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Other Voices

THE BELIEF STATEMENT OF THE WORLD PANTHEIST MOVEMENT*

For Humanists it might be a useful exercise to try to spot the difference. For example: names are not unimportant, and 'Pantheism' goes against the Humanist stance of non-theism. To Pantheists perhaps 'Humanism' suggests an anthropocentric approach. Ed

1. **We revere and celebrate the Universe** as the totality of being, past, present and future. It is self-organizing, ever-evolving and inexhaustibly diverse. Its overwhelming power, beauty and fundamental mystery compel the deepest human reverence and wonder.
2. **All matter, energy, and life are an interconnected unity** of which we are an inseparable part. We rejoice in our existence and seek to participate ever more deeply in this unity through knowledge, celebration, meditation, empathy, love, ethical action and art.
3. **We are an integral part of Nature**, which we should cherish, revere and preserve in all its magnificent beauty and diversity. We should strive to live in harmony with Nature locally and globally. We acknowledge the inherent value of all life, human and non-human, and strive to treat all living beings with compassion and respect.
4. **All humans are equal centers of awareness** of the Universe and nature, and all deserve a life of equal dignity and mutual respect. To this end we support and work towards freedom, democracy, justice, and non-discrimination, and a world community based on peace, sustainable ways of life, full respect for human rights and an end to poverty.
5. **There is a single kind of substance**, energy/matter, which is vibrant and infinitely creative in all its forms. Body and mind are indivisibly united.
6. **We see death** as the return to nature of our elements, and the end of our existence as individuals. The forms of "afterlife" available to humans are natural ones, in the natural world. Our actions, our ideas and memories of us live on, according to what we do in our lives. Our genes live on in our families, and our elements are endlessly recycled in nature.
7. **We honor reality**, and keep our minds open to the evidence of the senses and of science's unending quest for deeper understanding. These are our best means of coming to know the Universe, and on them we base our aesthetic and religious feelings about reality.
8. **Every individual** has direct access through perception, emotion and meditation to ultimate reality, which is the Universe and Nature. There is no need for mediation by priests, gurus or revealed scriptures.
9. **We uphold the separation of religion and state**, and the universal human right of freedom of religion. We recognize the freedom of all pantheists to express and celebrate their beliefs, as individuals or in groups, in any non-harmful ritual, symbol or vocabulary that is meaningful to them.

**Source: World Pantheist Movement: <http://www.pantheism.net>*

EDITORIAL

HUMANISM AND ACTIVISM



Most freethinkers are, by instinct, non-joiners. They see that any organisation, howsoever liberal, is bound to circumscribe their freedom to some extent. Yet almost all Humanists are also freethinkers - or so they like to think. Why do they join? Perhaps they join because most humanists are strongly charged with social passion. They want to bring about changes in society, and they can see that these changes cannot be brought about single-handedly; that like-minded people have to get together.

The major change that the Humanist movement set out to accomplish - providing an alternative to traditional religions - is basically in the realm of beliefs and attitudes. Those who have an academic bent, or those who are interested in philosophy, find dealing with ideas and concepts exciting enough. But those who are more action-oriented and enthusiastic about *doing* something tend to get disenchanted with the movement. It does not help that, even in the realm of ideas, Humanism does not offer the excitement, the certitude, that aggressive ideologies and dogmatic religions provide. The result is that most young persons who join tend to drift away. And, as the provocations and excesses of dogmatic religions increase, those who do stay adopt a more and more aggressive posture. Polemics replace persuasion. Rejection and ridicule replace sympathetic understanding. A leading figure in the IHEU declares: "The humanism of the twentyfirst century has to be an angry humanism ...". There is a call for action. As the late Nicolas Walter - himself a freethought activist - urged many years ago: "I suggest that Humanism needs fewer manifestos and more manifestations." Roy Brown says: "Simply the fact of having taken the step to renounce our faith of birth already marks us out as leaders: as shepherds, not sheep. Every Humanist I have ever met, having thought through for themselves the logic of Humanism, is half-way along the road to becoming an activist."

Those who have been associated with the Humanist movement over the last fifty years or more could not have failed to notice a steady shift of the Humanist movement towards activism - activism defined as a policy of taking direct and militant action to achieve a political or social goal (wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn). Activism is based on the belief that action, as opposed to intellectual theorising, is the way to truth and constructive social change. It thrives on confrontation and basically requires an adversary - generally an established authority such as the State or Church. Many worthy causes close to Humanist objectives, such as secularism, human rights, the protection of the environment and the eradication of superstition, lend themselves to the activist approach and have been enthusiastically embraced by the Humanist movement. Providing an alternative to traditional religions has

receded into the background. Consequently education, which was seen by the founding Humanists as the key to achieving our stated aims, has lost its salience for the Humanist movement. The efforts of the Institute of Humanist Studies in this direction are therefore particularly praiseworthy.

The tendency to shift from ideas to direct action has had other side-effects as well. It is perhaps fair to say that the early Humanists saw themselves as gatherers rather than hunters. As Walter Lippmann said, the 'acids of modernity' have made modern man unable to believe in traditional religion. "The modern man's daily experience of modernity makes instinctively incredible to him these unconscious ideas which are at the core of the great traditional and popular religions. He does not wantonly reject belief, as so many churchmen assert. His predicament is much more serious. With the best will in the world, he finds himself not quite believing." It is these individuals, whose faith in the myths and dogmas of traditional religions has already been eroded, whom the Humanist movement aims to gather in its fold. Unlike proselytising religions, it does not get after believers, insisting on proving them wrong, misguided or deluded. But many humanists believe that the growing stridency in the humanist movement is beginning to reflect the attitudes of proselytising religions.

Not surprisingly, the Humanist movement, which started off as an inclusive, pluralistic, non-parochial association of freethinkers, is beginning to develop the self-image of a minority, with a prescribed (albeit minimum) set of tenets, whose interests have to be protected. Steven Goldberg of COHE says: "Because in many places our numbers comprise but a small minority within society, we humanists must become more assertive in our outreach, education, and activism if we are to influence the social and political evolution of our communities and protect our civil rights." HJ Blackham has, however, warned us that: "Always, within the Humanist movement, there will be persons who want to impose upon it a particular philosophy. It is easy to see why. The leaders are likely to have their own clear-cut views. A definite philosophy makes a militant movement because it defines the enemy and drills the party. This tendency is always to be looked for and resisted."

Faced with the fact that the Humanist movement, over the last fifty years and more, has not been rewarded with the kind of success that its founders hoped for, one wonders whether the time has come to try out a more activist approach. But that does involve a radical change in the character and culture of the movement. Goldberg says: "Humanist activism, at its best, is a means of public education – whether in the form of a forum, a rally, a media campaign, a protest, political lobbying, or litigation – and a substantial goal should be to build awareness and understanding for our views." It may be worth trying.

Vir Narain

LOST IN THE MAELSTROM*

Elaine Glaser

In the pre-modern era, there was no distinction between sciences and the arts. They were intertwined enterprises. In his famous [1959 Rede lecture](#) at Cambridge University CP Snow lamented the fact that, as a result of increasing specialisation, they now occupied entirely different spheres. This set off a debate that has been raging ever since. But in recent years it's taken some odd twists. Science, even among the most literary and philosophical of public intellectuals, has taken ascendancy over the arts as the more dominant discipline. And Snow's two cultures have been replaced by a new dichotomy – between science and religion. Meanwhile the humanities, floundering somewhere in between, are in danger of being lost in the maelstrom.

