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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Humanist manifesto seeks secular salvation

Humanist leaders have issued a manifesto for a new "planetary humanism" that looks to science for values and progress; promotes an ethic of choice and recommends global institutions to curb poverty, pollution and overpopulation.

The "Humanist Manifesto 2000" has been signed by 120 humanists including nine Nobel laureates, entertainer Steve Allen, science futurist Arthur C. Clarke and former Sen. Alan Cranston, California Democrat.

"As humanists we urge today, as in the past, that humans not look beyond themselves for salvation," states the 14,000-word document.

It follows humanist manifestos written in 1933 and 1973.

Paul Kurtz, chief architect of the

new document and president of the International Academy of Humanism, described it as a set of guidelines.

"This is not a dogma or a creed," he said in an interview. "This document argues for a maximization of individual freedom and for local diversity, but also recognizes that global interdependence brings new responsibilities."

The manifesto proposes a world parliament as a democratic parallel to the United Nations, and global councils to address ecological concerns, income distribution and education about birth control.

While freedom and freethinking have been humanist hallmarks, Mr. Kurtz said, "The emphasis on responsibilities is a new feature."

The document has a long section

on ethics, saying they can be derived from reason, science and the "common moral decencies" shared by people of all cultures.

The manifesto is in the current issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine and will be distributed in a booklet.

Mr. Kurtz said the fresh statement was compelled by a new global economy, the information revolution, a rise of divisive multicultural and postmodernist views, and a rise in supernatural beliefs and apocalyptic faiths.

"The persistence of traditional spiritual attitudes often encourage unrealistic, escapist, otherworldly approaches to social problems," the document states.

Such religions also "too often defend archaic social institutions"

and "moral doctrines [that] inherit prescientific concepts."

Proposing "scientific naturalism" as a sound basis for human knowledge, the document honors all forms of voluntary birth control, diverse definitions of family and sexual partnership, and an adult's right to euthanasia.

Leonard Swidler, a Catholic theologian who helped draft a "A Declaration for the Religions of a Global Ethic" for the 1993 Parliament of World Religions, said any optimistic vision of the future is helpful.

He said the skeptical language secular humanists use toward religious belief as illusion "can be snidely put," but he nevertheless welcomed the manifesto's call for an ecological and social justice

"partnership" with world faiths.

"If we get some comeuppance from the humanists, then you have to say we had it coming," Mr. Swidler said, noting that many religions do cause wars and apocalyptic forms of faith do not care about the planet's future.

Boston University sociologist Peter Berger suggested the document represents a secular consensus among a "globalized intelligentsia." He noted that most societies outside Western Europe remain very religious. "It will have no impact at all. Who else will read it but this little club?"

In past efforts to draft a manifesto, some humanists refused to sign anything that looked like a creed. This time, Mr. Kurtz said, "I've had people decline to sign, but most have said it is long overdue."