



'It is grander and nobler to think for yourself...' (1) Diversity in British Humanism

Andrew Copson

Rationalists, freethinkers, sceptics, secularists, atheists, agnostics, humanists – the non-religious in the UK today go by many names,⁽²⁾ and this is not even to mention the many who are simply uninterested in any specific religious or non-religious worldview or lifestance: the vague, the simply unaffiliated, those who are only nominally or culturally affiliated to a religious tradition.

Across all these categories there are people who have come to their non-religious beliefs in different ways and this is one element of diversity amongst the non-religious. There are, of course, people who were raised religious and really believed with fervour but whose beliefs over time about the universe, morality and so on, moved from being religious to non-religious:

I was brought up as a Christian... to accept the certainty of God's existence. I took this so seriously as to become an ordained Methodist Minister. But I slowly began to doubt all this... As a humanist I have come to the belief that there is no meaning to life or for life outside ourselves. I believe in myself and other people.
(3)

Then there are people who have been raised in a slightly religious household, with religion as background cultural noise, who have simply found that, as life progressed, the situations in which they experienced religion diminished and they found they did not miss or need it to make meaning and purpose in their lives. Finally, there are those – a large and growing category – who had an upbringing that was basically humanist in its nature, as the child of non-religious parents, and who are still humanist now.

A full survey of such secular diversity would be impossible here, but to give us something concrete, we can focus on those areas where diversity of thought and approach is most apparent amongst the non-religious in the UK today, and where diversity within Humanism, as a worldview which has sufficient coherence to be examinable, is most apparent.

Against faith

People who define themselves as not religious do not, of course, believe that any religion possesses a true explanation of why the world is as it is, and they do not believe that the adherents of religions are correct to believe the opposite. There is diversity, however, as to how strongly against religion individual humanists express themselves as being. A humanist such as Richard Dawkins may be very robust in his criticism of religions as systems of thought – in his most recent book ⁽⁴⁾ more than any other. Another may advocate a very

different approach – Dylan Evans, for example, is a humanist who opposes what he calls, ‘a growing mood of intolerance among humanists... towards expressions of religious faith’. (5) There may be many such humanists, willing to take the rough with the smooth, who consider that, on balance, religion offers some benefits to some people even if it also has some negative consequences. There are some humanists who go further, and will express some admiration for some elements of religions. Baroness Whitaker, a working peer and Vice President of the British Humanist Association, has said,

I have come to the conclusion, however, after much voluntary and public work in the field of race relations, that the contribution of the major religions to our culture and their current importance to very many individuals means that non-religious people should respect and value religious affinity. (6)

Still, the diversity of views in this area perhaps should not be over-played. Whitaker’s own remarks quoted here are prefaced by the comment that she finds, ‘the religious presentation of sin and virtue uncongenial’ (7) – milder than some of her fellow humanists’ words but perhaps expressing the same basic view.

E M Forster said, ‘I like, or anyhow tolerate, most religions so long as they are weak... But I dread them all, without exception, when they become powerful,’ (8), and humanists such as Frank Furedi are explicit that the reason they themselves do not inveigh against religion in particular is because they do not believe it to be the greatest threat to Humanism, compared with anti-humanist political or social forces. Certainly the differences between humanists on this issue should not conceal the basic personal rejection of religion which they all share. Equally certainly, most atheists, agnostics and humanists are secularists – they believe that our laws, our political structures and our public institutions should be neutral and non-discriminatory as between people with different religions and beliefs, with no one privileged or disadvantaged solely on account of their philosophy of life. There are certainly very few non-religious people who would regard the idea of a theocratic state with anything other than horror.

Optimism

Jeaneane Fowler, in her survey of contemporary Humanism (9), makes a distinction between those who have humanistic beliefs and values in a way that she suggests perhaps most of the people in the UK – and certainly most of the non-religious – do today and those who are Humanist with a capital ‘H’. One of the key elements of Humanism she identifies is the regard that Humanists have for humanity and the conviction they have in the potential of human beings.

It may well be true that this is not a conviction shared by the generality of the non-religious. The grim pessimism of a secular writer such as John Gray (10) is extreme, but the dark view of humanity which he promotes is not unique to him, and may conceivably be shared by many other non-religious people. (This view is certainly often shared by those non-religious people who may think that religion is untrue but useful.) Humanists tend to be more optimistic about the capacities of people to be ethical without coercion, to create meaningful lives for themselves and to advance human knowledge with ever greater success – they are ‘pro-human’. Looking to the future, a humanist philosopher such as A C Grayling says, ‘my hope is that the intelligence and access of knowledge enjoyed by future people will allow the Enlightenment project to triumph at last’ (11), and in this he is united with humanists of

the past such as A J Ayer who, looking forward forty years ago, wrote, 'If the capacity for evil is part of human nature, so is the capacity for good.' (12) Author and humanist Philip Pullman has said that he is '51% optimistic' about human nature, and some would argue that this one percent is what makes Humanism what it is.

Life after death

An Ipsos MORI poll of 2006 found high levels of humanistic belief in the UK population. Over 60% of people polled had a humanist view of the value of evidence, the origin of morality, and the ultimate purpose of ethical behaviour. When asked about life after death, however, the division of opinion went fractionally against the humanist view. Only 41% endorsed the statement: 'This life is the only life we have and death is the end of our personal existence' whereas 45% preferred 'When we die we go on and still exist in another way'. It's true that this second statement is very broad – people could be said to go on existing after death in the memories of friends and family, in the accomplishments of their life, or in their children and descendants – but, if meant in the conventional sense of 'life after death', the majority belief contrasts with the rationalist and humanist position. Humanists tend to accept death as the inevitable end of consciousness in a stoical manner, perhaps observing with Marcus Aurelius in the *Meditations*: 'All things change and pass away so that in time new things may come to be'. But for whatever reason it may be – whether reluctance to accept what can seem a harsh truth about one's own mortality, or hope that a dead friend may be not totally gone – it does seem as if, even among secular people, there are great differences in thinking about death.

