

Humanism and the Common Good

At the Gathering in April 2013, Doug Golding presented two electives based on his continuing research into methods of comparing and contrasting religious and philosophic traditions based on what he calls ‘the 4 Bs’ of religion: believing, belonging, behaving and becoming. The first session considered the five major world faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism), the second session looked at humanism. Each session included discussion questions which challenged the group.

In the West, millions of people, perhaps the majority, do not believe in God, or do not believe in a God who impacts on their belonging, behaving and becoming. Their beliefs are often described as humanism – they focus on humanity, asserting that our past, present and future are all determined by our biological make-up and our cultural history. So we might ask two questions, at least:

How does this belief influence the humanist’s belonging, and behaving and becoming?

How does this widespread belief impact on what is generally accepted as being for the common good?

The importance of humanism is not in the size and influence of its formal structure – most humanist organisations are small and comparatively ineffective. The importance of humanism, in my view, is that humanistic beliefs dominate the thinking and behaviour of many people, some would say, most people, even though they claim to be Hindu, or Buddhist, or Jewish or Christian or Muslim. We may open our parish meetings or our synods with prayer, we may say we are seeking the will of God, but the decision-making process often proceeds in a very human way, some people would argue they proceed in a godless way.

One of the major sects of Buddhism in fact, calls itself ‘humanistic Buddhism’ – this is the sect which has built the largest temple in Australia, the Nan Tien temple at Berkeley, south of Wollongong. Last year they opened the Nan Tien Institute, Australia’s first Buddhist university.

Humanist ideas began to be articulated in the 14th century, as people began to take more seriously pre-Christian classical philosophy and literature. Humanist thinkers began to argue that man is the measure of all things — by applying reason to what is, rather than to what might be or should be or could be, humankind can discover all truth.

One of the greatest of the early European humanist thinkers was Leonardo da Vinci, painter, philosopher, anatomist, engineer, composer, musician and much

more. A man of genius, his famous drawing Vitruvian Man shows two views of a naked man in a circle, one superimposed on the other, illustrating the humanist principle that, by keeping everything in proportion, we can reconcile the two parts of our being, the physical and the intellectual.

Some scholars would argue that humanism is the dominant philosophy throughout much of the world today. However we need to take account of the fact that people do not always act strictly in accordance with one world view; many people's views are eclectic—in one situation they will have a modernist response—honesty is always the best policy, in another situation they may have a post-modern response, well, you can never be sure; in another situation they may give a theist response, God willing, seriously or flippantly; in another, they may give a utilitarian response, that will make a lot of people happy; in yet another situation, they may give a humanist response, it's all up to you.

Like most of the great world religions, there is not one humanism but many; humanism is not a single world view, but a family of world views which have a lot in common. Most forms of humanism began as a rejection of the dominant theism—the theism of ancient Greece in the 6th century BCE, the theism of Islam in the 12th CE, the theism of Christianity in the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century, and, most stridently, in the philosophical turmoil of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spurred by the Industrial Revolution and the agonies of the Great War.

So humanism was born or reborn a number of times as a negative philosophy: it was anti-theist, anticlerical, anti-religious, anti-authoritarianism of any kind, religious, political or social. Humanists were agnostics, at least, even atheists – God did not exist, or even if he/she/they did exist, divinity was irrelevant, the universe we know is all there is: we should focus our thoughts and our actions on humanity. The website of the Council of Australian Humanist Societies proclaims proudly that “an atheist is a man with no invisible means of support”. Does that mean that all atheists are men?

So mainstream humanism is often called secular humanism to distinguish it from other forms of humanism which are not as significant in decision-making today, at a national or international or community level, or even at a personal level. Humanism is like theism in that it has become institutionalised; most believers believe without belonging, but there are humanist societies in most major cities around the world; some of them have their own buildings; there is a Council of Australian Humanist Societies and national councils in Britain and the United States and some other countries.

