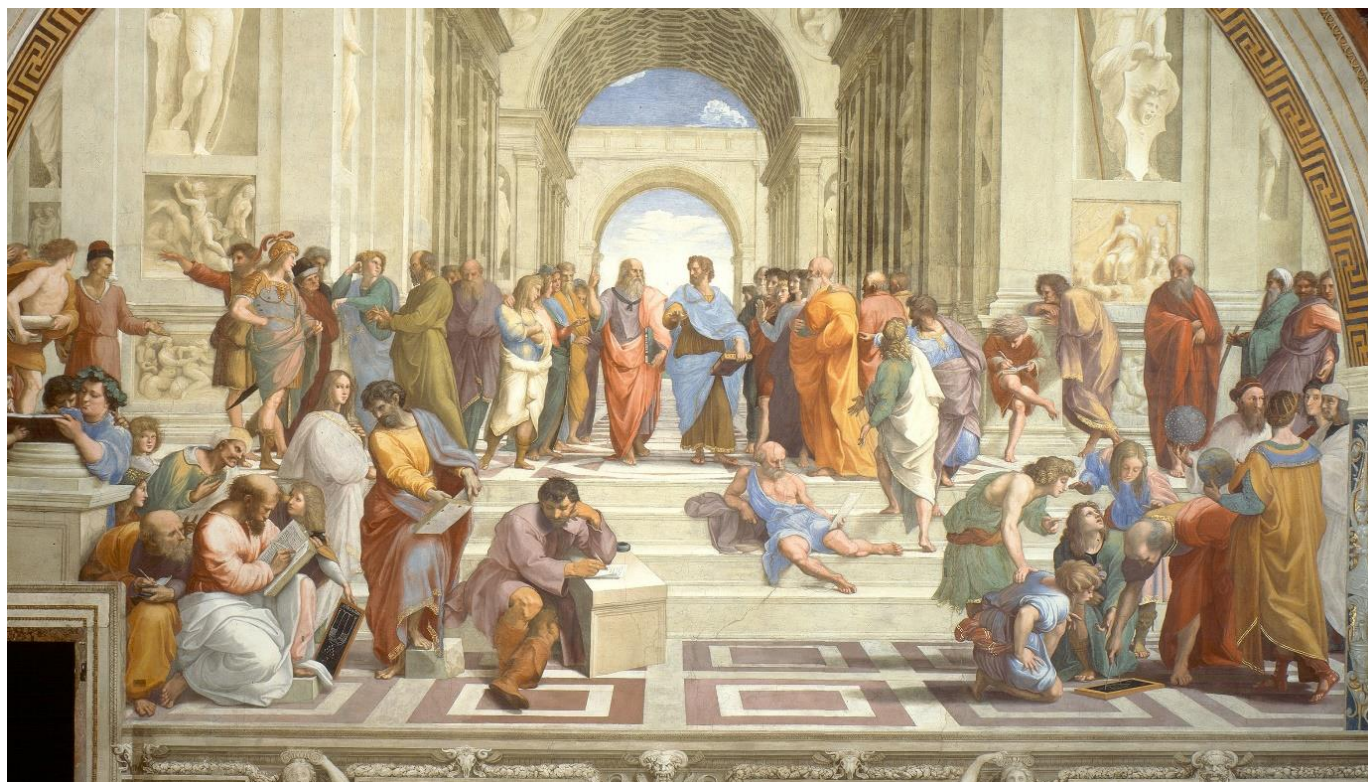


Discovering Humanism



Roy W Brown

International Humanist Publications

Cover picture:
The School of Athens by Raphael, The Vatican

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Dear Reader

You might have heard of Humanism and wondered what it is all about. Or you might have come across it for the first time at a Humanist wedding or funeral and wanted to know more.

If so, then this little book is intended for you.

Humanism is a philosophy of life based on reason and concern for others. It owes nothing to belief in gods or the supernatural and aspires to offer an ethical alternative to traditional religion.

Humanists believe that Humanism can be a way of life for everyone, everywhere.

Roy W Brown

London, March 2018

Discovering Humanism

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Chapter 1

“It’s ideas that rule the world” – Joep van Arendonk

Introduction

There is a deep and probably unbridgeable divide between those of us who believe in God and the supernatural, and those of us who do not. Running equally deep are major differences between religions, differences which have led to, or been used to justify, countless wars including some of the most barbaric in human history.

With world population continuing its inexorable growth and with advanced weapons technology becoming ever more widely available, the need to find ways of living more peacefully together has never been more urgent.