In that first, ground-breaking lecture, Snow condemned scientists for their “self impoverishment” which resulted from their dismissal of the literary and artistic culture, and then denounced members of the literati for being Luddite in their attitude to science. His argument was ostensibly a plea for intellectual unity and educational reform. At times, however, his complaint about the two-cultures-divide became particularly a complaint about the lack of public understanding of science.

He wrote: “A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?”

Although the response to Snow's lecture was mostly positive, this asymmetry in his argument prompted the literary critic [FR Leavis](#) to label Snow a “public relations man” for the scientific establishment, and the row between them continued for a decade.

The argument between Snow and Leavis was just one strand in the extensive debate over the “two cultures” thesis which followed Snow's lecture. Was the divide being bridged, or was it getting ever wider? Were the arts or the sciences more dominant in wider society? Eventually the debate erupted into open warfare. In 1975, the biologist EO Wilson published *Sociobiology: The Synthesis*, which introduced neo-Darwinian theories of human behaviour to a general readership. Inspired by this landmark study, the biologist Richard Dawkins, the linguist Stephen Pinker and the philosopher Daniel Dennett

launched a series of incursions into the humanities, in books such as *The Selfish Gene* (1976), *The Language Instinct* (1994) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995). They claimed that our genes and the instincts of our hunter-gatherer ancestors could explain diverse aspects of human behaviour, from our choice of partner to our ability to appreciate classical music.

Upbringing, class, education, culture and taste – all these influences were considered secondary to the biological template we had inherited. “We are survival machines,” wrote Dawkins, “robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.” And according to Dennett, “A scholar is just a library's way of making another library.” With the rise of cognitive neuroscience, the hard-wiring of our brains was now offered alongside genes as a predetermining influence on our lives. But the arguments were the same: the privileging of nature over nurture.

The humanities launched a counter-insurgency. Sociologists, psychoanalysts and literary critics argued that it was our environment, rather than our genetic or neurological hardware, that made us who we were. These critics accused the sociobiologists of relying on shaky empiricism and circular “Just So” causality, and they called attention to the atavistic and retrograde character of many of the sociobiologists' claims; most notoriously the notion that men are predisposed to rapewomen. They were helped along by Richard Lewontin and Steven Jay Gould, two biologists who opposed the essentialism of evolutionary psychology; Lewontin wrote a series of essays for the *New York Review of Books* during the '80s and '90s which were published in 2000 under the title *It Ain't Necessarily So: The Dream of the Human Genome and Other Illusions*.

Other critics accused the evolutionary psychologists of concealing a tendentious political agenda beneath what were presented as objective empirical observations. After all, they argued, science's claim to unmediated enquiry was compromised by the fact that scientists were, like everyone else, working with the grubby tools of language and culture. “Science studies” developed as an interdisciplinary field that situated scientific research in the context of history and society. At the same time, cultural studies and critical theory advocates began enthusiastically and – in their scientific critics' eyes indiscriminately – to draw upon the languages of particle physics and cybernetics. Sadie Plant founded the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick and Donna Haraway wrote her “Cyborg Manifesto”. Many scientists regarded all this as uninformed and modish appropriation.

This particular phase of the science–humanities debates became known as the Science Wars, which reached a climax in 1996 when Alan Sokal, an

American physicist, fabricated an article out of postmodernist pastiche and successfully submitted it for publication in the journal *Social Text*. For Sokal and his supporters, this stunt represented a resounding victory for real science.

The science–humanities debates were dogged at times by mutual misunderstandings and Punch-and-Judy stereotypes, but at their height they brilliantly illustrated the competing merits of the two conceptual approaches. But science’s aggressive inroads into the humanities took their toll. Lewis Wolpert, Jared Diamond and others claimed not only that science rivalled the humanities, but that it could do away with the humanities altogether. “Art works because it appeals to certain faculties of the mind,” wrote Pinker in his essay “A Biological Understanding of Human Nature”. “Music depends on details of the auditory system, painting and sculpture on the visual system. Poetry and literature depend on language.” The humanities receded from battle, cowed by the reductive power of scientific fundamentalism, embarrassed by the now unfashionable discursiveness of literary and sociological theory, and paralysed by a quandary over the question of where value in humanities research actually resides.

In short, science won; and as a consequence, the science–humanities debates have all but disappeared in recent years. The general public may be woefully ignorant of actual science, but a quasi-scientific mindset has taken hold in the media and public debate. In January, a team of evolutionary psychologists from the University of Missouri published research claiming that Victorian novels, with their emphasis on morality, duty and community, helped to spread altruistic genes throughout 19th-century society. Their findings were reported without scepticism in the British press.

Scientists regularly bemoan the absence of their colleagues on cultural television programmes, but their sense of being left out of the public conversation blinds them to the ubiquitous presence of a new scientism which dictates that every piece of scientific research is uncritically accepted as truth.

It is the public’s craving for truth, amidst crumbling traditions and certainties, that also accounts for the current resurgence of religion. Science, humanities and religion are all rival approaches to explaining the world. But having triumphed over the humanities, and with religion on the rise, science has trained its sights on religion as its new enemy.

This transition is particularly easy to make since many scientists lump the humanities and religion together as wishy-washy in their minds. But science’s war on religion is futile. Science has not only attacked religion; it has forced it, as it did the humanities, to adopt its own terms. As books such as *God: The Failed Hypothesis* by the physicist Victor Stenger and Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* illustrate, science opposes religion

on the on the basis of fact and evidence. The pseudo-scientific Intelligent Design argument is one consequence of this, and the insertion of the word “probably” into the [atheist bus advertisements](#) is another. But neither side is able either to prove its own case or to disprove the other’s, and certainly not in a manner that their opponent would be prepared to concede.

As the large number of religious scientists and science teachers illustrates, the opposition is a false dichotomy. Science and religion are simply different languages, discourses, genres: a case of apples and pears. Religion is about belief, and science is about testing hypotheses. Science doesn’t have the conceptual language to deconstruct religion, just as religion doesn’t have the methodological tools to criticise science. The inability of either side to win the argument is the reason why it rages tediously on.

The most effective opponent of religion is not science but the humanities. The humanities can help us move beyond the current redundant debate, because they understand concepts of language, discourse and genre, and are able to compare the two opposing enterprises philosophically. They have the analytical wherewithal to account for the growth of biblical literalism and scientific fundamentalism. The humanities are powerful allies of secularism, with their ability to critique the rise of religion historically, politically and culturally.

The fact that research in the sociology of religion has revealed significant variations in religious belief according to gender, race and socio-economic status shows that understanding why particular groups of people are more inclined towards religion than others is a far more potent way of deconstructing adherence to faith than simply telling everyone that God doesn’t exist. We need to recall why we valued the humanities in the first place and to renew our commitment to their incisive, sophisticated and subtle approach.

The old-fashioned literary critics of CP Snow’s time had a tendency to believe that the point of the humanities was to mine the arts – in particular canonical literature – for material with which to make sonorous and ultimately banal pronouncements on “the human condition”. But the humanities have undergone a revolution since the 1950s. Literary criticism, critical theory, sociology and cultural studies have evolved into rigorous and systematic tools of enquiry.

The humanities have since Classical times denoted a broad field of study including language, literature and history. That field is now extraordinarily rich. History employs a range of historiographical approaches to distinguishing the ways in which we are and are not products of the past. Sociology and

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From the Real World

IHASANSARE BAHUDASTARE

D. Narendranath

Ihasansare Bahudustare...Oh Lord! Please liberate me from this world so full of sorrows, and from this endless circle of birth and death. Bhaja Govindam by Sankaracharya

Superstition and ignorance shackle the development and prosperity of tribal communities.

