

# Humanism as a Secular World View: its Relevance to the Kent Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 2006

The Kent Agreed Syllabus aims to

- ...provide a high quality experience of Religious Education for all pupils in Kent by:
  - Promoting personal respect for pupils' own world views and those of others
  - Deepening understanding of their own and other people's beliefs and opinions
  - Fostering an enquiring and open mind
  - Encouraging the confidence to ask ultimate questions
  - Developing the skills of listening, communicating and empathising. (p.3)

Since a significant proportion of pupils will themselves hold non-religious beliefs and opinions, which they have either inherited from their family background or arrived at for themselves, it is important that all pupils should be encouraged to understand and respect non-religious world views. This is explicitly recognised on p.13 of the Syllabus:

It is essential that Religious Education enables pupils to share their own beliefs, viewpoints and ideas without embarrassment or ridicule. Many pupils come from religious backgrounds but others have no attachment to religious beliefs and practices. To ensure that all pupils' voices are heard and the Religious Education curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there are enrichment opportunities for all pupils to explore:

- other religious traditions...
- secular philosophies.

Specifically, the Syllabus allows for the possibility at Key Stages 2 and 3 of studying 'a secular world view, where appropriate' (p.14), in addition to studying Christianity and the other religions specified for the particular Key. Likewise, at Key Stages 4 and post-16, the Syllabus requires that 'Schools must continue to offer opportunities to study Christianity and other principal religions, and also other beliefs, secular world views and philosophies, in the context of a pluralistic society' (p.22).

It is important that pupils should be presented with a secular world view not simply as a negative rejection of religion, but as a positive framework for beliefs and values, ways of understanding and making sense of the world, sources of inspiration, and moral and ethical commitments. 'Humanism' is the name most commonly given to a positive secular world view.

This document offers

1. some background notes on humanism, organised in a way which is intended to be useful for teachers;
2. an overview of humanism adapted to the table of Teaching Requirements employed in the Kent Agreed Syllabus (pp.24ff.)
3. 'Teaching Toolkits' from the British Humanist Association's web pages 'Humanism for Schools'.

# 1. Humanism: Background Notes

Humanism is the belief in living a good life without religion. 'A good life' here means both a life that is morally good, and one that is meaningful and fulfilling for the person who lives it.

For the purposes of this document 'humanism' is used to mean *secular* humanism. As we shall see shortly, there are various strands in the humanist tradition including religious versions of humanism, but the word will here be used to refer to a secular world view which attempts to provide positive answers to ultimate questions.

Humanists in this sense are either *atheists* or *agnostics*. An *atheist* is someone who does not believe in the existence of any god or gods. An *agnostic* is someone who professes not to know whether there is a god, either because they think that the arguments and the evidence are not sufficient to warrant a decision either way, or because they think that the question of the existence of a god is one about which knowledge is impossible. Humanism is the attempt to move from the negative stance of atheism or agnosticism to positive beliefs about the nature of the universe, about the meaning and purpose of human life, and about how we ought to live.

## BRIEF HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Humanism is best thought of as a broad tradition which draws on various sources.

### *Ancient philosophy*

The western humanist tradition can be regarded as beginning with the ancient Greek thinkers of the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries BCE. The early Greek philosophers pioneered the activity of rational critical enquiry into the origin and workings of the natural world, and although not all of them were atheists they saw that their ideas required a rejection of the traditional religious beliefs of their societies. Socrates and his contemporaries, the teachers known as the 'Sophists' in the fifth century BCE, likewise encouraged the raising of critical questions about received moral ideas. Socrates remains for many humanists the model for a way of life which insists on questioning accepted ideas, on following the argument wherever it leads, and on refusing to accept beliefs unless they stand up to critical examination. Socrates' follower Plato and Plato's own pupil Aristotle were the two greatest thinkers of antiquity, and although their philosophies had room for the idea of a god or gods, they both argued for an understanding of morality which rested not on religious beliefs but on human nature and the idea of a fully human life. Perhaps the closest to modern humanism was the philosophy of Epicurus in the fourth century BCE, and the exposition of Epicureanism in the Latin poem *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius in the first century BCE is one of the great documents of humanism.