This book traces the quest for understanding – of ourselves and the world we live in – from the earliest times until today, and presents Humanism as a philosophy of life that could lead to a more peaceful and equitable world. It is not an attempt to persuade anyone to change their religion or belief. It seeks merely to explain why it is legitimate in the light of modern scientific knowledge to question both the factual claims of religion and their claims to moral superiority, and to suggest that Humanism offers a brighter and more satisfying worldview and a more benign system of values.

The search for a philosophy of life based on reason rather than superstition does not come easily to many. It can be painful, even soul-wrenching, to reject what we were taught as children and the beliefs that underpin our culture. But it is quite possible to accept and enjoy the wonderful contribution that religion has made to our literature, art, music and architecture without believing in the underlying mythology that inspired them.

The search for an alternative morality to that offered by religion can begin with no preconditions or assumptions other than that living together in peace and harmony is better than conflict. The objective is not to reject all religious teaching out of hand but to question both the beliefs on which that teaching is based and where it is leading us.

Whatever opinions or beliefs we might hold there are others who are equally entitled to theirs. Not all beliefs are equally entitled to respect, but we should respect everyone's right to hold or to change their opinion or belief. Yet that right, enshrined in international law, is under attack almost everywhere. We should challenge anyone who seeks to impose their beliefs on others and should oppose equally both religious extremism and state-imposed atheism.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Chapter 2

Embracing Reason

Accepting reason as our guide, the findings of science lead us to the sheer implausibility of a conscious creator god, or of a supernatural world beyond our senses

Our early ancestors were not fools. They believed the Sun went around the Earth because they could see it with their own eyes. It seemed equally obvious to them that the variety and complexity they could see in the natural world could not have arisen by chance, it must have had a creator. And human beings dominated the natural world because the creator had given it to us to exploit.

They asked themselves how we should relate to the creator who had given us all this; a creator who presumably would be equally capable of taking it all away, of annihilating humanity at a stroke? At the very least we should attempt to appease Him. Thus did religion arise.

In the hundred millennia of human history there are four major milestones along our path to civilisation. The first was the development of language and our capacity for abstract thought. This led in turn to our ability to work collectively on complex tasks, to agree on how to live together, and to the third milestone, the development of villages, towns and cities: in a word, civilisation.

The fourth milestone - which has transformed human life out of all recognition - was the scientific revolution. That revolution in human thought has transformed our knowledge of the world and ourselves. Darwin and Wallace's discovery that all living creature evolved from more primitive life forms through a process of evolution by natural selection laid at rest forever the need to imagine a conscious, intelligent creator for the extraordinary variety of life we see around us, including ourselves.

But all is not well. Although the scientific revolution has led to extraordinary advances in medicine, technology and our quality of life, science has failed to win the hearts and minds of the majority of humanity. When conflict arises between religious teaching and the discoveries of science, many of us are still willing to reject science because 'science doesn't know everything'. Vast numbers of the world's people still live in thrall to superstition and ignorance and it seems that too many of our leaders are happy to keep it that way, using religion as a tool to reinforce their control of society.

What is religion?

A religion is a set of beliefs and practices, shared by a group of people, usually believed to have been inspired by some supernatural deity.

Religions have succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of billions of people throughout human history. They arose from our ancestors' attempts to explain the forces of nature and life itself. Creation myths sprang up in almost every human society and were passed down from parents to children. Religious rituals were created as attempts to appease these unseen forces: the gods and spirits that were believed to control the world.

Our shared beliefs, whether religious or otherwise, provide the glue that holds our communities together. We find enormous comfort in the stories, traditions and cultural practices of our tribe.

What is science?

Science is a process of discovery based on observation and experiment. Scientific theories are models or descriptions of the natural processes that give rise to what we observe. Theories are often mathematical in form, such as Newton's laws of motion and his theory of gravity. Other are essentially descriptive such as Darwin's theory of evolution. Any scientific theory is essentially the best available description of the laws underlying what we see around us. Scientific theories are always susceptible in principle to refinement or even to being overturned in the light of new observations. It is this acceptance

of possible fallibility that sets a scientific theory apart from pseudo-science, religious dogma, superstition or mere speculation.

Human Behaviour

We inherit many of our behavioural traits from our parents through their genes. But many other behaviours and beliefs are learnt – from our parents and teachers or absorbed from the cultures in which we are raised. We are shaped by both nature and nurture. As children, we believe these stories because of our human instinct to accept what our parents and teachers tell us, in itself an important survival mechanism.

Genetic transmission of behaviour is essentially downward, from one generation to the next, but cultural ideas can be transmitted far more quickly, peer to peer, via the spoken word, by writing, in films, plays, cartoons, or by any one of the myriad ways now available to us.