The rains had ceased. Dada, that is, my colleague Satyaranjan, quarrelled with his clothes at the well. Clouds navigated lazily in the evening sky, often forming weird shapes, then diffusing, merging with each other. My mind must have been playing tricks with me—whose mind doesn't occasionally? But I cannot deny the fact that I saw the clouds take the shape of an old woman holding out a child in her extended hands, as if she were playing with him, tossing him in the air. Little by little, the 'child' disintegrated...

Despair overwhelmed me. Isn't that what had just happened here, in my village Baradih? Sitaram had just died. Yes, the chubby seven-month-old ruffian, who used to turn the world upside down when he did not see his grandmother. It was a brief illness of a week. Gut cramps? Dysentery? Who knows? Whoever went to the doctor? Not Dukhni, the child's mother; not Budhi, the grandmother, and not Ramlal, the father. Since they wouldn't go, we went to a nearby medical shop and bought some paediatric syrup, which we administered to Sitaram religiously. And the child did seem to get better.

Ramlal, however, did not believe in the effectiveness of modern medicines. He—rather, all of them—were convinced that it was the evil spirit of Dukhni's ex-husband that was causing all this trouble. That spirit needed to be pacified, cajoled. A puja needed to be done. Couple of chicken needed to be sacrificed. The magic-man, the Ojha, Mihilal of Chamudohar village, needed to be plied with some liquor. All this meant money. Ramlal was scouring the countryside for money. Superstition—a lasting curse on the Santhals.

I had to go out of Baradih for a week. Dada was left behind with the parents to look after the child. Every morning, noon and evening, he would personally give the syrup to Sitaram. The child had weakened considerably in seven days of the illness; yet, he cheered up slightly and started kicking around a little. Dada would tell Ramlal and Dukhni every time he met them to take the child to the hospital at Bartkatha. Initially, they said they didn't know where the hospital was; then they said they would take him on Monday, the market day.

On Sunday, the puja was performed by Mihilal—a man with steely eyes and shoulder-length hair. He was the local witchcrafter, who could invoke or exorcise spirits in return for a few bottles of liquor. Development, progress down the ages, has done little to release these simple people from the stranglehold of the Ojha. The Santhals have kept many of their traditional institutions such as that of the Manjhi-Haram (the headman), the Ojha, the Pargana Manjhi (the cluster headman), the marriage customs, death rituals, etc., free from rampant ‘Diku-i-sation’ unlike many other tribals in South Bihar. Preferring to settle in the remotest areas, development has always reached them last.

Mihilal came promptly on Sunday. Through his puja, he ‘liberated’ Sitaram from the clutches of the evil spirit that had come from Barkitarn, Dukhni’s sasural (husband’s home). In the process, he also gluttonously ‘liberated’ enormous quantities of chicken and mahua (the local liquor). Everybody was happy. Sitaram was now free. If only they could foresee just how ‘free’ he would be in the next few hours!

Monday, Dada reminded Dukhni to go to the hospital and went to the weekly market. He returned at five in the evening and went to look up Sitaram. They had not taken him to the hospital. “Why wastes one’s time in hospital now when the puja has been successfully conducted? See, how well Sitaram smiles?” Dada saw red. He stomped back to the centre and didn’t go back that evening. It must have been about one o’clock in the night when a fearsome shriek split the dreadful silence. Dada bolted out of the centre and reached Dukhni’s house in one leap. Ramlal, Budhi, Dukhni, Talo, Muniya—all sat huddled around the child, dumbfounded. A dhibri (a crude kerosene lamp) flickered violently in the corner, as if wanting to express its anguish. There lay Sitaram, his little hands and legs stretched, unnaturally. His breath came in painful spasms and his eyeballs rolled over, backwards. The imminent was obvious. Unable to stand the sight any longer, Dada returned to the centre. He lit a lamp and just sat there. Time moved at a snail’s pace. The deafening silence rammmed into his ears. He didn’t have to bear it for long. A few minutes later, a long-drawn-out wail signaled that the inevitable had happened....

Sitaram is gone. Back to his land, said Budhi. “God gave him to me for a few days and now he has taken him back. God must have his own reasons for what he did. But who has seen His ways? Why, God? Why did you choose me to be your plaything? Why did you give Sitaram to me at all, if you did not plan to keep him here? Earlier my husband died, I accepted it. Then my two sons died. I managed to live with that sorrow too. Then came Sitaram, I was happy. I gave him all I had. He too loved me. When he was here, we had someone at home to come back for, to buy little things for. You also loved him, didn’t you Master Babu? How he liked to receive those biscuits from you! How he

enjoyed playing on your motorcycle! Everybody loved him so. Now God has snatched him from us. Oh! It is so painful, it is so frustrating. There is a total emptiness. Dukhni does not want to stay in that house any more. She wants to go to her husband's place in Barkitarn. She's young. She has a future. Maybe she's right in going. But where should I go? I'm not going anywhere. I grew up in this place. I plan to die too in this place, even if I have to live alone."

Budhi was right. Dukhni was actually thinking of leaving Baradih with Ramlal. Uncertainties everywhere were the only thing holding them back. Dukhni did not take too well to Sitaram's death. The despair, the frustration, the feeling of emptiness—it was not only ours, not only Budhi's, but Dukhni's too. She was the mother and Sitaram was her only son. She was absolutely stupefied and moved, when she did, like a somnambulist. The first three days were like a nightmare, recounted Dada. Dukhni and Budhi just cried and cried. They did not eat a thing. Swollen eyes, which had no more tears to shed. Stony, empty stares. Occasional bouts of whimpering, which would burst into long-drawn wails. God! Was it painful listening to them! Who could console them? Dukhni would, occasionally, in half sleep, absent-mindedly grope around to embrace the child, who used to be there. Her hands would feel the empty bed sheet. The excruciating truth would strike her for the umpteenth time. A heart-rending wail! It seemed as though Dukhni would go mad! She looked mad!

Budhi was the first to come to terms with reality, the mind-boggling reality that the poor cannot afford to mourn their dead! "Such luxuries are only for the privileged! Not for us! We don't earn one day, we don't eat. Punishment for the unpardonable crime of being poor!" Budhi went out the next day, brought sal leaves from the forest, made leaf plates, sold them in the market and bought ration for the house. Dukhni took two more days to recover.

The day I returned to Baradih, Dukhni and Budhi had gone to transplant paddy in the fields. The previous day, they had had the shradh ceremony for Sitaram. All the villagers were treated to mutton and alcohol. Much money was spent. Ramlal had to pledge the standing crops in one of his fields to the mahajan, to borrow Rs 1,000 from him.

I will never forget the look on Dukhni's face when I saw her first on my return. She was standing at her door, having just returned from the field. When she turned and saw me, it was a strange stare. Her eyes had lost their spark. As if someone had pulled a shutter down her eyes. She seemed to look at me and at the same time not look at me. Her eyes seemed riveted at something behind me, beyond me in the horizon. Was she searching for someone – something there? A pair of little hands to reach up and caress her face? She pulled her much-worn saree around her aching breasts. The ache only a mother understands when a

suckling infant stops feeding suddenly.

