

HUMANIST THEMES AND VARIATIONS

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WAR AND PEACE

War, it has been said, is a thing that men enjoy, as they enjoy gluttony, fornication, gambling and crime. Violence and aggression are undoubtedly a part of human nature; and this is reflected as much in violence between states* as between citizen- individual as well as group- has, however, largely been brought under control. It is another matter that modern weapon and communication technology have put unprecedented destructive power in the hands of individual and small groups, seriously challenging this monopoly. To this we owe the rising menace of narcoterrorism and organized crime.

Violence between states, namely: war, is not subject to any supranational authority. But the international balance of power- both economic as well as military - has played a decisive role in curbing wars. In recent times two factor have been chiefly responsible for this: the advent of nuclear weapons, and the globalization of national economies. The development of nuclear weapons has installed deterrence at center-stage in international relation, relegating war fighting to conflicts among squabbling minor powers armed only with conventional weapons sold by nuclear-weapon powers. Most of these conflicts have their origin in religion, ethnicity or irredentism.

Morgenthau tells us. “ *As the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were followed by the dynastic wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as the latter yielded to the national wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so war in our time tends to reverts to the religious type by becoming ideological in character. The citizen of a modern warring nation, in contrast to his ancestors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, does not fight for the glory of his prince or the unity and greatness of his nation, but he “crusades” for an “ideal”, a set of “principles”, a “way of life” for which he claims a monopoly of truth and virtue.*” With the passing of Marxism-Leninism the major claimant for a monopoly of truth and virtue now is religious fundamentalism; and its potential for creating conflicts does not appear to be diminishing. It is this phenomenon which directly impacts humanist concerns; since the major task before humanism is to combat dogmatic belief systems. Dogmatic nationalism (my country, right or wrong) and religious bigotry make an explosive mixture.

The role of nuclear weapons remains one of the most troubling question our times. On the one hand, for example, there is Michael Howard who says, “*I find it hard to believe the abolition of nuclear weapons, even if it were possible, would be an unmixed blessing. Nothing that makes it easier for statesmen to regard war as a feasible instrument of state policy, one from which they stand to gain rather than lose, is likely to contribute to a lasting peace*”. On the other there is AJP Taylor: “*Those who worship the deterrent get nearer and nearer to using it. One day they will have to use it in order to prove that it exists, and by using it will prove that it does not exist. The deterrent does not prevent war: it provokes war*”. While most humanists are likely to be in favour* of the abolition of weapons of mass destruction, they cannot, in all fairness, support the discriminatory nonproliferation regime that the top five nuclear weapons powers seek to impose on the world. Nonproliferation can only be justified if there is a commitment to the eventual non-possession of nuclear weapons.

The role of globalisation is equally controversial. The increasing interpenetration of national economies* is perhaps one of the strongest factors at present for inhibiting recourse to force in international relations. A judicious use of trade and investment can, apart from yielding economic benefits, also foster relations, reinforce regional identities and mitigate unfriendly attitudes, thus improving the security environment. It does not however follow that there has been a radical change in the predatory nature of international relations: only that the arena has shifted to a large extent to the marketplace. Darwinism still prevails in the relations between States; the more powerful states continue to bully the weaker ones into economic submission. The imposition of sanctions by the USA under 301, the arm-twisting associated with the issue of intellectual property rights and the erection of non-tariff barrier on various grounds are blatant examples of this. The volatility of international financial flows is being exploited by rapacious non-responsible investors, creating problems for developing economies. Thus, the economic factor works both ways: asymmetries in economic power and terms of trade tend to create tension and conflict, the intermeshing of national economies makes recourse to force an unviable option.

The area of direct interest to humanists in all this has to do with pathological aggression, intolerance and narrow nationalism. The challenge before the Humanist Movements is to help people change these attitudes - through reason in the service of compassion.

- *Vir Narain*

LEARNING TOLERANCE: TEACHING TOLERANCE

Intolerance is the principal adversary of humanism and of civil society. Basically, intolerance is the inability to disagree without becoming disagreeable. This disagreeableness covers a vast range, from verbal abuse to physical violence. Religious intolerance has perhaps always been, and continues to be, the major source of oppression and cruelty in the world. St. Thomas Aquinas justified the death penalty for heretics. In our day Salman Rushdie is under a death sentence from the Ayatollah of Iran for writing a blasphemous novel. Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh is also under a death sentence for a similar offence. A teenage Christian boy was sentenced to death in Pakistan for allegedly writing blasphemous graffiti. The boy was reportedly illiterate! In India a Christian missionary was trapped and burnt alive in his car along with his two young sons by Hindu fanatics. Christians and Muslims have been killing and torturing each other on a massive scale in the former Yugoslavia. So have Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

Cultural and ethnic intolerance are closely related to religious intolerance, and are sometimes indistinguishable from it. Here, too, the record of our times is dismal. The hideous tribal carnage in Rwanda-Burundi is just one example. Even in secular and democratic India, cultural intolerance seems to be on the rise. Violent protesters have forcibly prevented the shooting of certain films. The State government was unable (or unwilling) to protect the legitimate rights of the film-makers.

Intolerance and Humanism cannot coexist. The rise of intolerance thus threatens the survival of Humanism. Evidence that the Humanist movement is seriously trying to combat intolerance is not very strong. There is a feeling that its major energies are still directed towards defining and redefining itself – and then refining the redefinition! In the meantime religious intolerance and xenophobia seem to be gaining ground, not only in the Islamic world (where these are endemic) but also in such countries as France, Germany and Austria.

Once intolerance has taken roots in a society, it becomes difficult to counter it directly. It can only be phased out through the inculcation of tolerance among the young. But this, again, is an almost impossible task in a society controlled by an intolerant regime. The Taliban phenomenon shows how badly things can go the other way.

But the upbringing and education of the young remains the key factor in combating intolerance. This has been recognized by many leading humanists. Narsingh Narain says: “*It seems to me that organized humanism should be more concerned with education than with anything else – education in all its stages from childhood onwards...*”. According to Julian Huxley, “*The most difficult lesson to learn is that irrational and intolerant certitude is undesirable... To cling to certitude is to prolong an infantile reaction beyond the period when it is necessary... The task before us, as ethical beings, now begins to take shape.*”

It is to preserve the force of ethical conviction that springs up naturally out of infantile dependence and the need for inhibition in early life, but to see that it is applied, under the correctives of reason and experience, to provide the most efficient and most desirable moral framework for living. This will undoubtedly mean radical changes in the early upbringing of children, as well as in the methods of education and in accepted religions and codes of ethics.”

The teaching of tolerance – especially to the young – is crucial for furthering the objectives of the Humanist movement. But tolerance cannot be taught directly as a thing apart; the whole method and spirit of education has to change. It does not help matters that tolerance – unlike, for instance, truth – is not an absolute virtue. In certain situations it may even be morally unacceptable. Should we, it is frequently asked, tolerate the intolerant? Howard Radest is probably right when he says: “*The excitement and fascination of inquiry reveal that both dogma and toleration are impoverished. The former narrows vision, the latter dispenses with it.*” A balance has to be struck.

