

Humanist Benchmarks

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

From November 22-24, 2013, Toni Van Pelt, public policy director and congressional lobbyist for the Institute for Science and Human Values, and I presented papers and were involved in discussions at a symposium of the Institute for Humanist Studies, held at Rice University. The theme of the symposium was relating humanism to the non-humanist world.

After I gave my presentation, Anthony Pinn, a leading scholar and director of research for the Institute for Humanist Studies, asked me to discuss some humanist benchmarks. However, I could not think of any. Since then, I have given the subject more thought.

Perhaps more than any other organized humanist endeavor, I have been highly impressed by the work and reach of Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS), founded by James Christopher in 1985. While I was with the Council for Secular Humanism, I had the pleasure of supporting the organization, primarily as its book keeper. I had the opportunity to see how the group was saving and improving the lives of thousands of alcoholics and drug addicts, all without a reliance upon a supposed Higher Power. Since the founding of SOS, other non-religious organizations have come forth to rehabilitate alcoholics and drug users without prayer.

Another important movement in the history of humanism was the Harlem Renaissance. This major literary and arts movement was led by such humanists as the poets Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, the writers Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer and others. (One can learn about writers and thinkers such as these in my first book, *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, my contributions to Tom Flynn's *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, and in many of my other writings.) This humanist movement had a profoundly positive influence upon the ways in which African Americans saw themselves.

Humanists have made important contributions to the women's rights movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was editor of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895-1896. The book demonstrated the numerous ways in which sexist biblical writings have contributed to the oppression of women.

However, long before Stanton, there was an even more impressive humanist benchmark. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote what many believe to be the first book spelling out the need for women's rights, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the 19th century, Ernestine L. Rose, Matilda Joslyn Gage and other non-religious women contributed greatly to the cause of women's rights; and many others have continued to do so up to the present day.

In the area of LGBT rights, Peter Tatchell and other humanist leaders helped combat homophobia in South Africa. Due in large part to their work, a major humanist benchmark was reached when the South African government became the first national government to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in their constitution.

I have set a few benchmarks myself. In 1991, with the publication of my aforementioned first book, I was the first to establish a strong historical foundation for Black humanism, atheism, agnosticism

and freethought. In 1989, I established African Americans for Humanism (AAH), the only international organization dedicated to promoting humanism, freethought and skepticism to Black people worldwide. Also in 1991, I founded and edited *The AAH Examiner*, the only regularly published journal by and for humanists of African descent. (The journal was no longer published after my departure from AAH in 2010.)

There have been other important Black humanist benchmarks. The Black Panthers promoted what they referred to as revolutionary humanism. Though they were widely known for toting guns and getting into battles with the police, they put forth a completely secular ten-point program for social and economic justice. Moreover, they operated free breakfast programs for the poor, transportation for the elderly, health clinics, etc.

Another benchmark was the establishment of Kwanzaa by the Black non-theist Maulana Karenga. The African-centered celebration, held from December 26 to January 1, is a *cultural* celebration, and not a religious observance, as Karenga constantly points out.

More recently, a humanist benchmark was reached at the Reason Rally held in Washington, D.C. in 2012. There were at least 20,000 in attendance. This was far more than the 3,000 that attended the Godless March on Washington in 2002, at which I was a speaker.

Humanists have set benchmarks in the area of charity. They have given money to disaster relief efforts in the Philippines, New Orleans, the New York City area, Asia, and many other parts of the globe. However, humanist charity is low in comparison to religious charity, owing in no small part to the much larger numbers of religionists. In any case, humanists must do much better in this regard.

Indeed, what Anthony Pinn was probably getting at is the fact that we need to set new humanist benchmarks. One of those benchmarks could be to try to get at least 10% of all humanists worldwide involved in organized humanism. This would include at least 10% of all Black, White, Brown, Red, Asian, aborigines, and Arab humanists, and any mixtures thereof.

At the next Reason Rally, why not shoot for at least 40,000? If the numbers could go from 3,000 to 20,000 in ten years, it should not be unreasonable to suppose that the numbers from the last gathering could at least be doubled.

Last but certainly not least, organized humanists should try to establish important benchmarks in the areas of social justice, economic justice, and prisoners' rights. Indeed, these areas are in dire need of attention, and how we address them will ultimately determine where we are headed as a species.