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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992

Box 45, Folder 4, Secular humanism, 1985.

## Norman Lear

September 11, 1985

Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum  
Director, International Affairs  
The American Jewish Committee  
165 E. 56th Street  
New York, NY 10022

Dear Marc:

Do you know what "secular humanism" is?

According to television evangelist James Kennedy, it's a "godless, atheistic, evolutionary, amoral, collectivist, socialistic, communistic religion" which has taken over our public schools. Jerry Falwell says "it advocates abortion-on-demand, recognition of homosexuals, free use of pornography, legalizing prostitution and gambling, and the free use of drugs." On the other hand, the New York Times claims that secular humanists "are people who believe that ignorance is the poorest armor."

Are you confused? So are most people, and that is why I am writing to you. Defining "secular humanism" is no longer just an academic exercise. It's part of a very serious problem involving a national campaign to censor classroom discussions in our nation's schools.

For years, the Religious Right has claimed that "secular humanism" is the root of almost every evil one can imagine -- from teenage suicide to the decline of academic standards to the erosion of the traditional nuclear family. Efforts to rid the schools of the teaching of "secular humanism" include trying to cancel courses on civil rights, the Holocaust, or anything to do with evolution. A group in Hillsboro, Missouri wants to bar movies such as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Walt Disney's Never Cry Wolf for the same reasons. And in Lincoln County, Oregon, the funds for guidance and counselling programs were completely eliminated due to a campaign alleging the courses smacked of "secular humanism."

Now these self-appointed censors have a federal law that will make it easier to rid the classroom of curricula and materials they don't agree with.

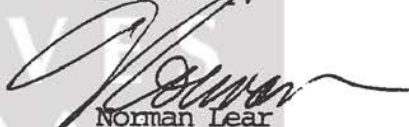
Last year, Congress passed legislation prohibiting the use of federal funds to teach "secular humanism" in Magnet schools -- educational centers specifically designed to promote desegregation. On May 22, the Department of Education issued regulations for the bill. Far from trying to clarify the problem, the Education Department left the definition of the term up to the local school board.

As a member of our Advisory Council, you are already aware of our efforts to stop censorship campaigns by the far right in schools and libraries around the country. You already know how detrimental these efforts can be to the education of our young people.

In an effort to show the absurdity of leaving the definition of "secular humanism" up to the local schools, People For is asking a number of well-known educators, artists, and public officials like yourself to give us your own personal definition of "secular humanism," along with your permission to publish it. By showing how widely the word can be interpreted, we will be able to demonstrate how easily a law prohibiting "secular humanism" can be used -- by extremists on both sides of the political spectrum -- to censor classroom discussions and materials they don't agree with. The education of our young people is too important to ignore such a threat.

I know how many demands there must be on your time, but please take a few moments to give us your one-sentence definition of "secular humanism." If you've never heard of it, let us know that also. You will not be alone. Please send your responses to me by October 4, if possible. If you have any questions, contact Christy Macy in the Washington Office at (202) 462-4777.

Sincerely,



Norman Lear

NL:cm



# The Horrors of Secular Humanism

A new amendment slid quietly into the Education for Economic Security Act last year. It prohibits the use of Federal magnet school funds for "any course of instruction the substance of which is secular humanism."

At the same time, a 1978 Hatch amendment requiring schools to obtain parental permission before giving pupils psychological tests was broadened to the point of vagueness at the urging of groups led by Phyllis Schlafly. The purpose, again, was to ban secular humanism.

What, one may be forgiven for wondering, is secular humanism?

According to our dictionary, *secular* means "of or relating to worldly things as distinguished from things relating to church and religion." *Humanism* means "any system of thought or action based on the nature, dignity, interests and ideals of man." Put them together and you get ... well, we don't quite know, but it doesn't sound like something to keep away from kids.

Oh, but it is, insist organizations like the Moral Majority, Christian Voice and Pro-Family Forum. They say secular humanism is anything that is anti-God, anti-American and anti-family. The precise definitions are up to the individual.