If tolerance is seen basically as consideration for others, it may be possible, in the upbringing and teaching of the young, to dispense with the larger conceptual issues and ethical dilemmas. As Kitwood has

observed: *“The major moral dilemma is not, however, the quintessential feature of the moral life, nor is its wise resolution the prime evidence of concern for others. Much more important, surely, are our countless small and unreflective actions towards each other, and the patterns of living and relating which each human being creates. It is here that we are systematically respected or discounted, accepted or rejected, enhanced or diminished in our personal being. Once this is acknowledged, the arena must be recognized not as primarily of rational decision-making, but of skilled practice.”* More than skilled practice, it is perhaps a matter of habit – a collective habit which constitutes culture. It is this habit – and culture - of concern for others that Humanism must promote with all its resources.

-Vir Narain

HUMANIST MANIFESTOS

Every organisation finds it necessary periodically to bring out a document setting forth what it believes in and what it intends to do. In this issue we reproduce (from *New Humanist*) an abridged* version of a new manifesto issued by the Council for Secular Humanism in the U.S. This manifesto has been signed by a number of distinguished Humanists around the world.

We also reproduce, from our archives,* the draft of a Humanist Manifesto proposed by Narsingh Narain in 1963, along with a letter from him to JP Van Praag- the Chairman of IHEU. This draft manifesto, we feel, is at least as relevant today as it was more than three decades ago. Read together, these two documents - separated by time, space and intellectual perspective - can perhaps help to give a 'stereoscopic' view of humanist beliefs and purposes.

Humanist Manifesto 2000 has already drawn some comments and will undoubtedly be discussed further by Humanists as well as their friends and critics. One point, however, does attract immediate attention. Many Humanists will wonder why it was necessary to assign such a pivotal position to scientific naturalism in humanist thinking. "*The unique message of humanism on the current world scene*" we are told, "*is its commitment to scientific naturalism Scientific naturalism enables human beings to construct a coherent worldview disentangled from metaphysics or theology and based on the sciences.*" There are echoes here of the manifesto of the Vienna Circle: '*The scientific world-conception serves life*'. Is it necessary for pragmatic Humanism, to rule out other views - such as the one - of Roger Trigg - given below?

"If our starting-point has to be science and if scientific discoveries were to challenge the materialist assumption on which science is allegedly based, it is not surprising that we get caught in a certain incoherence. Science seems to subvert itself. What is necessary is a recognition that even materialists uphold a definite metaphysical position, which can only be supported or condemned on rational grounds that may not themselves be narrowly scientific.

Whether the admission of such metaphysics supports or destroys naturalism is another question. If naturalism is intrinsically anti-metaphysical, the admission that it cannot itself do without metaphysical grounding, even of an austere kind, may be fatal"

There seems to be no need to make rejection of metaphysics a necessary part of humanist thinking. As Narsingh Narain has written in the draft manifesto (art. 8): "*No one will dispute that Humanism carries certain metaphysical implications, and that in this sense all Humanists take a metaphysical position whether they realize it or not.*" Hannah Arendt has an interesting story on this. "*Kant, as a very old man, after having dealt a deathblow to the "awesome science" (metaphysics) prophesied that men will surely return to metaphysics "as one returns to one's mistress after a quarrel" (wie zu einer entweiten Geliebten).*"

HUMANISM OF EXCLUSION

“The longer I live”, a Rabbi once said, “the more it seems to me that the conventional divisions that separate people - such as their political views, their nationality or class, their age or gender - are increasingly meaningless. The world is divided between people who are natural harmonizers - and those who are polarizers.” He ends with a polarizing statement; but obviously the Rabbi was on the side of the harmonizers. The task before the harmonizers is much more difficult than that before the polarizers, who have man’s natural aggressiveness on their side. Rejection and confrontation are much more exciting than acceptance and conciliation.

Humanists - individually and collectively - try to be among the ranks of the harmonizers. But organisations which take on the harmonizing role have an inherent disadvantage. While working for inclusiveness, they must set themselves apart as a group, establish their identity and build their self-image without dividing themselves too sharply from others. This is a task that requires much greater maturity and sophistication than is collectively available in any sizeable group. Perhaps that is why individuals who can be described as natural harmonizers are generally ‘non joiners’. Furthermore, as David Bohm has observed, *“Whenever men divide themselves from the whole of society and attempt to unite by identification within a group, it is clear that the group must eventually develop internal strife, which leads to a breakdown of its unity.”* Within the group the polarisers generally prevail, sharpening not only the divisions *within* the group, but also the division between the group and the whole of society. Most of the energy driving this polarising process comes from an insistence on doctrinal clarity, generally based on ideological rejection. Having rejected an old orthodoxy, the group drifts compulsively towards a new one. As Lippmann says: *“The modern world is haunted by a realization, which it becomes constantly less easy to ignore, that it is impossible to reconstruct an enduring orthodoxy, and impossible to live well without the satisfaction which an orthodoxy would provide.”*

The Humanist movement seems to have followed a similar course. Over the years there have been persistent attempts at achieving greater doctrinal clarity, culminating in the promulgation of an official Minimum Statement. The prevailing emphasis is on the rejection of theism (moderated somewhat in the revised Minimum Statement, Mexico 1998) rejection of religion and rejection of the supernatural as essential elements in humanist thinking. Humanist Manifesto 2000 seems to have added to these another key element: scientific naturalism (implying rejection of metaphysics): *“Humanists are committed to scientific naturalism”*.

These views are, of course, strongly valid, and most of them are shared by a large number of humanists. But is it necessary to insist that they are fundamental to the humanist position? As Narsingh Narain said: *“One of the evil legacies of our religious past, which we must outgrow, is that complete unanimity in beliefs is necessary for an effective pursuit of common practical ideals, a legacy whose influence is not confined to religion”* Another legacy of traditional religions is their exclusivity: there are believers and unbelievers - the latter generally being beyond the pale. It would be a pity if Humanism also divided people between believers and unbelievers. The Humanist message is perhaps best - most persuasively - delivered in a spirit of inclusiveness. The spirit of humanism suggests that, for the humanist, every person is “one of us”. As Lippmann has it *“It may be the part of wisdom, which is profounder than mere reasoning, to wish that intellectual distinction shall not divide men too sharply”*

ON VIOLENCE

A cynic would probably say that talking of non-violence in a violent world is like talking of snowflakes in hell. And he would not be very far wrong. The world is a much more violent place than we like to think; and nature more red in tooth and claw than we can imagine. The whole ecology of nature is built up of a hierarchy of predatory relations, with *Homo sapiens* now as the top predator.

Typically, as a self-obsessed species, we talk only of ourselves - and what we have done to each other - when we talk of violence. The tale is gory enough; but there is only the dimmest awareness of the violence we are doing to all other forms of life on the planet. Every day millions of living beings are butchered, often with ritual cruelty, to be eaten. (One writes this as a guilt-ridden non-vegetarian open to the charge of hypocrisy.) There is large-scale killing for sport and for fashion-wear. Large numbers of whole species are becoming extinct due to human invasion of the environment. We do not even acknowledge (*a la* Descartes) that we have a moral obligation to the animal world.

