**BASICS OF HUMANISM by Norman Bacrac (Haringey SACRE)**

*The following notes on Humanism are intended primarily to inform Religious Education teachers newly tasked with introducing the subject into their RE syllabus. This often covers six religions, including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, but may omit any non-religious viewpoint such as Humanism. Comments and queries on these notes are invited - just email:* [bacrac@fsmail.net](mailto:bacrac@fsmail.net)

**Humanism** is not a religion but a non-religious philosophy of life. Humanists maintain that:

1. All religions were created by human beings alone, so the books called *holy* and the texts held *sacred* by the various religions were not, as claimed, revealed by a god, nor delivered by an angel. Although religious works should certainly be studied, having valuable insights into proper human behaviour, some of the ideas expressed merely reflect the attitudes of the men (and it was men rather than women) that were current at the time. Also, we find speculations in the various religions about the origin of the world and the origin of living beings. These reveal, unsurprisingly, scant knowledge of how nature actually works and of how living beings came to exist. That is why humanists cannot accept religious writings as an infallible source of truth.

2. A reliable way to *approach* the truth about how nature works is called ‘the scientific method’. This starts with (1) *the desire to understand* an event or process, (2) studying it, making careful *observations*,(3)formulating an idea or *theory* to account for the observations*,* (4) doing *experiments* and/or making further *observations* to test the predictions of the theory, (5) *amending* or even *changing* the theory if necessary. This method was developed about 400 years ago; using it, we have discovered many of the laws or rules that apply to events in the world, enabling us to travel to the moon, cure many lethal diseases and utilize radio waves for worldwide communication.

3. We have found (from their DNA) that human and other animals and plants on earth today have a common ancestry, all having descended from the earliest life forms which arose almost four thousand million years ago. All life, including animal and human minds, has *evolved*, using a ‘ratchet’ mechanism (where the successful genes pass to the next generation) called *natural selection*. The view that evolution also needs a purposive, *super*natural, ‘intelligent designer’, deliberately manipulating atoms beyond the laws of regular biochemistry to form complex molecules (as claimed by Michael Behe) is not shared by most biologists.

4. Our ignorance on many problems (eg How did DNA originate? How do brains work? How can we find cures for still troublesome diseases?) should be readily acknowledged. These so far unanswered questions stimulate scientific enquiry; they pose an exciting challenge, especially to young people, who have the opportunity to contribute to their solution.

5. Moral questions (i.e. How should we behave towards one another and the environment?) are to be answered using the wisdom gathered from our collective human experience. Actions which benefit people are good; humanists do not expect to be rewarded (or punished) after death for their good (or bad) deeds, nor do they pray for special favours for themselves or others. Instead, while hoping for the best, they try to offer the most practical help in the circumstances.

6. The possible consequences to sentient creatures of our action should always be estimated: will it cause pleasure or happiness? – then it’s OK; cause pain or suffering? – then it’s not OK; cause pleasure to some but pain to others? – again *not* OK, because it’s wrong to seek to derive pleasure if that incurs another’s pain. If *forced* to choose between two inevitably unpleasant outcomes, the action that is likely to cause less pain should be taken. The long-term effects of an action should always be taken into account.

7. Even if scriptures really *had* contained divine commandments, or reported accounts of ‘superior’ moral behaviour, we ourselves would still need to evaluate those precepts and assess that behaviour to see if *our* ethical principles are satisfied. There is no *moral* merit in unquestioning obedience to commandments; only very young children are expected to do what they’re told without question - older children and adults should know and be satisfied with the reasons for their actions if they are to count as moral.

8. Human beings are necessarily the outcome of their own personal history. This starts at conception with their genes and is then constructed throughout life by the continuous *interaction* everyone has with their human and natural environment. This builds our brain’s abilities and results in how we each think and therefore behave *at this moment* - but we know that the brain is plastic, i.e. it can be modified by further education and learning experiences, so one’s character is not fixed.

9. Understanding people in this way (by appreciating the past causes of human actions) still allows us to influence the future. We may praise good actions (to encourage them) and condemn bad actions (to discourage them). Knowing the reasons for misbehaviour compels compassion; it precludes vindictive or retributive punishment, but it permits reasonable sanctions to deter harmful behaviour in the future; once someone fully acknowledges their misdeeds, their rehabilitation may become possible.

10. Adults may have consensual sexual relations; precautions should be taken to prevent unwanted conception. See *Humanism\** for a detailed discussion of contraception, abortion and homosexuality.