As in the early centuries of Christianity, humanism has spent a lot of time working on statements of its central beliefs, creeds, if you like. One of the most significant is the Amsterdam Declaration, which was adopted at the 50th annual congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Association in 2002. The Union is a kind of humanist equivalent of the World Council of Churches.

The Amsterdam Declaration

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

1. Humanism is ethical.

It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

2. Humanism is rational.

It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.

3. Humanism supports democracy and human rights.

Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.

4. Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.

Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

Two more values, or moral principles—finding the balance between individual freedom and social responsibility. This is one of the central questions of modern democracy—look at the current debates in Australia and elsewhere about welfare —welfare provides a safety net for individuals and families, but it may take money which could be used for social infrastructure and encourage people to deny any personal responsibility for their own welfare. It may also be used as an instrument of party political policy.

5. Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.

The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

After more than 100 years, the origins of humanism as a reaction against theism are now well down the list of humanist concerns. Believers and humanists often work together on particular projects to improve particular communities or to make the world a better place. But, in practice, humanists spend much of their time trying to reduce the influence of religion in society, particularly in politics.

6. Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.

In most cultures, religious belief spurred human creativity in the arts, and many of the most admired buildings in the world, in Europe and Asia and Africa were built as places of religious worship, even though some of them are now supported and maintained by the State, like Borobudur in Java and Amiens cathedral in France and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

7. Humanism is a life stance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call

upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

The dominant variety of humanism today is secular humanism, which rejects any belief in any supernatural power, any power beyond the human. Secular humanists argue that religious belief cannot be supported by rational argument, so it is invalid. Everyone has beliefs but, to be valid, beliefs must be based on physical evidence, on reason, and must be weighed and tested by each believer, not simply taken on faith. The term 'secular humanism' is actually quite recent, even though humanism began as a secular movement, as a rejection of theism.

The great 20th century humanist Bertrand Russell, delivered his Ten Commandments of Humanism.

Ten Commandments of Humanism

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking, for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or wife or children, endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
6. Do not power to suppress opinions you think are pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that is happiness.

Besides secular humanism there are many other varieties, which have a strong influence in particular areas of society, in many societies. These are just a few of them:

Religious humanism, again, is a family of views which marries humanist beliefs with religious faith. Religious humanists may belong to major theistic religious traditions but not accept all the teachings of that tradition. They may call themselves 'liberal Christians' or 'liberal Muslims' or 'liberal Jews' or 'liberal Hindus'; they may be Buddhists or multi-belongers, or have New Age beliefs. Some religious humanists practice their religion and see religious humanism as faith in action; some, like Salman Rushdie, who is an avowed Muslim humanist, do not practice their religion but say they have a great respect for religion, or for their own former religion. So Rushdie says, 'In the Satanic Verses I tried to give a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great world religion. For this, apparently I should be put on trial'.

Christian humanists are found in many, if not most, Christian denominations, notably in the Uniting Church, but most particularly in the Unitarian church. The website of the Sydney Unitarian Church in Francis St advertises that its creed is Believe as you will, so the first B is open but it does suggest how Unitarians should behave: Think truly, speak bravely, act justly.

Cultural humanism is the belief that rational and empirical thought must be dominant in all areas of culture — in science, political theory, education and the law — almost every part of our culture except perhaps the fine arts. Humanism has been a strong component of educational theory for almost 200 years, teaching that developing one human faculty, such as the mathematical or the linguistic faculty, would strengthen other human faculties as well. The slogan was 'transfer of training' or strengthening general intelligence, so in the early years of the 20th century we got the Binet IQ tests and the Spearman tests of general intelligence, and many others.

