

APPENDIX TO SACRE Minutes of 19th September 2023

On Humanism

Text of a presentation given to North Yorkshire SACRE 19.09.2023 by Professor John Adams

I will do three things in this brief presentation: tell you about myself (with regard to my involvement with Humanism and HumanistsUK); describe what Humanism is to me, and there are differences between humanists since ours is not a creed or a doctrine; and finally to respond to any questions/observations from colleagues.

Introduction

My first involvement with Humanism came, like so many people, following attendance at a ceremony, in this case a funeral. What was unusual was that the funeral was that of my father – which I had arranged. In the couple or so years before my father's death (which is now some 30 years' ago) I went to a number of funerals of my parents' friends, and they were very poor experiences. All were in crematoria, with a "rota" vicar incanting some ritual phrases: "sure and certain hope" (surely an oxymoron for all time) etc., and on one occasion getting the name of the deceased wrong. When the time came I was clear that I was not having that for my Dad. A neighbour gave me details of a non-religious organisation that did sensitive and personal funerals, and they in turn put me in touch with a local celebrant, who I went to visit. He was of my father's generation, knew of his war involvement (not in detail, of course, but what it was like to be in the War. My father was a fighter pilot and anyone who knows of such things knows that the probability of my existence is much closer to 0 than to 1). The ceremony was as good as such things can be; many attenders said it was the best and most fitting funeral they had been to (and some were the age of serial funeral attenders). I still have a clear memory of what is, after all, such a personal and affecting event. I concluded that this was an organisation that does good...and I should join.

I had little active involvement until I retired and moved to York where I was among a group who formed what became the York branch of HumanistsUK; I chaired the branch for a number of years and then was asked to join the board of HumanistsUK as Treasurer.

While the organisation has a lengthy and notable antecedence, it is in the last decade or so that it has grown rapidly in membership and influence. We have some 100,000 members and supporters and our list of patrons reads like a Who's Who of British intelligentsia. Our work involves: ceremonies (some 9,000 funerals last year and more weddings in Scotland than the Catholic Church); pastoral care, in hospitals and prisons; apostate support (in our "Faith to Faithless" section) providing care, advice and support for those leaving high-controlling religions; and, of course campaigning and representing the non-religious (that is to say the majority) view in the UK. Recent campaigns have focussed on: human rights (freedom of speech, blasphemy, gay marriage, the right to die with dignity); education (an end to discrimination in admissions and employment on religious grounds, collective worship); and constitutional matters like the presence of 26 Bishops, as of right, in the House of Lords.

What is Humanism?

Humanism, as a concept, has considerable antiquity. Socrates was put to death for, in effect, humanist beliefs (although that was not written on the indictment). Enlightenment Humanist figures

like Erasmus were extremely influential in 15th century Europe, while recently, in Dresden, I learned of the impact of Humanism on German artists like Cranach and Holbein. However a succinct modern definition might be the belief that we can lead a good, purposeful and meaningful life, based on liberal human values, without superstition.

That means (for me) that Humanism has three principal elements:

