

LLANDUDNO R.E. TEACHERS CONFERENCE 29.3.2017

HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE WELSH NATIONAL CURRICULUM

- The BHA welcomes the increasing number of opportunities to introduce young people to its beliefs and values in programmes of both RE and PSHE. In England, many of these are invitations from individual RE and primary school teachers, but we are delighted that in Wales the new curriculum opens up opportunities in all schools by requiring study of non-religious views. We will continue to strive to achieve the same level of enlightenment in England!
- Young people from a non-religious background are very often the majority in a classroom, which is the main reason for inclusion of a non-religious perspective. We passionately believe that it is their right to have their beliefs and values treated with the respect they deserve, instead of receiving a consistent message that the only way to be good is through religious belief. The non-religious perspective in your syllabus guarantees inclusive education.
- We are equally convinced that the inclusion of non-religious perspectives will make those without faith more ready to appreciate and benefit from learning about the world's faiths. We therefore see non-religious education as an essential supplement to multi-faith education, and indeed as a support for it.
- Now why Humanism? It is the most fully developed system of non-religious thought and belief, the outcome of thinking over at least 2,500 years. Above all it's a morality - a development of what's called the 'Utilitarian' approach to right and wrong, using our reason to act in the light of the probable consequences of our actions in terms of their effect on human happiness, welfare and wellbeing. And not just using our reason: we also look to our better feelings, our virtue: here our guide is the Golden Rule – treat others as you would like them to treat you: don't treat them in ways they would not wish, be sensitive to their needs and avoid all possible harm. This brings together two of the three main strands of moral thinking. These form the secular alternative to the third main strand of moral thinking, the absolutist, doctrinal morality. I'll deal with the accusation of 'moral relativism' later, but while Humanism is relative in contrast to the doctrinal approach, it is absolutely clear in what it demands of us: careful, compassionate thinking about everything we do. We think this is more likely to achieve its purposes than the more rigid approach, and more likely to make sense to many young people, and lead to good and useful actions.

- I also need to say that Humanists are as individual as anyone else in their beliefs, and while I will be giving you the British Humanist Association's perspective on issues, many Humanists may disagree on how to respond to challenging dilemmas like abortion and euthanasia, and how to put the principles of Humanism into practice. So you will hear about Humanist perspectives, but also references to 'many' or 'most' Humanists where appropriate.

- Following on from that, I want to assure you that although all Humanists are either agnostics or atheists, we are not all clones of Richard Dawkins in total rejection of religious faith. The BHA recognises the right to religious belief, and Humanist speakers in schools in the North West always assure those young people with faith that we recognise how important their beliefs are to them and how they help them lead good lives.

- The purpose of a non-religious approach is to explore an alternative that gives equal support to those many young people who have no faith, or may be questioning their faith, to assure them that their values will lead them to live as good a life as those with faith. You can be good without God – as good as those who believe they have got God with them. And we trust that those with faith will as a result come to see that their classmates are of equal value to them. This can, we hope, together with multi-faith education, support RE teachers in making a really significant contribution towards recreating the cohesion and trust that our society so desperately needs. Our non-belief is only a basis on which Humanism has built a value system relevant to our time. And we share many human values, and the Golden Rule, with the world's great faiths. Humanists are delighted when they are able to work with religious communities and teachers to meet human needs and help create a better world.

And now to the topics in the syllabus requiring Humanist perspectives.

A. THE WORLD

Creation

The Humanist view is a scientific one, in tune with the scientific and technological age in which we live. This is a rational explanation of past events based on evidence gained from observation and investigation of forces operating in those parts of the Universe we can see, whether by light or infra-red waves, and mathematical calculations that lead us back in time to the origin of those forces. This takes us,

with Stephen Hawking and others, back a very long way, 13.7 billion years to a 'Big Bang'. It's an explanation that Humanists accept.

Investigation of the origins of the earth and solar system takes us back a very long way too, using evidence from geology. We don't yet know for certain how things began, and even less why they began: that isn't the task of scientists. What we do know is that creation took place a very long time ago, followed by gradual changes over vast periods of time. Again Humanists accept this, and think that all young people need to know about it.