Ethical humanism focuses even more than secular humanism on values, on behaviour — ethical humanists believe that the most critical issue for all humans is how they behave towards other humans in the 'now' issues, like the AIDS epidemic, climate change, world hunger, the uneven distribution of the world's wealth, and continuing warfare, both between nations and within nations. Ethical humanists argue that human ethics can only be the product of human thought — there is no God, there is no law of Nature, there is no Providence which can lay down the principles of ethical behaviour. Human ethical principles must be human needs, human experience and human reason.

Objectivism is a particular expression of humanism in the work of the American philosopher Ann Rand. Objectivism says that the only true form of knowledge is objective knowledge, knowledge which can be measured and studied and reasoned about. The good person is the person who pursues his or her own rational self-interest, having full respect for the rational self-interest of others. Art is the supreme achievement of humanity because art transforms abstract principles of design into objects which people can respond to with the whole of their consciousness, with their reason, but with more than their reason. The chief character in the novel, John Galt, gives voice to the author's philosophy:

Objectivism

In the name of a return to morality, you have sacrificed all those evils which you held as the cause of your plight. You have sacrificed justice to mercy. You have sacrificed independence to unity. You have sacrificed reason to faith. You have sacrificed wealth to need. You have sacrificed self-esteem to self-denial. You have sacrificed happiness to duty (p 1010)

To live, man must hold three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason —Purpose—Self-esteem. These three values imply and require all man's virtues, and all his virtues pertain to the relation of existence and consciousness: rationality, independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness, pride. (p1018)

The good, say the mystics of spirit, is God, a being whose only definition is that he is beyond man's power to conceive – a definition that invalidates man's consciousness and nullifies his concepts of existence. The good, say the mystics of muscle, is Society—a thing which they define as an organism that possesses no physical form, a super-being embodied in no one in particular and everyone in general except yourself. (p 1027)

Ann Rand *Atlas shrugged* (1957)

There are movies, too, which challenge religious principles with a humanist outlook on life. You may have seen the British movie *Millions*, released in 2004. Two boys find a fortune in British pounds. They have only days to spend it before the currency changes to Euros. Seven year old Damien, who is a Catholic, believes the money has been sent by God and uses it to help the poor, and is supported by visions of St Peter and of other saints. Nine year old Anthony is, of course, older and wiser, he is a humanist, and he spends his money buying things for himself – including lots of new friends. Damien is worried about how many people he can help before the money becomes worthless, Anthony is worried about the tax rates which apply to sudden fortunes, and about interest rates on particular investments and other practical issues. But the money is part of the proceeds of a robbery and

the robbers are after the money as well. Eventually Damian runs off to the train tracks to burn the money, convinced that it was doing more harm than good. His religious faith could not help him.

Finally, when comparing and contrasting various world views, including religious world-views, some philosophers will ask how well a particular world view meets four specific criteria, in guiding belief and behaviour.

World view criteria

Is it coherent? Do the various propositions in this world view hang together in a consistent way or do any of them appear logically to contradict any of the others?

Is it evidence-based? Has this world view a sound basis in reality? Does it explain or illuminate all parts of the natural world and human experience or does it fail to explain large chunks of reality?

Is it pragmatic? Does this world view work in real life? Does it offer meaningful answers to the needs and concerns of human life?

Is it comprehensive? Does this world view have something meaningful to say about each of the four great questions people keep asking —

- a) What does it mean to be human ?
- b) What is reality?
- c) What do we mean by values
- d) How can we know?

Here are some of the answers humanists give to these four great questions.

Is this world view coherent?

There is no doubt that humanism is coherent – over the centuries it has developed its literature, its core beliefs, its associations of believers. The central principle is that giving up faith in any supernatural or super-human beings or objects, human life opens up in all its richness and diversity. Humans become responsible for their own destinies, they cannot hide behind a Divinity, they cannot use Divine will as an excuse for their actions, or as a reason for their actions, they take responsibility for their own actions and their own destinies.

Is this world view evidence-based?

This may depend on what you take as evidence or how you read the evidence.

