

# Yes, Atheophobia Does Indeed Exist

David Rand

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*This letter originally appeared in the magazine Humanist Perspectives, no. 187, winter 2013-2014, pages 6-7. It is a response to the reaction of John Shook (published in HP no. 186) to my article "The Trouble With Humanists" in HP no. 185.*

In HP #185, my article "The Trouble With Humanists" argued that some who call themselves humanists adopt a very negative attitude towards atheism and atheists, using them as scapegoats in order to assert that humanists are somehow superior, morally and/or intellectually. I maintain that this attitude is widespread and in fact anti-humanist, because humanism includes atheism as its essential core and is vacuous without it. I also maintain that this attitude compromises our efforts to achieve secularism and to counter religious bigotry. I gave several examples of this attitude, including:

1. Statements such as "A humanist is an atheist with morals" which imply that atheists are less moral.
2. A declaration by John Shook in *Free Inquiry* magazine that disbelief is as bad as religion.
3. The habit of avoiding the issue of communist atrocities by blaming them on "atheists, not humanists," thus implying that the two groups are distinct, while using atheists as scapegoats.

I also criticized the Manichean obsession with positivity. Most importantly, I rejected the idea that communist excesses were the result of militant atheism – arguing, on the contrary, that communists were religiously inspired – and presented Jean Soler's theory of the monotheistic origins of totalitarianism.

In HP #186, John Shook reacts to my article with a plethora of lurid exaggerations. He accuses me of "hysteria," while claiming that I made accusations of "slander," "treachery" and "sedition" (I did not). He accuses me of misrepresentation, while claiming that "Rand states his long-standing antipathy against Paul Kurtz" (wrong). He accuses me of cherry-picking, while reacting only to the brief passage that deals with himself and Kurtz, ignoring the other 87% of my article. He completely ignores points (1) and (3) -- does this mean he agrees with them? -- and dismisses my entire argumentation as a "grudge."

Shook raises the question of labels: How should we non-believers present ourselves: as humanists, as atheists, or as some other identity? An interesting question, but *not* the subject of my article. Shook claims that I divide atheists and humanists into opposing camps. Wrong again. I do precisely the opposite. My thesis is that, in general, humanists are atheists and atheists are humanists, and it is counterproductive to draw a strong demarcation between the two categories. Shook, on the other hand, markets his favourite brand, "secular humanism."

Shook is annoyed that I quoted and criticized his statement about disbelief. But in his reply, the original statement somehow gets transmogrified into "mere disbelief in God isn't a sufficient worldview for life." This is very different from his original statement, and it is also a rather paltry definition of atheism. For me, atheism is the rejection of unsubstantiated supernatural beliefs, especially divine command theory.

Shook's original statement was "disbelief, by itself, is just as disabling as any religion." This is much stronger than saying that disbelief is insufficient; it says that disbelief is harmful, and as bad as a religion! This assertion is obviously false, explicitly atheophobic and it provides the theoretical basis for the attitude which I criticize. Indeed, it is a staple of religious propaganda against non-believers. Why any self-respecting humanist would repeat such anti-humanist nonsense is beyond me. Saying it once, in writing, in a major humanist publication like *FI*, is once too often.

Clearly Shook subscribes to the value-added theory of humanism, the idea that humanism is much more than “mere” atheism, that humanist principles (whatever those are) must be explicitly adopted in order to achieve ethics and morals. This theory is an article of faith among many who call themselves humanists. I disagree. For me, humanism is simply atheist ethics.

If one chooses a very narrow definition of atheism and a very wide one of humanism, then of course this makes the latter much more than the former, by design! This is what Shook and his fellow Kurtzians tend to do. This game, harmless enough when limited to ideas, becomes problematic when applied to human beings. Changing one's preferred label from “atheist” to “humanist” (or “secular humanist”) does not make one a better person. The value-added hypothesis is often used to jump to the specious conclusion that humanists are better than atheists (which may be why it was invented in the first place). And therein lies the problem.

There is no conspiracy here, only banality and intellectual sloth: the banality of assimilating and repeating a widespread prejudice, and the failure to recognize that that received notion is against one's own best interests.