### *Renaissance humanism*

The word 'humanist' was first coined to refer to the scholars of the *studia humanitatis* in Renaissance Italy. Their revival of the study of classical antiquity was not, however, a mere scholarly interest, but the 'rebirth' of an ideal of humanity and a positive celebration of human worth and dignity. That same ideal is reflected in the celebration of the human form and the expression of human emotions by artists such as the painter Masaccio and the sculptor Donatello and their successors. Though located in a context of Christian religious belief, Renaissance humanism can also be seen as an important contribution to the humanist tradition.

### *The Enlightenment*

The philosophers of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment such as Diderot, Condorcet and d'Holbach were more explicitly critical of Christian belief and many of them were avowed atheists. They championed a commitment to rational enquiry, the rejection of superstition, and the pursuit of progress based on an understanding of human nature. Contemporary with them, the Scottish philosopher David Hume subjected the traditional arguments for the existence of God to devastating criticism in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and set out a theory of morals grounded in the human capacity for sympathy and fellow-feeling.

He represents a tradition of thought continued by the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century and by Bertrand Russell (Mill's secular 'godson') in the twentieth century.

#### *The growth of science*

The rise of modern scientific enquiry is another important strand in the humanist tradition. The Copernican theory that the earth and the other planets revolve around the sun, the discovery that our sun is just one among vast numbers of stars, the realisation that the same laws of motion govern the movement of physical bodies on earth and the movements of the stars and planets, the rise of modern geology in the early nineteenth century and the Darwinian theory of natural selection to explain how species of living things have evolved over millions of years from a common origin – these developments undermined the traditional Christian picture of our earth as the centre of the cosmos, and the separate creation of living species a few thousand years ago, all as part of God's plan for humanity. Religious belief can find ways to accommodate modern science, and the relation between the two is a matter for debate, but the scientific developments prompted many people to question traditional religion.

#### *The organized humanist movement*

Explicitly secular and humanist organisations emerged in this country in the nineteenth century. Two main strands in the movement were the local secular societies, which in 1866 came together to form the National Secular Society under the leadership of Charles Bradlaugh, and the ethical societies, which often had their roots in radical Christian denominations such as the Unitarians. The ethical societies came together to form the Union of Ethical Societies, which in 1920 became the Ethical Union and in 1967 was re-named the British Humanist Association. The word 'humanist' is thus a relatively recent term to have been adopted, the preferred terms in the nineteenth century being those such as 'secularist', 'rationalist' and 'freethinker', but the word aptly captures the positive emphasis and the continuity with the broader tradition of thought which celebrates what is best in human beings and strives for the realisation of human potential.

### **SOME MAIN HUMANIST BELIEFS**

There is no humanist creed, no set of teachings which all humanists must subscribe to. The following ideas, however, are ones on which most humanists would tend to agree.

#### *Science*

Humanists believe that questions about the nature and origin of the universe can only be answered by the methods of the sciences, not by religious teachings and traditions. To the question of how the universe began, the most plausible answer so far is to be found in the work of physicists on the 'big bang'. The most promising approach to questions about the origins of life, and variety of animal and plant species and the emergence of human beings is to be found in modern biosciences and neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory. What are most important for humanists are not the particular scientific theories, but the *methods* by which scientific theories are arrived at. Science works by the use of careful and detailed observations and experiments, by proposing theories which could explain the evidence, and by testing the theories with further experiments. All scientific theories are provisional. What looks today like the best scientific explanation may tomorrow be refuted by new evidence or replaced by a better theory. Humanists value science because of its appeal to experience, rational argument and *critical* enquiry. They would contrast scientific method with those religious teachings which claim that there are truths about the universe which have been revealed once and for all and cannot be questioned.