In Hillsboro, Mo., for instance, a parents' group, fearing secular humanism, protested the showing in school of the movie "Romeo and Juliet."

In Cobb County, Ga., the school superintendent circulated a memorandum to teachers restricting classroom discussion on several topics, including evolution, communism and "valuing." In Maryland, a Coalition of Concerned Parents on Privacy Rights has distributed a letter citing the broadened Hatch regulations as requiring parental permission for 34 categories of classroom practices and materials. Among them are autobiographical assignments. Strictly speaking, to ask a student to write about "What I did on my summer vacation" would require a letter from home.

"I think about what I'm doing twice," a Texas teacher once told *The Times*. "Is there anything controversial in this lesson plan? If there is, I won't use it. I won't use things where a kid has to make a judgment." Parents who put their trust in the public schools now may find great holes in the education they provide, thanks to other parents waving the club called secular humanism.

Since definitions are so subjective, we'd like to suggest our own. Let secular humanists be people who believe that ignorance is the poorest armor. That keeping a careful eye on education ought not to mean rewriting history or expurgating science. That religious beliefs should not be forced on public schools. No educator would have anything to fear from secular humanists like that. Fortunately, they far outnumber their antagonists.



# 'Secular Humanism' Stirs School Censorship Furor

By PETER J. BOYER, Times Staff Writer

ATLANTA—Jo Williamson, an English teacher at suburban South Cobb High School, was instructing a student on Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, "The Scarlet Letter," when she halted, suddenly unnerved.

"I thought, 'Oh, my gosh. Here I have this child, and I'm doing witchcraft and religion,'" Williamson said.

Her concern was caused by a memorandum from the county school administration outlining the banning or restriction of nine topics in Cobb County classrooms. Among the restricted subjects are witchcraft and religion, issues considered in Hawthorne's story of morality and guilt in 17th-Century New England.

The memo, drafted three weeks ago after a parent complained about materials used in her daughter's sixth-grade class, sought to gently guide teachers around subjects sensitive to parents. Instead, it created a furor.

"I was worried to death," Williamson said, "but I went on (with 'The Scarlet Letter') anyway."

Williamson is not alone in her concern. Other teachers in the 57,000-student Cobb County school system feared accidentally straying into restricted areas during the normal course of instruction.

The dilemma in Cobb County may be a precursor of similar disputes across the country. Fundamentalists—and others—are becoming more concerned about what their children are taught and how. Along with new federal regulations that could cut off federal funds to disobedient or unresponsive school districts, the opponents of "secular humanism" threaten to make public schools a battleground over private values.

The memo, which has been approved by the school board, identified as subjects banned from the classroom "alternative sexual behavior," such as homosexuality and "other aberrant sexual behavior" and abortion as a topic in sex education.

The memo also said discussion of seven other topics is to be restricted to material provided in the official Cobb County curriculum. They are evolution, abortion as a

political or social issue, communism, religion, witchcraft, personal inquiries and "valuing"—instructional activities designed to promote student decision-making and value selection.

The Georgia Assn. of Educators denounced classroom censorship and launched an investigation into the memo. The National Education Assn. called the memo "ridiculous . . . an outrageous overreaction." Students at one Cobb County high school threatened a boycott to protest the memo until school officials soothed their fears.

But the administrators responsible for the memo insist that they were misunderstood, that the memorandum was drafted to prevent just the sort of controversy it created.

"It was a preventive piece of correspondence," said a distraught Stanley Wrinkle, assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum, who wrote the memo. School officials said they did not intend to limit classroom freedom but, on the contrary, meant to forestall increasing assaults from parents who are angered by what their children are learning in school.

## Concern Over Values

Much of the parents' concern stems from a notion that schools are subverting the values that children learn at home, an idea that is gaining widespread acceptance among parents across the country.