Gradually, she got used to the fact of not having her son around. Surely, she had got used to thinking of her son as dead. She had adapted rather quickly. Like every Santhal, she has taken that death in her stride. "If you want to live, you have to die every moment of life," said Swami Vivekananda, and he is dead. His words live on. But for the Santhal, life is about avoiding death. The trapeze artist plays with his life, the crowd claps and he gets paid. The santhal pays with his life. A life in which death stalks every moment, one cannot but get used to it as a constant companion. Wild animals, snakes, diseases, rivalries and to top it all...poverty! It is a complicated life. One which you and I cannot comprehend easily. "Tadwat jeevitam atishaya chapalam!" (*Strange are the ways of life.*)

Does the story end here? Sadly, no! Budhi blamed her fate and God, and continued to stitch sal leaf plates. Dukhni reconciled herself to Sitaram's death. But Ramlal was not the one to give up easily. Sitaram could not have gone just like that. If it was not the evil spirit from Barsot, it had to be from somewhere else. He had to find out. He set out, with five others from the village to Parasnath, near Giridih, to a village called Kubri, to meet a man they call the Sokha Baba. A man with divine powers, who when offered a couple of hundred rupees, some rice and jaggery, will bare open before you all the notorious deeds of evil spirits.

Sokha Baba lived in Devas. There are two such Devas around Barkatha, one at Parasnath and the second near Bishungarh in a village called Hotoi. Bad patches in life, death, and rivalries—all these ensure a constant stream of believers round the year to the Devas. The Sokhas fleece them. Yet they keep coming back. Any problem in life, the Sokha has to be visited. The Santhals, when faced with seemingly unsurmountable circumstances—not very rare—and when at their wits' end, turn to Ojhas and Sokhas. However, there are some shrewd members in the community, who are conditional believers. One of them is none other than Ramlal.

The Sokha Baba at Kubri told Ramlal that the child was killed by the evil spirit residing at Chhotu, Ramlal's cousin's house. It was quite shocking to think that the child's own uncle would try to kill it. Yet that was what the Sokha Baba revealed.

To go back in time a little: Budhi's father-in-law's father, Jhalo Manjhi, came to Baradiah with his son over 50 years ago. At that time, there were only one or two families there. Jhalo came to look after the property of a very rich Pandey of Belkapi village. When Pandey died, he bequeathed a lot of land to

Jhalo. On Jhalo's death, those lands got transferred to his son's name. Now a rich landlord, this son became the Manjhi-Haram of Baradih. He had three children, two sons and one daughter. The eldest son, who subsequently became the Manjhi-Haram, married Budhi. They had three daughters and two sons. The second was the daughter who had three sons and two daughters. Her youngest son had two sons. The key characters in this story are the 2 sons of Budhi, 2 sons, Talo and Khadia of the second daughter and 2 sons—Chhotu and Jeevlal—of the youngest son.

After Budhi's husband died, his two sons inherited his share of the land and the elder son became the Manjhi-Haram. By this time, due to division over the generations, individual holdings had become meagre and were barely sufficient for a decent survival. Occasional scuffles among cousins over boundaries were not uncommon. At this juncture, the two sons of Budhi died in quick succession due to some illness.

There was a galore of allegations and counter allegations. Talo and Khadia accused Chhotu and Jeevlal of deploying evil spirits to kill Budhi's sons, so that they could usurp their lands. Chhotu and Jeevlal were sure that Talo and Khadia had taken help of evil spirits. They had the other families staying in the village to support them. Thus the families in the village split into two factions – Talo, Khadia in one faction and the remaining eight families in the other. Budhi remained neutral.

The Devas was the next resort. Representatives from both factions went to the Sokha Baba at Kubri. The verdict of the Sokha went against Chhotu and Jeevlal. But instead of taking any compensatory measures such as a puja or a sacrifice, they accused Talo of foul play. Thus the rift widened and the quarrel continued. It continues to date.

Coming back to the events at hand, as the people of Baradih quarrelled through thick and thin, Dukhni conceived and gave birth to a chubby young boy, Sitaram. Sitaram grew to be the apple of everyone's eye in the village. His sudden death was a terrible shock to the family and to all of us. The verdict by the Sokha Baba that Chhotu and Jeevlal had conspired to kill him was a further jolt. But again, instead of conceding the verdict, Chhotu and Jeevlal said that they want to go to another Sokha to confirm the verdict. What followed was an ugly form of motivated conspiracy and design. The design of Chhotu and Jeevlal was to harass Ramlal so much so that he would be compelled to leave Baradih. Budhi and Dukhni also would be compelled to leave with him. Then all the land would be theirs. They were not exactly happy at the prospect of the ghar-jamai enjoying the property that could have theirs if they had the support

of other families, who gleefully watched when cousins fought. They conjured up a case that Ramla

I was seen talking to and taking advice of Talo, who was their rival. This was not called for. Therefore, if they had to remain in the village, they (Ramlal and family) would have to conduct a big feast for all the villagers (except Talo and Khadia) or else they would be excommunicated and their lands confiscated. Ramlal was baffled out of his wits. His child had just died and he had not yet regained his bearings. And here he was being asked to do penance for a non-issue. But what could he do? Jeevlal was now the Manjhi-Haram according to law, and a majority of the village was with him. Ramlal did not want to be excommunicated. More than himself, he was afraid of his younger brother, who he said would not get a bride if they were excommunicated. So, much against his and our wishes, he pledged the rest of his standing crops and conducted the feast. Everyone in the village, except Talo and Khadia and us, was treated to lot of meat and liquor. Ramlal was exonerated of the crime of talking to Talo.

Poor Ramlal! His woes were yet not over. The controversy over Sitaram's death remained. Chhotu and Jeevlal wanted to consult another Sokha Baba for a second opinion. Since Ramlal was the appellant, again they went, at his expense, to the Sokha Baba at Hotoi, near Bishungarh. And here is the piece de resistance. This Sokha said that the evil spirit had come from Budhi's father's house and it was Budhi herself who had kept this evil spirit in her house to kill Sitaram! Naturally, this verdict was acceptable to Chhotu and Jeevlal, and Ramlal did not know to do.

Yes, Ramlal did not know what to do. He still doesn't. He has a wife who is half dead, a mother-in-law who still has some life left, a brother who is unemployed and himself, along with two pint-sized bullocks and a leaking dilapidated house. All his standing crops have been pledged to the local money-lender. He doesn't know where to go from here. The world had not been kind on him. He lives now in Baradih, a totally shattered man. "Inhasansare Bahudustare....."

Source: NewsReach, June 2008

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FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN*
A Window to a Freer, More Just and Secular Middle East
Azar Majedi

If any Reformation is to come about in our times within Islam, three countries are likely to play a key role in it: Indonesia, India and Iran. This article brings out some important pointers as far as Iran is concerned. Iran is on the threshold of a crucial election

When I agreed to write about Humanist movements in the Middle East, I thought I had the whole idea in my head. But when I sat down to write, I felt confused. "How do we define Humanism?" The question came to my mind. I started searching, browsing and reading. I realised that it was not only me; the concept is too broad, too undefined. I decided to go back to my original idea, write about what I consider Humanism to mean. I always considered Humanism to mean the outlook which begins with a human being's well-being, happiness and prosperity. A Humanist is one who cares about a human being's sufferings, who is touched and moved by injustices, inequality and oppression; an outlook that has human beings at its core. This definition might sound very arbitrary, and perhaps it is. But on the basis of my research, I think this interpretation is actually valid and applicable.

The Middle East

The Middle East is socio-politically a volatile region. The long standing Israel-Palestine war has definitely left a deep mark on the region. Moreover, the whole Middle East is under official or de facto dictatorships. Struggles of people against the state of affairs are an inevitable part of life in the Middle East. Religion has always played an important role in the Middle East, but in the past 30 years, it has come to occupy a much more prominent position. Different factors contributed to this. The rise of political Islam as a powerful political movement, the loss of credibility of Arab nationalism due to its weaker military position vis-à-vis Israel, and the absence of any other ideological alternatives due to the dominant dictatorships, were the main contributing factors. More than ever the institution of religion has acquired a political and ideological prominence.