Humanists would be especially critical of 'creationists' who think that the correct way to answer questions about the origins of the universe and of living things is to be found in the accounts of creation in *Genesis* rather than in modern scientific enquiry. Humanists would have no objection to children being taught about the *Genesis* creation accounts as stories to be set alongside creation myths from other cultures and religious traditions. What they object to is creationism taught as though it were science. Humanists also recognise, of course, that most religious believers accept scientific methods and theories, including the theory of

evolution, and believe them to be compatible with belief in a divine power working in and through the evolutionary process. Humanists would themselves tend to think that scientific explanations leave no further need for some additional explanation of a religious kind. They would see this as something to be debated – in religious education, not in science lessons.

### *Morality*

Humanists believe that moral values are independent of religious belief. They believe that there are *shared human values* which are common to all the great world religions and to those with no religious belief. These values are shared not because they are religious but because they are human. They are built into our need as human beings for happy and harmonious lives lived with others in a human community. The most fundamental of these shared values is the Golden Rule, to be found in the sacred texts of all world religions: 'Treat other people as you would like to be treated by them.' At the heart of moral education, therefore, humanists would emphasise the importance of encouraging children to imagine themselves in other people's position, to identify and empathise with others. Children need to be helped to imagine *what it is like* to be bullied or excluded, to be hurt or deceived, to be the victim of racial oppression or war or extreme poverty. Stories and human testimonies would play a central role in a humanist approach to moral education.

The sharing of core values such as care and compassion, honesty, fairness, and respect for life leaves room for deep disagreements at the level of controversial moral issues such as euthanasia, abortion, embryo research, war, and poverty. Humanists would emphasise that the way to try to resolve such dilemmas is not through appeal to sacred texts or religious authority, but through open debate and rational argument. They therefore welcome the encouragement given to pupils in RE to debate such issues and form their own views, for example in sixth-form day conferences on such topics, and are always happy to provide resources and speakers.

In their own views on controversial moral issues, humanists tend to reject simple general rules and to emphasise the complexity, especially when different values come into conflict with one another. Moral decisions will often require difficult judgements about what will have the best consequences for people's well-being, for human happiness and suffering, in particular circumstances. For this reason humanists tend to emphasise the importance of people making their own choices on matters such as abortion and voluntary euthanasia. They also stress the importance of human rights and the values of respect, tolerance, and the acceptance of diversity.

Humanism does not mean that only human interests count. It can embrace a concern for the welfare of non-human animals. Animals too can suffer, and if human suffering is bad then so too is the suffering of non-human animals. A concern for the non-human environment would also be an important part of a humanist morality – not because 'the environment' has interests of its own, but because of our responsibilities to future generations and our obligation to pass on to them a world which we have nurtured and not spoiled.

### *The Natural World*

The natural world is for humanists not only an object of moral concern but also an inspiration for feelings of awe, wonder and reverence. These are sometimes thought of as distinctively religious emotions, but they are as important for humanists as for anyone else. The scientific approach to the understanding of nature does not exclude feelings of wonder - it may even increase them. Our sense of awe at the beauty and variety of the natural world is not diminished but enhanced by a knowledge of the immense distances of the night sky, or of the evolutionary process by which small changes, over great periods of time, have produced the wonderful diversity of living species. Education for pupils' spiritual development can draw on these secular sources.

### *The Arts*

For the same reason, it is important that education for spiritual development recognises the inspiration which all human beings, regardless of religion, can derive from the creative arts. Humanists often describe themselves as 'rationalists' but there is no conflict between this and the valuing of the delight to be found in the beauty and emotional expressiveness of music and painting and literature. That includes religious music and art and stories. Pupils can be helped to see that even if you do not accept the literal truth of the religious beliefs expressed in religious art, you can still appreciate the insights it gives us into our shared human condition.

### *Mortality*

Most humanists would reject the belief that human beings can survive the death of the physical body. Immortality may be a deep human yearning but the humanist commitment to science makes implausible any belief in survival after death. All the scientific evidence points to the dependence of our consciousness and our experiences on the functioning of the physical brain, and when the physical processes cease, there is no non-physical 'soul' which can continue without them.

