

# **The Humanist Institute**

by Robert B. Tapp

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Over the years, many individuals and many organizations have labeled themselves “humanist.” “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose—neither more or less.” There is no way to freeze dry or copyright the term “humanist.” For some it is a proud label; for others it is an evil force in modern societies. It is, however, important to remember that ideas and ideologies succeed to the extent that they build organizations—and that studying organizational histories may be more helpful than a focus upon individual claims and usages.

Those who hold minority philosophical views—including North American nontheistic, naturalistic humanists—have traditionally been prone to disagree with all who don’t think exactly like themselves. Thus, the varied trajectories of modern humanism (free-thought, free religion, liberal religion, Ethical Culture, religious humanism, and secular humanism) are strewn with factionalism and personal feuds. The ability to compromise, adjust, negotiate, synthesize, or even empathize has often been woefully absent—resulting in conflict within and between various humanist institutions.

In 1982, a number of us created the North American Committee for Humanism (NACH). We had come together as individuals, but most of us belonged to one or more humanist organizations. Unnecessary rivalries among these groups troubled us, and we saw a common humanist denominator that needed to be articulated and expanded. We were convinced that a shared training of new leaders and a common reassessment of our separate histories would strengthen the humanist cause.

On the founding board were humanist leaders affiliated with the American Ethical Union, the American Humanist Association, the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (now the Council for Secular Humanism), the Fellowship of Religious Humanists (later Friends of Religious Humanism, and now HUHumanists), an affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Humanist Association of Canada, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. NACH’s first project utilizing this united effort was the establishment of the Humanist Institute (HI), which enrolled its first class in 1984.

Although the institute was committed to the task of training new humanist leaders for the future, current leaders sometimes joined the classes—their presence helping to develop the nascent curriculum. Gradually, the institute broadened its purposes to include the training of humanists not necessarily seeking an identifiable humanist career but simply wanting to become more effective humanist voices.

The founding dean of the Institute was Howard Radest, who served at that time as

director of the Ethical Culture Schools in New York City. Humanist Institute classes met in Manhattan through the hospitality of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Radest mentored the first class and began the construction of what would be an intensive course of study. The ongoing dialectic among students and faculty helped shape topics for the second- and third-year curricula.

As the Institute evolved, new mentors were added, being paired to achieve balance regarding gender, philosophical approach, and organizational background. Training of future humanist leaders also requires a strong adjunct faculty, made up of those with organizational as well as academic expertise. A significant part of our annual budgeting goes toward bringing this faculty together to critically face major issues and publish the results in *Humanism Today*. Now in its fifteenth volume, this journal is available online, where people around the world (not only those who can afford computers but also anyone with public or educational library access), can read the articles, at [www.humanistinstitute.org](http://www.humanistinstitute.org).

Academically, class readings were at the graduate level, and seminars principally involved Socratic dialogue as opposed to traditional lectures. Given NACH's mission to facilitate a bonding of humanists from varied traditions, the institute curriculum embraced the ideas of a wide range of freethought, liberal religious, religious humanist, and secular humanist forerunners.

From the outset, major attention was devoted to science as a source of humanist thinking. Students were expected to develop a working knowledge of frontiers of modern science as they affect society, and to evaluate various pseudosciences critically. They also became involved in critiquing contemporary attacks on science by post-modernists as well as the religious right.

Major sessions were also built around racism and gender issues, with the goal of cutting through simplistic solutions and helping students lead groups into more reality-based and sophisticated positions. In addition, considerable attention was paid to economic and political issues, which necessitated an analysis of "atheism without humanism." Currently, more attention is devoted to problems of market economies and questions of justice in the distribution of wealth.

Great emphasis was also given to changing family structures, with both their promises and problems. Academic ethics was studied, particularly in relation to child moral development and the educational process. Along with such topics, there were institute sessions on humanism and the arts and the place ceremonies occupy in humanist living.

NACH and its Institute afford a way for leaders of varied organizations to study together, learning better the histories and experiences of each grouping. At the same time, a common thread humanist history emerges, linking those who are committed to a naturalistic philosophy that sees humans as responsible for human history, and sees the sciences as affording our best knowledge of who we are and where we are. On the basis of this growing knowledge, we can best make our ethical decisions and surround them with the supports of all the arts—poetry, song, dance, music, story, visual. Artistic and emotional experiences are important in expanding our visions and our joys, and in suggesting new possibilities for human flourishing—and in expanding the common good.

Worldviews based on philosophy alone seldom survive; worldviews based on some emotional surge (nationalism, tribalism, supernaturalism) divide humans and foster horrible violence. The focus of humanism has always been primarily ethical—achieving

good lives for individuals and their groupings on universal bases. A commitment to universal human rights, and a commitment to extending these rights to persons overlooked or victimized on the basis of belonging to subgroups of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age—this is the motivation of humanistic ethics. Not fixed codes based on some past culture, but guidelines and proposals that strengthen human dignity on a universal basis. This also necessitates concern for our surrounding and sustaining non-human environment.

As the Institute brings a sophisticated reading of the modern condition into fruitful dialogue among humanists of various traditions, it seeks to broaden the usual humanist concerns to include issues like racism, sexism, ageism, and intellectual and social freedom. The institute seeks to help humanists come to terms with various economic systems, foster a reduction in social violence, promote the intelligent development and application of technology, assist in the building of cultures in which science can flourish, and, above all, develop rational, moral perspectives that can expand the quality of life for rich and poor individuals and nations alike. These concerns, along with environmentalism and human rights, are global in nature and demand a global ethic—one that stands alone, unencumbered by ideological, theological, and “spiritual” dogmas and ambiguities.

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No doubt stimulated by the success of the Institute, several humanist organizations have instituted leadership-training structures of their own. This includes the American Ethical Union, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the Center for Inquiry. We need to find ways to ensure the recognition and appreciation of an ecumenical humanism within these ventures. Only through the training of humanist leaders can humanists ensure that their philosophy will be a vital option for our grandchildren. The survival, let alone the flourishing, of ideas requires several supports: leaders, structures, institutions, and funds. These are what make possible the clear statement and restatement of ideas to each generation, as well as a dialogue between these ideas and developing thought. It is toward all of this that the institute continues to provide in-depth training in the humanist philosophy and its applications.

### *Notes*

A complete list of HI participating organizations, along with their contact information, can be found at [www.humanistinstitute.org](http://www.humanistinstitute.org).