They also need to know that this doesn't disprove the existence of God. As Darwin said 'The mystery of the origin of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one am content to remain an agnostic'. All the investigation since hasn't changed this, and there is still room for a first cause if you feel the need for one. For me that's as good as speculation about an endless series of universes. It is all speculation, without evidence. Maybe we will have to live with uncertainty, and be content with probabilities. But Humanists are perfectly happy to accept this: it seems to us to be an honest statement of where we stand.

Where scientific explanations do query God is because they show that the Earth is not at the centre of the Universe, as religious doctrine stated before Copernicus and Galileo in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Once it was shown that the Earth goes round the sun, so neither it nor humankind is at the centre of anything.

The origin and evolution of life on Earth

Once again science has shown this happened a very long time ago, but hasn't yet shown precisely how. My very general reading suggests that there probably was a series of random fusing of sub-atomic particles at extreme temperatures creating molecules that combined to develop proteins and so on. Again this could well have been a natural development as conditions on earth evolved, and this is a possibility that young people need to know.

Humanists accept evolution and natural progression as the explanation for the development of life from this point on. They think that this explanation does exclude the need for God for this to have happened. Once a spark of life came into being, Darwin's wonderfully simple thesis of evolution, sometimes known as 'blind evolution', came into operation. In his book published in 1858 he called this 'the origin of species, including human beings, by natural selection', and defined this as 'the principle by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved'. Thereby different species emerge over thousands and millions of years. There is evidence here, mostly

fossils, dated according to the age of the strata in which they are found, and the rate of radio-active decay of the bones. This shows that human beings are part of the animal kingdom, not a special creation linked to a God. This took the threat to religion a stage further forward from the time of Copernicus and Galileo.

The outcome is that, again quoting Darwin, 'for the ordinary view of each species having been independently created we have no scientific evidence'. So the explanation in Genesis of a special creation a few thousand years ago isn't accurate, nor could it have been because no one knew any facts, so each religion understandably made up its own story. Young people need to know this. This is why Humanists oppose the teaching of Creationism, especially as part of science, because it is destructive of scientific explanations. But most will recognise that Genesis is a valuable moral tale about the origins of right and wrong, and a valid part of RE (though please don't blame all evil on Eve).

So teaching about the origins of life needs a critical analysis of Genesis. The story of Darwin's discoveries in the Galapagos islands is an exciting one: young people can work out for themselves the way he explained the slight differences he noticed between the beaks of finches and the shells of tortoises on different islands. They can work out why this led to bitter arguments between religious leaders and scientists, which is because natural explanations did undermine supernatural ones, God did become unnecessary at what is a key point for religions.

All this is still relevant today, as many religious believers who accept evolution and the critique of Genesis, need to reconcile this with their faith. This is where 'intelligent design' arguments for a 'planned' evolution come in. This argument maintains that God did start everything off, engineered the 'Big Bang', created the spark of life on Earth, and built in the evolutionary process. Intelligent design argues that the wonders of nature are such that, just as a complex and delicate mechanism like a watch is evidence for a watchmaker, so the natural world is evidence for a God. Humanists and most scientists follow Darwin and Dawkins in rejecting this: the complexity that inspires awe and wonder can all be explained without recourse to a God.

And there's another consideration too: if you want to explain a good, kind God, don't look to nature. We know that nature is red in tooth and claw, but here's a quote from Sir David Attenborough: 'When Creationists talk about God creating every individual species as a separate act, they always instance hummingbirds, or orchids, sunflowers and beautiful things. But I tend to think instead of a parasitic worm that is boring through the eye of a boy sitting on the bank of a river in West Africa, [a worm] that's going to make him blind. And [I ask them], 'Are you telling me that the God you believe in, who you also say is an all-merciful God, who cares for each one of us individually, are you saying that God created this worm that can live in no

other way than in an innocent child's eyeball? Because that doesn't seem to me to coincide with a God who's full of mercy'.