Coming back to ourselves, the tendency is to talk in terms of war and peace when discussing violence. Vastly greater in scale and vastly more vicious is the violence that has become a part of our everyday life: domestic violence, child-abuse, psychopathic crime, terrorism, religious persecution and racial discrimination. There is no evidence that even the most advanced societies of our time have been able to contain the rising levels of civil violence. The issue of handgun control in the USA is just one example. In fact, living conditions in modern industrialised societies tend to promote feelings of insecurity, alienation and aggressiveness, which finally find expression in violent crime. As a Western psychologist has observed: *"...the most advanced civilisations are now characterised by incredible degrees of mass alienation, brutality, and crass insensitivity."*

There is no reason why the top predator cannot assume the role of preserver. Nature has endowed man with the brains and the instincts of sympathy and benevolence necessary for the task. It is true that cruelty and aggression are also as much a part of human nature; but man's intelligence and capacity for introspection have given him a unique ability to exercise rational control over conflicting impulses. Biological evolution has helped mankind to cross the threshold beyond which sociological evolution must take over its further progress. This depends crucially on the individuals' ability to exercise selective rational control over their own aggressive impulses; and also on the ability of social institutions to inhibit and control aggressive behaviour.

Clearly, the first has to do with the proper upbringing and education of the child; and the second with good governance. The early upbringing of the child depends critically upon the stability of the nuclear family. This is becoming increasingly problematic in post-industrial society. No satisfactory solution is in sight. The best that can be expected is that education and good governance will help to correct the distortions caused by the disintegration of the nuclear family. If education is to inculcate the values of tolerance and free enquiry - without which there can be no chance of a non-violent society - it has to be freed from the influence of religious orthodoxy and dogma. Perhaps more than half the world's population is still in the grip of authoritarianism and religious bigotry. Good governance implies democracy; and there has been an encouraging proliferation of democratic regimes in the recent past. Nevertheless, sizeable populations are still being ruled by authoritarian regimes.

At this stage of history, non-violence can only remain a distant ideal. The progressive containment of violence is the best that can be expected. It can be argued that any progress towards a non-violent society is possible only if the entire ecology of nature - including particularly the animal world - is taken into account. A certain reorientation of the humanist outlook may be required. One critic says: *"...Green Politics rejects the anthropomorphic orientation of humanism, a philosophy which posits that humans have the ability to confront and solve the many problems we face by applying human reason and by rearranging the natural world and the interaction of men and women so that human life will prosper. We need only consider the proportions of the environmental crisis today to realize the dangerous self-deception*

contained in both religious and secular humanism. It is hubris to declare that humans are the central figures of life on Earth and that we are in control. In the long run, Nature is in control.” This is perhaps not a fair generalisation regarding the humanist position. Long before environmental concern became fashionable, Narsingh Narain wrote: “Some people think that humanism excludes the idea of any ethical obligation towards animals. This is a misconception. Humanism, for us, means reliance upon human capacities and human appreciation of values, as opposed to the dictates of alleged divine revelation. It does not mean an exclusive concern for human welfare. How far we can go in abstaining from killing or causing pain to animals is a question on which humanists differ. Whether we can make any practical contribution in this sphere will depend upon the common ground among us, which will have to be worked out, and other factors.” Perhaps International Humanism needs to address this question with greater clarity and emphasis, for how we treat fellow-humans cannot be entirely insulated from how we treat other fellow-creatures.

- Vir Narain

BAMIYAN AND THE “TRIUMPH” OF EDUCATION

Mullah Mohamad Omar, the head of the Taliban movement can rightly match the Duke of Wellington's famous boast about the playing fields of Eton. The two thousand years old Buddhas of Bamiyan were destroyed in the Islamic *madrassas* located all over South Asia, from Bangladesh to Afghanistan. Omar himself is a product of the *madrassa* at Kandahar; and most of his associates were full or part-time students at *madrassas* in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Taliban literally means students. Many of them had been born in refugee camps in Pakistan and educated in Pakistani *madrassas* and had picked up their fighting skills from Mujahidin parties based in Pakistan. “As such”, says Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist specialising in the Central Asian States and Afghanistan, “the younger Taliban barely knew their own country or history, but from their *madrassas* they learnt about the ideal Islamic society created by the Prophet Mohammad 1,400 years ago, and that is what they wanted to emulate.”

The ideological base of the* Taliban is an extreme form of Deobandism, named after the small town in central India where the first *madrassa* was established by two mullas in 1867 - ten years after the Mutiny. By 1879 there were twelve Deobandi *madrassas* all over India. Already they had a sizeable number of Afghan students, reportedly a turbulent lot. By 1967 there were 9,000 Deobandi *madrassas* across South Asia. Deobandi *madrassas* developed very fast in Pakistan after 1947 - the year of Partition - but during General Zia ul Haq's regime there was phenomenal growth in the number of *madrassas*. In 1971 there were only 900 *madrassas* in Pakistan. By the time of Zia's violent death in 1988 there were 8,000 registered *madrassas* and 25,000 unregistered ones in Pakistan.

Disturbingly, even in secular India there has been considerable growth in the number of *madrassas* run by fundamentalist outfits. A recent report describes the situation in West Bengal, which has been run by a communist government for more than twenty years. “In many Muslim homes, the *madrassas* run by the Left Front Government are scoffed at for the dwindling content of Koran and Arabic literature in their syllabi. The drive to “purify” education is spearheaded by the Barua Rahmani Education Society (BRES), an organisation of Islamic leaders with strong Saudi Arabian ties. BRES was registered in 1993, but it has already opened 109 madarsas in the state, including 35 in Murshidabad, 22 in Malda and ten each in Birbhum, North Dinajpur and Nadia. Over 40,000 students attend the BRES classes and the number is growing.”² According to the report, one of the text books, *The Economics of Islam*, written by one Moulana Mohammed Abdur Rahim tells the students that the chief source of national income is the divine act of “expropriating the property of the vanquished enemy”. (There are echoes here of Genghis Khan: “Happiness lies in conquering one's enemies, in driving them in front of oneself, in taking their property, in savouring their despair, in outraging their wives and daughters.”) Further: “BRES is flush with Arab funds. The Dhulian unit received \$1, 64,000 (around Rs 73.8 lakh) in 1997 from the Islamic Development Bank of Jeddah in compliance with the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). Earlier, the Beldanga unit received \$1, 76,000 (Rs 79.2 lakh) from the same source.”⁴ Under the title: *Madrassas in the Valley: jehad factories or schools for the poor?* A report on the mushrooming of Deobandi *madrassas* in the Kashmir valley, Muzamil Jaleel has also pointed out how Taliban philosophy is gaining ground.

It is not only in the Valley that the Taliban philosophy could be gaining ground. The lesson is likely to be learnt throughout the Islamic world, where fundamentalist elements are being kept in check only by authoritarian means. The success of Taliban ruthlessness could not have been lost upon these elements. It would perhaps be unwise to rule out the Talibanisation of Pakistan. But the effects of this on the stability of South Asia are too awesome to contemplate.

Clearly the fundamentalists' programme of education, of which the Taliban can rightly claim to be the crowning glory, has been an outstanding success - at least in terms of their own aims and objectives. This, of course, is not to minimise the contribution of CIA and ISI. As Ahmed Rashid says: “Prior to the war the Islamicists barely had a base in Afghan society, but with money and arms from the CIA pipeline and support from Pakistan, they built one and wielded tremendous clout. The traditionalists and the Islamicists fought each other mercilessly so that by 1994, the traditional leadership in Kandahar had

virtually been eliminated, leaving the field free for the new wave of even more extreme Islamicists - the Taliban.”