There are plenty of happy humans, but not all of them are humanists, very few of them are believing and belonging and behaving humanists; just as not all of them are believing and belonging and behaving religious believers. Theists and

humanists often work together on projects to improve human welfare, the believers see this as putting their faith into action, humanists see themselves as proving that humanity is all there is and that they have a responsibility, as humans, for the welfare and happiness of other humans. Both theists and humanists have shown that they are capable of going to super-human lengths to serve others, but they draw their strength for similar achievements from opposite world views.

Is this world view pragmatic? Does it work?

Again, the answer has to be 'yes'. Many humanists find their happiness in being human, they contribute a lot to humanity, in politics and social work and education and literature ... but no more, in proportion to their numbers, than theists or utilitarians or even post-modernists. Some humanists see their world view as being very like a religion, a religion without a deity, just as Buddhism is. If the core of religion is forming a community with common beliefs and common aspirations and a sense of belonging and mutual caring, yes, humanism could be described as a religion, a religion for a godless world.

Is this world view comprehensive? Does it offer answers to the four great questions:

a) What does it mean to be human?

For the humanist, to be human is to recognise that this world is all there is, this life is the only life, and that humanity can progress only through the exercise of reason, not through faith in the other than human. Being human is a state of mind, as well as a physical state; being human is recognising the humanity of other humans and being committed to their freedom and happiness and well as our own.

b) What is reality?

For humanists, the only reality is physical reality: using the principle known as Occam's razor, 'All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best', humanists argue that reality is simply what can be sensed by the senses — religion and spirituality, are in that sense, senseless so they must be discarded as understandings or explanations of reality. For humanists, reality is simply fact, not opinion; reality is simply what is, even if it cannot be understood. Some humanists will explain reality in scientific terms, they will talk about 'the reality of the wave structure of matter in space'; they say they can't yet explain what this is, or how it works, but it is real, because they say that all that is is matter in space, arranged in different combinations and placed in different places. No, these waves cannot be seen, but they can be deduced from what can be seen.

Modern humanists, whether they are secular humanists or religious humanists, take a positive view of reality, in opposition to the common theistic idea that material is 'bad' and spiritual is 'good'.

c) What do we mean by values?

The word 'values' appears a lot in humanist literature, but the definitions and explanations are very diverse and often conflicting. For some humanists, values simply means recognising the dignity and worth of every human being; for others, this does not go far enough, it is passive rather than active — for them, values is about improving the happiness and well-being of other human beings as well as our own happiness and well-being; all humans, they argue, are brothers, children of the same parents, and must be treated as brothers; for other humanists, the essential values are being secular, democratic and pluralistic; for others, the greatest value is human freedom, so values are flexible and contextual — there are many versions, but the common theme is that values are human values, they have no divine origin, and need nothing but reason and compassion to put into practice.

Humanist values can seem very similar to religious values, like treating other people as you would like them to treat you, sometimes they are the opposite of religious values — for example, for some humanists, being faithful to the one spouse or partner is wrong, because it limits or reduces or even nullifies the essential value, which is human freedom.

d) How can we know?

We know by using our human senses -- we can see and hear and taste and smell; we can reason, we can understand; like the butterfly, we can fill our days with the things that we love, we can soar, we can swoop, we can savour every moment, and we can enhance that experience by helping others to do the same. We know from experience, not from dogma or from what others teach us; we learn by doing, we learn simply by being. For the humanist, to be human is to know.

In a world where religious values often seem swamped by humanist values, we need to be able to assert not just what we believe, and why we believe, and accept that different beliefs may often result in similar behaviours. You may have seen news reports that an atheist ‘church’ was started in a disused London church a few months ago, and is packing in more than 600 people every Sunday. A second ‘church’ is due to open in Glasgow next month, and there are plans to open similar ‘churches’ in Toronto and Sydney. So you may soon see this logo going up on a notice board near you.

I wonder if the Sunday assemblies will discuss the common good.

Doug Golding