All over the Middle East secularism has been pushed back to the margins, struggling to find a voice in the society. However, there is one very different case in the Middle East, that is, Iran. Iran, because of its very different socio-political development in the past three decades, presents a totally different picture, and its future development would have a significant impact on the

whole region. The subject of this article is to try and explain the socio-political situation in Iran and in so doing talk about social movements there which, in my opinion, have a very strong Humanist character.

Historical Background

In order to understand the current state of affairs and its regional significance, we need to look at the recent socio-political history of Iran. Iran, except for very brief periods, has always been under a dictatorship. Two revolutions and one rather long and important political upheaval mark its history in the twentieth century. Up to the 1979 revolution that resulted in the coming to power of an Islamic regime, there had been open and hidden conflicts between religious establishments and secularist forces, which included basically left and communist groups and some sections of intellectuals. The state and religion, despite some conflicts and clashes, on the whole worked hand in hand.

Capitalism became the dominant mode of production in Iran in the sixties. A land reform took place which resulted in migration of a large part of the rural population into cities, a source of cheap labour, and some measures towards integration of women into social and economic life were taken by the monarchist state. Both of these policies came under fierce attack by a section of the religious hierarchy led by Khomeini. The religious establishment was one of the biggest landowners in the country and extremely reactionary and misogynist. A small uprising was organised by the religious establishment and followed by traditional section of merchants, i.e. the Bazaar. This uprising was swiftly quashed. Khomeini was sent to exile to Iraq.

The sixties and seventies were an era of change. Capitalism grew rather rapidly, thanks to oil money which provided the capital for investment in infrastructure and heavy industry. Socially, changes took place as well. More female students joined the universities, and more women began to work. In big cities the traits of Western culture, in music, film, fashion and lifestyle were quite apparent. However, the economic exploitation and injustices, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the oppressive political system, which led to many young people being arrested and tortured, and widespread corruption led to the formation of a revolution. The first signs of a political upheaval became apparent in 1977 and eventually led to military takeover of the streets by the army. In summer-autumn 1978 a full-blown revolution took over the whole country, calling for overthrow of the monarchy.

Up until this time there was no sign of the Islamic leadership. The slogans were anti-monarchist, anti-dictatorship and basically left-wing. However, a swift change became apparent. In autumn 1978 Khomeini was deported

by Saddam Hussein, Iraqi president, to France, seemingly for his political activities against the Iranian government. Once Khomeini arrived in Paris and was placed in a glamorous chateau in Paris, owned by a rich Iranian business man, socio-political changes took place very rapidly. Foreign media interviewed Khomeini every day and read his commands and press releases from their short wave radios every night. Thanks to tight censorship of the national media, everyone listened to the foreign media, which included BBC Persian service, Radio Israel, American Voice of Liberty and Moscow radio, for information. This is how a leader was born. Mind engineering of the masses was achieved. Public opinion was formed.

Over a short period of time the revolution for justice and freedom and against poverty and corruption, and one which ironically gave rise to various women's organisations, was called an Islamic revolution. Protests by the youth were violently crushed, but demonstrations organised by the religious establishment and with Islamic slogans were calmly tolerated. Gradually more veiled women turned up at the demonstrations. An overnight transformation took place. A small piece of news around this time gave hints as to how this masterpiece was created: the Guadalupe summit by the industrialised countries designed and executed this plan. The western powers, for fear of the left coming to power in Iran, a neighbour of the Soviet Union, an important geo-political country for the West and a very close ally of the USA, played an instrumental role in bringing an Islamic regime into Iran.

Islamic republic vs secularism

The left was taken by surprise. The women's organisations, which were being formed in Tehran and other big cities, had mixed feelings; Islam and women's rights are antonymous, but anti monarchist/anti-imperialist emotions were running high. The irony was that these organisations were being formed to promote women's rights and equality in the new atmosphere. But suddenly they were faced by the Islamic offensive. Secularism was not formulated as a demand, but the nervousness of a great section of the left, women's movement and non-religious people was apparent. In order to calm this socio-political anxiety, a campaign of misinformation was launched by the Islamists: "Women are equal under Islam" "Khomeini's wife plays the piano and speaks French and English." (This was to neutralise the fear of banning music by Islam and anti western characteristic of Islamists.) This proved to be a clever propaganda campaign.

The clash between the women's rights movement and the Islamic regime, less than a month after its coming to power, was one of the first signs of a long and hard battle between freedom and equality seeking movements, the

left and secularists, with the regime, which resulted in more than 100 000 political executions, from communists to different opposition groups, including other religious groups. Opposition was crushed and suppressed brutally, particularly during 1981-1990. However, the nineties witnessed the rise of a wave of social movements for women's rights, freedom of expression and association, cultural emancipation from strict religious rules by the youth. The young generation, which was the main actor of these movements, had not experienced the relative freedom of culture and lifestyle in the sixties and seventies. It had not experienced the coup d'état like the crushing of the opposition, notorious prisons and torture and summary executions. They were born in the Islamic regime, obligatory veiling and gender apartheid, the banning of western music, culture and lifestyle in the era of increasing globalization and Internet. The regime was faced with a mission impossible.

These social movements have developed over time. The regime has done its utmost to crush them; arrests, persecution, torture, abduction, and killing of activists have not been able to subdue these deep-rooted movements. Iran is in great socio-political and cultural turmoil with a deep economic crisis. Aspirations for a better, freer and more egalitarian life run high among the people, particularly the young generation that comprises the majority of the population. The constant battle between women and the vice police over the veil, clothing, make-up and supposedly "improper" and un-Islamic behaviour of the former, the fight between the youth on the streets and at the universities with the security forces over gender apartheid, dress code, freedom of speech and cutting the presence of security forces from the university, the every day battle of the workers over pay and dismissals with the police form distinct features of the socio-political portrait of Iran today.

Social movements

There are four distinct and important social movements, deeply rooted in society, which have mass backing and contradict all the fundamental characteristics of the Islamic Republic. By their nature these movements are secular, even if they do not openly articulate this demand, and Humanist, according to the definition this article subscribes to.

The women's rights movement

One of the most powerful movements in Iran having mass backing is the women's rights movement. Ever since the coming to power of the Islamic regime this movement has been in existence. It was active and organised protests for a couple of years, and then it was suppressed. However, women's resistance continued in individual form. Around a decade later it started to voice its demands. Women's journals, be it in a very moderate or conservative format, were published. Eventually the women succeeded in changing the bal

ance of power at the national level. The veil became less restrictive, clothing became more fashionable, women's attitudes more confident and outspoken. The number of women's entries to university rose consistently. Last year around 65 per cent of university admissions were girls. Resistance both in individual form and en masse is strong, despite the regime's harsh suppression. Despite the fact that part of the legal leadership of the women's rights movement claims there is no contradiction between Islam and women's rights, this movement is the most secularist movement in the country. It should be noted that this positive portrayal of Islam is by no means shared by the majority. Women's equality by its nature is against Islamic laws and traditions. The women's rights movement has great potential to challenge Islam, its rules, traditions and the Islamic regime. The effects of this movement are wide reaching. This movement, by virtue of its root, is secularist and a staunch enemy of political Islam. This movement is capable of affecting the whole Middle East.

Political freedom

The fight against political oppression is very large and is a mass movement in Iran. The Islamic Republic came to power as the result of the defeat of the 1979 revolution. Therefore, from the beginning it provoked political opposition. In the past decade, political demonstrations and protests have become an inseparable part of the country's social landscape. Freedom of expression, association, demonstration and beliefs, scrapping of censorship of the media, films, books and cultural events, and creation of a free political system are high on its agenda. As this movement fights with a religious state, the demand for separation of religion from the state is recognised as a necessity to achieve these demands.