We develop a strong emotional attachment to ideas that we acquire as children, and early learning is often extremely difficult to shake off in later life, manifesting itself as instinctive negative reactions to ideas that don't conform to what we already know, or believe we know.

Distinguishing between truth and falsehood.

Our world is changing more rapidly than ever before in human history. Universal access to the internet and social media has brought about a fundamental change in the speed with which ideas can be spread. Stories, either true or false, can reach millions in a few hours, but unlike news stories or opinions broadcast by the traditional media, there is often no identifiable source and no sanction against those who disseminate falsehood.

From this it follows that ideas do not have to be beneficial, or even true, in order to propagate successfully. All that is necessary is that the recipient of a story be motivated to pass it on. With the internet,

interesting stories can rapidly go viral. This has led many commentators to suggest that we now live in a 'post-truth' era.¹

Examples abound of lies that have gone viral, sometimes with devastating consequences. Just two recent examples will suffice to illustrate the point. The first was the orchestrated campaign during the 2016 race for the US presidency to discredit Hillary Clinton and favour Donald Trump; a campaign involving fake news stories and the alleged involvement of the Russian government.

The second example, that has actually cost hundreds of children's lives, was the campaign by imams in northern Nigeria to discredit the polio vaccination programme that had virtually eliminated the disease world-wide. The medical teams were driven from the region, and polio has once again spread to no fewer than eight other African countries.²

The need for evidence

Lies gain traction because of our evolved propensity to believe what we are told. The first step in the search for truth therefore is to question what we hear, see or read, even including our own beliefs. Scepticism is the important first step along the road. While the believer can rely on faith alone, the sceptic or rationalist needs evidence or what he or she hears. It isn't easy to be a sceptic, our human nature stands in the way.

Equally, to doubt everything is not the answer. Most of the information we absorb in our daily lives has to be taken on trust. But what of claims for which there is no credible evidence? It was the philosopher David Hume who first pointed out that extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence. All of the arguments in favour of a god rely on the idea of a supernatural world beyond the physical world that we inhabit. Since such a supernatural world is by definition beyond nature, its existence must always be the subject of conjecture. Science cannot help us here. For the rationalist there is no distinction

¹ New Scientist, 3 December 2016: "Seeing Reason"

² WHO: World Polio Report 2014

between the supernatural and the imaginary. If we wish to believe in a god or the supernatural it will always be a matter of faith. Mark Twain once wrote: “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so”. He would have been more accurate if he had written “Faith is believing what you wish were true”.

The first step on the road away from superstition therefore is to recognise that the lack of direct evidence of supernatural phenomena, including the existence of a god, is a good enough reason to doubt.

The Evidence from Cosmology

It’s easy to forget that it was only in the 20th century that astronomers discovered that the Milky Way is a galaxy, that it contains more than 100 billion stars, and yet is only one of more than 100 billion galaxies in the observable Universe. Our planet, the Earth, circles just one of those 10 billion trillion stars. Rationalists argue that this fact alone might lead one to wonder whether the force that created all those stars would have done so in order that its chosen species would appear nearly 14 billion years later, on just one planet, circling just one of those stars, at the end of a long and apparently un-directed process of evolution. Is it really plausible to believe that this distant creator is even aware of our existence, let alone cares how each of us behaves in our private lives?

The Evidence from Evolution

Most religions claim that human beings, along with all of the other creatures that inhabit the Earth, were created by a god in essentially their present form, just a few thousand years ago. But we now know with absolute certainty that our species, *Homo sapiens*, evolved from earlier life forms over hundreds of millions of years through a process called natural selection.³

Life forms evolve over time through genetic changes that manifest themselves as changes in the organism’s makeup and behaviour. Those changes will persist within a species or will eventually disappear

³ See for example: Part I, “Introduction” to the Princeton Guide to Evolution:

depending on whether or not they contribute to the organism's survival and reproductive success.

Our understanding of evolution began in 1859 when the British naturalist Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*.⁴ Since then, scientific advances over the past 150 years have not only deepened our understanding of evolution but have revealed the very mechanism by which life evolves and new species are created.

The earliest life forms appeared on Earth between three and four billion years ago and have been evolving ever since. More than 99 percent of all species that ever lived on Earth have probably become extinct as they were killed off by catastrophic events or competition for resources, while others, better adapted to the changing environment, survived and thrived.

Since life began on Earth, there have been five major mass extinctions leading to large and sudden drops in the variety of species. The most recent of these, which wiped out the dinosaurs, occurred about 66 million years ago.