The intervention only figures to grow with the implementation Monday of a set of Department of Education regulations that permit parents to challenge certain school curricula and programs. If parents' concerns are ignored, federal funds to schools can be cut off.

The regulations were adopted after intense lobbying by religious fundamentalists and members of such conservative groups as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, who were bolstered in their efforts by sympathy from the White House.

The rules give teeth to the so-called Hatch Amendment, a 1978 amendment to the General Education Provisions Act. Schools are forbidden from subjecting students to psychological inquiries or exercises that ask political affilia-

tions, sexual attitudes, critical appraisals of family members and other such personal matters—values clarification, in short—without parental consent.

The conflict is grounded in an old argument holding that when the U.S. Supreme Court banned prayer from schools in 1962, educators removed all fixed moral standards from the classroom. Into the vacuum, the argument goes, flooded an ideology most often referred to as "secular humanism."

Secular humanism is a term sometimes applied to a philosophical outlook—a religion, some say—which holds that humans are autonomous, rational beings capable of self-realization in this life, as opposed to any hereafter. Humanists eschew moral absolutes, and some embrace such notions as relativism and situational ethics.

Its critics believe that humanism pervades the news and entertainment media, the courts, universities and, since 1962, the public schools, where it manifests itself in what former U.S. senator and educator S.I. Hayakawa (R-Calif.) calls "therapy education"—education that is less concerned with teaching skills and knowledge than with addressing students' feelings and emotions.

This "affective education," as it is called, applies techniques known by such terms as "values clarification" and "higher-order critical thinking skills"—techniques meant to help children identify their values, resolve value conflicts and the like.

It was the recognition of those buzz words in a teacher's manual by Cobb County parent Kathy Trock, a follower of Schlafly's, that ignited the controversy in Cobb schools.

Trock examined the curriculum guide for a sixth-grade substance abuse program at her daughter's Pine Mountain Valley Middle School and saw exercises in the book that seemed to have nothing to do with instruction on drug abuse. For example, in one exercise called "either-or forced choice," the teacher asked the students such questions as: "Are you more, yes or no? More like a tortoise or a hare? Like a paddle or a ping pong ball? More like a no trespassing sign or a public fishing sign?"

The purpose of the exercise, the manual said, was to compel students "to make a decision between competing alternatives . . . in making their choices, students have to examine their feelings and their self-concepts and values."

## Parent Complained

Curriculum chief Wrinkle defended the manual, saying that



such values exercises are important because, "like it or not, we (parents and teachers) are not going to be around when these kids have to make a decision about drugs."

But Trock saw something else in the exercises: secular humanism. She complained to the school system.

"Schools are just full of this stuff," Schlafly said in a telephone interview. "If they're filling up the time with this, then they're not teaching things like reading and writing."

"It has a plan, this psychological education," she added. "The effect is to alienate the child from the parents' views, to make him subject to peer pressure."

And that, Trock said, helps explain the epidemic of teen-age drug abuse, pregnancy and suicide.

But John Yocom, a teacher at Cobb County's Osborne High School, said, "We do as much counseling as we do teaching these days." Some teachers fear that classroom restrictions will squelch communion between teachers and students, he said.

Jo Williamson told of the time one of her students confided that she was pregnant and asked whether she should have an abortion. Williamson persuaded the girl to consult her mother—who helped her daughter decide on an abortion. "That little girl trusted me and came to me," Williamson said. "I don't mean to be unfeeling, but this memo might end that."

#### Concerns Widespread

Don Cameron, executive director of the National Education Assn., the national teachers' union, said the worry over secular humanism in schools is the product of conservative "extremists" who have become "more strident in their promulgation of this notion in the last two or three years since the Reagan Administration took office."

"They take a string here, a twig there and build a nest of intrigue linked to the devil and communism," Cameron said in an interview. "They see a conspiracy to brainwash children and send them all to hell. It's crazy. It's crazy stuff."

