

Organized Unbelief, Social Justice and Branding

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Today many non-theists maintain that too few leaders and organizations among unbelievers are involved in social justice. They maintain that non-theists give too much attention to church/state separation, defense of evolution, religious criticism, etc.

However, many of these critics seem to go too far in the other direction. Rather than working to see to it that social justice becomes a major component of their activities, these critics actually make unbelief a minor consideration in their social justice work.

Now would be a good time to go over some important definitions in no particular order:

- Secular humanism: a system of doctrines or practices that disregards or rejects any form of religious faith and worship
- Secularism: the belief that religion and ecclesiastical affairs should not enter into the functions of the state, esp. into public education
- Skepticism: doubt about fundamental religious doctrines [or paranormal claims]
- Atheism: without a belief in God or gods
- Freethought: the formation of opinions about religion, politics, morals, etc., independently of tradition, authority, or established belief
- Rationalism: the principle or practice of accepting reason as the only authority in determining one's opinions or course of action

One may agree or disagree with any or all of these definitions. However, the point is that in none of these terms is social justice at the center; and this is as it should be. Yet for some non-theists, social justice has come to be practically synonymous with humanism, secular humanism, skepticism, etc.

Some humanists are extreme in this regard. For example, Barry Seidman, a long-time humanist from New Jersey, defines humanism as a “non-hierarchical” system. In other words, Seidman is an anarcho-socialist or libertarian socialist. In his estimation, a true humanist must embrace libertarian socialism or some other supposedly non-hierarchical system.

The Black Atheists of Atlanta equate atheism with Afrocentrism and reactionary African nationalism. They have maintained that any organization with the word “Black” in the title must necessarily be closed to non-Blacks, especially Whites. After all is said and done, the Black Atheists of Atlanta are simply Afrocentrists that might happen to be atheists. Indeed, they rarely even *discuss* atheism.

However, other non-theists are not so narrow and dogmatic with their definitions. They simply go about promoting social justice in the name of skepticism, atheism, humanism, freethought, etc. That

is to say, the emphasis is on social justice, and not unbelief, though one could not tell this from the organizations' names.

This causes a great deal of confusion, anger and resentment. However, it does not have to be that way. The burning question is: Why do these non-theists that are almost exclusively concerned with social justice not simply form secular social justice organizations, or join secular social justice organizations that already exist? This way, they would be attracting and working with the best social justice advocates from among the non-religious *and* the religious.

Indeed, this is the way it worked in the past. Great leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, James Forman, W.E.B. Du Bois, Hubert H. Harrison, Maulana Karenga, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and others formed secular organizations to advance their causes. (Moreover, the names of their organizations did not obscure their primary interests.) Yet they did not imply that their primary interest was in promoting secularism, non-theism, etc. per se.

Newton and Seale founded the Black Panther Party and called their philosophy "revolutionary humanism," a term most of their followers were not even familiar with. This was not the same as having an organization primarily dedicated to the furthering of secular humanism per se, and no one had a problem with that. Social justice was the main goal. There was no confusion. There was nothing in the name of the organization that would have misled any thinking person to assume that social justice was not the main concern of the organization.

Some of today's social justice advocates seem to be trying to coerce or hijack the non-theist movement by falsely equating non-theism with social justice. However, these terms are simply not one and the same.

It would certainly improve matters if those that are first and foremost concerned with social justice would see to it that their goal is reflected in their groups' names and prominently displayed mission statements. Names such as the Radical Humanist Group, Humanists for Social Justice, etc. would let non-theists know what they are getting into. The Atheism Plus movement is a good example of this. To equate social justice with non-theism, however, seems disingenuous, and it is certainly misleading.

The late Gordon Stein edited a journal called *The American Rationalist* (now published by the Council for Secular Humanism.) Stein was of the opinion that the numbers of organized humanists were so small that it was best to focus only on rationalism and to avoid subjects that might divide non-theists. Many non-theists share this view.

Today it is hard to get the various non-theist groups to agree to support a single social justice issue. It seems that one answer to that is to first focus on trying to get more non-theists to come out of the closet. Until non-theists constitute a critical mass, any kind of meaningful large-scale activism will continue to be a dream.

Meanwhile, those non-theists that are only concerned with social justice issues should be above board and make that fact immediately known to those humanists seeking to join and network with like-minded people.