Humanist Worldview Traditions

In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay

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This in-depth subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying core subject knowledge essay and glossary, available both on our website and for download.

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Introduction

Humanism is not a religion. It is a non-religious, ethical worldview, concerned with some of the same concepts as religions, but generally derived from secular ideas and considerations that have affected and influenced the lives of people, particularly since the Enlightenment. Humanism is a worldwide phenomenon although it is most often associated with the post-Christian trends of the 20th century in Europe and the developed nations. It has arguably somewhere in the region of 150 million active adherents which is about 2% of the world's population.

The resources contained in the list of subjects below are a basic introduction to the facts and traditions of humanism. They are a portal or window into the world of humanism and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more and more about this worldview.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the facts and traditions of humanism, but also address the issues that humanism encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Basic beliefs

The most important humanist beliefs are that that we can live good lives without religion or a belief in God, and that we can know what is good by using reason, experience and empathy with others, not by reference to religious rules and traditions. Most people who call themselves humanists:

1. do not believe in God: they may be agnostic or atheist;
2. believe that we understand the world and what is true though experience and reason;
3. believe that people, whatever their backgrounds, have much in common. They believe that many, perhaps most, of our moral values are shared, because they are based on shared human nature and needs, and what works best when people have to live together.
4. believe that this life is all there is – there is no afterlife and that the rewards and punishments for the way we live our lives are here and now; so we should make the best use we can of our lives.

Humanist beliefs are often arrived at independently, by evaluating the beliefs around one and thinking about how well they relate to the real world and one's own understanding.

Some humanist parents pass on their beliefs, though usually within a liberal framework of education and discussion which would allow children to choose their own worldview.

Many humanists read or hear something – perhaps in a book, a broadcast, a conversation, a humanist funeral, or an RE or Philosophy lesson – which they realise expresses their own beliefs. "Now I know what I believe!" is a fairly common reaction to learning about humanism.

Beliefs translate into practices for humanists in two main ways:

1. in trying to live good lives by the light of reason and experience;
2. in trying to avoid hypocrisy; humanists are not "don't knows", and having arrived at their beliefs by thinking deeply, tend to be disinclined to compromise over matters such as participating in worship or calling themselves "Christians" for convenience. For this reason, humanists have developed their own ceremonies to mark the significant stages of life.

That said, there are no obligatory practices for humanists. They may choose to join a humanist organisation or to seek out other humanists for comradeship and support – or not; they may choose humanist ceremonies for rites of passage, or opt for civil ceremonies or none at all.

Sources of authority

Humanism has no authorities or leaders in the usual senses of these words, that is, individuals, texts or organisations that command obedience or universal respect.

Individual humanists seek and find knowledge, wisdom and guidance from a variety of sources, but they choose for themselves how much weight to give these sources, judging them against their own experience and how applicable these ideas might be to their own lives and times.

For their understanding of the world, humanists will look to and respect the methods and findings of science (the scientific method); for their values and their understanding of other people, humanists might look to philosophers and writers, ancient and modern, testing their ideas against their own. The ultimate moral authority for a humanist will be not be a text or religious authority, but his or her own conscience, though this raises questions about what the conscience is and where its intuitions come from. Most humanists would locate the conscience in the mind, and the feelings of guilt or satisfaction associated with the conscience in our understanding of and empathy with other people.

Because there is no authority, there are no obligatory practices in humanism which would express authority or respect for authority. Indeed, many humanists distrust authority and obedience per se and rely instead on reason and evidence.

Humanists acknowledge and accept the compromises and sharing and limitations on some freedoms that living alongside others entails. But they tend to be individualistic, in the sense of thinking for themselves and evaluating sources of knowledge and wisdom for themselves, though not in the sense being especially self-interested. One favourite maxim of humanism is: "Think for yourself, act for others."

As a result, humanists tend to love discussion and debate, both amongst themselves and with religious believers. But often, despite their different and varied sources and influences, humanists share many moral values not just with each other but with religious people. Humanists attribute this to our most important values arising out of shared human nature and needs.

Beliefs and society

The impact of humanist beliefs on people's lives may be considerable and life-changing or relatively uncomplicated, depending on family and social background. To be a humanist in a very traditional family or a society where atheism or agnosticism is not understood or tolerated will be hard or even dangerous, as it once was in Europe. A humanist who has once been a devout believer may feel alienated from family and community and rather isolated. In some societies (e.g. the USA), atheists, agnostics and humanists can be distrusted and discriminated against in various ways.

Others find that their humanist beliefs are acknowledged and respected, even widely shared, and that "open" societies can be as accepting of humanism as they are of religions. A humanist society would put more stress on personal autonomy and responsibility than on tradition.

Teachings about the Way Things Are

The truth claims of humanism are largely to do with our understanding of the world and ethics (how we relate to and treat each other and the natural world, and why). The source and evidence for both sets of truth claims lie in human experience and knowledge gained by the scientific method rather than in authority or tradition.

Humanists understand the world through observation and through reasoning and hypothesizing (not necessarily in that order), processes normally associated with science and not uniquely humanist, of course, though exclusive reliance on them does differentiate humanists from some religious believers.

The distinctive truth claims made by humanists are ethical: that our relationships and moral values are founded on human nature and experience alone and concern for others does not require an external source or authority.

Individuals and organisations

Humanists rarely, if ever, attain positions of authority or influence in society as a direct result of their humanism, though humanist beliefs and values may well inform their choices of career and how they use authority and influence once achieved. But no individual humanist has authority over other humanists or can claim to represent them adequately in the public sphere. The development of humanist organisations around the world provides humanists with a public voice and representation to public authorities and governments.

Humanist organisations are democratic and egalitarian, usually run by representatives of their members and answerable to them as well as to institutions such as the Charity Commission in the UK. Their success is evaluated by members on grounds such as: Are they providing the services needed by members and the wider non-religious community? Are they responding to public affairs in the ways that members require? Are they recognised and respected as the public face of humanism?

Humanism had a much more gradual, less defined foundation than most religions, with few "leaders". However, humanist ideas are part of a long and influential tradition of scepticism and belief in a non-religious basis for morality, and humanists have often been very active in world events.

Influential or inspirational thinkers from this sceptical, humanist tradition range from figures from ancient history such as Confucius, Cicero and Epicurus to contemporaries such Carl Sagan, Peter Singer and Richard Dawkins, with many, many in the centuries between. Their influence goes well beyond humanism.

Humanists have contributed to human welfare through science and medicine, including the discoverers of radium Marie and Pierre Curie, Professor Sir Anthony Epstein, one of the discoverers of the Epstein-Barr virus and Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, discoverer of DNA fingerprinting. Others such as writers John Fowles, Ian McEwan, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman, and poets Alan Brownjohn and Maureen Duffy, have inspired through the arts. Many humanists have been active in politics, peace movements, the formation of the United Nations, and in campaigns for equality and autonomy.