Economic justice

The country has plunged into a deep economic crisis. In this oil rich country the majority live below the poverty line, by conservative official estimates. Homelessness, the phenomenon of street children, widespread prostitution, child prostitution and child labour are some of the symptoms of this economic crisis. Workers' strikes, sit-ins and protests are an ongoing event in the country. Workers are sometimes not paid for up to six months. The minimum wage is well below the poverty line. The lack of social benefits, universal health care and unemployment benefits have devastated the lives of millions. This condition has led the workers' movement to try and mobilise and organise protests. It should be noted that workers are deprived of the right to organise, mobilise and strike. This movement seeks a fundamental change in the socio-economic and political system. Having lived under a theocratic regime, it is very much against the religious system and for a secularist one. This movement has the widespread backing of the population.

Cultural Emancipation

Last but not the least, this new phenomenon is in an ironic way the product of a religious regime. The three decades of total domination of an Islamic state, restricting and interfering in any and every aspect of people's lives, even their bedrooms, has given rise to a cultural revolt. The youth has revolted against all Islamic codes of behaviour and lifestyles, and aspire to live like the youth in the west. Their taste for music, cinema, fashion and lifestyle in general goes against what the entire regime and old traditions stand for. This I call the cultural emancipation movement. This is much stronger than the cultural movement of the 70s in the west as far as its political impact is concerned. The youth in Iran do not want to live under an Islamic regime, or any religious system, for that matter. They aspire to a secularist and free society, in which they can live free from political and cultural restrictions and in prosperity. This is the root of these great social movements in Iran which threaten the Islamic regime and political Islam in general and create a window to freedom, equality and prosperity in the Middle East.

*Source: International Humanist News November 2008. Azar Majedi is the chair of Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran and a veteran campaigner for women's rights and against political Islam

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cultural studies not only describe but also account for the ways we organise and perceive the world. Literary criticism teaches us how to read advertisements and political speeches alongside fiction and poetry.

Psychoanalysis reminds us that despite the attractively straightforward insights of Darwinism, we are still in the grip of self-delusion. Some of the more technical branches of critical theory may merit a measure of Sokal's satire. But it is lamentable that scientists routinely take no account of these developments, entitling themselves to a vision of the humanities that is stuck in the 1950s, and believing that joining a book group or attending the theatre is essentially all that's involved: that "doing the humanities" is, in other words, a matter of pleasure and appreciation. If scientists failing to halt the rise of blind faith and unreason we need to employ the critical and analytical approaches which the humanities provide, because where religion is concerned, the empirical method is not yielding results.

*Source: New Humanist, Mar/Apr 2009. Reproduced by permission.

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THE IMPACT OF DARWIN*

AC Grayling

There are a few faces which, when we see them depicted anywhere, need no accompanying text to say who they are. Einstein and Darwin are two outstanding examples. They are giants of science, and even more, they are giants of general culture, whose work has wrought fundamental changes in the way the universe is understood and viewed well beyond their own sciences of biology and physics. These remarks are indisputably true, but a slightly misleading implication of them has to be guarded against. This is that without the two men in question, those same advances would not have been made. That would be a mistaken view. Science is a co-operative enterprise, and every advance depends upon those made beforehand, both in theory and in the practicalities of research. Had Darwin not lived to publish his *Origin of Species* its insights would have emerged anyway following the work of Alfred Russel Wallace and other naturalists. This is illustrated by the fact that when T. H. Huxley first encountered Darwin's views he said to himself, "How stupid not to have seen that!" Many before Darwin had proposed the ideas of evolution and the mutability of species; the great age of the earth was well understood; the convergence of lessons from geology, the fossil record, natural history, and the selective breeding of crops and domestic animals, which Darwin added to his own observations and reasonings derived from the *Beagle* voyage, would have been effected by others sooner rather than later, for these ideas were being energetically pursued. So it is the central ideas of evolutionary biology, for which Darwin was the prime convener, that have the impact that I shall sketch here, using "Darwinism" and "evolutionary theory" as a shorthand for this. Here too, though, a prefatory note is in order. Darwin saw that all living things have descended from a common ancestor by natural selection. In identifying natural selection as the mechanism by which speciation occurs, he gave the first great impetus to the new world view which has followed, for he had identified a mechanism which applies in many other respects too, well beyond the biological sciences.

It (natural selection) is a mechanism which economically describes how complexity arises from simpler elements through modifications selected by pressures of various kinds.

From individual learning to social change to the development of technologies such as steam engines and computers, the pattern is visible and explanatorily powerful. As a result the concept of evolution has come to be deployed sometimes controversially – outside biology, influencing thought in other natural sciences and in the social sciences, the humanities, philosophy and literature.

Familiarly, Darwinism itself had to wait until recognition of Gregor Mendel's work on peas had given rise to an understanding of genes and their role, and then for the discipline of population genetics to develop, for what Julian Huxley called the "new synthesis" in evolutionary biology to emerge. This "new synthesis" is the standard view, and serves as the central organising principle of all the biological sciences. When I talk of "Darwinism" or "evolutionary theory" here, I mean this. We can take for granted the transformative effect of evolutionary theory on the biological sciences, but as just suggested, the impact goes much further. The first and most obvious example is the impact on traditional views of humankind and its place in the universe. A first revolution in this respect had occurred when the Copernican view about our planet's position in the solar system challenged the idea that humanity is the pinnacle of creation at the centre of the universe. It is hard now to appreciate the blow this gave not just to theology but to human amour propre. It was nevertheless still possible for many to continue believing that the earth and its inhabitants were created by an interested intelligent agency with some purpose for them in mind.

But Darwin's discoveries took the displacement of humanity from some kind of cosmic pole position further, by placing it squarely in nature, and describing nature itself as a realm of nonpurposive forces and circumstances in which, through vast tracts of time and with enormous wastage, biological complexity emerges from simpler elements and structures.

There is neither room nor need here for the idea of an interested purposive agency or deity. Darwin was of course fully aware of this implication, and delayed general publication of his findings partly for this reason. Reception of Darwin's ideas in his own day was very mixed, with some being variously frightened or outraged by them and others welcoming them. His theory was widely misunderstood as the claim that human beings have descended from monkeys, and Darwin himself was caricatured as an orangutan. The spectrum of religious views was broad enough for some clerics to think that evolution was consistent with theology; the Reverend Charles Kingsley wrote to Darwin to commend his work, and Darwin included a reference to Kingsley's endorsement in the third edition of the Origin, in an effort to placate some of those who accused him of destroying morality by attacking religion.

Whereas Darwin's discoveries and those in geology and palaeology refuted religious views based on a six-day creation and the fixity of species, some religious apologists tried to articulate a view of "theistic creation", in which a deity sets the evolutionary process in motion and perhaps occasionally puts a hand on the tiller to ensure "progress" towards the emergence of

“higher forms of life”. But this too Darwin rejected, as he shows in his autobiographical writings and correspondence. The main argument against “theistic evolution” is that the involvement of an agency in the evolutionary process is unnecessary and redundant.

For Darwin the compelling reason was what philosophers call “the problem of evil”: that nature is so wasteful and so full of suffering that the idea it should even be countenanced, still less deliberately created, by an agency competent to do otherwise, was repugnant.

