

On Black Non-Theism and Unity

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

When I founded African Americans for Humanism (AAH) in 1989, our goal was to attract more people of African descent throughout the world to organized humanism. We were successful in establishing and/or strengthening 72 African humanist groups in 30 African nations. We also helped to strengthen a humanist group in Haiti and Curacao, and we established contacts with Black humanists in Barbados, the Netherlands, Canada, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, England, and other nations.

Over the past few years, the numbers of African Americans involved in organized non-theism have grown a great deal. There are quite a few Black non-theist groups throughout the U.S. Black non-theists hold conferences, Black atheist philosophers congregate to read papers, Black atheist Donald Wright of Houston established a day for Black non-believers to come out of the closet on the last Sunday in February, Black History Month, etc. There have been quite a few books by African American non-theists, and African American non-theists have been invited to speak at major non-theist conferences with far greater frequency than in years past.

However, it is deeply troubling that, since my departure from AAH in 2010, African American non-theists no longer establish close contacts with their counterparts in other countries. When I led AAH, we published articles and essays by and about Black humanists in Africa, and to a lesser extent, the Caribbean. We traveled to Africa and invited African humanists to visit us in the U.S. However, on Websites and podcasts hosted by African American non-theists, there is nothing by or about humanists or humanism among Blacks outside the U.S., and there are no regular trips between members of African and African American humanist groups.

This problem even manifests itself among the Blacker-than-thou Afrocentric African power freaks of the Black Atheists of Atlanta. Despite all of their professions of supposed African superiority, they know nothing about organized non-theism in Africa, the Caribbean, or anywhere else outside the U.S.

This might not be surprising to many. After all, many Americans, including African Americans, are only concerned with what happens in their own nation. Indeed, many Americans actually brag about their ignorance and lack of concern regarding anything that happens outside the borders of their nation.

Sadly, for many African Americans, it is considered traitorous for Black people in the U.S. to extend assistance to their sisters and brothers outside the U.S. This mindset came to the fore a few years ago when Oprah Winfrey contributed a great deal of money to educate girls in South Africa. Many African Americans harshly criticized Winfrey and complained that as long as African Americans are economically deprived, that money should be invested in African American neighborhoods. However, people that harbor such attitudes should remember the saying that “charity begins at home, but it should not end there.”

Organized humanism in Africa goes back to the 1950s. Samuel Etu founded the Nigerian Humanist Association. According to leading Nigerian humanist activist Leo Igwe, “Not much is known about this group. But it is believed it did not survive the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). In fact, there are no clear signs of its continued activity after the war.” (“Humanism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Reflections from a Humanist Organizer and Activist,” by Leo Igwe, p. 40 in *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism: The Colors*

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In recent years, Igwe has visited the U.S. to speak at many gatherings of non-theists. However, he has been able to make very little contact with African Americans involved in organized humanism. This is a hindrance to the development of organized humanism among Africans and African Americans.

When I was involved in organized humanism, I joined Igwe and others in establishing the African Humanist Alliance. Long before that, the agnostics W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James organized Pan African Congresses for people of African descent. Du Bois was the secretary of the first Pan African Congress in London in 1900. There were also congresses held in London and Lisbon in 1923, in Harlem in 1927, and in Manchester, England in 1945. These were not conferences for non-theists. However, Blacks from all over the world were welcomed.

There is no reason to suppose that humanists of African descent could not hold international conferences and form international alliances. There have been other international alliances among humanists in Latin America (which I helped initiate), Asia, among Arabs and ex-Muslims, and others. Humanists of African descent should strive to unite in similar fashion.