

*When*  
**COLORBLINDNESS**  
**ISN'T THE ANSWER**

*Humanism and the Challenge of Race*

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You'll notice that I use the term "theism" over against the more common concern of humanists and atheists—"religion." This is an intentional move on my part, one meant to point out what I would consider the actual target of humanist/atheist critique and challenge. In a word, both "secular" humanists and atheists argue there is no evidence sufficient to advance the idea of God or gods. They oppose the reality of an overarching force in the world that shapes and orchestrates creation and ongoing life (and death)—called God or gods and addressed through a variety of names: Allah, Jehovah, Changó, Krishna, and so on. Theologians, like Paul Tillich, have argued that "God" serves for theists as the "ultimate concern" that determines the shape of life—what is done, what isn't done, and what motivates us as we move along this pathway of ethics and morals. One should not assume this pathway only goes in the direction of well-being and healthy conduct. No, as human history demonstrates, allegiance to the will of God or gods can lead to destructive behavior and violent attitudes.

It is willingness to be guided by an imaginary force that troubles

humanists, and the destructive and otherwise counterproductive thinking and behavior stemming from this allegiance gets the brunt of humanist critique and challenge. This is certainly the case if one monitors humanist's conversations and activities. So, theism is the problem.

Some might ask, what's the difference between theism and religion? At times there appears little distinction: theists consider themselves religious and in the United States the vast majority of those who understand themselves to be religious are theists. True, yet there is an important distinction to be made and the usefulness of this distinction enters humanist camps, for example, as the idea of *religious* humanism is brought into play. Mind you, adherents to this are often (if not typically) humanists who do not hold to supernatural claims, but in many cases attend to rituals—e.g., church services—that they consider religious. No God or gods. But, from their vantage point, they nonetheless are religious. This situation has created something of a tension felt in many humanist meetings and gatherings; yet, from my perspective this isn't a necessarily negative tension.

At this point, I want to make what I consider an important distinction that goes this way. Theism is the structuring of life around belief in cosmic forces and supernatural "realities." Religion, on the other hand, is simply by definition "a binding together." Religion can be thought of as a particular framing of and response to the fundamental and haunting questions of human existence: Who are we? What are we? Why are we? When are we? Where are we? Sure, science broadly conceived (and I include the social sciences and humanities here) wrestles with these in a manner pretended to be objective. Yet, there is a more emotional and subjective response as well to these questions and that takes the form of religion. So, in that it is an effort to render life meaningful, to develop a fuller sense of human subjectivity as conscious and self-aware creatures, religion isn't synonymous with theism. In doing this work, religion assumes no gods and requires no concern with superhuman worlds of wonder. Religion and theism are not the same thing. In fact, theism is a type of religious orientation, but it certainly isn't the only way to think about religion. In itself, as an effort to wrestle with questions of our being and knowing, religion

can be very historically situated and bound. It need not pull adherents into supernatural framings of life; transhistorical thinking isn't a requirement of religion. So conceived—and there are ample examples of religion understood this way—it is merely a tool, a human tool for unpacking and exploring the workings of human life.

Again, theism is a particular way of unpacking and exploring human life, but it does so in a way that can divest human life of its “earthly” quality by arguing its “true” meaning is part of some cosmic and divine plan developed and orchestrated by God/gods. Pointing beyond history can remove from humans accountability and responsibility for their actions by making human will subject to cosmic forces. God/gods are given ultimate knowledge of and control over human history and its content. Humanism does well when it points out and critiques this problematic framing of human life as a critical failure of theism.