And this leads to another consideration. The implications of scientific explanation for human beings are enormous. Darwin showed human beings as part of an extended family: we are linked to all life on earth. Genetic understanding shows our DNA as 98% identical to that of the apes and very high percentages to other living things. So as the Australian Humanist Peter Singer argues, our moral circle extends to all life on earth. And surely therefore all talk of superiorities and all forms of discrimination within the human family are invalid.

And here's a final consideration about evolutionary theory. Your syllabus mentions Richard Dawkins as well as Charles Darwin under 'blind' as against 'planned' evolution. This leads me to think of an aspect of planned evolution that Dawkins has certainly contributed to: the very recent development of genetic modification, especially the CrisprCas techniques for using enzymes to snip out part of a genetic code and removing damaging genes associated with a number of untreatable illnesses. This is indeed of the product of research into our genetic structure by biogeneticists like Richard Dawkins. It has massive ethical implications for human beings. Humanists support it as a means of saving individual people from horrifying and painful experiences. But if you can take out genes you can put in others, and this will have effects down the generations. I don't believe that anyone will ever be able to design 'super-humans' because of the multitude of genetic and environmental variations involved, but Humanists are as frightened by the implications of this as anyone else, and scientists are as concerned as others to create procedures to prevent this: but the potential and attraction of this can't be removed.

Stewardship and sustainability

Humanists accept the need for a sustainable life-style and responsibility to improve the condition of the world we live in. We think this issue is crucially important to us all. We accept the scientific evidence for climate change and the now almost irreparable damage to our environment that puts the survival of our species as well as others at risk. Evidence shows that hundreds of species become extinct each year. We accept that it's our way of life based on over-exploitation of fossil fuels made possible by science and technology that's made a big contribution towards the damage through pollution and emissions creating global warming.

So as we human beings have been responsible for the damage done to our planet, we all have a responsibility to try to limit it. For Humanists there is no outside agency that might intervene to rescue us, and, more important, the situation we've got ourselves into should not be accepted fatalistically as 'the will of God', but we should do everything we can to deal with it. Many scientists are particularly

concerned: having created the powers that are being misused, they are working to devise some strategies to reduce the damage.

But we will all have to change some, and probably many, aspects of our way of life if we are going to be able to sustain it without irretrievably damaging the planet on which we all depend. This is what stewardship means to Humanists – empathy towards and responsibility for the welfare of other societies, future generations, other species. We reject the interpretation of stewardship as dominion over the earth, as some religious thinking implies: we accept responsibility towards the Earth: once again, reason looks at the evidence provided by the consequences of our activity, and empathy demands a humane response.

And it is not just a matter of re-use and recycle. Because climate change affects the whole world, and is having its worst impact on poorer communities in more tropical areas of the South, we who are lucky enough to live in the richer part of the world need to have global awareness of the need to support the many initiatives that will help communities cope with the changes and become more prosperous and self-sustaining. This is the only world we have, and we should all have the chance to enjoy it. Preserving this is a priority for Humanists, as the work of the group known as 'Humanists for a better world' demonstrates. Many individual Humanists support the work of the many non-Government agencies doing just this, and so have many distinguished Humanists in the past like Julian Huxley working at the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, Pandit Nehru's work for poor children, and Bertrand Russell and Fenner Brockway's work for peace.

There is also the sensitive issue of population growth. More people means more pressure on dwindling resources, and this is one area where we as individuals and as a species have the power through medical knowledge to control the situation. Humanists deeply oppose the refusal of certain religions to approve the use of contraceptives. Human well-being and the future of the world is more important than the creation of more Catholic souls.

For Humanists responding to climate change by increasing our efforts for stewardship of the planet by the creation of sustainable economies is a moral priority. And this is as good a demonstration as any that Humanism is a morality, a set of values and principles leading a good life that helps to secure and increase the sum of human happiness and well-being. This means that it is equally important to live and work in such a way as to reduce the harm that causes pain and misery.