Billions of different life forms now cover the planet from the deep-frozen Arctic wastelands to the deepest seas, some even living without oxygen and sunlight, fuelled by hydrothermal vents in the deep ocean floor.

It would surely be naïve to suppose that the evolution of life on Earth was unique in the Universe; the Cosmos must be teeming with life, but most of it likely to be so far away in space and time that we earth-bound creatures are extremely unlikely ever to have contact with any other life form anywhere else.

The view from science and reason

This then, is the world explored by science, and for the rationalists it is all there is. What those two examples of scientific discoveries show is that there is more than ample reason to dismiss the idea of an Earth-

⁴ <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F373&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>

based god that created the Universe and everything within it, a god that is even aware of our existence. Humanists therefore claim the right to challenge the tenets of any religion on the basis of the sheer implausibility of their foundational mythology.

Freedom from fear

For many Humanists and rationalists, recognition that there are no gods, no afterlife and no divine judgement lying in wait for us when we die has been the most liberating experience of their lives. Death holds no fears; it is merely a return to the state of non-existence that preceded our birth.

Freedom from the fear of gods, spirits, demons and the afterlife is surely the greatest gift of reason to humanity.

Chapter 3

How then shall we live?

Atheism alone is not enough. Where do we find our values, and how then shall we live?

Rejecting the concepts of a god and the supernatural immediately raises the questions of where to look for moral guidance, and how should we react to religiously-inspired notions of morality which we can now see to be no more than artefacts of our cultural evolution? For many, faith in God is closely linked to morality and to instructions about how we should live.

It has become a mantra of religious leaders to claim:

“If people no longer believe in God they will believe in anything”,

“Atheists have lost their moral compass”, and

“Without God people are free to do evil without the fear of divine punishment”.

Rationalists, however, can quickly dismiss these claims with simple counter-arguments. The first point is that a sense of fair-play and altruism are instinctive in almost every human being and have enabled us to evolve as social animals. Notions of fair play pre-date every known religion.⁵

The second point is that believing what we want to believe is fine, but it's how we behave that matters.

And thirdly, there is no such thing as divine punishment. Even our religious leaders apparently don't believe in it, keen as they are to ensure that those they see as offenders are punished here on Earth without waiting for judgement in the afterlife.

⁵ <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/zygo.12089/abstract>

Nevertheless, atheism has a very poor public reputation, almost certainly as a result of religious propaganda. Atheism is blamed for the evils of both Nazism and Communism even though the Catholic Church supported Hitler and enabled many leading Nazis to escape to South America at the end of the Second World War. And Soviet-style Communism had more of the hallmarks of a state religion than a system based on freedom of thought.

A recent survey⁶ of 3,000 volunteers from 13 countries from across the religious spectrum found that even atheists are likely to presume that a serial killer was an atheist rather than religious!

Since atheism brings with it no pre-established moral guidance, it up to every non-believer to seek his or her own moral path. There have been, however, many millions who have trodden this path before us and who can provide us with guidance. But we should also remember with John Donne that 'No man is an island'. Almost all of us live in family groups within a wider society and culture and do not have complete freedom of choice. The norms and expectations of these groups set limits to our permissible behaviour and often to our freedom of expression. If we are unfortunate enough to live in a strictly religious society we may need to appear to accept its norms while keeping our thoughts to ourselves. Even in more liberal societies it may be prudent not to preach one's atheism too widely.

The problem is that atheism - the dismissal of belief in gods and the supernatural - tells us nothing by itself about how we should live. We need more; we need a system of morality based on both reason and concern for others - and that is precisely what Humanism seeks to provide.

But unlike atheism, the Humanist view of morality cannot be argued purely through evidence, reason and logic. It needs to be established pragmatically by considering what works best in practise.

⁶ Good without God? *New Scientist* 19 August 2017

Concern for Others

The first step is to recognise that care for others is built into our makeup through our genes. We need no divine sanction to make us good and kind. Yet all of us are capable of selfish and greedy acts. A starving animal will think only of finding food, whatever the cost – and we are animals. But once our bellies are full we can afford to share what extra we have with others and indeed will go out of our way to help even a stranger in want or in danger.

The Golden Rule: “Treat others as you would wish to be treated” or “Do as you would be done by” is part of what makes us human. It is something we have inherited from our primate ancestors.⁷

Human-centred systems of morality were proposed independently on every continent as long ago as the second millennium BCE. In “The Origins of Humanism” published jointly with this volume, we look at how Humanist thought has developed throughout history, leading eventually to a philosophy of life which we believe provides a model for anyone given the opportunity to learn of it and the freedom to practice it.

In the next chapter we look at how these ideas led to the evolution of modern Humanism.