Some key figures helped to establish the Ethical Churches which eventually, in Britain, evolved into the British Humanist Association. One of the founders of the British Ethical Society movement, Moncure Conway, started his career in America as a Unitarian minister. He fell out with his family over slavery and was dismissed in 1856 from his church over his abolitionist stance. In 1863, he came to London where he became the minister of the South Place Chapel, but he abandoned theism after one of his sons died, and he and his congregation eventually broke from the Unitarian Church. In the 1880s, led by Stanton Coit (who at his American university was called "the most sceptical man in our class but also the most spiritual"), the South Place Chapel evolved into the Ethical Church and then Ethical Society, but Coit continued using the word God to indicate the noblest good, and referred to "the Religion of Humanism".

A more political, campaigning secularist was Charles Bradlaugh, who became Britain's first openly atheist MP when he was elected by the voters of Northampton in 1880. As an atheist, he was not allowed to swear allegiance on the Bible or to affirm (a right which did not then exist) and so could not take up his seat in Parliament. Eventually, after he had been re-elected several times, he was allowed to swear allegiance, and the episode led to a change in the law allowing non-religious affirmations the same legal status as religious oaths.

It was still possible in the 1950s to shock Britain by saying, as humanist psychologist Margaret Knight did, that the moral education of children was too important to be built on the shaky foundations of religion. She and others such as Harold Blackham, A J Ayer and Julian Huxley were important in the mid-20th century as leaders of and advisers to the newly-formed British Humanist Association.

Though these 19th and 20th century figures were important in the development of humanism and humanist organisations, it has to be admitted that many humanists know little or nothing about them. Although humanists may have benefited from their work and campaigns, they could not be said to be directly influenced by them.

These and many others exemplify humanist moral and spiritual values such as searching for the truth, belief in human equality and shared values, and working actively for peace, progress and human welfare.

Visions, values and inspiration

In living with integrity by their humanist values, sometimes at some personal cost, the figures described above offer humanists good examples of how to live. They were characterised by a belief in the power of reason, which gave them the strength and motivation to speak out against the orthodoxies of their day, and none of them resorted to violence. Their values remain relevant today, as many of the ideas and freedoms they struggled for remain out of reach for large numbers of people.

Humanism, with its emphasis on shared values based on shared humanity and on thinking for oneself, encourages and supports the independence of thought and empathy with others exemplified in many of the people mentioned above. For humanists the meaning of life lies in making the best possible use of our lives and our abilities – and these and many other humanists have done just that.

Humanists would locate the source of their inspiration in those aspects of the human character (or "spirit") that make them question conventions, and courageous or stubborn enough to stand up for what they believe to be right. One may be born with these qualities or they may be attributed to culture, education or upbringing, but they are human and natural rather than supernatural in origin.

Ways of Living

Guidance for life

Humanist beliefs impact on humanists' lives in the following ways:
Humanists try to live good lives by the light of reason and experience, rather than by relying on tradition or authority;
Humanists try to avoid hypocrisy and tend to be disinclined to compromise over matters such as participating in worship or calling themselves "Christians" for convenience;
For this reason, humanists have developed their own ceremonies to mark the significant stages of life. However, there are no obligatory rituals, practices or texts for humanists;
Humanists may feel rather isolated if they have arrived at their beliefs independently, as many do, and if they never learn about humanism or discover other humanists or humanist organisations;
Humanists may be discriminated against in various ways, though this depends very much on the society they live in. Even in our relatively secular and tolerant society, they are often told that religious believers are morally superior to them, or that humanism has no place in education.
The benefits to individuals of learning about humanism and defining themselves as humanists include:
Finding philosophical and practical support for their deeply held beliefs and values;
Finding a positive way to describe themselves and their worldview, instead of a negative like "atheist" which simply describes what they do not believe, or "agnostic", which implies that they don't know what they believe. "Humanist" includes a moral perspective and a respect for human life and human capacities;
Increased confidence in their values from the realisation that they are not alone, that many great thinkers over the ages have expressed humanist beliefs.
The benefits to communities and to the world from atheists and agnostics learning that their beliefs need not be purely negative ones, that moral values are not unique to the religions, and that there are rational reasons for trying to live a good life, must be considerable. Humanists have always worried that an over-close identification between religion and morality would encourage some non-believers to think that morality has nothing to do with them.

Practical values for living

'Humanism is about the world, not about humanism', wrote one of the founders of modern humanism, Harold Blackham, in 1968, emphasising its capacity to look outwards. In many countries, humanism supports secular, non-traditional values and developments that help to improve lives, for example human rights, the education of girls and family planning.

Some of the things that humanists value include reason, education, personal autonomy and equality of opportunity. Like most other people, they value honesty, kindness, love, friendship and families, but unlike some, they are often very accepting of non-traditional families. A humanist would think it worthwhile to debunk harmful beliefs or superstitions, as

humanists do in India, for example, or to fight discrimination against minorities or gay people, as they have done in many places. These general models of "worth" are exemplified in the lives of individual humanists, some of whom have been very distinguished in their fields and can be read about on various humanist websites. Humanists are just as likely to work in the "caring professions" or to do voluntary work or give to charity as religious believers.

Studying and interpreting key thinkers

There are no sacred texts in humanism and, although some humanists do choose to get together, meetings do not involve worship or reading specific texts. (See also the page on "Worship".) Although many humanists have their own favourite supportive texts and influences (see Bibliography below for some examples), they contain little specialist language and have no particular status or authority within humanism; indeed humanists are very likely to argue about their relative merits.

Although there is nothing in humanism analogous to a sacred text, there have been many thinkers and books either reflecting a humanist philosophy or helping to influence or develop it. Very early examples include Confucius, Democritus, Epictetus, Epicurus, Protagorus and Cicero, but it was probably the 18th century thinkers of the European Enlightenment, for example, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft, Baron D'Holbach, and Denis Diderot, who did the most to advance modern thinking about secular morality, though they would not at the time have called this humanism.

The 19th century brought developments in biblical scholarship and in science which undermined the historical accuracy and literal truth of the Bible for many people, and further influential thinking about rational, atheistic moral values, for example the Utilitarianism of philosopher John Stuart Mill.

20th and 21st century intellectuals built on these influences, to the point where humanist thinking is the implicit basis of much public discourse, though often unacknowledged. This lack of acknowledgment, and various contemporary religious reactions against humanism and secularism, are likely to have been behind the recent phenomenon of very assertive and popular defences of atheism exemplified by Richard Dawkins and A C Grayling.

It has to be stressed, however, that any thoughtful person can arrive at humanist ideas and principles by reflection alone – no reading or authority is required. Reading, for humanists, can be very supportive, demonstrating that there are, and always have been, others who share and articulate a humanist worldview, but it is not essential.