Here we should consider the views of Peter Singer, the Australian Humanist philosopher whose overriding concern is not happiness but avoidance of suffering. While Humanists all believe in avoiding doing harm, and reducing misery as far as they are able, Singer takes this one step further, making it the prime purpose in life. His bottom line is that no one can be happy if others are unhappy and suffering. So

we should constantly strive to remove suffering by charitable action. He couples this with a plea for effective altruism, for supporting charities that make a real difference.

However, Singer goes further, calling for a morality that looks beyond human happiness to include the suffering of all living things that is caused by human beings. There is plentiful evidence that animals do have feelings, and are our equals in this respect. The Humanist concern for empathy and compassion, to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number, should extend to all living things. Singer criticises a focus solely on human happiness as 'specieism'.

Many Humanists would probably agree in principle, but insist on the human focus. Some, but not all, will be vegetarians. All Humanists will want to do all they can to prevent unnecessary cruelty to animals, especially perhaps those being used for medical experiments for our benefit. But being practical, most Humanists would put human beings first, even if this is a privileged position. We have enough on our hands trying to deal with the misery that human beings cause to others. My own priority is spreading awareness of the need to deal with climate change to sustain life for the thousands of species which our actions are destroying at an alarming rate.

Climate change is in our view already causing a great deal of human suffering through more intense natural disasters such as flooding, drought, and rising sea levels that are forcing people off low-lying areas and making farmland unusable. It is only likely to get worse. Humanists therefore welcome the opportunity the Welsh syllabus gives to RE teachers to discuss this vital issue with young people. It is, after all, they and future generations who will have to cope with the consequences of what we and earlier generations have done or failed to do.

B. THE ORIGIN AND VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

The second relevant section of your syllabus deals with issues of life and death such as abortion and euthanasia, where the Humanist view is based on compassion, on empathy and respect for others. Humanists seek to promote human welfare and well-being, and secure individual rights to happiness, choice and the best quality of life. They value empathy and our capacity for compassion as the basis for morality. They apply the Golden Rule of treating others as you would wish to be treated yourself. So they welcome the opportunities science has provided for safe abortion and death with dignity, and they seek the best outcomes of action or inaction in each individual situation. But they accept that these are complex issues that engage our deepest feelings, and there are a range of opinions among Humanists on

aspects of both issues. What Humanists reject are doctrines that forbid or limit the use of these opportunities.

The syllabus raises two general considerations that I'll deal with first. It states accurately that Humanists are concerned with the quality of human life rather than the principle of its sanctity as the creation of God. As Humanists don't believe in God the creator or the existence of an afterlife of any kind, then human life is part of nature, without any special virtue or sanctity. We can only work within the natural context, so improving the quality of life and human happiness and well-being here on earth, without any outside help, are our greatest responsibility. Humanists see this as a responsibility for ensuring human beings' rights to the best possible quality of life.

The syllabus links the issue of quality or sanctity of life to the issue of the validity of a situational/relativist approach to morality rather than a doctrinal/absolutist one. Humanists argue for a situational approach on the grounds that attempting to predict in each situation the consequences for happiness and well-being of our individual behaviour and our laws, and changing these if necessary, is the best way to benefit as many people as possible. This is not 'moral relativism' in the sense of a freedom for each individual to act according to their personal preferences. It is the best possible outcome relative to the situation in which a person lives. The absolutist approach tries to counter this by alleging the inevitability of a 'slippery slope' whereby humans will do whatever it is in their power to do unless there are rules to prevent misuse. Humanists have rather more confidence in the better nature of human beings and the powers of the law to establish and maintain safeguards and limits. Most Humanists would agree that we need some rules to live by.

Abortion

The link between the issues of quality of life and situational ethics for Humanists is the potential consequences of abortion. Medical knowledge now informs us at an early stage of the potential for inherited disease and mental or physical disability in a conception. This knowledge and surgical skill gives us the power to intervene in the process of conception and the development of embryo and foetus. Humanists argue that we should do be allowed this on the grounds of assessment of the future happiness and quality of life of mother, father and child.