⁷ “Origins of Altruism and Cooperation”, Sussman and Cloninger (eds), Springer 2011.

Chapter 4

Organised Humanism

Modern Humanism. an alternative to religion based on reason and concern for others, first saw the light of day in the 19th Century.

Humanism is a philosophy of life that is centred on individual freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual vis-à-vis society. This focus leads to concerns about the way in which society is organised; to politics and to the centrality of democracy in Humanist philosophy.

What we can now see as the beginnings of modern Humanism date back to the early 19th century with freethought organisations appearing in Germany, Canada, the United States and England, created to counter religious dogma and influence. The term Humanism derives from the German *Humanismus* coined in 1802 by Friederich Niethammer to describe the teaching of classical studies; it was later adopted in English as *Humanism* with the same meaning. During the 20th century however the term became used increasingly for a philosophy of life based on reason and humanity.

The 19th century saw the foundation of a large number of freethought communities by German immigrants to the United States, fleeing persecution in their homeland.

In the English-speaking world organised Humanism began in the mid 19th century with pioneers such as Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant and Henrietta Barnett in England, and Montcure Conway and Felix Adler in the United States. The magazine *Freethinker*, an essentially atheist publication which champions social justice, was founded in England in 1881 and is still going strong. What these early pioneers

had in common was a rejection of the supernatural, and their search for a system of ethics not dependent on divine sanction.

The first modern Humanist organisations, many describing themselves as Ethical Societies or congregations, developed in the United States and England during the 19th century. The first Ethical Society was founded by Felix Adler in Chicago in 1892.

In the United States, the **American Ethical Union** now has member organisations in 12 states plus Washington DC. The **American Humanist Association** (AHA) has its roots in the 1920s with former Baptist and Unitarian ministers seeking to create a godless religion. But the AHA was only formally founded in 1941 from the Humanist Press Association. The main focus of the AHA has been the popularisation of Humanism and defence of the first amendment to the Constitution. The **Council for Secular Humanism** (CSH) and its magazine **Free Inquiry** were founded by Paul Kurtz in 1975 to oppose religious influence in society. CSH is now described as a 'program' of the **Centre for Inquiry** (Cfi), a group of organisations based in Buffalo, New York, with nation-wide and international aspirations, and with consultative status with the United Nations.

In the United Kingdom **Humanists UK** founded in 1896 as the Union of Ethical Societies by an American, Stanton Coit. It became the British Humanist Association in 1967 and took its present name in 2017. Humanists UK campaigns for a fairer society and a secular state, and provides Humanist ceremonies: weddings, funerals and baby-naming. It has special consultative status with the United Nations. The **National Secular Society** founded by Charles Bradlaugh in 1866 exists to challenge religious privilege and is Britain's only organisation working exclusively towards a secular society. The NSS works closely with IHEU at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. The **Rationalist Association**, founded in 1899 as the Rationalist Press Association played a seminal role in spreading rationalist and freethought ideas throughout the British Empire in the first half of the 20th century with

its Thinker's Library, leading to the creation of Rationalist Associations in most notably India, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Dutch Humanism is a direct descendant of the Renaissance Humanism of the 16th century philosopher Erasmus, and has long been seen as one of the pillars of Dutch civilisation along with the churches. It has achieved deep and abiding influence in Dutch society. Throughout the 17th century the Netherlands provided the only safe haven in Europe for freethinkers. The principal Dutch Humanist organisations are: the **Humanistisch Verbond** (Humanist Union) a membership organisation, founded by Jaap van Praag in 1946 to promote Humanism as a counter to the nihilism he saw in Dutch society; **Humanitas** founded in 1945 to provide social services for those uncomfortable with religious charities; **HIVOS** an international development organisation founded to channel government funds to overseas development projects of a broadly secular nature: and the **University of Humanistics** (formerly University of Humanist Studies) which changed its name to better reflect its postmodern focus and independence from purely Humanist studies.

In France it has been freethought and secularism that, following the Enlightenment, captured the hearts and minds of non-believers. **La Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée** (the National Federation of Free Thought) has branches throughout the country with its main focus being to protecting French laïcité (Secularism), church-state separation and the law of 1905.⁸ **La Ligue de l'Enseignement** (*the Educational League*) has its roots in the late 19th century struggle for free, secular, publicly-funded primary education. A government-funded association,⁹ La Ligue now counts 30,000 affiliated local organisations and 1,3 million indirect membership. It provides holidays, cultural events and all kinds of support for some 800,000 beneficiaries each year.

⁸ A former member of IHEU, the FNLP resigned over IHEU's support for state funding for Humanist organisations, such as in Norway and the Netherlands, on an equal footing with religion.