But, recently, it is not only arch-conservatives and fundamentalists making the complaints. The Education Department's Gary Bauer said: "I've traveled a great deal around the country, and I have

found it would be a mistake to assume that the concerns on these issues are limited to a couple of fringe groups. There is a great desire by the average parent to have a core set of values transmitted to their children in the classroom."

Indeed, Georgia state Rep. Terry Lawler, who serves on the Education Committee in the Georgia House, said that secular humanism has become a hot topic lately across a broad spectrum of parents.

"The belief that secular humanism is getting itself into the schools is a subject that is becoming more and more heard these days," Lawler said. "In the past, it was something that most parents didn't know enough about to even ask."

Teachers, meanwhile, maintain that parents have nothing to worry about from them. "I have never met a teacher who knows anything about secular humanism," the NEA's Cameron said. "In fact, in 20 years, I've never met a secular humanist."

#### Teacher's Style

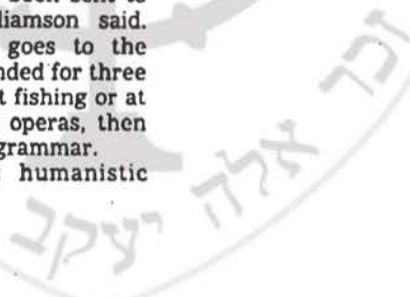
For the students of South Cobb High's Jo Williamson, at least, there would seem to be less to fear from secular humanism than from Williamson humanism.

The veteran English teacher tells of one student who used a four-letter word in class and expected to be sent to the principal's office. Instead, Williamson made him conjugate 20 verbs.

"He'd rather have been sent to the principal," Williamson said. "But, if that child goes to the principal, he is suspended for three days. And, if he is out fishing or at home watching soap operas, then I'm not teaching him grammar."

"To me, that is humanistic teaching."

JEWISH  
ARCHIVES





# HUMANIST SOCIETY

of Metropolitan New York

A Chapter of THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

September 1985 **NEWSLETTER** Vol. III, No. 4



James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, flanked by HSMNY President Jesse Gordon, left, and Rabbi Balfour Brickner, right, at the June Humanist Dialogue. Professor Farmer addressed the issue "Where Does the Civil Rights Movement Stand Today?"

## CIVIL RIGHTS TODAY

James Farmer, founder of C.O.R.E. (the Congress of Racial Equality), spoke on "Where Does the Civil Rights Movement Stand Today?" at the June 24 Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York's Dialogue at the New York University Club. Farmer, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under President Richard Nixon and currently professor at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, VA, has long been a member of the Editorial Board of *The Humanist*, and in 1976 received the Humanist Pioneer Award.

(Continued on Page Three)

## HUMANIST DIALOGUE MEETINGS

Held at NYU Club, 123 West 43rd St., NYC.  
Dinner and meeting, 6:30 p.m., \$20  
Dialogue only, 8 p.m., \$5.00. Checks and dinner reservations must be received by Wednesday of the week before the meeting.  
Information: Call Jesse Gordon, 687-2477.

Monday, September 23

Guest Speaker: Sidney Zion, former Assistant U.S. Attorney and staff reporter for the New York Times

Topic: "Malpractice and Medical Murder"

Chair: Dr. Julius J. Manson, Professor Emeritus and Former Dean of the School of Business and Public Administration, Baruch College, CUNY

A civil suit charges New York Hospital and four doctors with the death last year of an 18-year old college student who was the daughter of our guest speaker.

New York Hospital, associated with Cornell University Medical School, is one of the world's finest and most compassionate medical facilities. Yet even the finest is not exempt from challenge. According to recent articles in the New York Times, lax candidate evaluation, lax medical reviews and disciplinary procedures of hospitals, state medical licensing boards and medical societies are compounded by lackadaisical reporting and coordination of information. Fear of lawsuits inhibits disciplinary action: incompetent physicians and even convicted criminals practice medicine without restriction.