What are the ingredients of this outstanding success? While Saudi funding for the madrassa system on a large scale has undoubtedly played a part, the greatest strength of the system comes from the dogmatic certitude derived from a fixed belief system - such as the Wahabi ideology. That is why liberal education systems cannot hope to match the appeal of systems based on closed ideologies. But how should a secular state deal with the dilemma of sectarian education? In India the present trends do not seem to be hopeful. The government is tending to steer education in the direction of obscurantism, chauvinism and conservatism. Subjects like astrology have been introduced for study in the Universities. Courses are to be offered in the performance of priestly duties. At the same time, the madrassa system seems to be gaining ground. There is every appearance of two educational systems on a collision course. The result could be a catastrophe of tectonic proportions.

– *Vir Narain*

Humanism and Complacency

"It is not human", William Empson tells us, "to feel safely placed". It is true that human beings are never satisfied. They always want more, want to be somewhere else, or someone else. But when it comes to beliefs - whether it is religion, ideology or life stance - an unshakeable complacency sets in. This is nothing like the quiet self-assurance of a person secure in his (or her) beliefs. There is an assertive insistence not only that one's own beliefs are right, but also that the others are wrong. This is especially true of proselytising religions and reform movements. They divide the world between believers and non-believers - and the non-believers are by definition wrong. Tall claims are made for one's own beliefs. Traditional religions may claim divine revelation; secular ideologies will claim universality, or scientific truth. Dark hints of a conspiracy among the unbelievers are put about.

Even humanists are not entirely immune to this. Humanism acknowledges - and celebrates - the fact that there cannot be any finality about beliefs, that all questions are open. As individuals it is perhaps true that most humanists subscribe to inclusiveness and the tentative nature of their beliefs. But when presenting the collective humanist position - speaking of the Humanist movement - there is a certain change of tone. We tend to adopt the idiom of traditional religions. We carry in this issue an article by Babu Gogineni based on his lecture at the joint conference of the American Ethical Union and the American Humanist Association in June 2000. It is an excellent and inspiring article, a rousing call to humanists to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Yet, at some point in the process of getting carried away, we are assailed by doubts and questions. Are we not beginning to emulate those whose example we profess to reject? Should we really seek to "*re-create the world according to our conception of the human being*" (emphasis added)? Then why should not the Muslim ummah insist on recreating the world in their image of Islam? Do we not echo them when we say: "*I am a believer. It is people on the other side - those who deny humanity's ability to improve itself - who are the nonbelievers.*"? Do those "on the other side" really deny humanity's ability to improve itself? Do we really want a monolithic, monochromatic, humanism? Should a diversity of approaches - ethical, religious, secular, pragmatic - really be looked upon as a "burden"? Can we say: "*our identity should be as human beings first and last*" and, at the same time, declare: "*a humanist organization should be open only to humanists*"? Who decides who is a humanist? While we decry the baneful effects of traditional religions and narrow nationalism, the conjuring up of a "confederacy of irrationalism" reinforces the us-and-them syndrome - projecting a 'humanists versus the rest' situation. This naturally leads to the exhortation: "The humanism of the twenty-first century has to be an angry humanism."

We feel that Humanism should be large, self-confident, liberal, understanding and open-minded enough not to see itself as a beleaguered minority. It must identify itself with all of humanity and - beyond that - with the living but increasingly fragile ecosystem of this planet. The charge of anthropocentrism is only reinforced by our assertion that Humanism is the philosophy of the human being. Humanism is more than that.

- Vir Narain

Law and Humanism

In the issue we carry the next of the 11th Narsingh Narain Memorial Lecture delivered by Justice M N Venkatachaliah on *Law, Justice and Human Values*. The presentation is remarkable for its depth and lucidity - a rare combination.

Law and Humanism spring from the same source. “*We have a natural propensity to love our fellow men,*” Cicero said, “*and that after all is the foundation of all law.*” This natural propensity is also the foundation of humanism. Humanism has been described as “reason in the service of compassion”. It can be claimed - except perhaps in a theocratic context - that law is humanism codified. It seeks to protect the weak against the strong, to preserve a society which aims not only to be composed of free individuals but to be itself free. There can be no better guarantee of this than just laws framed under a secular and democratic constitution safeguarded by a judicious separation of powers. Recent trends have shown two emerging areas of concern: the undermining of our secular polity, and the blurring of the lines demarcating the separation of powers.

Justice Venkatachaliah put the question of secularism in the clearest possible light when he said in the course of one of his judgments: “*The concept of secularism is one facet of the right to equality woven as the Central Golden Thread into the fabric of our Constitution... the purpose of law in a plural society is not the progressive assimilation of the minorities in the majoritarian milieu... In a pluralist secular society law is the great integrating force. Secularism is more than a passive attitude of religious tolerance. It is a positive concept of equal treatment of all religions. What is material is that it is a constitutional goal and a Basic Feature of the Constitution.*” It is a pity that the Supreme Court’s judgment in the *Hindutva* case does not seem to strengthen this position.

In the sphere of separation of powers, recent trends in judicial activism have been heartening as well as disquieting. There are any number of instances where the Supreme Court has stepped in as a saviour in matters of great public importance. But there are also a growing number of cases where there has been avoidable overlap with the functioning of the executive. Justice A S Anand says “*When two organs of the State fail to perform their duties, the judiciary cannot remain a mute spectator.*” This justification has a familiar ring, and the implications - and resonances - of this statement by the Chief Justice of India can be disturbing. Elsewhere, he has said: “*It is the solemn duty of a judge to extend the jurisdiction of the court - based as it is on the principle that law must keep pace with society to retain its relevance.*” (emphasis added). A judiciary armed by the instrumentalities of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) can enjoy unchecked powers and this, in the long run, can prove debilitating for the State. Like cortisone therapy, judicial activism can play - and has played - a life- saving role. But, like cortisone therapy, it has to be sparingly used. As Lord Hailsham has said: “*Judges can be trusted - if they are asked to do what a Judge is trained to do, to try a justiciable issue, if he is not given a justiciable issue, a judge will wander about the woods until the robins lay leaves on his recumbent form,*”.

As the power and scope of the higher judiciary increases - and in India there has been enormous increase over the last few years - the selection and training of judges becomes more and more critical. According to one British commentator: “*A career judiciary, knowledgeable about economics, penology and philosophy, as well as law, trained by an apprenticeship served on tribunals and lower courts, would, perhaps, better cope with the dilemmas of choice faced in hard cases than does the present judiciary, put on the Bench late in life, without any training, and after a lifetime of pleading in chambers and arguing nice points of law in court.*”

The Indian Judiciary, working within the magnificent architecture of the Constitution of India, has set an example to the world in upholding the values of secularism, democracy and active concern for the underprivileged. This example has to be followed by the other two organs of the State as well.

-Vir Narain

Religious Human Rights

In the face of the brutal acts of terrorism and religious bloodletting going on around the world, International Humanism has to change its attitude towards traditional religion. In his article, *Time to Stand Up*, in the *New Humanist* (Winter 2001) Richards Dawkins says: "Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and and speak out. Things are different after September 11th. Let's stop being so damned *respectful!*" In many ways, things are *not* all that different after September 11th. The savage genocide in the Middle East, and the frenzied killings in Gujarat are still going on. The International community has not done much to stop the bloodshed in the Middle East; and the state government even less to stop the massacre of innocent civilians in Gujarat.