⁹ Receiving €23 million in government grants per year.

In Germany, a long tradition of freethought came virtually to end with the ascent of the Nazis in 1934. Following World War II several local and regional freethought groups emerged, leading in 1993 to the foundation of the **Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands** (HVD) (*Humanist Association of Germany*). HVD's aim is to promote the secular humanist worldview and to advocate for the rights of non-religious people. Currently with some 20,000 members, the HVD provides humanist and non-religious ceremonies in many states, and maintains more than 30 kindergartens across Germany. In Berlin HVD is responsible for the optional school subject *Humanistische Lebenskunde*, with over 50,000 participants.

Another European country where Humanism has established deep roots is Norway. The **Human-Etisk Forbund** (HEF) has branches in all the main cities in the country and with over 80,000 members is the largest Humanist membership organisation in Europe. The HEF receives government support on a par with the churches, pro-rata its membership. It campaigned for state-church separation and the disestablishment of the Lutheran Evangelical Church which it achieved in 2017. For more than 60 years the HEF has conducted coming-of-age ceremonies for more than one sixth of the youth of the country as well as officiating at weddings and funerals. Levi Fragell who presided over the rapid growth of HEF during 1980s and 90s served for several years as president of IHEU.

Founded in 1991, the **European Humanist Federation** (EHF) based in Brussels now represents 63 member organisations from across Europe at the European Commission, the European Parliament and at the Council of Europe, defending freedom of expression and the rights of non-believers, and promoting Humanist principles.

Rationalism gained a foothold in British India before the Second World War, largely through the Thinker's Library publications of the Rationalist Press Association. But it was only in the 20th century that Humanism began to organise under the leadership of a number of social reformers, several of whom had been active in the independ-

ence movement. Based in Delhi, M.N. Roy created the Radical Humanist Party (later the Radical Humanist Association) and became a founding vice-president of IHEU.

In 1940 in Andhra Pradesh, the social reformer Gora with his wife Saraswathi founded the **Atheist Centre** in Vijayawada to promote “Positive Atheism” and social change: a Humanist organisation in all but name. The centre runs a hospital and a variety of social programs. In 1925 in Tamil Nadu, Periyar founded **Dravidar Kazhagam** a quasi-political self-respect movement that opposes Brahminism and the caste system and now counts some 500,000 members in the state. In 1998 many regional rationalist associations collectively formed, the **Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations** (FIRA) to promote scientific literacy, oppose superstition, witchcraft and the caste system, and to expose the trickery of the so-called ‘god-men’. FIRA has more than 80 branches in Maharashtra state alone.

Every society and culture is unique, and the focus of concerns among Humanists will be coloured largely by national and local issues. Nevertheless, Humanists around the world share common values, mostly at the progressive end of the political spectrum. It was a recognition of this common ground that led in 1952 to the creation of the **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU) in Amsterdam by leaders of the Dutch, British, American and Indian Rationalist, Ethical and Humanist societies. The founding conference, chaired by Sir Julian Huxley then Secretary General of UNESCO, produced a declaration setting out the basic principles of modern Humanism: the Amsterdam Declaration.

IHEU has grown steadily from its relatively humble beginnings and now has more than 130 member organisations world-wide in over 50 countries. IHEU provides international support to its member organisations through its consultative status with the United Nations, and maintains delegations at the UN in New York and Geneva (where

delegates speak regularly at the Human Rights Council), and at UNESCO in Paris. It also publishes an annual Freedom of Thought report analysing the state of freedom of thought and expression, country by country around the world. And in a major new undertaking, IHEU leads a world-wide campaign for the abolition of blasphemy laws.

The governing body of IHEU is the General Assembly which meets annually, hosted by one of its member organisations. IHEU holds World Congresses every three years, open to any member of any of its member organisations, as well as to individual supporters of IHEU itself.

Humanism as a world movement now has an established presence on every continent and in the vast majority of states. But despite the solid intellectual and moral foundations of Humanism there still exist many states where even to whisper unbelief in the state religion is to risk discrimination, imprisonment or even death.

The Amsterdam Declaration

By the time of the 50th anniversary of IHEU in 2002 it had become clear that the original Amsterdam Declaration was showing its age. Published at the height of the Cold War, the declaration was a child of its time, with a heavy emphasis on the need for democracy rather than totalitarianism. It was felt that an updated statement of the basic principles of Humanism had become necessary.

The revision process lasted five months with dozens of the world's leading humanists being involved, and led to the unanimous adoption of the *Amsterdam Declaration 2002* by the 15th IHEU World Congress on 9th July 2002.