This is a bitterly contested area. As things stand, we have the 24 week limit for abortion because this is where the foetus is generally assessed to be viable. There is pressure to extend it from the pro-life campaign on the grounds of the sanctity of

life, defined as existing from conception. You will appreciate that much as Humanists value human life, it is quality of life, indeed of lives, that motivate them. They oppose the pro-life campaign because it is pro-birth, completely regardless of the quality of life. So Humanists defend the right to abortion, even if within limits. The alleged danger of a slippery slope into 'free for all liberalism' isn't the reality: the pro-life campaign is aggressively active, so all the pressures are in the other direction.

The Humanist position was best expressed by Bill Clinton: abortion should be 'safe, legal and rare'.

- with effective and open sex and relationships education in school, and contraception freed from any guilt or shame, abortion should rarely be needed. But this is not generally the case.

- the evidence shows that abortion is safe, if available through the NHS. If a woman's life is at risk if she continues a pregnancy, then abortion should be an unquestioned right: her life is sacred. No woman should be forced to seek an unsafe backstreet abortion that threatens her life and health: but this happens, and will become more frequent if the law is tightened.

- abortion should therefore be legal, at the present point if not later. It is not 'playing God': this unhelpful argument rules out all medical treatment in life-threatening situations. It is not murder, unless you define life as present from conception, which Humanists don't. Humanists see abortion as a legal and human right if a woman or young girl finds herself unexpectedly and undesirably pregnant for whatever reason (at the worst rape or incest, but also medically ascertained likelihood of disability or serious inherited illness, or carelessness, or failure of contraception).

Now there is undeniably a clash of rights in the abortion debate, between that of the unborn child and the potential mother. For most Humanists the mother's rights should prevail. The philosophical foundation for this is the Humanist belief in rights to happiness and well-being of both mother and potential child: the child who deserves a loving upbringing, and the mother who is unlikely to be able to give that if she didn't want the child. This is where quality of life comes in as a deciding factor. Carrying an unwanted child is a cause of unhappiness, but more important the consequences of enforcing the completion of unwanted pregnancies are likely to be damaging to all concerned, and to society in the form of problems within the family and beyond. After all, situations may change and a woman may at a later point in life want to have a completed pregnancy because she will then be able to provide the quality of life a child needs.

However, the case for the foetus having rights must not be cavalierly disregarded. Many people believe that life begins at some point earlier than the 24 week limit: certainly the potential for life does, even if the point at which this is realised is debated. The Humanist position is that it is a matter of balance between rights, and that a mother's are more important because she is a living being, with a host of rights and responsibilities, important to many people. An unborn child's situation is not so easily determined.

Finally I recognise that there are areas of uncertainty in the Humanist position. Can we predict the quality of lives in the case of inherited disease, potential disability or unwanted pregnancies? Hopefully yes. Is adoption a reasonable alternative to abortion? Probably not so good. Is a request for abortion a selfish desire to avoid responsibilities? This is judgemental, and in any case motives are a matter of personal convictions not the consideration of best outcomes for others.

Euthanasia

Here the more important of our two issues is the quality or sanctity of life. The medical potential to extend life in cases of terminal illness, permanent incapacity or mental decline can unarguably prolong suffering and reduce the quality of life. Individuals in such cases may wish for death as a merciful release to preserve their dignity, and Humanists respect this desire. It is at present legal to allow people to die who express a wish for voluntary euthanasia, by withholding sustenance (passive euthanasia) or administering painkilling drugs that may hasten death (indirect euthanasia, widely practised but condemned by many).

But suffering individuals may not choose active euthanasia by injection of lethal drugs because of a belief in the sanctity of life upheld by religions. God gives life, only God may take it away. There is also a more valid concern for Humanists that active euthanasia may be practised on individuals who either can't express their wishes, or who are bullied into agreeing to it for the financial benefit of uncaring relatives: an invitation to murder. So individuals do not have the choice of active euthanasia: from this perspective the 'slippery slope' argument is based on an anxiety that the law may be changed to allow and respect individual choice.