But things *should* be different from now on. It is clear that religious tolerance cannot be brought about while dogmatic religion has such a hold on people's minds. Dogmatism and fanaticism are the chief enemies of Humanist values, and the promoters of intolerance. Yet International Humanism has tended to focus more on its opposition to supernaturalism. As Narsingh Narain observed: "It seems to us that the most objectionable feature common to all religions is not supernaturalism but authoritarianism, that is, the attachment of finality and infallibility to their teachings. We feel that the primary task of Humanism is to help in the transition from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian society in all spheres of life."

While dogmatism and fanaticism are the chief enemies of Humanist values, it is also true that some religious doctrines and beliefs lend themselves more to dogmatism than others. (Gore Vidal says, for example: "The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism.") The treatment of dissidents and heretics in various religions is a good index of this. It is important for the Humanist movement to calibrate its response to the various religions and ideologies on this basis. Perhaps a 'hardness index', on the lines of the Mohs' Scale for the hardness of minerals, is needed. Undiscriminating secularism - which tars (or gilds) all religions with the same brush - is not going to help; and we have practised it for too long. At the same time, the criticism of religion has to be measured and rational. Lampooning religious figures or quibbling over their historicity merely arouses antagonism. There is a danger of becoming, in the words of Walter Lippmann, like "those thin argumentative rationalists who find so much satisfaction in disproving what other men hold sacred." The urgent task before the International Humanist movement is to assist in the weaning of vast masses of people from traditional religion, from adherence to dogma, revelation and infallible authority. Clearly, even if it had the resources (which it does not), it cannot make a dent in the problem so long as a sizeable proportion of the world's population lives under theocratic regimes with laws and education systems based on scriptures and religion.

The current concept of religious Human Rights perhaps also needs modification if the divisive influence of traditional religions is to be moderated. Apart from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1984), there are a number of treaties and declarations: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights(1976), the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990), the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981), the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (a UN General Assembly resolution adopted in 1987). But anomalies and inconsistencies remain- in theory as well as in practice.

While in some countries minority religious (and human) rights are routinely denied, in others strident demands are made by religious/ ethnic minorities in the name of religious freedom. These demands, predominantly, are not in the sphere of religious or other belief, but in matters such as dress and diet. The underlying motive is generally the assertion of a separate identity. Headscarves, turbans and kirpans become matters of public controversy. At best these should be treated as cultural rather than religious issues since religion is essentially a matter of inner belief. Insistence on displaying outward symbols of religious identity without regard to local custom or usage only accentuates the divisiveness of traditional religions. As Dawkins says: "It is not an exaggeration to say that religion is the most inflammatory enemy-labelling device in history." Let us do away with these labels.

- Vir Narain

PREVENTIVE EDUCATION

Preventive Medicine is perhaps the most important branch of medical science today. Countless lives have been saved worldwide by child-immunisation programmes. This has to be an unceasing struggle in a natural environment teeming with infections and pathogens of all kinds that attack the body. Suddenly, perhaps within a decade or so, we have witnessed the explosive growth of man-made vectors and pathogens which attack the mind with results no less deadly. It can be argued that the results are even more deadly. While, over millenia of evolution, the body has developed a highly efficient immune system, the mind has no such in-built resistance. On the contrary, if there has been any development at all, it has been in the direction of conformity, authority-acceptance and tutelage. Conformity and credulity must have played a large part in the building of cohesive families, tribes and larger groupings. There must have been strong selection pressures against sceptics. The in-built resistance to 'mental infection' was at the community and tribe level where conformity with local mores and norms was enforced with a heavy hand, and radical or heretical ideas were brutally suppressed.

The tremendous power and reach that the electronic media have acquired in the last few years has changed the situation drastically. Most of this power and reach is directed at the young, who are constantly being bombarded from all sides. Big business sells consumerism and hedonism; the entertainment industry sells escapism, and the Church and State continue to sell orthodoxy and unquestioning nationalism. Yet one hardly hears of preventive education designed to protect young minds from this onslaught. There is preventive education on AIDS/HIV - but that really is part of preventive medicine. However there is, interestingly, a preventive education programme called International Cult Education Programme (ICEP). In its own words ICEP "develops and distributes preventive-education materials and services to clergy, educators, and others interested in teaching young people about cults and psychological manipulation. This is a vital area of work because research indicates that at least one-third of cult members joined when they were students, with 10% saying they were first recruited while in high school." Lloyd Roberston has written on *Cult-Proofing Our Children in Humanist in Canada* (Autumn 2000).

What we need is a much more comprehensive programme of inoculation. Our children have to be proofed against consumerism, celebrity-worship, authoritarianism, religious indoctrination and a host of other influences being peddled by a powerful media. International Humanism has a large part to play in this.

- Vir Narain

National Integration and the Electoral Process

The promotion of national integration and communal harmony has been the main objective of the Indian Humanist Union since its inception more than forty years ago. Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear that we have to take serious account of the social costs and consequences of the electoral process, and their impact on national integration and communal harmony.

Periodical elections - which have to be fair and free - represent the heartbeat of democracy. There can be no democracy without elections. But, especially in a large pluralistic society, the electoral process can have serious side-effects. The compulsions of vote-bank politics, which depends heavily on group-identities, drive politicians to widen existing divisions between groups, and create new divisions where none exist. Group grievances and antagonisms are then nurtured to secure a constituency. There cannot be a more fertile ground for such politics than India, with its enormous range of ethnic, religious, caste, linguistic and regional identities. Before every major election old rifts are widened, new rifts are created, and the whole body politic suffers a kind of convulsion whose effects take some time to subside.

If general elections were to take place once in five years, as envisaged in the constitution, perhaps these periodical seizures would not have a significant cumulative effect on society. But the inherent instability of coalition governments - at the centre as well as the states - has resulted in frequent elections in the recent past. The rise of right-wing political parties has resulted from - and now reinforces - this process. Clearly, unless something is done to reverse this trend, India may have to face disintegration in the coming decades.

Electoral reform is one obvious step that has to be taken urgently. Various sporadic attempts have been made in the past to institute electoral reforms, but they have not amounted to much. It has to be remembered that the dominant political class, in whose hands the power to initiate these reforms lies, is the very group which has been thriving under the present system. It is unlikely that they will seriously address the question of electoral reforms. In fact a recent attempt by the Supreme Court to introduce even a modest reform was resolutely negated by politicians. The vast electorate is not sufficiently educated or organised to press successfully for electoral reform. The intelligentsia have not exerted themselves, and there are hardly any NGOs working in this area.

Apart from electoral reforms the frequent toppling of governments (which inevitably leads to frequent elections) is an issue that needs to be addressed. An Assembly or Parliament, once elected, must be allowed to serve its full term. Many workable models (eg the German one) are available internationally which can be drawn upon. When a vote of no-confidence is proposed it should be mandatory to submit, at the same time, the name of the next Prime Minister or Chief Minister.

With social, communal and caste antagonisms becoming more violent, the criminalisation of politics was inevitable. Aggressive groups with criminal clout and individuals with a criminal record are enlisted. Criminalisation, money power (witness the number of plutocrats in the upper house) and crass populism (note the number of movie stars in politics) have combined to give the Indian political scene its peculiar flavour. No wonder good governance is a thing of the remote past and national integration an endangered species. In this situation the humanist task of promoting liberalism, communal harmony and tolerance - while steering clear of politics - becomes doubly difficult. If only the young, particularly students, could be enthused to help in this task there would be much more room for hope. But with education going the way it is, this is not likely to come to pass.

