

# *The Arrogance of Humanism*

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Some years ago I attended a humanist conference. In attendance were African American humanist scholar Anthony Pinn and my old colleague, Verle Muhrer, of Kansas City. Pinn was astounded to hear some cold, callous remarks coming from a self-professed humanist. I told Pinn that it should not be surprising that humanists are capable of such callousness. After all, they are fallible human beings. Moreover, I pointed out that some humanists imagine themselves to be completely objective and above and beyond any negative influences of their culture, history, etc. This prompted Muhrer to say that perhaps we need a book titled *The Arrogance of Humanism* to complement Forrest Woods' excellent book, *The Arrogance of Faith*, a superb critique of the role of biblical teachings in the defense of slavery.

Earlier in the 1990s, I attended a gathering of humanists in Kansas City (hosted, coincidentally, by Muhrer.) In attendance was the Black psychologist Charles W. Faulkner. A White male humanist approached Faulkner and me as we were speaking. The White man had the unmitigated gall to ask us why Black people are lazy! We were stunned by this man's ignorance and audacity. I had stern words for him. However, he said that as a critical thinking humanist, he knew from experience that what he was saying was true.

These are just a couple of anecdotal stories I am using to make my case that some humanists are incredibly arrogant. Some humanists believe they are necessarily incapable of racism, sexism or any other kind of bigotry. Complicating matters, many White humanists believe that Western (White) civilization is the gold standard of rationality and objectivity.

Many humanists blindly embrace scientism. They ignore and/or downplay racism in science and medicine, imagining these fields to be free from all forms of bias. However, this is certainly not the case. For example, in her recently published book, *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels*, Sikivu Hutchinson discusses racism in medicine:

“In her book *Medical Apartheid*, Harriet Washington documents how the field of gynecology developed through experimentation on black female slaves. Black women were used for gruesome experiments that often left them maimed or infertile. In 1852, a white physician named Marion Sims was credited with pioneering the groundbreaking vesico-vaginal fistula procedure. Sims' research, which involved fashioning sutures to stabilize the vagina, had been pioneered on the bodies of captive black women.” (p. 161.)

Then there is the ugly history in the U.S. and other ostensibly democratic nations in which tens of thousands of non-White women have been sterilized against their will. White male humanists in particular never discuss these kinds of issues except to dismiss them as the ravings of paranoid conspiracy theorists, and to serve as apologists for White Western civilization.

Recently many women have brought charges of sexism against male humanist leaders. For example, in the summer 2013 (Volume 3, Number 2) issue of *The Human Prospect: A*

*Neohumanist Perspective*, journalist, writer and blogger Lindsay Beyerstein discusses the sexist views of such non-theists as TJ Kincaid, “The Amazing Atheist”:

“As far as strengthening the secular community, the single greatest threat to community cohesion is an online subculture of virulent misogyny personified by the Amazing Atheist and his fans. (The Amazing Atheist is notorious for repeatedly threatening to rape a woman who identified herself as a rape survivor during an online discussion.) Feminist freethought activists, particularly feminist bloggers, are being deluged with abuse, including rape and death threats from fellow secularists. One prominent secular feminist blogger, Jennifer McCreight, abandoned blogging [altogether] after a sustained campaign of online harassment.” (“Why Secularism Needs Feminism,” p. 34.)

Too many White male secular humanists in particular all too often greet these kinds of charges with incredulity, ridicule or worse. Sadly, however, such bigotry among humanists is nothing new. In earlier years, leading freethinkers such as James Hervey Johnson and Woolsey Teller promoted much racist thought. Moreover, many of the heroes of White male humanists, such as Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire and David Hume put forth racist ideas. Furthermore, when White humanists promote the Enlightenment, there is precious little discussion of the racism and sexism that characterized that movement.

Many White humanists do not understand that race trumps humanism, just as it does everything else. There are certain ideas and interests that unite racial groups far more than humanism, religion, etc. ever could. For example, the racial divide over the Trayvon Martin case, the O.J. Simpson murder trial and numerous other cases highlighted the fact that, no matter how objective one professes to be, many people continue to see everything through the prism of race.

There are many White non-theists, like Richard Dawkins, that believe that because human rights conditions are so much worse in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other parts of the globe, victims in the West should simply be thankful that they have it so good. However, this mindset is arrogant and insensitive. Rape, sexual harassment, racial profiling, stop-and-frisk policies, redlining, racism, etc. still occur in the Western world, and not surprisingly, victims in the Western world are going to be first and foremost concerned with their own suffering.

Arrogant humanists need a reality check, and quickly. They need to understand that we all have our biases, and the challenge is to try to eliminate all bias and to strive toward true objectivity and fairness. However, the coldly analytical approach will not make people more humane. Until more humanists understand the importance of developing what Robert Ingersoll called a “caring rationalism,” the arrogance of humanism will continue to plague the humanist movement.