The Amsterdam Declaration 2002

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

The fundamentals of modern Humanism:

- 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 un-dogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

- 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.*
- 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.*
- 7. Humanism is a lifestance 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 people aware of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By using free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination in the pursuit of peace and in the service of compassion, we believe 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.

Adopted unanimously by the World Humanist Congress 2002.

The Secular State

A major theme of modern Humanism, and central to the agenda of virtually every Humanist organisation, is support for the idea of the secular state, that is, a state that is neutral in matters of religion or belief, favouring none and discriminating against none. Secularism is often falsely equated with atheism and misinterpreted as being anti-religious, so it is important to emphasise that it is not, secularism merely seeks equality between all faiths and none. As John Locke maintained:

“No earthly man is able to judge between the competing claims of religion”.¹⁰

The first constitutional endorsement of the secular principle, and still certainly the best-known, was the adoption of the First Amendment to the American Constitution by the United States Congress on 15th December 1791. It reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The first amendment has been under attack by conservative religious forces ever since. State legislatures have frequently been ready to adopt legislation that was subsequently struck down by the US Supreme Court on the grounds that it violated the first amendment.

It was Thomas Jefferson who in a letter to the Congregational Church of Danbury Connecticut in 1802 coined the phrase “a wall of separation” between church and state, a phrase widely used since to explain the intended scope of the first amendment.

The US Supreme Court has consistently taken the position that the first amendment be interpreted as prohibiting any support whatsoever for any religion (including the display of religious symbols)

¹⁰ John Locke: “A Letter Concerning Toleration” 1689.

within any government or government-funded organisation or on any government property or land.

Strangely, almost identical wording in the Australian constitution has been interpreted as permitting government support for religion provided it does not differentiate between religions; a position clearly open to attack by Australian secularists. But Australia has never had a Thomas Jefferson.

It was only in 1905 that France finally adopted a law of separation of religion and state which, inter-alia, transferred ownership of all French churches to the state – a move which has ever since created a major financial burden for local governments for church maintenance. This law has however been significantly weakened a number of times, most notably by the “Law of Debré” of 1959 permitting state funding for religious schools.

In 2006, seeing papal opposition to secularism in Europe, IHEU in collaboration with the European Humanist Federation and Catholics for Choice launched a campaign to defend the principle of secularism in the debate on the proposed European Constitution. The campaign was successful with 1000 leading European figures, Nobel Prize winners, religious leaders, senior politicians, government ministers and former presidents from across the political spectrum endorsing the *Brussels Declaration*¹¹ setting out a Secular Vision for Europe.

In the event, the drive to create a European constitution foundered in the face of popular opposition, most notably from Ireland and Denmark, and the draft constitution was replaced by a treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, which is in fact a European constitution in all but name. As a direct result of the IHEU-led campaign, and to the dismay of Pope Benedict XVI and many European heads of state, the preamble to the Lisbon Treaty makes no reference to God, religion or to Europe’s supposed ‘Christian heritage’, thereby accepting the principle of a level playing field for all religions and none, and implicitly recognising

¹¹ See www.avisionforeurope.org

that while much of Europe's history may be Christian, its heritage is that of the Enlightenment.

The struggle for secularism continues around the world. The United Kingdom, alone with Iran among democratic states, has unelected religious leaders sitting in parliament by right. Demagogues and dictators around the world continue to see the benefit of religious support bought by means of government support for religion.

The battle for secularism will not be easily won, but it is a battle in which Humanist organisations world-wide will continue to be engaged.

Humanist Campaigns

"One of the greatest mistakes a man can make is to do nothing because he can achieve so little."

Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797)

Humanists can frequently be found in the forefront of campaigns for a more just and equitable society, for example in favour of the human rights of women – including sexual and reproductive rights – and the right to die with dignity.

National organisations continue to campaign on a wide variety of mainly progressive issues: equality for all under the law, for human rights as individual rights, for separation of religion and state and against religious privilege in government and society – especially in education where discriminatory notions of superiority inculcated in children can colour their attitudes for life.

Here are some examples of campaigns in which Humanist organisations across the world continue to be involved:

- In support of individual non-believers suffering death threats, persecution or punishment for expressing their non-belief
- For the abolition of blasphemy laws

- For Equality legislation to ban all forms of discrimination on the grounds of caste, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or for any other reason.
- For separation of religion and state:
 - neither favouring nor discriminating against any religion or belief
 - with no state funding of religious institutions or faith schools.
- Against corruption, a major obstacle to progress in many countries.
- For ethics classes as an alternative to religious instruction in schools
- For a woman's right to choose in matters of sex and reproduction
- For the right to choose a doctor-assisted death with dignity
- Against exceptions to any rights on religious grounds
- Against religious courts ruling in cases of family law
- Against religious animal slaughter without pre-stunning.