No text has any particular authority for humanists, and there is no special humanist interpretation or analysis of texts, though since the 19th century humanists from the Christian tradition have been strongly influenced by the scholarly analyses of the Bible mentioned above.

Humanists use and may be inspired by poetry and poetic and figurative language (for example, it is often forgotten that Richard Dawkins' famous phrase "selfish gene" is a metaphor), but it has no distinctive humanist meaning.

Humanists are sceptics about revelation, and consider all texts and authorities to be human rather than divine in origin (a viewpoint that some religions might see as itself an interpretation). Humanists think that wisdom can be found in many places, but that even the most respected thinkers and books may be superseded as new evidence emerges and knowledge advances.

The journey of life

Humanists may see life as a metaphorical journey, from youth to maturity, from ignorance to understanding, from aspiration and hope to fulfilment, but the journey is not a central concept or metaphor in humanism (despite some critics seeing humanism as embracing a naïve belief in human progress).

Humanists recognise the human need for rituals to mark the important stages of life. There are humanist ceremonies to celebrate birth and marriage, and in some countries, though not the UK, the arrival of adulthood. Humanist ceremonies are tailor-made for the people involved, and may involve readings, music, poetry as well as statements from those most closely involved and, possibly, a humanist celebrant. They will not include hymns, worship or prayer, though they may include time for quiet reflection or prayer for those who wish. They may also include traditional symbols such as flowers and rings.

Humanist baby-namings can take place anywhere, and are usually fairly informal occasions, in which family and friends welcome the new arrival and express their hopes and promises, in words such as: "We promise to use all our wisdom, patience and love to help you to fulfil yourself and help others throughout your life." They may invite a friend to be the baby's mentor or involve other children in the family in the ceremony.

Humanist weddings may be indoors or outdoors, formal or informal, traditional or very individual in style. The important thing is for the ceremony to suit the couple and add something personal, particularly the couple's own readings and vows, to the necessary legal civil ceremony.

Humanists do not believe in an afterlife, and so humanist funerals look back rather than forward, celebrating the life of the deceased as well as offering an opportunity to grieve and say farewell. There will be no suggestion of life after death. A humanist celebrant may lead the funeral and offer guidance and suggestions to ensure that it reflects the beliefs, culture and personality, as well as the life and achievements, of the deceased.

Special days and celebrations

Humanists have no particular festival days. Some humanists choose to celebrate New Year or "Winterval" rather than Christmas; some celebrate International Humanist Day on 21 June, or Human Rights Day in December, or on the birthday of Charles Darwin on 12 February, but none of these is obligatory. Many humanists simply enjoy public holidays such as Christmas and Easter in their own ways, and there are, of course, many non-religious festivals that include everyone: local fairs and celebrations and anniversaries, film and book festivals, Bonfire Night, et al. Humanists would like to see more of these, and some public celebrations that are meant for everyone, such as Remembrance Day on 11 November or "Peace Days" becoming more inclusive.

For humanists, the importance of festivals and holidays lies mostly in the rest and recreation and opportunities to be with friends and family that they bring. Some festivals are also an opportunity to remember a special person or event, or to celebrate human solidarity. Family celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries are important to humanists too.

Humanists celebrate festivals, even ones that are religious in origin, in secular ways, and tend to stress the ancient (pre-Christian) seasonal origins of some holidays, for example those in the middle of winter or at the start of spring. They may well exchange cards and presents and have special meals and family traditions, just like most other people, but they will probably not join in with the more religious elements of some festivals.

International Humanist Day is important as the only day that celebrates humanism, though it is not a public holiday or a mandatory one for humanists. Human Rights Day is important to many humanists because humanists value human rights as an international acknowledgment of the shared human values that are central to humanism. The anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin is important because he provided an alternative explanation for the way life evolved that made it possible for people in the 19th century to envisage life without religion.

There are no particular rituals associated with humanist celebrations; how humanists mark these occasions will depend on the cultures and societies they belong to and on individual preferences.

Humanists have long recognised the need for rituals to mark the important stages of life, such as birth, marriage (and same-sex civil partnerships) and death, but humanist ceremonies are tailor-made for the people involved rather than following any particular tradition or pattern.

The most distinctive features of all humanist celebrations, whether personal, family, public or civic, are the absence of hymns, worship and prayer, and the individual nature of each ceremony.

Ways of Expressing Meaning

Learning from stories and narratives

There are no key stories in humanism, and no sacred stories.

On the other hand, it seems to be a general characteristic of human beings to enjoy and learn from stories, both true ones and fiction, and so stories of various kinds are important to humanists. Though they distinguish carefully between truth and fiction, humanists find psychological and moral truths in both.

Most humanists in Europe and North and South America are familiar with the stories of the Bible and the great works of mythology and literature that are part of our common culture and which encourage us to think about the human condition and our place in the universe. Humanists are capable of appreciating stories from the world's religions without believing that they are necessarily literally true. Most humanists appreciate the power of imaginative fiction, poetry, myth, drama and metaphor to move us and persuade us to empathise with characters both like and unlike ourselves and to think about important moral questions. Teachers will be familiar with the way even quite banal stories can stimulate intense discussion about motivations and morality.

Historical and scientific narratives can also be inspirational for humanists, who, for example, find meaning and beauty in the immense "story" of evolution or in stories of human benevolence, courage and creativity.

Stories can be taken at face value, as mere entertainment – and humanists are unlikely to object to "mere" entertainment. But fictional and non-fictional narratives are often also a way of exploring the world and learning more about it, ourselves and other people. The works of Shakespeare, for example, are valued for their psychological and moral insights as well as for their drama, poetry and narrative drive.

Humanists also see the scientific account of evolution of life on Earth, and the accounts of the discoveries which led to it, as both true and fascinating, placing humankind firmly in the natural world (a place which is not seen by humanists as demeaning) and offering powerful explanations of human beings, their nature and behaviour, as well as of other species.

Humanists do not necessarily share stories, so their impact will tend to be personal rather than communal. As a group, however, they do attach great importance to the scientific accounts of life on Earth; the developing understanding of this in the 19th century was instrumental in moving many Christians away from literalist interpretations of the Bible, and for some caused a loss of religious faith and a shift towards humanism.

Symbolism

There is no great range of symbols unique to humanism and none of any great age. The best known is perhaps the "Happy Human" symbol. This was the winning design in a competition in the 1960s and has been adopted and adapted by humanist organisations all around the world. It was chosen for its happy appearance, happiness and humanity being central concepts to humanists, and for its H-shape, standing for humanism. The slightly higher arm on the left was intended to hold different national flags.

The meaning of the "Happy Human" symbol is easily understood, but it is a human creation and has no special or sacred status.

The "Happy Human" symbol is very distinctive, but humanists do not always choose to appear distinctive and many do not wear or display the symbol. It is useful as a well understood logo that links together many different humanist organisations around the world.