**HUMANIST SOCIETY OF METROPOLITAN NEW YORK**  
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**HUMANISTS OF NORTH JERSEY**

HSMNY welcomes the Humanists of North Jersey, a group started this year. Theodora Trent, of Ridgelyfield, N. J., a member of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York and Lawrence Hyman, the chapter president, a retired English professor, were featured in a New York Times article on the chapter last June. A humanist, Hyman says, supports all the good and all the morality that established religions profess. Humanists believe in "love, friendship, peace and reconciliation." The group meets monthly and has about 20 members.

**A WILL TO GIVE**

One of the most effective ways of HSMNY insuring its future security is through estate planning: deferred giving can be an excellent way to make certain your heirs as well as HSMNY will benefit from your foresight.

Detailed information can readily be obtained by writing to: Harrington Harlow, Esq., Chairman, HSMNY Legacy Development Committee, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N.Y. 10016. Phone: (212) 696-4050.

**NEWSLETTER**

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**LETTER**

Your June Newsletter is particularly instructive. Please convey my congratulations to Ms. Woodward for her piece, "Are We Going Bankrupt?"

Nevertheless, the June Newsletter reminds me of the Halloran meeting of 13 May. I am sure you won't take it amiss if I say that was not, could not have been, a real "dialogue." It was a completely one-sided performance, evidently well rehearsed and often repeated, full of statistics, charts and assertions that nobody in the audience could effectively challenge at the spur of the moment. I suggest that in the future, if you'll have a controversial speaker on a crucial subject, you should also have an equally well-versed speaker who is prepared to present an opposite view. Only this will be a true "dialogue."

John H. E. Fried, Professor Emeritus, CUNY, Dr. Fried was Special Legal Consultant to the U.S. War Crimes Tribunals, Nuremberg.

**DIRTY WORDS IN SCHOOL**

(Excerpted from "Guide to Humanistic Terminology," Voice of Youth Advocates, August, 1982)

Since so many of the attacks on the schools focus on something called "secular humanism" we thought you would like a road map to this pernicious enemy of true American values. The following list appeared originally in THE SCHOOL BELL, published in Dallas, Texas. We received our copy with our membership in People for the American Way. From this point on, the words all belong to THE SCHOOL BELL, not us.

To aid our readers who have asked for help in identifying terms used in Humanistic education, we have compiled the following list:

Academic Freedom	Open Classroom
Black Studies	Parenting
Citizenship	Peace Studies (NEA)
Democracy	Private Journals
Enlightenment	Racism
Feelings	Responding
Global Economy	Secular Humanism
Humanities	Sex Education
Inductive Method	Social-Interaction
Journals	Trust
Kettering Foundation	Understanding
Laboratory Method	Values
Mental Health	World Goodwill



# CIVIL RIGHTS TODAY

(Continued from Page One)

Rabbi Balfour Brickner of New York's Stephen S. Wise Free Synagogue, who had also been jailed in the 1960's civil rights struggles, introduced Professor Farmer. He described Farmer's pivotal role, alongside Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins, and emphasized his principled resignation in "total frustration" from his Nixon administration position over that administration's lack of interest in civil rights. Among those in the audience were New York State Supreme Court Justice Bruce Wright and Fred Edwards, Executive Director of the American Humanist Association.

A major emphasis of Farmer's talk was the need for a long-range, up-to-date civil rights plan. He opened by noting that today's issues are far less clear than those of the 1960's. Men like "Bull" Connors, the Birmingham, AL police chief, who set dogs on young blacks, were clear-cut "devils," sharply contrasted with the protesting young blacks, whom many Americans saw as heroes. Today, however, many whites feel that the blacks got "too much too fast," despite their still being economically far behind, and the economy's lack of expansion, which pits job seekers against one another, further aggravates negative feelings toward blacks.

