

“What is Geohumanism? Or, Why I’m a Geohumanist”

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Humanists are, historically speaking, advocates of the humanities, a neoclassical curriculum that originated in Renaissance Italy. Most early humanists were Christians. The convergence of secularism and humanism began in the nineteenth century. Contemporary humanism is, by and large, a search for meaning and goodness in a world without supernaturalism. By studying art, literature, history, and philosophy, people can, the idea goes, improve civics, even civilization. After the two world wars—civilizational crises created by men tutored in the humanities—the international community of humanists reformulated their cause as “ethical humanism” or explicitly “secular humanism.” Today, Christian humanists barely exist. Most humanists now reject religion and totalitarianism as foes of free inquiry, and promote the universality of the scientific method, even as they warn against destructive applications of science and technology. Postwar humanism—a passive form of atheism—is an ethical approach rather than a spiritual quest. That being said, humanists can be credulous about the capacity of the human imagination to solve the existential problems of the world.

As a professor of the humanities in a time of planetary crisis, I have devised a neologism for my scholarship—a historical inquiry into how people sacralize and also desacralize landforms as they change landscapes. I am a *geohumanist*.

I can explain this descriptor in relation to others. I am not a deist, though not exactly an atheist: I seek common ground with those who see divine goodness in planet Earth. I am not a Gaian—the geologic record contains too many mass extinctions—but I believe that

earthly life has purpose beyond human intention. Wonder at the blessed unlikelihood of life on Earth need not presuppose supernaturalism. Praise and thanksgiving for the gift of our biosphere—miracle of miracles—is supremely rational.

More specifically, here are three reasons I like the word *geohumanism*:

1. It puts Earth first, literally, not in an anti-human or even eco-centric way but in recognition that this perfect planet is precedent to humanity.
2. It suggests that geology, geomorphology, geography, and the geosciences are essential to the humanist project—and vice versa. We are, like it or not, a planet-changing species: geologic actors, climate changers, drivers of evolution and extinction.
3. It implies that geopolitics, geogovernance, and geoengineering are unsolvable problems without the humanities. Consider climate change. The science is firm, the economic analysis is strong, the policy recommendations are sound. But the politics of climate—a matter of narrative, emotion, belief, ideology—is bewildered. Climate inaction is a cultural problem.

In short, the old monotheistic position that humans are stewards of the Earth has become reality, with or without God, for humans hold the (near-term) future of the planet in their hands. In this condition, geoscientists would do well to use the language of the sacred, and religious people would be good to learn the language of geoscience. In the Anthropocene, all humanities are geohumanities.

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