1. A rejection of supernatural beliefs. Not from prejudice or bigotry (indeed we leave that to others) but from reason and evidence. For a supernatural event to take place the laws of physics must be in abeyance, and Humanists (and others) do not think that is very likely to happen. It is not possible to prove that it cannot happen, of course, since it is impossible to prove negative propositions of this sort, but a study of physics from the sub-atomic level to the cosmological gives no reason to suggest it ever has....or ever will. Indeed the search for existential evidence of a transcendental concept is well established as itself incoherent.* The conclusion leads us to look for human explanations for the existence and behaviour of all phenomena, and in the past two or three hundred years those explanations have vastly changed our understanding of natural phenomena both on the Earth (to the level of particle physics) and also within our galaxy and beyond – and expanded it in a manner far beyond the compass and even imaginings of doctrinal books.
2. The absence (non-existence) of the supernatural generates the obvious conclusion that religions are social constructs. As such they relate to time and place displayed as obvious differences in the representational features (where that is permitted) of different deities: Indian gods look like Indians, Egyptian gods like Egyptians, Chinese like Chinese people and so on. The reason is self-evident; the communities from which these deities emerged had never seen anyone who looked significantly different from themselves. Cognitive anthropologists look back some 40,000 years to evidence of early religiosity (largely by inference from the existence of grave goods), with doctrinal religions (particularly associated with settled herding and agricultural lifestyles) perhaps less than 10,000 years.** Those communities endowed their gods with particular attributes - especially with respect to healing and predicting the future (propitious hunting or weather for crop growing). It is then a very small step to Feuerbach's famous reversal that it is not god that made man in his image but rather the reverse – mankind has invented numerous gods and worshiped their own creations (gender specificity is the author's).
The attempts to number the principal deities that have emerged geographically and throughout history have by their nature been problematic; the number of 10,000 is sometimes quoted...so there's a lot to choose from! Humanists (and others) might reasonably respond to any remark about god with the question: "Which one?"
There are also many similarities between religions. Ritual, for example, often plays an important part. They may be "low effort" rituals (obedience or genuflection), "medium effort" (regular attendance at a place of worship, repetitive actions or recitations), or "high effort" rituals involving self-harm or semi-incarceration. Synchronicity often plays a significant role, with actions or activities being performed in concert seemingly more powerful. Many Humanists are interested in religions and the role that these ritualistic activities play in their continuing appeal. Some have even attempted to emulate them...not with great success.

Many religions also promote some form of “creation” story and these are almost universally absurd. The Bible, for example has god creating light a couple of days before creating the sun (which is a very neat trick), while elsewhere in the same text people on Earth observe the sun standing still. The circulation of the sun is, of course, an illusion caused by the rotation of the Earth. At the equator the speed is a little over 1,000 mph. Were the Earth to stop (so that the sun would appear to stand still) that rotation would have to cease and billions of tons of material would be cast into the atmosphere (together with the observers). Also, creation stories present creation as a thing of the past, whereas we know that stars and planets throughout the universe both collapse and come into being. Our galaxy creates on average an estimated seven new stars each year – there may be in the order of 400 billion galaxies... and that is a lot of continuous creation. The lack of understanding of these and numerous other issues causes many Humanists (and others) to doubt the divine authorship of these texts. How could a divinity create physics and not understand it? The Bible also, famously, gets the value of Pi wrong .

3. If religions are cultural artefacts, where does morality come from? When I ask schoolchildren where they get their moral codes from they say their parents, relations, friends, the things they read, etc. It is rare, these days, to find many young people citing the Ten Commandments or some other doctrinal injunction. Morality is also, therefore, a human contrivance. It is both a very important one - for social harmony - and one which changes over time: just consider the moral stance in this country about gay sex now and (say) fifty years ago. Homosexuality has gone, in the course of my lifetime, from being a crime to being unremarkable. Our views about the position of women in society have similarly changed enormously, and would be in conflict with many doctrinal texts authored centuries ago.

So Humanists look to ourselves, to our species, for answers to questions about existence, belief and conduct. We are aware, naturally, that religious people take a different view. We are respectful of those people, of course, and most assuredly not in any sense “anti-religion”, but we do reserve the right to use our human faculties, in a free pluralist society, to examine different beliefs ...and for ours to be examined in return. To use the words of a celebrated passage from one of the most distinguished Humanists of the 20th century, we owe it to ourselves to recognise our humanity, to examine the world around us having set aside nationalism, prejudice, bigotry and selfishness. “There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge and wisdom. ...I appeal to you as a human being to human beings: remember your humanity, and forget the rest” (Bertrand Russell quoted in Bakewell***).

Not bad advice, I should have thought.

John Adams September 2023

- A J Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic, Chap VI*
- ** Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures, Chap 8*
- *** Sarah Bakewell, *Humanly Possible, Chap 11*