At the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, IHEU has spoken out and continues to speak out on issues as diverse as:

- The human rights of the Dalits (the Untouchables) in India;
- against attacks from a number of countries including Russia, China and the Islamic States on Freedom of Expression.
- in favour of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including the right to change one's religion or to have no belief;
- against accusations of witchcraft against children and old women in Nigeria and India;
- against individual cases of abuse of human rights in many countries including India, Iran and China;

- against the complicity of the Vatican in the cover-up of child abuse by Catholic priests, leading to a damning condemnation of the Holy See by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

And as mentioned above, IHEU also led a successful Europe-wide campaign to keep any reference to God, Christianity or religion out of the preamble to the Lisbon Treaty.

Chapter 5

If you would like to know more

Most Humanist organisations hold regular meetings and conferences and seek to recruit new members. Many have groups of celebrants able to conduct weddings, funerals and baby-naming ceremonies. These ceremonies are often the first contact that those attending have ever had with organised Humanism. I hope that copies of this book can serve as a resource for such people wanting to know more.

There are now Humanist organisations, associations and societies in virtually every western country and major city, and many more throughout the developing world. Most are happy to welcome new members or simply to provide information to those wanting to know more. Many can provide books on Humanism, Secularism, rationalism and scientific issues and many of their websites contain articles on important current issues.

If you would like to join us

We noted earlier that freedom from fear – of the wrath of gods, demons and the afterlife - is perhaps the greatest gift of reason to humanity. But there is nevertheless plenty to fear here on earth. Humanism has taught us that the solution to human problems lies exclusively in human hands, and this knowledge has motivated Humanists to become involved in the struggle for social justice and for the use of evidence in the formulation public policy.

The advent of social media on the internet has given a new momentum to people power. It is now relatively easy to initiate or to add one's name to a petition campaigning for justice in individual cases, or for social or political change.

If you would like to learn more or you would like to get involved, please make contact with one of the organisations near you. You will

be sure to receive a warm welcome. Below you will find details of some of the leading Humanist organisations around the world.

Some Contact Details

It would be quite impossible list here all of the hundreds of Humanist organisations around the world, but many are members of IHEU or the European Humanist Federation and details can be found on their websites or simply by Googling 'Humanism' and the name of the country or city in question. The following are the websites of some of the more significant Humanist membership organisations:

United Kingdom

Humanists UK	https://humanism.org.uk/
National Secular Society	www.secularism.org.uk/
Humanist Society Scotland:	https://www.humanism.scot
Rationalist Association.	https://newhumanist.org.uk

Ireland

Humanist Association of Ireland	https://www.humanism.ie
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United States

American Ethical Union	https://aeu.org
American Humanist Association	https://americanhumanist.org
Council for Secular Humanism	https://www.secularhumanism.org

Canada

Humanist Canada	https://www.humanistcanada.ca
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The Netherlands

Humanistisch Verbond	https://www.humanistischverbond.nl (in Dutch only)
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France

Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée	https://www.fnlp.fr (in French only)
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Germany

Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands	http://www.humanismus.de (in German only)
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Norway

The Human-Etisk Ferbund

<https://human.no/english>

Belgium

Centre d'Action Laique (CAL):

<https://www.laicite.be>

(in French only)

deMens.nu (formerly UVV):

www.demens.nu

(in Flemish only)

Italy

Associazione Nazionale del Libero Pensiero "Giordano Bruno"

<http://www.periodicoliberopensiero.it> (in Italian Only)

Unione degli Stei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti

<https://www.uaar.it/> (in Italian only)

Australia

Council of Australian Humanist Societies

<https://www.humanist.org.au>

New Zealand

New Zealand Humanists

<https://humanist.nz>

India

Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations info@iheu.org

Atheist Centre, Vijayawada

<http://www.atheistcentre.in>

For information on Humanism in European countries not listed above you can send a request for information to

info@humanistfederation.eu

About the author

Roy Brown is a former president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). He also served for 12 years as head of the IHEU delegation to the United Nations in Geneva where he made more than a hundred oral and written contributions to debates in the Human Rights Council on issues from freedom of expression, women's rights, modern slavery, and the plight of the Dalits (Untouchables) in India, to the universality of human rights and against laws and attempt to weaken international human rights law.

In 1987 with his wife Diana he founded the World Population Foundation based in in the Netherlands, and in 1999 co-founded the International Foundation for Population and Development in Lausanne, Switzerland.

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