While they understand the symbolism and the need for symbolism of some faith groups, some humanists object to religious symbols being on permanent display in shared public spaces such as crematoria or schools because they feel excluded by them.

The arts

The "Happy Human" symbol has not yet permeated into art, music, literature and architecture, and on the whole humanists share many of the symbols and symbolic language of the rest of humanity, such as flowers signifying transience at funerals, but also representing beauty and nature at other times, rings and the stars suggesting eternity. We are all surrounded by artistic, literary and practical symbols (such as warning signs, brands and logos) – and it would seem to a humanist that using and understanding symbolic images and language are natural aspects of being human.

Meeting Places

Humanists have very few buildings of their own in the UK. Two examples are Leicester Secular Society and Conway Hall in Holborn, London; both are large buildings with many rooms of various sizes suitable for meetings and lectures.

Leicester Secular Society's building is particularly interesting. Built in 1881, partly because of the difficulties atheists and freethinkers had in finding places to meet, its façade features busts of Socrates, Jesus, Voltaire, Thomas Paine and Robert Owen.

Conway Hall was opened in 1929 when the South Place Ethical Society needed a new home. The Society wanted "a dignified and commodious building, which it is hoped may become the Headquarters of the Ethical Movement in the British Isles, and also provide an open platform for speakers from any part of the world." Conway Hall remains a centre for free speech and progressive ideas. It holds a library of free-thought and hosts the world's longest running continuous series of chamber music concerts, which began as secular alternatives to

church-going on Sundays. Ethical Societies still thrive in many cities in the USA, where there is also an Ethical Union based in New York, with a slogan "Deed before creed".

Expressing humanist beliefs at meetings

Humanists today do not worship, as they do not believe in a deity to be worshipped. However, the 19th century forerunners of contemporary humanism, Ethical Churches, were run like very liberal churches, with sermons, ministers and hymns, and the British Humanist Association has in its archives copies of the 1818 Ethical Church / Ethical Society hymn book "Social Worship". Ethical Churches, later Ethical Societies, fulfilled a need for non-conformists and freethinkers to get together for an inspirational communal experience, usually on a Sunday when everyone else was at church. The focus was on doing good and inspirational ideas such as peace, liberty, justice, duty and courage. These were reflected in the language and format of meetings, though their roots in Christian services are evident, with references to God and Jesus alongside poems by Keats, Wordsworth and Tennyson set to music.

Later, Ethical Societies in the UK joined together as the Ethical Union, which in the 1950s became the British Humanist Association.

Humanists who choose to meet with other humanists today can do so freely. They meet in each other's homes or in public spaces such as libraries, meeting rooms or pubs. Their meetings vary according to the interests of the group but might include visiting speakers, discussions on ethical subjects, or planning social events or fund-raising for charities, but not worship or prayers. The meetings are important to their members as spaces where they can meet like minds and find support for their humanist worldview.

Inspirational places

There are no sacred places or places of pilgrimage for humanists. Some find inspiration in places of natural beauty or in museums or art galleries or places where inspirational figures lived or concert halls, locations which remind them of humankind's place in nature or human creativity and culture.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Humanist identity and belonging

There are few overt signs or demonstrations of humanist belief. Humanists dress like most other secular people of their own societies and there are no obligatory rituals or observances. There is no humanist authority expecting and imposing moral codes or certain kinds of behaviour. On the other hand, to declare oneself a humanist is to commit oneself to a particular ethical worldview, one which demands reflection and a concern for others, as in the humanist maxim: "Think for oneself; act for others". "Belonging" is an internal and

personal matter for humanists, unlikely to be expressed in any obvious external or symbolic way.

Humanists may express their beliefs by, for example, sending their children to an inclusive school (rather than a faith school), and by not participating in prayer or worship. They may choose to celebrate life events with humanist ceremonies such as baby-namings, weddings or funerals. They may simply declare that they are humanists, or they may join a local humanist group or a national organisation like the British Humanist Association, which "supports and represents" humanists and other non-religious people. Or they may simply express their beliefs by trying to live a good life according to their humanist values.

What "belonging" means to a humanist depends very much on time and place. In some societies being a humanist is accepted as perfectly normal, while in others it can lead to discrimination or conflict with the wider community: there are countries where atheism is not accepted at all and where there is no visible humanist or atheist community to belong to, indeed such a thing would be dangerous.

In Britain today, an individual identifying as a humanist and belonging to a humanist family or group or organisation will find reassurance and support of various kinds, philosophical and practical. Joining the humanist community can provide companionship with like minds and help to build the confidence needed in a society that, though very tolerant and in many ways secular, still sometimes expresses negativity or ignorance towards atheism and humanism.

The humanist community will feel it really belongs in society when its organisations are treated in the public sphere with the same consideration and respect as is accorded to faith groups.

Very little is formally expected of a humanist – humanists do not have to join anything, read anything, perform any rites, or go to particular places on particular days. Informally, when people decide they are humanists (and that is all it takes) they are committed to a worldview that is secular, moral and human-centred.

There are no identifying marks or symbols or dress codes for humanists. Some may choose to wear a "Happy Human" badge.

Humanists are, therefore, not easily recognised. Additionally, it is still considered impolite or unduly provocative in some circles to discuss religious or sceptical beliefs and some humanists may, for that or other reasons, choose to treat their beliefs as a private matter. On the other hand, some humanists will be recognised because they have declared themselves humanists (for example when filling in an official form or choosing a school), or because they have chosen to affirm rather than to swear a religious oath or to have a humanist ceremony for a life event or to opt out of a religious ceremony or festival, or by their membership of a local or national humanist organisation.

Foundations of identity

One of the basic principles of humanism, shared with many religions, is the "Golden Rule": "Treat other people as you would like to be treated yourself", and humanists would expect themselves, and others, to live by this principle. They also expect to have to think about the consequences of their actions, for others as well as themselves. That both these guiding principles require thought and adaptation to particular circumstances is not considered a bad thing by most humanists, who, without being moral relativists, distrust absolute codes that demand unquestioning obedience.

Humanists are not usually committed to a group view or identity or a group code of behaviour, and in this sense humanism is probably one of less committing worldviews. This does not mean, however, as some people occasionally imagine, that humanists can do exactly what they please with no thought for others. Humanism places considerable weight on individual judgment and personal responsibility.

Humanists may choose to express their personal worldview in some of the ways suggested. Other ways might include: doing voluntary work; giving to charity; talking about their beliefs; sending their children to inclusive schools rather than faith schools; not joining in public prayers or hymns; saving or investing ethically; being environmentally-friendly. Probably a higher proportion than in the general population are vegetarian, an expression of concern for animal welfare and/or the environment. Neither these expressions of what is valued, or the thoughtfulness about ethics that underpin them, are unique to humanists, of course, but they do seem to be characteristic of them.

