

Resource Guide: Ethical and Humanist Perspectives on Climate Change

compiled by Donald Frederick

Overview

Western ethics and humanist perspectives have long sought the good via the work of humans. Secular Humanism and Religious Humanism share common ground with regard to human rights and well-being. Additionally, Humanism, in all its stripes, shares this same concern – human well-being – with those who are members of a religious faith tradition. Like most major religions, humanism and secular ethics share a belief in the commonality of man and the ethical imperative of the “golden rule”: treat others as you would like them to treat you.

Today there is a new Humanism emerging that diverges from previous humanist traditions in its belief that humanity is no longer and never was the center of the universe, nor was it the final cause of creation. Instead, today humanity must come to grips with its new place as just another part of the planet, one species among many. It is in this new realization that we learn that the Earth was not made for only our needs, but was made to sustain all beings. We, as late comers, have an ethical obligation to protect that which has allowed us to thrive. It has been through the ecological and evolutionary sciences that we have arrived at this newer and better understanding.

Today, we have indisputable evidence that global climate change is real and that we are major contributors to the change.

At the 2002 meeting in Amsterdam of the International Human and Ethical Union (IHEU), the umbrella organization for various humanist groups, a new Amsterdam Charter was signed. The new charter extended the original signed in 1952, also in Amsterdam. In the 2002 document (see www.iheu.org/amsterdamdeclaration), the fourth principle states:

Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility. Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognizes our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic <sic>, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination. (Underline added)

As humanists and ethical beings, we realize that we have a moral obligation to sustain and protect the natural world, especially now in the face of climate change. It is this view that guides the declaration on the environment by IHEU Congress in 1992. It states, in part, that “The IHEU Congress. . . declares that humanists will: 1. Accept the challenge to bend the current development into a direction of sustainable life” (see www.iheu.org/node/2030/print).

We then, as ethical individuals, share the same commitment to the Earth’s well-being as that outlined in the Earth Charter’s principle of “Universal Responsibility,” which states:

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when

we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

— from the Preamble of the Earth Charter (www.earthcharter.org).

The same spirit of compassion and reverence for our fellow humans has been a guiding principle for Humanists and ethical persons of all ages. For instance, Julian Huxley (first Director General of UNESCO) and Brock Chisholm (first Director of the World Health Organization) were both Humanists who took action (see www.iheu.org/taxonomy/term/391). It is now our turn to help lead, as Henry Beissel writes:

We must now apply the very perspective the Renaissance humanists recovered for the history of humankind to the history of life. What emerges is an intricate web that has evolved over billions of years. All creatures and species play their part in this infinitely interactive crosshatching of organisms, and none occupies any privileged position or serve any exalted purpose. Yes, humankind is special and unique, but so are bats and cockroaches.¹

We hope that you will take the time out of your day to participate in activities around your community for the National Day of Prayer and Reflection on Climate Change. Remember, we may disagree with our brothers and sisters about certain issues of faith, but that is no reason why we should not join with them in the fight to protect our shared home – Earth.

Below are some notable quotations, suggested events, discussion questions to be used individually or in a group, contact information, and further resources, including recommended readings.

Notable Quotations

It is a curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose, should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life. But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself.

Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (1951)

It seems to me that we all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little.

Oscar Wilde, “De Profundis” (1905)

A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people.

Franklin Roosevelt, speech, January 29, 1935

The Supreme Reality of Our Time is. . .the Vulnerability of our Planet.

John F. Kennedy, speech, June 28, 1963

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

Possible Events

Even if you are not a member of a faith tradition, this does not mean that you will not be welcomed to one of their events marking this day of national prayer and reflection on global climate

¹ Beissel, Henry, “The Second Humanist Revolution: Eco-Humanism,” *Humanist Perspectives*, Issue 157, Summer 2006.

change. As a humanist or ethically concerned individual, you do not need to believe that prayer is for supernatural intercession. Instead, think of this day of prayer as a day of solidarity to stand beside your fellow humans. If you are not already a member of a local humanist group, you may find information about local groups at www.ihcu.org.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Humanism has often been falsely criticized as being merely a materialist hedonist and often nihilistic worldview. How might our work on climate change and our participation with members of faith traditions change this?
- 2) Persons of faith traditions have often viewed humanists skeptically. How might our work in this and other projects help to grow a sense of commonality and freedom of consciousness with people of faith traditions?
- 3) Why should humanists and ethical individuals care about climate change? So what? If the world heats up, cannot we just all own beach houses? Why is this sentiment nihilistic and anti-humanist?

Further Resources

Web sites

The International Humanist and Ethical Union
www.ihcu.org/

Unitarian Universalist Association
www.uua.org/csw/issues.htm

Books

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*, Fawcett Crest Book. Greenwich, Conn.,: Fawcett Publications, 1962.

Cronin, John, and Robert Francis Kennedy. *The Riverkeepers : Two Activists Fight to Reclaim Our Environment as a Basic Human Right*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1997.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. 1st U.S. ed. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, and Edward Waldo Emerson. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 12 vols. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

Flannery, Tim F. *The Weather Makers : How Man Is Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth*. 1st American ed. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005.

Gore, Albert, and Melcher Media. *An Inconvenient Truth : The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 2006.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

- Lovelock, James. *The Revenge of Gaia : Why the Earth Is Fighting Back - and How We Can Still Save Humanity*. London ; New York: Allen Lane, 2006.
- Muir, John. *The Writings of John Muir*. Sierra ed. Boston,: Houghton Mifflin, 1917.
- Muir, John, and John Muir. *West of the Rocky Mountains*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976.
- Serres, Michel. *The Natural Contract*, Studies in Literature and Science. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Singer, Peter. *One World : The Ethics of Globalization*, Terry Lectures. New Haven, Conn. London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Thoreau, Henry David, and Aldren Auld Watson. *Walden : Or, Life in the Woods*. Mount Vernon, N.Y.: Peter Pauper Press, 1956.
- Whitman, Walt, Harold William Blodgett, and Sculley Bradley. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: New York University Press, 1965.
- Wilson, Edward O. *The Creation : An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.