- Vir Narain

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I vehemently support the rights of the minorities to be different; but the most vulnerable of all minorities, and the one most in need of support, is the smallest minority of all - the individual.

Barbara Smoker

Voters' Wisdom

A fixed convention has developed in India never to question the wisdom of the electorate. In fact no opportunity is lost in flattering the voter. Even those who are disappointed with the outcome of an election, and disagree with the verdict of the people, put the blame on politicians and political parties and never on the voter. The result is that demagogues and rabble-rousers who secure votes on the basis of divisive majoritarian policies claim moral justification on the basis of this verdict. The old cliché, the voice of the people is the voice of God, is buried somewhere in the subconscious of the people - giving some of us perhaps one more reason for being atheists. While the verdict of the majority, expressed in a free and fair election, must be implemented, it must also be subjected to public criticism and questioning.

Recent events in Gujarat, culminating in assembly elections, have brought these issues in sharp focus; and the impending assembly elections in other states, where the Gujarat model is likely to be replicated, lend urgency to the task of examining the ethical implications of majoritarian politics. Justice M Venkatachalliah has said "*The purpose of law in a plural society is not the progressive assimilation of the minorities in the majoritarian milieu... In a pluralist secular society law is the great integrating force.*" It is the moral responsibility of the majority community to uphold this purpose of the law; and the politics of Hindutva runs directly counter to it. There can be no doubt that, in the aftermath of the horrible acts of sectarian violence in Gujarat, the voters of both major communities were swayed by fear and hatred of the other, as promoted by their respective leaders. As Breytenbach has said, "*Humans are fragile. It is not difficult to bring out the worst in them*".

It can be disastrous for the integrity and unity of India if this becomes a pattern for elections in other states. The raising of the Bhojshala issue in Madhya Pradesh is an ominous signal. If national unity is to be preserved, it is clear that massive efforts will be required to reach out to the good sense and the better nature of the electorate. In the face of the incitements and provocations of divisive politics these cannot be taken for granted. As Alcuin said long ago "*Nor should we listen to those who say, 'the voice of the people is the voice of God', for the turbulence of the mob is always close to insanity.*"

- Vir Narain

Teaching Scepticism

Teaching scepticism has to be an essential part of any project of preventive education. Scepticism here refers, not to an issue of epistemology in philosophical discourse, but to a method of approaching matters of belief. A habit of questioning every belief has to be inculcated in the young. "Connect," said Goethe, "always connect." The sceptic's advice would be, "Question, always question - even yourself." The rallying cry of the Enlightenment: *Sapere Aude* - dare to think - clearly means: dare to think for yourself. Given that almost every culture and system of thought enjoins conformity and credulity, this was a giant intellectual leap for mankind.

The sceptic's position is undermined somewhat by the concept of absolute truth. To arrive at the truth is to arrive at an unquestionable belief, as in the case of religious revelation or faith. But, as Peter Abelard said: "Truth, like an onion, has many coats, each of them equally hollow." Falsehood, on the other hand seems more solid, easier to identify and track down with the help of reason. Perhaps that is why those who pin their faith on faith find reason so abhorrent. Calling reason an "Ignis Fatuus in the mind" Rochester goes on to describe the fate of its "misguided follower":

*Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long,
That all his life he had been in the wrong;
Huddled in the dirt the reasoning engine lies,
Who was so proud, so witty and so wise.*

Bertrand Russell says, "It is a curious fact ... that, as reasoning improves, its claim to the power of proving facts grows less and less. Logic used to be thought to teach how to draw inferences; now it teaches us rather how not to draw inferences." This could well be the central point of any course on scepticism: learning how not to draw inferences, sharpening the ability to detect spurious arguments and invalid inferences. For this it is necessary to cultivate the habit of initially approaching every proposition with disbelief - or what may more accurately be called a 'willed suspension of belief'. Graded exercises in critical reading, where the student is required to spot the defects and fallacies in a given text, would probably be an important part of the course. The teaching of scepticism should seek to promote it as an intellectual discipline rather than as a world-view - which may well turn out to be negative and sterile. Thus even scepticism should be open to question. Priestly has made a very interesting observation: "In his autobiography John Cowper Powys tells us that a friend of his combined scepticism of everything with credulity about everything... A mind without credulity would never learn anything new. A mind without scepticism would believe any nonsense."

The full richness and complexity of our mental lives can only be realised if we allow a creative interplay of reason and emotion, fact and fantasy. For this creative interplay to be possible two conditions have to be met: we have to break out of the rigid mould of fixed belief systems; and we have to give up the quest for certitude. While the former has no place in humanist thinking, one cannot say the same for the quest for certitude. Can we learn, like Powys' friend, to alternate between scepticism and credulity, reason and imagination? The Neckar Cube, with its alternating interpretations, seems to suggest that we can. But, conditioned as we have been for millenia to believe and conform, rationality and scepticism have first to be strengthened.

- Vir Narain

MULTICULTURALISM: MISUNDERSTOOD OR MISGUIDED?

Multiculturalism has lately been under strong attack in the West. Given the hurt, and the sense of betrayal caused by the events of September 11, this is not surprising. In his excellent book on the terrorist threat - *The West and The Rest* - Roger Scruton records: "When the news came of the September 11 attacks, many immigrant communities in France, Germany, and Britain took to the street in rejoicing. It became apparent - what the liberal establishment has been trying for a decade or more to conceal - that the loyalties on which the European *Rechtstaat* are founded are not automatically shared by those who come from elsewhere to enjoy their protection."

He puts the blame on multiculturalism: "The official view in most Western countries is that we are multicultural societies, and that cultures should be allowed complete freedom to develop in our territory, regardless of whether they conform to the root standards of behaviour that prevail here. As a result, the "multicultural" idea has become a form of apartheid. All criticism of minority culture is censored out of public debate, and newcomers quickly conclude that it is possible to reside in a European state as an antagonist and still enjoy all the rights and privileges that are the reward of citizenship." The operative part here is the phrase "complete freedom", which Scruton has obviously used in a rhetorical sense. But it is certainly true that many liberal Western countries have overdone the accommodation of culture differences - by a very wide margin. Even in the field of religious and sectarian education, which is a very serious matter, Western democracies have been excessively liberal. But this cannot justify the outright rejection of the very concept of multiculturalism.

Understandably, the rejection of multiculturalism is accompanied by a strident reassertion of the superiority of the Christian West. The website for the Ayn Rand Institute, for example, states: "By embracing "diversity," multiculturalism claims to extinguish racism. Far from being a cure for racism, multiculturalism is racism in a new, self-righteous guise. The purpose of this ad hoc newsletter is to describe the efforts of the Ayn Rand Institute to oppose multiculturalism and to defend the superiority of Western Civilization."