11. We should have concern for the state of our society: everyone should have the opportunity for education, work and the provision of health care; injustice and unfairness should be investigated and rectified wherever possible.

12. Everyone should expect criticism of their ideas. Ideas and beliefs have no feelings and so cannot suffer. Humanists are not offended by criticism of their beliefs but welcome frank discussion of them. Criticism of religious doctrines and ideas should not be considered offensive – ideas are not the sole property of their believers but are available for anyone to comment upon.

13. Everyone should have concern for the present and future state of the world, including all its peoples, animals and plants. Humanists in particular feel responsible for their environment on planet Earth, which is their only home.

14. Death ends life; there is no consciousness after death. We can remember past people’s good qualities and their achievements; we can profit from the example of those who advanced human welfare - and learn about those whose acts caused misery.

**Humanists value:**

1. **conscious experience**, which includesthe five senses as well as thoughts, feelings and emotions, and therefore aim to increase the amount of happiness and satisfaction experienced by sentient (conscious) beings and reduce the amount of pain suffered by them. Animals with nervous systems are assumed to be sentient and should at least be given the benefit of the doubt;

2. the creative use of **imagination** and **intelligence** for artistic, literary, physical and scientific pursuits;

3. the **golden rule**, expounded for thousands of years -- the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated in the same situation – or rather, as *they* would wish to be treated;

4. **truth,** essential for authentic social interaction and for understanding the world;

5. the **freedom** to express ideas and theories because history shows that that is how errors and unfounded beliefs are corrected and progress made. *Criticising ideas* should not extend to *insulting* the people and groups holding them but criticising someone’s ideas should not be regarded as insulting *them.* People and animals are entitled to respect, but not ideas;

6. **tolerance,** because they accept that people may hold and express differing views and opinions, so long as they do not interfere with other people’s freedom, happiness and security, which interference should not be tolerated;

7. those ideas they consider to have merit, whatever their source, but take a **sceptical, critical** attitudetowards religions, ideologies and dogmas because humanists recognise no infallible authority.

**Glossary of useful terms**

A **theist** believes that a god or gods exist. Theists usually follow one of the major religions of the world.

A **deist** believes that a god or spirit created the universe but does not intervene in its working or take an interest in human activity.

An **atheist** sees no reason to believe that any god exists and has good reasons to believe that an almighty, all-knowing and totally beneficent god does *not* exist (especially the experience of chronic pain and suffering by millions of animals and humans during the world’s history). Most humanists are atheists but not all atheists are humanists: an atheist who is very strongly committed to a political ideology having almost sacred texts may perform or endorse actions harming individuals for the sake of the ‘cause’ – so cannot be a humanist. In practical life one has to believe many things, so if one does not *believe* in the existence of god or follow a religion, then one is living ‘without’ religion and so is actually an atheist.

An **agnostic** claims one can never *know* either that gods exist or that they do not exist. Actually, there is little we can know - according to the philosopher Descartes, *certain* knowledge is limited to our present conscious state. Even atheists can’t *know* that no god exists (they don’t claim to). If one is unsure about all this, just say “I’m unsure what I believe about god”.

A **materialist** believes that life and consciousness are the natural products of the material universe, evolving in accordance with its laws. Although not in receipt of immaterial souls, we know our brains may generate amazing experiences once exposed to all the potentialities of civilisation. Being a materialist in this *philosophical* sense will not lead one to overvalue mere possessions.

A **utilitarian** strives for the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Most humanists agree that good actions are those whose effects may diminish others’ pain, and/or increase others’ pleasure. **Non-utilitarians** may say that good behaviour consists in practising virtues (e.g. honesty - never tell a lie) and/or carrying out what they see as their duty (e.g. always obey your orders). But is this always good and worthwhile *whatever* turn out to be the consequences, even if very harmful to people?

A **secular state** would be one where there is no state religion (as the Church of England is the state religion of England at present), receiving special privileges (eg bishops in the House of Lords) over other religions and beliefs. In a secular state, individuals and groups with different religious or non-religious beliefs would be treated impartially in public life and have equal rights to maintain their beliefs and (within the law) their practices. Humanists and all religious groups should look forward to a completely secular state, which would guarantee to all their freedom to pursue their ideals. Secularism is not anti-religious.

\* HUMANISM for inquiring minds by Barbara Smoker [7th edition (2017), 80 pages, £6.50. ISBN: 978-1-911578-04-8] available from the publisher, G.W. Foote & Co. Ltd. [www.freethinker.co.uk] {24.3.17}