The struggles of the 1960's led to many agreements between local authorities and the black communities to correct the inequities which had existed so long, Farmer pointed out. But the Reagan administration had been seeking increasingly to overturn such agreements, particularly those which have been operating most successfully. In Brooklyn's Starrett City, for example, where agreement had been reached on a black percentage not to exceed 40 percent (to prevent the community from "tipping" into ghettoized all-black), the Justice Department has been seeking to undo the agreement in the courts. But residential developments with no blacks are not under attack from Washington.

"Fire and police departments which have worked out satisfactory agreements for minorities" are also having those agreements challenged in the courts by the administration. It is acting "either from narrow ideology or malignant design," Farmer said,

adding, "and I see it as the latter more and more."

The great need, according to Farmer, is for long-range planning. "We should have done it when the movement was alive, but emergencies always arose." So "when victories occurred, the movement was caught flatfooted without programs." Such errors, as well as the triumphs, are discussed in Farmer's recent book, "Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement" (Arbor House, N.Y., \$16.95), copies of which he autographed for members of the audience.

Finding appropriate tactics is difficult today because "personalizing the enemy" is so hard, Farmer said. He continued, "not being able to define the enemy, we turned on each other." When one right stands against another, as in the Bakke case -- where "they were both right," he said -- it is very easy for particular differences to be blown up into general antagonisms.

"We must form broad coalitions," Farmer said, even if members do not agree on all issues. Disagreement on some questions should not make allies into enemies.

"We must help rebuild black communities, and strengthen our young men, especially through education. America has over 26 million people who cannot read or write. We must address the teenage pregnancy problem and strengthen nutritional programs."

Planning the agenda for such a coalition requires acting carefully, he said. "We must prepare papers, circulate them," and continue reformulating them until we "come up with solutions. We must have a plan to work from."

He mentioned blacks like Clarence Pendleton (Chairman of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights and a previous Humanist Dialogue speaker) and James Meredith, who have been taking positions undermining the gains made by the civil rights movement. "There'll be more," Farmer noted wryly. "There's gold in them thar hills."

The 1960's civil rights movement was already dead when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in 1968, Farmer said. But its gains are now under serious, concerted and increasing attack from the Reagan administration, perhaps by "malignant design."

NSL

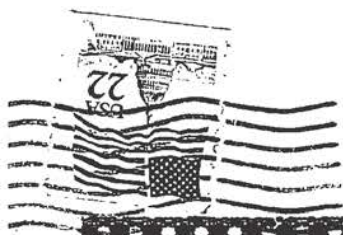


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FIRST CLASS MAIL



HUMANIST SOCIETY OF METROPOLITAN NEW YORK  
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## DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know that the first directors-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Health Organization (WHO), and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) were humanists? They were Sir Julian Huxley for UNESCO, Dr. G. Brock Chisholm for WHO, and Lord Boyd-Orr for FAO. Huxley and Boyd-Orr were British and Chisholm was a Canadian. Another Humanist, Dr. Luther H. Evans, an American, served as director-general of UNESCO following his appointment as Librarian of Congress in Washington, D.C. Dr. Evans was an active member of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York until his death.

I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very, very sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all possible means--except by getting off his back.

...Tolstoi

## WHAT IS HUMANISM?

Humanism affirms that human beings have the capacity, bound by a moral imperative, to improve the conditions of life on this planet. Humanists believe that we shape our own destinies, not a supernatural power. A sense of joyous commitment to meet the challenges of our times pervades the life of every dedicated Humanist. Moral and ethical values are held to have their roots in human experience, and the lessons of history. Judgments of "good and bad," of "right and wrong," are viewed as the consequences of human action upon others and upon society. Humanism affirms the interdependence of all life on this planet, and holds that only when humans work cooperatively toward improving conditions will betterment occur. It follows that divisive creeds which separate people into hostile camps are inimical to human betterment. . . whether they be religious dogmas, political ideologies, or fanatical nationalisms. Since earliest times Humanists have held firm to the Jeffersonian ideal of separation of church and state, and democracy in political matters.