We carry in this issue a highly perceptive article, *The New American Theocracy*, by Paul Kurtz (*New Humanist: Winter 2001*). He says "Whether humanists can persuade their fellow Americans to develop a new set of humanistic values relevant to the entire planetary community, and whether Muslims will agree, remains at this highly doubtful." Subsequent developments (the latest being the invasion of Iraq) have fully vindicated his doubts - and not only as regard humanism in America. We also carry an article, *Against Multiculturalism*, by Kenan Malik (*New Humanist: Summer 2002*) where multiculturalism has been condemned as "an authoritarian, anti-human outlook". On the face of it, it seems disappointing that humanists should join the proponents of the superiority of the Christian West in condemning multiculturalism. Perhaps the problem is in definitions. As is so often the case, if a concept is to be rejected a definition is set up that can easily be shot down. It seems fairer to use a pre-existing definition if it is available. Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English defines multiculturalism thus: "multiculturalism: the belief that it is important and good to include people or ideas from many different countries, races, or religions." Most humanists would agree with this. Kenan's objection: "Why should I, an atheist, be expected to show respect of Christian, Islamic or Jewish cultures whose views and arguments I often find reactionary and despicable?" is based on a misunderstanding of what the multiculturalist approach entails. What is expected is that one respects the *right* of other people- Christian, Muslim, Jews or atheists- to follow their beliefs and practices, not the beliefs and practices as such. The question "are all cultures equal?" is neither relevant nor amenable to an objective answer; and multiculturalism obviously does not even entertain the question.

One crucially important aspect of multiculturalism is that a clear distinction must be made between multiculturalism as a personal attitude and multiculturalism as public policy. As far as the individual's approach to multiculturalism is concerned the position is very clear; he or she has to respect the right of others (individuals or groups) to follow such practices and engage in such behaviour as are by law sanctioned. The second part, that of public policy, is exceedingly complex. And it is here that the West has

in the past bent over backwards almost to snapping point. Unrealistic asylum laws, permissive approach to immigrants' insistence on flaunting visible symbols of separateness (such as headscarves, turbans, kirpans), perpetuating separateness in the educational system, have all contributed to the fostering of the wrong attitude in the immigrant population as well as resentment among the local citizens. As things are, there is a danger of over correction at home and over reaction abroad. As Paul Kurtz contends, religious jingoism rules the day, and the USA has become a virtual theocracy (*de facto* if not *de jure*). Are the wounds of the West beginning to fester?

- *Vir Narain*

Unintended Consequences

If the road to hell is paved with unintended consequences, the fanatics responsible for the mayhem on September 11 opened up a virtual highway to hell when they crashed into their targets in New York and Washington. Blinded by religious hatred, they could not have foreseen the massive avalanche of unintended consequences they had set in motion. But it is difficult to believe that the leaders of such rational, mature democracies as the US and UK could have been blind to the unintended consequences of their recent actions. In invading Iraq they have violated the UN Charter, bypassed the Security Council and ignored world opinion, seeking justification in trumped-up stories of weapons of mass destruction. "Such action", the Executive Committee of IHEU cautioned Mr. Bush before he went to war, "could lead to long-term global instability, severely damage the reputation of the United States and its allies, and could seriously jeopardise the future of the United Nations and the rule of international law on which world order depends." These were unintended consequences that could plainly be foreseen, but were ignored. Many other immediate consequences, such as the collapse of civic order in Iraq, the massive scale of suffering inflicted on ordinary Iraqi citizens, the inflaming of Islamic zeal and revanchist sentiment worldwide, should also have been foreseen. Many more unintended consequences, as yet unforeseen, will undoubtedly follow as the coalition forces get more deeply mired in Iraq.

One development, which also has far-reaching implications, is the desecularisation of international politics. Despite all disclaimers, it is clear that a sharp polarisation is taking place between the Christian and Islamic worlds. Internationally, the major religious conflict has so far been confined to Arab-Zionist confrontation, spilling over into anti-West sentiments in the Islamic world arising out of America's perceived pro-Israeli policies in West Asia. In the shape of the Muslim *ummah*, an Islamic bloc has never been far from the consciousness of Muslims worldwide, despite their multifarious differences. Muslim leaders have openly been condemning the value-systems of the West; so have the leaders of Muslim immigrant communities residing in the West. A large, liberal and self-confident West has so far not taken much notice. But, after the events of 9/11 - and with Mr. Bush's handling of the war on terror - all this has changed. A liberal and secular America has suddenly woken up to its Christian identity. As Paul Kurtz says: "The land of the free is becoming the land of the religious right and the reaction to the World Trade Center attack proves the point."

The case of the US Deputy Undersecretary of Defence for Intelligence, a much-decorated veteran whose promotion and appointment was confirmed by the Senate in June, is perhaps not an isolated one. He speaks of Islamic extremists hating the US because "we're a Christian nation" adding that our "spiritual enemy will be defeated if we come against them in the name of Jesus." The enemy, according to him, "is a guy named Satan." The Great Satan was a name reserved for the USA by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. Now the compliment has been returned. Humanists will find a certain irony in the fact that Fareed Zakaria of the *Newsweek*, while condemning Gen. Boykin's remarks, approvingly quotes Senator Joseph Lieberman's address to an Arab-American group. "We meet here today not as Muslims or Christians or Jews," Lieberman said, "not as people of Arab or European descent or African or Asian descent... We are children of the same God and of the same father, Abraham. We are quite literally brothers and sisters." According to Zakaria, "That is the message America should send to the world. And it will cost us nothing." He does not say where it leaves those who are not of the seed of Abraham.

As the killings in Iraq and Palestine continue, and as the US turns its pre-emptive attention to more Muslim nations - such as Syria and Iran - mutual hatred and suspicion between Arab Street and Main Street is likely to get progressively more vicious. In Muslim eyes there is a clear and growing danger to Islam. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad - a moderate Muslim - says: "We are enjoined by our religion to prepare for the defence of the *ummah*. Unfortunately we stress not defence but the weapons of the time of the Prophet. Those weapons and horses cannot help to defend us any more. We need guns and rockets, bombs and warplanes, tanks and warships for our defence." If recent reports of a secret deal between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are correct, these needs may soon be met. The two countries have reportedly decided to move ahead with an exchange of free, or cheap, Saudi oil for Pakistani nuclear know how.

As the 'children of Abraham' shed each others' blood, the greatest damage will be to secularism, and the rule of law in international relations. Civil liberty, religious tolerance and minority rights, even in liberal democracies, are likely to face progressive erosion. The effects are already being felt in America and Europe. But it may still not be too late. Democracy and secularism are still strong enough in the USA to arrest this trend, or at least contain the damage. Public opinion is no longer in favour of the involvement in Iraq. The Bush Administration (barring the hawks in Pentagon) has realised that it can no longer deny the UN its legitimate role in Iraq, that sovereignty cannot be withheld from the Iraqi people indefinitely. But once sovereignty passes to them, will the democratic process lead to the formation of a secular or a theocratic state? Chances are that it will be the latter. So a brutal but secular dictatorship will have been replaced by a theocratic democracy (is there not a contradiction in terms here?), but at what human and moral cost! The most that one can hope for now is that it will not go the Taliban way.

- *Vir Narain*



Pain, Ethics and Animal Rights

All over the world, except in India, vegetarians form a miniscule minority and people generally look upon them as cranks or faddists. Veganism, which carries concern for animals even further to almost an extreme - perhaps as much as Jainism does - may strike a sympathetic chord in India, but nowhere else. Our ruthlessly carnivorous world is highly resistant to vegetarianism, despite the compelling logic of the ethical and environmental arguments favouring it. Veganism seems a beautiful but impossible dream. Apart from the force of habit and custom built up over the centuries, certain traditional religions have played a major part in obscuring the ethical dimension in our treatment of animals. Reinforcing this, a strong philosophical tradition also developed in the West denying animals any rights. Descartes and Kant were perhaps the most influential proponents of this view. Schopenhauer, who contended that compassion, not Kantian rational law, is the basis of morality, reports Kant as saying that beings devoid of reason (hence animals) are things and therefore should be treated as means that are not at the same time an end. Schopenhauer also quotes Kant's view that "man can have no duty to any being except human" and "cruelty to animals is contrary to man's duty to himself because it deadens in him the feelings of sympathy to their sufferings, and thus a natural tendency that is very valuable in relation to morality in relation to other human beings is weakened."