The finite span of human life does not, for humanists, make it pointless. Our concern for what happens after our deaths is a concern for future generations and a desire to do what we can to make the world a better place for them, and this concern is rooted in a sense of ourselves as members of an on-going human community and contributors to an on-going human story. To make a difference to the lives of those who will survive us, and to be remembered by them, is all the immortality that we can hope for or need.

## **FESTIVALS**

Humanists do not have their own special festivals. They would not want non-religious pupils to be excluded from the Christian and other religious festivals but would want those festivals to be celebrated, in schools and elsewhere, in a way which acknowledges their wider human significance. It is no accident that the great Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter come at those points in the year when people need to revive their spirits as the nights are shortest and the days are darkest, and when they celebrate the emergence from winter and the coming of new life. These festivals are rooted in a pagan and pre-Christian past and they reflect a deep need to mark the turning-points of the year. Much of their symbolism has a universal human significance – the Christmas tree and holly and ivy as a symbol of life continuing through the winter, the Easter egg as a symbol of nature coming back to life. These and other festivals are also times to value the coming together of the family, and Christmas presents are a reminder of the importance of giving. Charities such as Oxfam provide schemes by which we can use Christmas as an opportunity to give to those less fortunate than ourselves (a theme which can be linked with the symbolism of the child for whom there was no room in the inn).

## **rites of passage**

Just as humanists recognise the need to mark the turning-points in the year, so likewise they recognise the importance of marking the turning-points in human lives – the naming of a new child, the celebration of a marriage or civil partnership, and mourning for someone who has died. The public marking of these events signifies that they are important not just for those immediately affected but for the wider human community. The new baby is welcomed into the community. The two people who embark on a marriage want to make their vows in the presence of others. When someone dies, people need to come together to share their sense of loss. When we participate in these events, we reinforce our sense of the significance and shape of any human life.

The British Humanist Association provides training for, and maintains a list of, humanist officiants who can conduct naming ceremonies, celebrations of marriage (including civil partnerships between gay people), and funerals. These ceremonies are strictly secular but are also inclusive, and a humanist funeral will typically include a time of silence which those who are religious can, if they wish, use for silent prayer. Humanist funerals are an occasion

to share our grief and to celebrate the life of the person who has died. They usually include contributions from family or friends talking about the person who has died and sharing their memories, and the reading of poems or the playing of music which has a special personal significance.

## **HOLY BOOKS**

Humanism does not have any 'holy' book, and humanists would not treat any text as 'sacred' in the sense of being beyond criticism. They recognise the wisdom which can be found in the holy books of the world's religions, but for humanists these are not the product of divine revelation but are human creations. As such they are a mixture of deep insights, valuable traditions, inspiring stories, out-dated beliefs and rules, unreliable history and muddled thinking. Humanists will treasure the insights but will treat any text as something to be critically assessed. They would want religious education to encourage that activity of rational criticism, in pursuit of the aim of 'fostering an enquiring and open mind' and assisting pupils to 'challenge their own beliefs and values' (*Kent Agreed Syllabus* pp.2-3).

Stories from the Christian Bible and from other religious texts can be valuable as a stimulus to pupils' understanding and reflection, and their value can be separated from any claim to literal truth. Such stories as that of Noah's ark or Joseph and his brothers encapsulate human experiences from which pupils can learn, in the same way that they can learn from the Gospel parable of the good Samaritan the importance of responding to those in need. For humanists, however, these are just a portion of the wealth of stories which have an educational value, and which includes also fables, fairy stories and nursery tales, as well as the many wonderful children's stories written by contemporary authors, and the rich store of the world's literature. All such stories are a vital element in spiritual and moral education. They enable pupils to enter into the lives of other people and to understand experiences different from their own, and thereby to empathise with others. They provide examples for reflection and discussion, through which pupils can explore their responses to different situations, can understand their own emotions and can make better sense of their own lives. That experience of reflection and discussion, which goes beyond simply listening passively to a story, is something in which pupils can engage from a young age.

