

**The Neo-humanism of Paul Kurtz**  
**Presented by Harold W.Wood, Jr.**  
**at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia**

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Paul Kurtz – one of America’s leading humanists, the author of several editions of the “Humanist Manifesto” has often been called —”the father of secular humanism.” As a member of the [American Humanist Association](#), and a long-time editor of its magazine, *The Humanist*, he contributed to the writing of [Humanist Manifesto II](#) in 1973, which was an update on the original 1933 document. Before Kurtz embraced the term "[secular humanism](#)," which had received wide publicity through fundamentalist Christians in the 1980s, humanism was more widely perceived as a religion that did not include the supernatural. This can be seen in the first article of the original [Humanist Manifesto](#) in 1933 which refers to "Religious Humanists," by the major development of humanism as a religious philosophy which began to be taught in Unitarian Universalists theological seminaries in the 40s and 50s, and by Charles and Clara Potter's influential 1930 book [Humanism: A New Religion](#).

But there has been recent controversy among the ranks of the secular humanists. In May of 2010, Dr. Paul Kurtz, resigned from the [Center for Inquiry](#), the world’s foremost secular humanist organization, which he founded in 1991. Kurtz’s resignation stems from both managerial and philosophical disagreements with the direction of CFI.

One of the reasons is this: in 2009, the Center for Inquiry announced “Blasphemy Day,” which established September 30th “as a day to promote free speech and to stand up in a show of solidarity for the freedom to challenge, criticize, and satirize religion without fear of murder, litigation, or reprisal.” The announcement of this event was met with mixed reactions in the humanist community.

Among the most vocal critics of “Blasphemy Day” was Kurtz. He wrote at the time:

The celebrating of “Blasphemy Day” by the Center for Inquiry by sponsoring a contest encouraging new forms of blasphemy, I believe is most unwise. It betrays the civic virtues of democracy. I support the premise that religion should be open to the critical examination of its claims, like all other institutions in society. I do have serious reservations about the forms that these criticisms take.

It is one thing to examine the claims of religion in a responsible way by calling attention to Biblical, Koranic or scientific criticisms, it is quite another to violate the key humanistic principle of tolerance. One may disagree with contending religious beliefs, but to denigrate them by rude caricatures borders on hate speech.

Another of the off-shoots from this controversy is Paul Kurtz is now leading the way to not only promote greater tolerance, but to support the “greening” of humanism. Paul Kurtz and other leading humanists are now advocating a new statement for modern humanism, called “Neo-humanism.” Their recently issued document, largely written by Dr. Kurtz, is entitled the “NEO-HUMANIST STATEMENT OF SECULAR PRINCIPLES AND VALUES: PERSONAL, PROGRESSIVE, AND PLANETARY. So far, this new statement is being signed by dozens of leading humanists, skeptics, and free-thinkers, though of course not by many in the

“New Atheists” movement or some of the more traditional humanists.

Despite his use of the term “secular,” this statement calls for an ongoing relationship with the world’s religions, rather than outright rejection of them. I find these statements to be much closer to the philosophy of Unitarian Universalism than the current Humanist Manifestos I, II, or III. In fact, among the signers of the NeoHumanism Statement include some of our leading UU Humanists, including William R Murry, Unitarian Minister, Past President and Dean of Meadville Lombard Theological School, David Schafer, President, HUHumanists Association (Unitarian Universalist Humanists), and by Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow who many of us know through his speaking events here – the author of *Thank God for Evolution*.

This form of neo-humanism clearly represents a major evolution of “humanist teachings,” which is part of our Fifth Source. For example, among the first 16 points in Paul Kurz sixteen recommendations for neo-humanists is this:

Neo-Humanists:

1. aspire to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to religious believers who share common goals;
2. are critical of theism;
3. are best defined by what they are for, not what they are against.

The statement on Neo-humanism acknowledges the traditional split between Religious Believers and atheists, but points out that a black and white approach of opposition between these two camps is neither realistic nor productive. The statement on Neo-humanism recognizes, “the community of religious dissenters includes not only atheists, but secular and religious humanists, agnostics, skeptics, and even a significant number of religiously affiliated individuals.” The statement recognizes “Among the self-described religious humanists, we may find people identified with liberal Protestant denominations and Unitarian Universalists, secular Jews, lapsed Catholics, Muslims, or Hindus. Although they are naturalistic humanists rather than supernaturalists and do not believe in a transcendent God, they wish to encourage a new humanist cultural identity based primarily on ethical ideals that are humanistic.”

Just like traditional Humanists, Neo-Humanists “wish to use critical thinking, evidence, and reason to evaluate claims to knowledge.” But neo-humanists go further. In Kurz recommendations include the following key components, which again I find to be more in the camp of UUism than in traditional Humanism, tying in our same principles of social justice and for environmental protection flowing out of our respect for the inter-dependent web of all existence:

Neo-Humanists:

11. accept responsibility for the well-being of society, guaranteeing various rights, including those of women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; and supporting education, health care, gainful employment, and other social benefits;
12. support a green economy;
13. advocate population restraint, environmental protection, and the protection of other species.

The Neo-Humanist statement goes considerably beyond the previous Humanist Manifestos by stating: “We have an obligation to future generations yet unborn, and a moral responsibility to *ecohumanism*; namely, a loving care and concern for our planet and life on it.”

For those of us who accept and value the findings of science, yet find spiritual inspiration in scientific knowledge and the scientific method, I find this final quote I want to make from the Neo-humanist Statement to perhaps go even one step beyond our 7<sup>th</sup> principle of respect for the inter-dependent web of all existence:

“Among the highest virtues that we can cultivate is some *reverence for nature*, and an appreciation of the bounty that it affords for the human and other species.”

Surely our study of the seven quintillion five quadrillion grains of sand on earth, and knowing, as Carl Sagan said "The total number of stars in the Universe is larger than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of the planet Earth" helps us realize the science is not merely a source of scientific information and technology, but something that helps us cultivate a sense of wonder and even reverence for the mystery of the Universe.