The Humanist position is that active euthanasia is morally no worse than passive or indirect: the intention and outcome is the same. It is not murder. It prevents a great deal of unnecessary suffering for families as well as individuals. In many cases relatives will wish to assist their loved ones end their suffering, but at present be prevented from assisting their death out of fear of prosecution and disapproval. The law should therefore be changed, in confidence that legal procedures will ensure that this right is not misused.

These are complex and difficult issues. The one key question is: who decides? Who has the right to decide? Is it the individual or others, whether those close to them or society at large?

The Humanist perspective is that quality of life is the only consideration, not its presumed sanctity. And so it is the right of individuals to die with dignity. British people should not be forced to go abroad to enjoy what should be a human right, which only those with funds running into several thousand pounds can afford. Wherever it takes place, concerned and loving relatives should not face criminal charges for helping those desperate for assisted dying. The law should be changed, and not just because the overwhelming majority, 80% of those polled (including 76% of those with religious convictions) believe it should be. The slippery slope in this case is towards human well-being! Humanists believe the law should respect this, and is capable of ensuring beneficial outcomes for those in need rather than opportunities for those who have only their interests in mind.

The philosophical foundation for Humanists here is again the happiness and well-being of individual people, their right to make their own decisions rather than be at the mercy of those who claim the right to decide what should happen to others, often on the basis of belief in a sanctity of life in which most people in Britain don't believe.

The value of life without any afterlife

Humanists think that their perspective on both abortion and euthanasia increases the value of life by attempting to avoid unhappiness and limit harm being done. It does not devalue life. Nor does the fact that Humanists do not believe in an afterlife; this too increases the value of what we do in this one. For Humanists death is a final end, but there is no sense of loss in not having an afterlife. If you do not believe in a soul there is nothing left to go anywhere, and if you do not believe in an afterlife there is nowhere else to go in any case.

So for Humanists there is just this life, and that is one to be lived to the full, to create as much happiness for those we know, and as much well-being for those we affect as we can. Sometimes Humanists are accused of selfishness, just being good because people may be good to us in return, or we feel good doing it. But when we think about death, generally towards the end of our lives, we're still doing what we can for others; that's not selfishness. And as we're not doing it to gain heavenly bliss for ourselves, or to avoid eternal damnation, we certainly can't be accused of selfishness. Humanists actually think their motivation is in every way as good as that of those sustained by faith.

C. BELIEFS ABOUT DEATH AS THE END OF LIFE

The emphasis of your final section is on funerals as reflections of beliefs about death as the end of life. Here the Humanist view is one of celebration of that was good and valuable in the life of a deceased person, without any reference to a possible afterlife. A Humanist funeral focuses on the quality and value of life in this world.

There are now over 10,000 Humanist funerals a year, each unique and personal. Of course there is sadness and a sense of loss, but there is joy and happiness as well in the opportunity to celebrate the lives of those who have passed away. A life may have come to a final end, but the deceased live on in the memories of those who knew them, the effect of their actions on the beliefs and values of those they have influenced, and of course the genes that many will have passed on to future generations.

All this is realistic. What would be missing for a religious person is of course hope of eternal life for one's loved one, and the hope of meeting them again in a future existence, assuming everyone makes it through the pearly gates successfully. No one should be forced into a non-religious ceremony that denies them that consolation. But nor should non-religious people have to stand silently as non-participants in a religious ceremony, avoiding the hypocrisy of saying prayers and singing hymns they don't believe in, or assenting to sentiments about another life for which they have no evidence. In a Humanist ceremony everyone can fully share their appreciation and thanks for a life well lived, as well as regret that it has come to the end. It is what the deceased would have wanted, and it is their right to rely on it.

One final thought about life and death. I think that Christians need the fear of death and divine judgement to give meaning and purpose to life. Humanists don't: they find enough rich purpose in just making life good for other people. That's Humanism!

Rob Grinter, Vice-Chair of Greater Manchester Humanists, 29 March 2017.

robathome@ntlworld.com