Humanists think that every person is unique because they are a unique blend of "nature" and "nurture", that is, genetic influences (some immediate, from parents and family, and some very ancient, part of the shared human heritage) and environment (upbringing, culture, education – all the external influences on us). Humanists tend not to identify themselves by what they do not believe in, which may be just one element in their lives, and may be more comfortable with the concept of multiple identities, based on nationality, neighbourhood, profession, age, family, race, sex, sexuality, interests, beliefs, political affiliation et al. Humanists also think that we have a great deal in common because we are all human beings, living in human societies, and tend to look to sciences such as psychology, social psychology, anthropology and evolutionary psychologists for explanations of human nature and individual personality.

Family and community

The family is just as important to humanists as it is to everyone else, though humanists may have a fairly liberal and inclusive idea of what constitutes a family. The humanist idea of a good family, like their idea of a good community, will be based on how members treat and care for each other, including the more vulnerable members, and how much good it does in the world.

1Community is important to humanists as a source of friendship and support, and some humanists find these particularly within the humanist community. But many humanists do

not restrict their idea of community to those who share their beliefs, and have a strong sense of the wider "human community".

Humanist families may practise their beliefs by, for example, sending their children to an inclusive school (rather than a faith school), or in withdrawing their children from school worship or Religious Education (though the latter would be unusual and might depend on the local RE syllabus or a teacher's interpretation of it; most humanists do not object to their children finding out what others in our society believe, though they also welcome the inclusion of their beliefs in RE).

More generally, humanist parents encourage their children to think for themselves and to become responsible adults.

Humanist families may choose humanist ceremonies such as baby-namings, weddings or funerals. In some countries, particularly those where most adolescents are confirmed, young humanists participate in alternative humanist summer camps or classes, leading to humanist coming-of-age ceremonies. For example, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association runs a preparation course for "civil confirmation" taught by philosophers, which includes:

"ethics, human relations, human rights, equal rights, critical thinking, relations between the sexes, prevention of substance abuse, skepticism, protecting the environment, getting along with parents, being a teenager in a consumer society, and what it means to be an adult and take responsibility for your views and behaviour … There are 2 main rules in our course: 1) it is all right to be different, to dress differently, look different, and hold different views from the majority. And 2) One should be honest."

The humanist community may practise its beliefs by developing courses and ceremonies for its members – and, usually, for anyone else who feels they are appropriate. It may come together in national organisations like the British Humanist Association, which "supports and represents" humanists and other non-religious people, or humanists may meet together locally.

Both of these are linked by the desire and need for humanists to live lives of integrity, according to their own beliefs. One impact on the wider community is the availability of a choice of ceremonies suited to the non-religious. Another is the greater visibility of humanists and a growing awareness that, for example, legislation on discrimination and freedom of belief protects humanists too.

The impact of belonging to a humanist family or community depends very much on time and place. In some societies it may be accepted as perfectly normal, while in others it once was or is still a source of tension or conflict with the wider community: there are countries where atheism is not accepted at all and where there is no visible humanist or atheist community, indeed such a thing would be dangerous.

In Britain today, to belong to a humanist family and / or community would be a confidence-building source of support, helpful in equipping one against some of the negative assumptions that still exist about atheism and humanism.

The humanist tradition entails trying to do some good in the world and a commitment to working with others for the common good; many humanists work alongside religious believers in, for example, education and the "caring professions", and in projects, campaigns and charities which aim to improve the world in some way. In many of these settings whether one has religious belief or not is less important than the task itself and may not come up as an issue.

Humanist diversity

Humanists are fairly diverse, as humanist ideas have arisen independently in many places at many different times. There are humanist groups and organisations all over the world. As with religions, shared ideas, beliefs and values can create strong bonds across different nationalities and cultures.

Humanists sometimes worry that humanism lacks a clear "identity". For the non-religious it is not always easy to find a group identity, but many humanists are satisfied by their belief in human solidarity and / or the concept of "multiple identities", which may include family, profession, politics, hobbies and interests, neighbourhood, nationality and their humanist worldview. One humanist answered a child's question "Who am I?" like this:

"You are an intelligent human being. Your life is valuable for its own sake. You are not second-class in the universe, deriving meaning and purpose from some other mind. You are not inherently evil – you are inherently human, possessing the positive rational potential to help make this a world of morality, peace and joy. Trust yourself." (Dan Barker in "Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist")

Humanists will be divided, as are philosophers and scientists, on the "mind / body question": Is the mind is simply another way of talking about the brain, or is the mind (or consciousness or "spirit" or "soul") something separate and different? Whichever it is, humanists will look for a naturalistic explanation; it is inconceivable to a humanist that there is anything within us that could exist independently of the brain, or after death. For humanists the only possible survival after death is in the work, the memories, the children, that we leave behind, and in the fact that our remains will sooner or later become part of natural world.

Other religions and beliefs

There is some diversity within humanism about the merits of religion and of interfaith dialogue. Humanists are sometimes excluded from interfaith dialogue and networks on the grounds that humanism is not a religion, and thus do not always know what it involves. However, most humanists would prefer to see dialogue rather than religious conflict, and

many would like to enter into dialogue with others, regardless of their worldviews, about common concerns such as climate change and world poverty.

Some humanists, like some religious believers, are very interested in what other people believe and would like to find out more in a neutral setting that does not compromise their own beliefs. Humanists do participate in some local interfaith groups and SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education).

Increasing diversity during the past half-century has made the UK a much more interesting place to live, but humanists are often concerned that the freedoms associated with an open society may be threatened by too many concessions to religious groups. Humanists are not on the whole separatists, and do not seek their own schools, or youth or scout groups, or welfare services – and would prefer that pluralism was expressed in "reasonable accommodations" of religious and cultural needs within a framework of shared values and shared public and community institutions.

Whilst strongly believing in a democratic secular state that does not privilege religion in any way, humanists also have a clear commitment to human rights, including the rights to freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression. Humanist beliefs rarely, if ever, clash with the requirements of citizenship, at least in secular democracies, though, of course, humanists do not necessarily agree with everything that their governments do. Humanists believe that citizenship should be based on the acceptance of shared values and institutions, but should not demand abandonment of religious or cultural beliefs and practices, as long as they do no harm.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Feelings and experiences

Humanists feel awe and wonder – at the natural world, for example – and concern, joy and sadness just like other human beings. When it comes to praise and thanks, humanists would thank and praise other people for the good things in life, not a deity, and they do not worship. One difficulty for humanists in discussing the "spiritual" is that all so many different feelings and concepts are encompassed in the word "spiritual", some of which they share, and some of which they do not because they are essentially religious concepts. Humanist reservations reflect the fact that humanists share the normal range of human emotions (despite sometimes being written off as coldly rational), but do not believe in gods or souls/spirits or anything supernatural.

One impact of the above can be unease amongst humanists about the word "spiritual" and discussions about how far humanists can use the word to describe their emotional and aesthetic lives. Many would avoid the word altogether if it were not so prevalent, for example in education.