## **SOME TRICKY WORDS**

### *'Religion'*

Is humanism a religion? Some humanists have used the word. The nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill advocated a 'religion of humanity', by which he meant a way of life inspired by and dedicated to the betterment of our fellow human beings. The twentieth-century biologist Sir Julian Huxley referred to his version of humanism as 'religion without revelation', meaning by a religion a set of beliefs which can 'help man to cope with the problem of his place and role in the strange universe in which he lives', and which involves a 'sense of sacredness or reverence' felt for what 'transcends immediate, particular, everyday experience'. Not all religions include belief in a god – Buddhism is an example. Most humanists, however, would be reluctant to describe their views as a 'religion', seeing this as a potentially misleading departure from the common use of the word. In the 2001 Census, 15% of the population (in the UK and likewise in Kent) described themselves as having 'no religion', and it is important that pupils from a non-religious background should have their background and beliefs recognised and respected. Humanism is best thought of as a 'world view' which 'reflects on ultimate questions'. Humanists strongly welcome the inclusive character of modern religious education and its acknowledgement of secular philosophies and beliefs.

### *'Faith'*

Is humanism a faith? Again, most humanists would be reluctant to apply the word to their own beliefs. Traditionally the word has carried connotations of a contrast between 'faith' and 'reason', and humanists would want to see their beliefs as being based on reason rather than on a 'leap of faith'. Many humanists are keen to participate in what is described as 'inter-faith dialogue', but they would prefer the more inclusive phrase 'faiths and beliefs'.

### *'Spirituality'*

This is another word of which humanists tend to be suspicious, when it carries connotations of something which is the monopoly of organised religions. They are even more suspicious of 'new age' fads which offer a spiritual quick fix. However, the 'spiritual development' of pupils, understood in a broad sense, is something which humanists take very seriously. The school curriculum is required to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children and young people and this forms part of the Ofsted inspection framework. Linking spiritual development with the other three items in the list implies a recognition that education should be of the whole person, encompassing not just intellectual development but the education of the emotions and the imagination. Spiritual development should draw on pupils' sensitivity to moral values, their understanding of their society and their responsibilities as future citizens, and their appreciation of cultural and artistic creativity, but it is something more than this - the making of these things vivid in the experience of the individual, in such a way as to give meaning and purpose to his or her life. Spiritual development could perhaps be seen as the cultivation of those aspects of life which go beyond material needs and desires to provide a deeper sense of meaning, identity and fulfilment. Nurturing pupils' sense of awe and wonder at the natural world, and their appreciation of the insights and inspiration to be found in literature and music and the other arts, are central to a humanist approach to spiritual development.

### *'Materialism'*

The word 'materialism' is confusingly ambiguous in a way which mirrors the ambiguity of 'spirituality'. Humanists may well describe themselves as 'materialists' in a philosophical sense. That means that they reject the existence of a disembodied 'soul', and find incoherent the idea of a deity who is a disembodied spirit. They believe that everything which exists must in some sense be part of the physical world, including human consciousness and thoughts and emotions. But that does not mean that humanists are materialists in the sense of valuing only physical pleasures or the acquisition of consumer goods. To attack humanists for their 'materialism', with the implication that this makes their view of life shallow and impoverished, is a deeply confused misrepresentation.

## **HUMANISM IN BRITAIN**

The main organisation representing humanists in Britain is the British Humanist Association. (There are others such as the National Secular Society.) The BHA is in no sense analogous to a church or faith group, and there is no suggestion that being a humanist is the same thing as being a member of the BHA. The BHA postulates that there are far more humanists than it has members. Many people hold in effect to humanist principles without knowing it – that is to say, they have no religious beliefs but do have a positive commitment to living a good life, both in terms of taking moral responsibilities seriously and of looking for meaning in life, which are clear humanist values and ideals. Often, when such people encounter the term, or discover the organised humanist movement, their response is 'So that's what I am.' It is important to bear this in mind when teaching pupils from a non-religious background, who may need this affirmation that their beliefs are widely shared.)

