interview with him, please contact Jesse Christopherson at (480) 882-8370 or jchristopherson@ishv.net.

For additional information see the attached "Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values" and visit:

- <http://www.instituteforscienceandhumanvalues.net/>
- <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Institute-for-Science-and-Human-Values/126165470752456?ref=ts>