In practical ways, the assumption that everyone prays or worships can be an irritant to humanists, especially when it is coupled with assertions that those who do not worship a

god must therefore worship possessions or football teams. Humanists usually make time for "private reflection" in their ceremonies, and have devised their own "graces", for use in formal situations, such as:

"… First, let us think of the people we are with today, and make the most of the pleasure of sharing food and drink together. Then, let us think of the people who made the food and drink and brought it to us, who serve us and wait on us, and who clear up and clean up after us. Finally, let us think of all the people all over the world, members with us in the human family, who will not have a meal today."(Nicolas Walter)

There is a close relationship between what people value and what they feel. Humanists value the natural world, human relationships and culture, and these are the sources of some of their deepest feelings. They may share the philosopher Immanuel Kant's "awe and wonder" at "the starry skies above and the moral law within".

Humanists see religious experiences as entirely internal, subjective and personal, and as religious interpretations of ordinary human experiences, such as the feeling one might get watching a beautiful sunset or a baby being born. Humanists do not believe in miracles either, and see all these religious phenomena as explicable in naturalistic ways, by, for example, sciences such as psychology and medicine, wishful thinking or the placebo effect.

In this account of a humanist "spiritual experience", Fenner Brockway (1888-1988), socialist MP and member of the Advisory Council of the British Humanist Association, described how it influenced his life:

"This spiritual experience came one evening as I stood looking over the green ocean towards the red sunset. A great calm came over me. I became lost in the beauty of the scene. My spirit reached out and became one with the spirit of the sea and sky. I was one with the universe beyond. I seemed to become one with all life … I have said that this experience is my religion, yet it leaves me an agnostic … I have no sense of a personal God. My philosophy is founded on the experience I described. I cannot be other than a world citizen, identifying with all peoples."

Many humanists see such events more simply, as joyful aesthetic experiences, but this account shows how they can be interpreted, with profound effects on a humanist's life.

Answers to ultimate questions

The 'ultimate questions' for humanists are probably similar to those for religious believers. They are questions about purpose and existence: Why are we here? What happens to us when we die? Why is there so much suffering? Is there a god? How do we know what is right?

For a humanist, speaking of "the ultimate" can be problematic. Humanists ask this kind of question because they are reflective human beings, and because thinking about these questions is part of determining who they are and how they live. However, many "ultimate

questions" do not seem very susceptible to the usual humanist thinking tools of evidence and reason; on the other hand, religious answers are utterly unconvincing to humanists.

Humanists have various options when they consider ultimate questions:

They can remain agnostic about them, acknowledging the human need to ask such questions and being prepared to explore them, but believing that we can never be certain of the answers.

They can adopt a rather dismissive attitude to them, perhaps best exemplified by A J Ayer in 'Language Truth and Logic' (1936) in which he categorises all statements that are not either true by definition or empirically verifiable as "nonsensical", or by Bertrand Russell's airy answer when asked how he would explain the existence of the universe, "I should say the universe is just there, and that is all."

They can find their own answers. Some will look to science to provide answers. Richard Dawkins, for example, tends to do this, but he also finds a kind of transcendence in contemplating and exploring the natural world, as do many humanists. Humanists may also share the philosopher Immanuel Kant's "awe and wonder" at "the starry skies above and the moral law within", or experience transcendence in creativity or the arts.

Questions of personal identity – "Who am I?" – tend to be answered by humanists in relatively pragmatic, empirical terms. Everyone is a unique blend of genetic influences (some immediate, from parents and family, and some very ancient, part of the shared human heritage) and environment (upbringing, culture, education – all the external influences on us). Humanists also think that we have a great deal in common because we are all human beings, living in human societies, and tend to look to psychology, social psychology, anthropology and evolutionary psychologists for answers to questions about human nature.

Humanists respond to experiences of transcendence by seeking rational explanations. Experiences such as joy, wonder, sudden clarity or understanding, forgetfulness of self, or love, often categorised as "spiritual" can also be seen as normal human emotions, often aesthetic or to do with relationships. To seek naturalistic explanations of these experiences and to deny that they are religious is not to belittle them; they mean a great deal to those that experience them. To explain things, to "unweave the rainbow" (as Keats' expressed his criticism of "cold philosophy" in his narrative poem 'Lamia') is not necessarily or even usually destructive or reductive; it may even be life-enhancing and inspiring:

"… isn't it sad to go to your grave without wondering why you were born? Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed eager to resume discovering the world and rejoicing to be part of it?" (Richard Dawkins 'Unweaving the Rainbow')

Suffering appears to be an inevitable aspect of the human condition: few of us have lives untouched by pain, loss or failure, and none of us can avoid death. How does a humanist respond to "the problem of evil", the impossibility of reconciling suffering with an omnipotent, omniscient benevolent god? For humanists, this is not so much a problem as a

powerful argument against belief in such a god. Humanists would not blame a deity or any abstract concept of evil for suffering; nor would they look to a deity for solutions or comfort. They find these in human action and solidarity, and in themselves and their relationships.

The end of life

Humanists do not believe in any kind of supernaturally inspired end to human existence, or in the possibility of surviving death. But many, along with many religious believers, are becoming concerned about the prospects for humanity in a crowded, over-exploited world with dwindling resources and rising temperatures. They see this as a natural problem, to be solved, if it can be, by human effort, which will probably include changes in behaviour and technological developments.

If humanists find any meaning in death, it will be in reflecting on a life well lived and on transience: as Marcus Aurelius put it in his Meditations (121 – 80 CE), "Nature's law is that everything changes and passes, so that, in due course, other things may come to exist."

The main difference between the humanist attitude to death and that of most religious believers is in the absence of belief in life after death. The only way we can possibly live on, humanists believe, is in the achievements and memories and children we may leave behind us – an extra incentive to live a good life. Belief in death's finality is not necessarily gloomy: "Death is nothing to us: for after our bodies have been dissolved by death they are without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us," said Epicurus, in "Principal Doctrines", c.300 BCE, and most humanists agree.

Humanists adopt a similarly rational attitude to life and death issues such as abortion and voluntary euthanasia. Life may be very precious but it is not "sacred" or "God-given" for a humanist and there can be good reasons to end it. Autonomy, the power to make decisions about one's own life, is very important to humanists, and they do not, for example, believe in causing or prolonging suffering unnecessarily.

Humanists, in their ceremonies, are usually expressing a commitment to another person, as well as a public commitment to humanist beliefs and values.

Religion and science

Humanists think that the only reliable evidence for truth claims is empirical, and that scientific method is the only way of finding out how the world works. They accept that the findings of science are provisional, and that good theories may be superseded by better ones if new evidence appears, without being relativists. Many theories achieve the status of knowledge or truth because the evidence for them is so strong and no counter-evidence has been found. Humanists also accept that the vast explosion of knowledge in recent centuries means that it is no longer possible to know everything from first-hand experience; we have to take some knowledge on trust.