He had, he tells us in his autobiographical notes, given up Christianity early; he had become a complete “agnostic” by the time the Origin was written. In the passage of the autobiographical notes where Darwin recounts these points – a passage which in earlier editions was omitted at the request of his widow as too painful to her sensibilities – he directly describes himself as an agnostic, and indirectly as a sceptic. He wrote, “Nothing is more remarkable than the spread of scepticism or rationalism during the latter half of my life. Before I was engaged to be married, my father advised me to conceal carefully my doubts, for he said that he had known extreme misery thus caused with married persons...[he] added that he had known during his whole long life only three women who were sceptics...[though] he had to own with respect to one of them, his sister-inlaw Kitty Wedgwood, that he had no good evidence, only the vaguest hints, aided by the conviction that so clear-sighted a woman could not be a believer.”

Darwin was clear-sighted, as his scientific work vastly shows; the implication that he was “not a believer” (a stronger claim than that he was “merely” agnostic) follows. His use of the word “agnostic,” coined by his friend and colleague T. H. Huxley in the first battles of the “Darwin wars” that followed publication of the Origin, should not be allowed to mislead. Even today in many parts of the world the word “atheist” has the resonance for some of “murderer” or “paedophile”; this was all the more so in the nineteenth century; it was a term of malediction. “Sceptic”, “rationalist” and “agnostic” did duty instead. Religious apologists, clutching at straws, prefer it when people self-describe as “agnostic” because they hope that it leaves open a smidgeon of possibility that there might be supernatural agencies in the universe. Manifestly, that is not what someone “too clear-sighted to be a believer” would intend by using the term.

The expression “the Darwin wars” could be used to refer to the continuing effort mounted by opponents of Darwinian biology to cling to creationist views, including the more sophisticated (and sophisticated) avatar of these

views as “intelligent design theory”, a story that runs through the Scopes trial of 1925 to the Scopes trial of 1925 to the present day, sustained by well-organised and well-funded religious lobbies principally in the United States. But the phrase “the Darwin wars” has come to denote a different aspect of the impact of Darwinism, relating to the use made of the concept of evolution in the social sciences, and specifically in the new fields known as socio-biology and evolutionary psychology. These have provoked a storm of controversy, their critics pointing out that the effort to explain society and psychology in purely evolutionary terms is too reductive, because it ignores the influence of culture, learning, and the concomitant transmission of values and beliefs, together with the feedback mechanisms that these factors themselves involve in prompting further change.

The quarrel about the limits of application of evolutionary theory outside biology has often been a vituperative one, with Stephen Jay Gould calling evolutionary psychology a form of “fundamentalist Darwinism” and therefore “foolish,” “fatuous,” “pathetic” and “egregiously simplistic.” He also locked horns with Daniel Dennett and others over his own reformulation of Darwinian theory in terms of “punctuated equilibrium”.

While these arguments have proceeded, other social scientists have been disturbed by the fact that in his *Descent of Man* Darwin himself gave some ground for the extrapolations of evolutionary theory into talk of race and eugenics that followed, in the hands of Herbert Spencer (from whom Darwin himself borrowed the term “survival of the fittest” in later editions of the *Origin*), Francis Galton, and eventually the Nazis and others. Here the point to be made is that a theory as powerful as Darwinism inevitably gets dragged through all sorts of bushes into neighbouring fields, too many of them inappropriate; and obviously enough the failure or misapplication of the theory in those fields does not in any way infirm the theory in its home sphere. In line with this thought, it remains that the greatest impact of Darwinism is in biology and such related fields as agriculture, medicine and neuroscience, from which some of the greatest changes to life and the future are already flowing. When the “Darwin wars” over the insights offered by evolutionary theory into psychology and society have calmed down, there will doubtless be found much of value there too.

Although evolutionary scientists themselves continue to investigate the fine details of aspects of evolution the significance of factors such as genetic drift and catastrophe as well as chance mutation, for example – the fact is that evolution is a fact, not a speculative hypothesis. Opponents of evolutionary theory, principally the creationist lobbies, try to insist on the point that evolutionary theory is a theory, as if doing so introduced a significant element of doubt. This is a misunderstanding (and a wilful one) about the concept of a theory in science. Unlike hypotheses, which are suggestions to be tested and scrutinized, scientific theories such as Newton’s theory of gravitation and

Einstein's general relativity are powerfully supported by evidence and the success of their application. They are facts, not suppositions, even if we can expect to refine and improve our understanding of them, and discover more about their implications, as our enquiries continue.

Evolution is a fact, fully and overwhelmingly supported by evidence and by every consequence it supports.

One example will suffice: we test new medications on guinea pigs rather than ants because the former are genetically closer to humans than the latter. This simple point is explained by the fact that the common ancestor of guinea pigs and humans is more recent than the common ancestor of guinea pigs, ants and humans. The power of the theory explains why efforts, often successful, to apply it in fields other than biology are so attractive. Underlying it is the idea that complexity arises from simplicity without purposes or consciousness.

Here is the key of the Darwinian revolution: beforehand it was thought that complex things can only be brought about by yet more complex things; there was no grasp of how matters could be otherwise.

That is why even after Copernicus religious views persisted. But “the blind watchmaker,” as Richard Dawkins called natural selection in contradistinction to Paley's watchmaker analogy for purposive design in nature, is fully competent to produce the millions of life forms – 90 percent of them now extinct – that the planet has so far seen, nothing else required. One thing is certain: evolutionary theory has changed the entire framework of thinking about the world and mankind in it, and there is no going back: Darwin's life and work marks a watershed, and we are just beginning our journey into its further side.

*Source: International Humanist News, February, 2009

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OBITUARY: HAROLD BLACKHAM*

by Editorial Staff of *New Humanist*

More than anyone else Harold Blackham, who has died aged 105, had a claim to have been the architect of modern humanism. Through his dedicated efforts over three quarters of a century, which included writing, lecturing, activism and administration, Blackham's view that there was a lineage of thinking which led from ancient Greeks, through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Victorian science and philosophy and up to 20th century forms of free thought and rationalism, a lineage that was positive and optimistic about human capabilities and human nature and should be called and celebrated as humanism, became the dominant definition within the disparate organisations which make up the British humanist movement. As an honorary associate of the Rationalist Press Association, founder of the British Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and as a prolific writer and speaker, Blackham has left his mark right across the national and international humanist scene.

Born in the Midlands in 1903 and educated at Birmingham University Blackham, whose father and grandfather had been lay Congregationalist preachers, moved to London in 1933, where his active involvement in organised humanism began. After the Second World War he set out to revive the free thought movement under the banner of "humanism", looking, as he wrote in 1981, to recover "for expression in a modern humanism the full body of the age-old tradition, with its accumulating scientific, social and ethical content." In his development of humanism Blackham wrote many books and articles over almost 70 years, including *The Humanist Tradition* (Routledge, 1953) and *Humanism* (Penguin, 1968).

But more important even than his writing was his energetic activism. In Birmingham in the 1920s he had founded a local branch of the League of Nations Union and in 1938 he had helped to organise a World Union of Freethinkers conference in London, which turned out to mark the end of the old free thought movement in the face of Fascism and Communism (he was himself involved with bringing Jewish refugee children from Austria to Britain to escape Nazi persecution). Still thinking internationally after the war, in 1946 he called a London conference of the World Union of Freethinkers to discuss "The Challenge of Humanism". The need, however, was for a new international organisation. Blackham took the lead by working with the ethical organisations in Britain, and also with new humanist organisations around the world. Visiting Holland after the war he met the Dutch philosopher and humanist leader Jaap van Praag, with whom he founded the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in 1952. Today, the IHEU is a worldwide union of over 100 organisations

in 40 nations which continues to develop Humanism internationally. Blackham served as its secretary from 1952 to 1967 and Julian Huxley became its first president.

Blackham also brought his unifying skills to bear in Britain, where in 1963 his efforts persuaded the disparate Ethical and Rationalist organisations in Britain, including the Rationalist Press association and the Ethical Union, to join forces and form the British Humanist Association (BHA). Blackham became director until his retirement in 1968.