'Spirituality'

Many non-religious people are uncomfortable with the word 'spirituality'. Taking a strictly rationalist approach, they may deplore what they see as the 'soggyness' of this portmanteau term, and they refuse to believe that they have any such experiences that might fall under its umbrella. Some non-religious people, in reaction against religion, and the religious connotations of the word, may deliberately reject notions that there can actually be any such experiences for people as the word describes. The humanist philosopher Simon Blackburn has written persuasively of the need for non-religious people not to make the mistake of believing this:

Richard Dawkins has spoken eloquently of the awe and wonder he felt when gazing at the skulls of the earliest known hominids in Africa. The world opened by science is wonderful enough to rouse awe and fear or elation – the appropriate, complex, reactions to the sublime – in most of us. So we should resist the idea that there are special emotions available only to the adept, while only an impoverished 'materialistic' life is left for the rest of us. (13)

Many humanists endorse the need to have a term that at least attempts to capture the range of those thoughts and feelings that constitute the inner life of all who are fully human. Robert Ashby, a former Executive Director of the British Humanist Association, seeks to define what 'spirituality' might mean to a humanist:

Moments of being composed of pure emotion, imagination and memory – which somehow link up to take us beyond everyday awareness to an enhanced sense of reality. (14)

He rejects any supernatural causes of these feelings, but he acknowledges the importance of them for our fuller humanity. This acknowledgement may well not be universal amongst the non-religious – again, however, the division of opinion here can be too easily overstated. Of course, no humanist would think that her cultivation of an inner life had about it anything supernatural or that the existence of such sublime moments of awe, wonder, or bliss need lead us in any way towards a dualistic conception of the human being. More than that, there are actually few people who will seriously argue that the individual's perceived inner life is totally fictional or a delusion – they are far more likely to argue on the contrary, with Blackburn, that such feelings are ultimately human and natural – and so not dependent on any religious sentiment. In claiming terms back for the secular, many non-religious people are happy to speak even of experiences and feelings they may call 'sacred' (15) to make this point, and though other non-religious people might scoff, the difference is more cosmetic than authentic on the whole.

Freethinking and diversity

Humanists believe in the essential unity of humanity in many ways, but the diversity of competing thoughts is something that they have always valued, and it has never been something that Humanism has feared, persecuted, or sought to eliminate. On the contrary, the humanist view of society is premised on the benefits of free thought, free expression and the free exchange of ideas and this positive embracing of diversity lies behind many of the political concerns of active humanists – opposition to single faith schooling, or to the unfair privileges which continue to be accorded in the UK to a single established church, for example.

To be human is to think, to reason, to contend, and to relate to fellow human beings – without a diversity of views to encounter and a diversity of people with whom to engage we would be much less than we are. The humanist tradition has benefited from this free exchange of views and cultures and Humanism – as a worldview characterised by a set of attitudes and flexibly applied principles, not rigid commandments or rules – makes room within itself for difference.

Notes

- (1) Ingersoll, R. G. (1876) *The Gods*, quoted in Herrick J (ed) (2005) *Humanist Anthology*, London: Rationalist Press Association
- (2) And there is a multiplicity of organisations dedicated to them: in addition to the British Humanist Association, there are the Rationalist Association, UK Skeptics, National Secular Society, and the Ethical Society, to name only a few.
- (3) Heath, G. (Sept 2004) *My Humanism*, a talk for BBC Radio Derby's *A-Z of Beliefs*, based on Heath, G. (2003) *Believing in nothing and something: an approach to humanist beliefs and values*, Chesterfield: Bowland Press
- (4) Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam
- (5) Evans, D. (2006) 'Secular Fundamentalism', in D. Cummings (ed) *Debating Humanism*, Exeter: Societas – this excellent book is invaluable for revealing some of the more nuanced differences among contemporary humanists.
- (6) <http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentViewArticle.asp?article=2221> (accessed 25/05/07)

- (7) Ibid
- (8) Forster, E. M. (1955) *Letter to the Twentieth Century*, quoted in Herrick J (ed) (2005) *Humanist Anthology*, London: Rationalist Press Association
- (9) Fowler, J. (1999) *Humanism*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press
- (10) E.g. Gray, J. (2002) *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, London: Granta
- (11) Grayling, A. C. (2003) *What is Good? The search for the best way to live*, London: Weidenfield and Nicolson
- (12) Ayer, A. J. (1968) *The Humanist Outlook*
- (13) Blackburn, S. (2006) 'Humanism and the Transcendental', in D. Cummings (ed) *Debating Humanism*, Exeter: Societas
- (14) Ashby, R. (1998) 'The Spiritual Experience', in *Humanity*, vol 6, London: British Humanist Association
- (15) Rogers, B. (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?*, London: Routledge

Useful resource

www.humanism.org.uk: the website of the British Humanist Association, particularly the Humanism and the Education Resources sections

Andrew Copson is responsible for education and public affairs at the British Humanist Association (BHA). He worked for a number of campaigning and education charities, including the Citizenship Foundation, before moving to the BHA in early 2005.

A note about copyright

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in *World Religions in Education 2007* should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.