Many religious believers also trust in scientific method, empirical evidence and the experts for their beliefs about the world.

Humanists are not necessarily or usually relativists, people who think that there things can be "true for you, but not for me" or that there are special "religious" kinds of truth. Humanists do not think that simply believing things makes them true, or that metaphors should be treated as if they were literally true, or that individual subjective interpretation of experience is reliable. They would use the word "faith" for ideas which are not backed up by empirical evidence.

Humanists would not believe something to be true simply because an authority, religious or secular, says it is. The experts they trust are those who employ scientific method and are prepared to change their minds when new evidence appears, and who distinguish carefully between matters of personal taste or opinion and matters of fact.

Most humanists do not think that science and religion have much in common, even though they sometimes use similar language. Some agree with the idea, popularised by Stephen Jay Gould, of non-overlapping magisteria, that is, that science and religion deal with completely different areas of experience, science with the empirical realm and religion(though not only religion) deals with ultimate questions. Others, such as Richard Dawkins, take the claims about the world made by some religious believers as evidence that religion and science are in conflict over the same kinds of truth claim, and that science gets them right, because its methodology is good, and religion gets them wrong because its "evidence" comes from sacred texts and traditions.

Humanists would look to sciences such as psychology and anthropology for explanations for the appeal and ubiquity of religious faith. They would not take ubiquity as evidence of the truth of religion, but would see it as an expression of human needs: for explanation – particularly of existence and death – for certainty, for rules and sanctions, for tribal cohesion, for ritual.

The evidence is that it is clearly possible to be both a scientist and a person of faith (as many people are).

Humanists tend to point to the resistance of religious authorities to the many scientific discoveries that they have seen as challenges to faith, as evidence of a clash of worldviews. Examples include the Church's opposition to Galileo's observations about the Universe, which were seen as undermining Christian beliefs about the centrality of the Earth and humankind in God's creation, and religious condemnation of the Darwinian theory of evolution, which contradicts the literal truth of many sacred texts and suggests a godless mechanism for the development of the vast array of life-forms on Earth.

Because empirical and religious language sometimes overlap, for example in the use of words like "reality", "truth" and "knowledge", it is easy to imagine they share the same

meaning. But they may well not, as religious concepts and expression are often very different from scientific or empirical ones.

Values and Commitments

Rules and ethical guidelines

Like many of the world's religions, humanism values human happiness and flourishing and the morality of the 'golden rule': "Treat other people as you would like to be treated yourself". The 20th century humanist philosopher, A J Ayer, described the basis of humanist values in 'The Humanist Outlook', 1968: "The only possible basis for a sound morality is mutual tolerance and respect: tolerance of one another's customs and opinions; respect for one another's rights and feelings; awareness of one another's needs."

Humanists see the source of all moral values in shared human nature and needs. Human nature includes the abilities to understand and empathise with others and to learn from experience, and human needs include security and friendship. Even those values that are not directly concerned with human relationships, for example those that influence how we treat other species or the environment, are founded in human needs – for a safe and sustaining Earth, for the pleasures of seeing and interacting with the natural world.

Many humanists agree with the utilitarian principle expressed by 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."

Within humanism there are few, if any, rules, just the hope or expectation that humanists will try to live by the general principles outlined above and base their values and behaviour on reason and experience rather than on unthinking obedience, prejudice or fear. In the wider community, humanists have been influenced by the concept of human rights, which supports the humanist viewpoint that there are universal moral values shared by everyone, regardless of race, culture or religion. Many humanists, for example, support Amnesty International and other human rights organisations.

Moral exemplars

Many have been influenced by a humanist worldview to use their talents to try to make the world a better place. Some have been famous for their contributions to society, science, medicine and the arts, for example, Charles Bradlaugh, the first openly atheist MP, the Curies, Thomas Hardy and Percy Bysshe Shelley in the 19th century; and A J Ayer, Fenner Brockway, E M Forster , Sigmund Freud, Julian Huxley, Nehru , M N Roy, and Bertrand Russell in the 20th. Humanists Brock Chisholm, Peter Ritchie Calder and John Boyd Orr were instrumental in setting up the institutions of the United Nations in the mid-20th century. Today many distinguished and influential humanists continue to work to improve the world.

One of the founders of the British Ethical Society movement, Moncure Conway, quarrelled with his American family and was dismissed in 1856 from his Unitarian church ministry because he opposed slavery. Later, in London, he spoke for women's suffrage. Britain's first openly atheist MP Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91) had to fight to take up his seat in Parliament with a non-religious affirmation, and was sentenced to six months in prison in 1877 for publishing a pamphlet about family planning.

Humanist politician Fenner Brockway (1888-1988) devoted his life to world peace and racial equality. He too was imprisoned – for his opposition to the 1914-18 war. He played a leading role in bringing about the independence of Britain's former colonies. He worked with the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru (1889-1964), who, despite a peaceful campaign to establish independence, was sent to prison many times by the British government of India. Nehru observed how ignorance and religious dogma and traditions held back India and saw the need for secular democracy and social reforms.

Indian social reformer, Shri Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (also known as Gora) (1902-1975), motivated by atheism and despite his own high caste, strove to abolish the caste system with its 'untouchables', and the idea of 'karma' or divine fate.

After World War 2, Julian Huxley (1887-1975), an early supporter of humanist organisations, was appointed the first Director-General of UNESCO, where he promoted world-wide education, population control and conservation of nature.

Another early adviser to what was then known as the British Humanist Association, John Boyd Orr (1880-1971) put his belief that we should use our knowledge to eradicate hunger in the world into practice when he became the first Director of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). He was followed at the WHO by humanist Brock Chisholm (1898-1967) who dedicated much of his life to awakening the world to its responsibility for the present and future welfare of humankind, and to the problems caused by over-population.

Peter Ritchie Calder (1906-82), was a humanist, journalist, British delegate to UNESCO and UN Famine Conference, and adviser to Oxfam. He helped to start the UN Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, as well as being active in the British Peace Council and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He believed that science, used properly, could help the world.

Not all humanists have achieved fame of course. As one distinguished freethinker of the 19th century, writer George Eliot suggested: "… the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Individual and social responsibility

Humanists respond to contemporary ethical issues using the tools of reason and empathy. These do not, however, always lead to the same conclusions; for example, some humanists are pacifists while others would support a humanitarian war or a war of self-defence. But humanist responses are usually liberal and permissive on issues such as voluntary euthanasia, sexuality and abortion. They do not tend to believe that all human life from conception to death is "sacred" or inviolable, and set great store by personal autonomy on issues such as the expression of sexuality or the value of one's own life and when to end it, as long as one's actions do not harm others. Thus this apparent license is constrained by respect for others and the desire to do as much good and as little harm as possible.