The stated aims of the BHA<sup>1</sup> are:

1. To promote Humanism and a humanist approach to ethics through provision of educational materials, speakers and courses for schools and adults
2. To support humanists through pastoral services, including funerals, weddings, affirmations and baby naming ceremonies, and the exchange of ideas at meetings.
3. To represent humanists and Humanism through the media, direct contact with Peers and MPs, and active involvement in consultations by Government, its committees, departments and quangos.

The BHA is not anti-religious, but it does campaign against religious privilege. It regards as indefensible the special status of the established church in public life, including automatic representation of the Church of England in the House of Lords. It has lobbied for anti-discrimination legislation (which it strongly supports) to include extending equal rights to the religious and the non-religious, and it has argued against attempts by some religious groups

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Shaping the Spirit' – ASK/SACRE guidance

to be given exemption from anti-discrimination legislation (which would allow them, for instance, to discriminate against gay people). It is critical of the government's tendency to equate consulting local communities with consulting *faith* communities, which are often unrepresentative even of their own members, let alone of the wider community.

The BHA is opposed to the recent expansion of faith schools, regarding them as divisive and as making more difficult the promotion of respect and toleration between different faiths and beliefs. It strongly supports the inclusive character of modern religious education, with its emphasis on encouraging pupils to explore and challenge their own beliefs and to investigate and understand the beliefs of others. It would want to see faith schools following the same RE syllabus as other schools. It would also wish to see school assemblies having the same inclusive character.

The BHA is pleased to supply resources and speakers for schools. An extensive range of resources for teachers and students is directly available on the BHA's web site: <http://www.humanism.org.uk> – see especially the section 'Education' (more details in section 3 below).<sup>2</sup>

There is a local humanist group in Kent, 'East Kent Humanists', which can be contacted via its website: <http://east-kent-humanists.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/>

## **FURTHER READING**

The BHA's resources for teachers include two booklets, *Humanist Perspectives 1* (for primary school teachers) and *Humanist Perspectives 2* (for secondary school teachers), both published in 2005.

A useful anthology of short pieces representing the breadth of the humanist tradition, from Confucius to David Attenborough, is:

*Humanist Anthology*, edited by Margaret Knight, revised by Jim Herrick, published by the Rationalist Press Association, 1995 (ISBN 0 301 94001 0)

A book providing comprehensive information about all aspects of humanism is Jim Herrick, *Humanism: an Introduction*, published by the Rationalist Press Association, 2003 (ISBN 0 301 00301 7)

Two other general books:

Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (Routledge, 2004, ISBN 0 415 30523 3)

Peter Cave, *Humanism: a Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, 2009, ISBN 978-1-85168-589-9)

## **A 'DO' AND A 'DON'T' FROM A HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE**

*Don't* interpret the inclusivity of the RE syllabus in a way which actually excludes the non-religious. That can be the effect of using the language of 'all religions' or 'all faiths'. Aim for more inclusive phrases such as 'faiths and beliefs'. It is true that the main focus on the Kent Agreed Syllabus is on 'religion' but remember it also allows for the study of non-religious life stances (from Key Stage 2 upwards) and that teachers will want 'to start where the children are at' which for some of them is from a secular world view.

*Do* bear in mind that in the 2001 Census, 14.92% of the Kent population described themselves as having 'no religion'. That is eight times as many as the combined total of those describing themselves as Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. This means that a large proportion of pupils in Kent schools will come from a non-religious background, and it is important that religious education should encourage them, like all other pupils, to explore their own beliefs. In particular, they need to be helped to recognise that people who have no religion can and do have positive values and ideals and beliefs about ultimate questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Like many religious websites, the BHA site obviously presents a distinct view.