Blackham had a lifelong commitment to education, and moral education in particular. Working with people like Cyril Bibby, Lionel Elvin, Sir Gilbert Flemming and Edward Blishen, he went on to make the BHA a significant advocate of moral education and personal development in schools, recognised as such even by the Church of England. He was one of the founders of the Journal of Moral Education, which is still published. Working with Dr James Hemming, his fellow humanist and educationist who died in 2007, Blackham ensured that the humanist voice was a feature of debates over religious, moral and values education throughout the second half of the twentieth century, always prepared to work with faith groups and believers in the interests of finding practical solutions to social problems. To that end he founded the Social Morality Council (now the Norham Foundation), which brought together humanists and eminent religious believers to produce agreed solutions to moral questions affecting society.

On his retirement as director in 1968, after a career that included more than 4000 speaking engagements, the BHA acknowledged Blackham as “the architect of the British and international humanist movements”. Throughout his long life dedicated to improving the lot of humanity and offering practical moral guidance to whoever wanted it, Harold Blackham offered an exemplary example of Humanism in action.

Harold John Blackham, humanist, born 31 March 1903; died 23 January 2009

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Editor's Note. I remember attending a lecture by Blackham in Conway Hall in London in 1957 along with my father. On the latter's death, Blackham said: "He made a unique contribution to Indian Humanism that can hardly be replaced....I met him on the several occasions of his attendance at Congresses of the International Humanist and Ethical Union... Always he struck his own quiet, distinctive, and distinguished humanist note, which he made clearly heard and was never drowned by the orchestra of the larger national humanist movements."

NEWS AND NOTES

Defamation of religion passes at UN Human Rights Council again

The United Nations Human Rights Council has once again passed a resolution proposed by Islamic countries which urges the creation of laws in member states to prevent criticism of religion (namely, Islam).

Members of the Human Rights Council voted 23 in favour of a resolution yesterday to combat “defamation of religion.” Eleven nations, mostly from the West, opposed the resolution and 13 countries abstained. Ahead of the vote, nearly 200 secular, religious and media groups from around the world (including the NSS) appealed to the Council in Geneva to reject the proposals, which were introduced by the 56-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference.

In a statement, the coalition of NGOs said the “defamation of religion” resolution “may be used in certain countries to silence and intimidate human rights activists, religious dissenters and other independent voices,” and to restrict freedom of religion and of speech. The resolution, its critics said, would also restrict free speech and even academic study in open societies in the West and elsewhere.

The OIC argued that criticising or satirising religions is a violation of the rights of believers and leads to discrimination and violence against them. The resolution, proposed by Pakistan on behalf of the OIC, says “Defamation of religion is a serious affront to human dignity leading to a restriction on the freedom of their adherents and incitement to religious violence. Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism.” It called on states to ensure that religious places, sites, shrines and symbols are protected, to reinforce laws “to deny impunity” for those exhibiting intolerance of ethnic and religious minorities, and “to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs”.

The resolution is not binding, but versions of it have been passed repeatedly by the Council, at which Muslim countries and their supporters have a built-in majority. It is thought that the resolution will have a chilling effect on free speech and help justify suppression of dissent in many of the despotic countries that voted for it. The Canadian representative said: “It is individuals who have rights, not religions. Canada believes that to extend (the notion of) defamation beyond its proper scope would jeopardise the fundamental right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of expression on religious subjects.” The German representative, speaking for the European Union said that while instances of Islamophobia, Christianophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of religious discrimination should be taken seriously, it was

“problematic to reconcile the notion of defamation (of religion) with the concept of discrimination”.

“The European Union does not see the concept of defamation of religion as a valid one in a human rights discourse,” it said. “The European Union believes that a broader, more balanced and thoroughly rights-based text would be best suited to address the issues underlying this draft resolution.” Activist groups say this new resolution is part of a growing offensive by the Islamic countries to impose their concepts of rights and religion on the rest of the world. They argue that the concept of “defamation of religions” is so vague that it can be used against any challenge to a religious tenet and bolster laws against blasphemy in authoritarian regimes where one religion holds sway.

Condemnation of “defamation” was originally included in a draft of a declaration to be issued by a U.N. anti-racism conference, dubbed Durban II, in Geneva next month, but was withdrawn after Western countries said it was unacceptable (see last week’s Newsline). However, critics say they fear OIC states and their allies are working to insert it in an existing U.N. convention against racial discrimination. They say “defamation of religion” has no validity in international law because only individuals, and not concepts or beliefs, can be defamed.

Among the groups signing Wednesday’s statement were the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the Geneva-based U.N. Watch, the Muslim Council of Canada, the American Islamic Congress, the World Jewish Congress, the U.S. Freedom House, and the Paris-based International Press Institute. It was also backed by organizations representing believers, agnostics and atheists in India, Australia, Europe, Africa and Latin America. Roy Brown of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (to which the NSS is affiliated), and the moving force behind the NGO protest, said: “The resolution is part of a wider campaign by the Islamic States to impose values on the rest of the international community which are largely unacceptable in liberal democracies. Freedom of Expression is protected in international law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 states that everyone has the right “to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression.” Articles 19 and 20 also set out the permitted limits to freedom of expression. They do not include protection for ideas, beliefs or religion per se; it is the believer not the belief that the ICCPR seeks to protect. The sponsors of this resolution have failed to understand that Freedom of Religion or Belief depends on Freedom of Expression. If the beliefs of one religion are to be deemed ‘defamation’ of another, society is on a very slippery slope.”

Source: NSS Newsline 27 March 2009

Indian Charlie Chaplin statue halted by nationalists

Plans for a giant statue of Charlie Chaplin in southern India have been stymied by protests from Hindu nationalist groups. A 20m statue of the film star was planned in the town of Udupi in the state of Karnataka at a cost of £48,000. It was to be part of a film set. But Hindu nationalists condemned the move on the grounds that Chaplin was a Christian. Activists from Hindu Jagarna Vedike chased builders away and buried their tools. They demanded that film-maker Hemant Hedge instead make a statue of Swami Vivekananda, a 19th Century Hindu missionary. Mr Hedge said: "I'm really surprised that people would associate Charlie Chaplin with being a Christian and not allow the statue."

Chaplin had declared himself an agnostic.

Source: http://www.metro.co.uk/news/world/article_id=582941&in_page_id=64

Posted by: "Aditya Mishra" aditya11@sbcglobal.net adityanm

Tue Mar 17, 2009

Paris comes to the rescue of Taslima Nasreen

NSS Honorary Associate Taslima Nasreen is to live in Paris, it has been reported. The Bangladeshi writer has been under threat of death from Islamist extremists who accuse her of blasphemy in her writings.

Municipal authorities in Paris will provide her with a large studio in an artists' residence in the French capital, and initially pay her rent. Nasreen, who was made an honorary citizen of Paris in July 2008, put in an application for housing six weeks ago.

"You are at home here, in the city where it was proclaimed that men are born and remain free and equal and nobody can be condemned for their beliefs," Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë said when she was given honorary citizenship.

Source: NSS Newline 09 January, 2009

Legal expert argues for recognition of sharia law

In a debate on Islam and English Law, held at London's Temple Church, Baroness Butler-Sloss — England's first female Appeal Court judge and former head of the Family Division — said that judges should stop granting civil divorces to separating Muslim couples unless they had already been through a religious divorce. She claimed the move would end the "injustice" of women being left unable to remarry if their husband refused to grant them a divorce, because under Islam only men have the power to end marriages.

Source: NSS Newline 09 January, 2009

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