Humanism and human rights have both been influenced by Enlightenment thinking which stressed the commonality of human beings, regardless of race, culture or religion, and therefore the universality of moral values, because they are based on shared human nature and needs. Social justice, the equal treatment of all citizens and the protection of citizens from abuse by powerful institutions all fall into the category of universal human needs. Humanists have championed "the open society" (essentially liberal democracy), as the best way of securing personal freedom, happiness and fulfilment.

Humanists do not on the whole set up their own separate humanist organisations to work towards progress on these issues, preferring to work with others for the common good, to support some of the many excellent organisations already working in these fields, and not to discriminate amongst those who need help on grounds of belief.

The environment

Humanists strongly believe that humankind must take responsibility for improving the world, and increasingly today for protecting the environment that sustains us all. For humanists, human rights, fairness and social justice are right and necessary because they contribute to human fulfilment and happiness and because people suffer in their absence; care for the environment is important because we and other species depend on it, and future generations will suffer if we allow it to degrade too far or exhaust Earth's resources.

Humanists bring an emphasis on evidence, experience and reason into any discussion on global issues. Humanists take a sceptical view of religious or cultural traditions that limit human potential or cause unnecessary suffering: they would not think an action or convention or rule right simply because it was the tradition or because an authority said it was right. Humanists would demand hard information and reasons for any argument or action on these issues, and might seek evidence or expert opinion, for example, from scientists or philosophers.

One insight that is perhaps particular to humanism is the belief in shared values. Other groups often stress differences – in values, in culture, in beliefs – but for humanists the differences are outweighed by the similarities between people and their needs. Generally, humanists judge actions by their consequences and tend to question orthodoxies, and,

unlike some faith groups, they value the contributions to human knowledge and welfare made by science, technology and modern medicine.

Ethical decision making

Discussions amongst humanists are completely free and impossible to monitor or control. There is no central authority to decide on global or other issues, but a shared humanist perspective often emerges from rational, evidence-based discussion. For example, although a few humanists thought that the 2005 Make Poverty History campaign was vacuous "motherhood and apple pie" (and in the light of hindsight they may well have been right), there was little or no opposition to Humanists UK (known as the British Humanist Association at the time) signing up to it; few, if any, humanists think that desperate poverty and vast inequalities of wealth are good things – because they are obvious causes of unhappiness and suffering, preventing flourishing and fulfilment.

Humanist organisations usually try to find a consensus, and / or rely on their trustees and staff to decide policy rationally. Where there is no consensus, for example, on pacifism or the Iraq war, or the task is beyond the remit of the organisation, for example, feeding the hungry, it is left to individual humanists to either join with others outside organised humanism to work for a cause or campaign, or to find humanists of a similar mind to work with. Humanist organisations and individuals also rely on expert advice, for example from philosophers and scientists.

Humanism, like some religions, is global and so may have global contacts and insights into different cultures and perspectives. Religious believers may well, if their judgements on global issues are based on experience, reason and empathy, come to very similar conclusions to humanists about the problems and possible solutions. Sometimes, even though their rationales are very different, humanists and religious believers arrive at similar positions; for example, humanists may be motivated to do something about global warming by concern for the future of humanity in a degraded environment and / or aesthetic and emotional losses as species die out, and religious believers may be motivated by an obligation to look after "God's creation" – but the results, in awareness and action on environmental problems, may be the same.

On the other hand, humanists do not think that insights and actions based solely on tradition or religious authorities or theological arguments, can be sound. For example, humanists have ideas very different from those of some religious believers about the role of women and the use of contraception and prophylactics against HIV/AIDS, and are very critical of the damage done in Africa by religiously-motivated aid workers who promote abstinence as the only way of preventing pregnancy or STDs.

Humanism and Anti-Racism – Some Examples

Here is a list of humanists who have been actively involved in anti-racism and some suggested works (some recent some more historical)

James Baldwin, American novelist and activist

See The Fire Next Time and other works

Video clip: www.facebook.com/watch/?v=260083205058947

Richard Wright, author

See Native Son (fiction)

Ta Nehisi Coates, author and journalist

See Between the World and Me

Zadie Smith

Contempt as a virus (essay)

Kenan Malik, writer and lecturer

In The Meaning of Race (1996) Malik 'throws new light on the nature and origins of ideas of racial difference. Arguing that the concept of 'race' is a means through which Western society has come to understand the relationship between humanity, society and nature, the book re-examines the relationship between Enlightenment thought and racial discourse, clarifies the nature of scientific racism, and presents a critique of postmodern theories of cultural 'difference'.' [Google Books]

Adam Rutherford, How to Argue with a Racist

Adam Rutherford is a geneticist and author. How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality takes aim at pseudoscientific arguments used to justify racism and racial stereotypes, both historically and today, using biology – and socio-economics – to challenge the harmful use of racist tropes presented as fact.

Watch: How to Argue with a Racist

Some other info on humanists and anti-racism

John Amichi, Patron of Humanists UK

Video clip for schools: Not-racist v anti-racist: What's the difference?: www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zs9n2v4

Asa Philip Randolph, Civil Rights leader

Asa Philip Randolph was a civil rights leader who campaigned for racial equality in the workplace. He organised the March on Washington in 1963 at which Martin Luther King delivered his 'I have a dream' speech.

'This condition of freedom, equality, and democracy is not the gift of gods. It is the task of men, yes, men, brave men, honest men, determined men.'

First Universal Races Congress

The First Universal Races Congress took place in London 26-29 July 1911: the first ever conference of its kind. The Congress sought to challenge racial divisions in the light of social and scientific understanding, pre-dating comparable efforts by international bodies such as UNESCO by four decades. Developed from an idea suggested by Felix Adler at a meeting of the International Union of Ethical Societies (a precursor of today's Humanists International) in 1906, the Congress was principally organised by Gustav Spiller, drawing attendees from across the world.

heritage.humanists.uk/first-universal-races-congress

W.E.B. du Bois

Lifelong anti-racist activist and writer on racial inequality. Castigated the Church for its role in upholding racist ideals and institutions (e.g. slavery).

Albert Einstein

Einstein drew on his own experience of anti-semitism to decry racism. During the 1930s and 1940s, while living in America, Einstein joined civil rights organisations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Crusade Against Lynching (ACAL), acting as co-chair for the latter, and lobbying for federal anti-lynching legislation alongside its founder Paul Robeson. In a commencement address for the historically black Lincoln University, he described racism as 'a disease of white people'.

How Albert Einstein Used His Fame to Denounce American Racism

A.J. Ayer was Chairman of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination in Sport

Barbara Wootton

'In case of fire or shipwreck no one stops to inquire into the intelligence quotient, the character, or (one hopes) the social status or racial origins of those whose lives are at stake, in order to give priority to those of higher standing. At such times all are treated as equal,

preference being given only to those least able to help themselves. But we have yet to learn that what is good in emergency is no less good in everyday life.'

More can be found on the Humanist Heritage website: heritage.humanists.uk/

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