Even in our day, despite great advances in our understanding of biology and ethology, a highly respected philosopher has this to say: "Animals have neither duties nor rights, and it is not merely sentimental, but absurd, to treat them as though such moral ideas applied to them. If you try to apply such ideas to animals, the result is not merely confusion, but a radical failure to relate to them at all. You will achieve nothing that you want, and nothing that they want either."

Two points need to be made here. The first is the centrality of pain in the discourse on ethics. We have a duty to refrain from inflicting avoidable pain, not only on other human beings, but on any sentient entity or organism capable of feeling pain. There will be marginal cases where issues of sentience and identity might arise; but that cannot be allowed to obscure the fact of clearly visible and widespread pain and suffering in the animal world - and, of course, in the human world as well. Death, in this context, can be taken as the upper extreme of pain, leading us to the concept of reverence for life. The second point has to do with rights and duties. Rights do not exist in vacuo.

For every right there is a corresponding duty cast on someone to respect that right. Basically, as moral beings, only humans (excluding the very young and those of unsound mind or who are otherwise disabled) can have duties. Rights are not so confined; and the notion that only those who have duties can have rights cannot be justified. Humans, as moral beings, have both rights and duties in their relations with each other. Between us and animals there can be no such mutuality: they have rights which we, as moral beings, have a duty to recognise. Claiming that animals have the right to live, and the right not to be subjected to pain, is equivalent to saying that it is the duty of humans, as moral beings, to avoid causing pain and death to animals unless no sensible alternative is available.

The Indian Humanist Union has consistently, but perhaps not very forcefully, advocated the inclusion of humane treatment of animals in the IHU's declaratory statements. Many years ago, a member of the IHU suggested that an appeal should be made to our members and to the public generally to refrain from killing those animals which are not harmful to human beings. In reply, Narsingh Narain said, "This in effect is a plea for vegetarianism, but many of our members regard the killing of animals for food as necessary and justified. In the West, Humanists like others, regard vegetarianism as crankish. I did meet some Humanists in Europe who were vegetarians, and one great Humanist, Gilbert Murray, was a vegetarian. Murray's first revolt against Christianity, when he was still a boy under 11, was caused by the miracle of the Gadarene swine recorded in the Bible. "It seemed to me so monstrously cruel to drive - or be indirectly responsible for driving - a lot of unoffending pigs over a precipice", he has said. But these are exceptions. The following facts may be of interest.

In the Philosophy Section of the International Humanist Congress held in London in 1957, which was considering a revision of the Amsterdam Declaration of 1952, I pressed for the inclusion of a clause defining our moral obligation to animals. The suggestion was mentioned in the report, but not incorporated in the draft manifesto. The late Dr Henry Neumann of the American Ethical Union was the Chairman of this Section. He was also the Editor of the "Ethical Outlook" and asked me to write something for that journal. I sent some articles, including one about our moral obligation to animals. All were published,

except the one relating to animals. (This might not have been intentional.) On another occasion, more recently, when a new manifesto was being drawn up by the IHEU, I renewed my suggestion, but again without success. This time a very brief statement was eventually adopted. Perhaps I have earned a vote of thanks from the animals, but that is all.” Elsewhere he has written, “It may be noted, however, that though the Indian religious tradition is favourable to a good treatment of animals, our practice somehow does not come up to our theoretical professions. As Mahatma Gandhi observed: “The ideal of humanity in the West is perhaps lower, but their practice of it is very much more thorough than ours.” Jawaharlal Nehru has said in his Autobiography that, in spite of our “general philosophy of non-violence to animals” we are “often singularly careless and unkind to them.” Radhakrishnan has also written in the same strain: “And yet callousness to the suffering of animals, and the slaughtering of animals for sport and sacrifice are rampant in India today, however much they may be opposed to the Hindu spirit.” Our societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals rarely get even moderate support.

In the present state of our practice, a man who talks to Humanist gatherings in the West about our obligations to animals is apt to be reminded politely, in private informal conversation, if not in the open sessions, that it is rather too early to think of animals when we cannot yet feed even all our human population. In commenting on our Memorandum of Association, Professor JBS Haldane wrote, in a letter to me, that “love of fellow beings”, for which we stood, might include mosquitos and even bacteria.”³

As Schweitzer once said in his address to the French Academy: “The man who is concerned for the fate of all living creatures is faced with problems even more numerous and more harassing than those which confront the man whose devotion extends only to his fellow human beings. In our relations with animals and birds we are continually obliged to harm, if not actually kill them. ...Each one of us, therefore, must judge whether it is really necessary for us to kill and to cause pain. We must resign ourselves to our guilt, because our guilt is forced upon us. We must seek forgiveness by letting slip no opportunity of being of use to a living creature.” He goes on to say: “Ethics is only complete when it exacts compassion towards every living thing.”⁴

Kant’s argument that “cruelty to animals is contrary to man’s duty to himself ”certainly has great force. It is unlikely that the high levels of chronic violence among human beings that we are experiencing today can ever come down to manageable proportions unless we face squarely the ethical deficit in our treatment of animals. The International Humanist movement does have a certain duty in this regard.

- *Vir Narain*

References:

1. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1992 page 253.
2. Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1994, page 232-233
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The Age of Entertainment

For God's sake, let us be men
not monkeys minding machines
or sitting with our tails curled
while the machine amuses us, the radio or
film or gramophone
Monkeys with a bland grin on our faces. ----

What was perhaps no more than an irritant when D H Lawrence wrote these lines seems set now to become a major human disaster. Riding on the back of an accelerating revolution in electronics, the entertainment industry and mass media have infiltrated the innermost recesses of people's daily lives everywhere, threatening to turn them into near-zombies. The poison of the puffer fish is said to have the effect of turning men into zombies; but the fish is such a delicacy that some people cannot refrain from eating it. This claims about a hundred lives each year in Japan. One cannot even begin to speculate on the toll taken by the entertainment industry and the mass media.

Neil Postman, author of the seminal book 'Amusing Ourselves to Death' says: "When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when in short, a people becomes an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at great risk; cultural death is a clear possibility." Those who followed the California recall elections - when the people elected Schwarzenegger Governor of that state - or more recently, on a much more massive scale, the general elections in India, will know that Postman was not exaggerating. In India, major political parties were vying with each other in enlisting movies stars and sports stars to campaign for them. This was the only way an apathetic and disenchanted electorate could be induced to turn up at their political rallies, which the media now aptly calls their 'road show'. The Indian parliament has a fair sprinkling of cinema stars and cricketers. Some have even been made cabinet ministers. Increasingly, the intelligentsia is being excluded from the political process.

In India the reach of the media is expanding at a far greater rate than the spread of literacy or primary education; and the movie industry has always had a strong grip on the Indian public. Henry Winthrop's observation: "The influence of the movies in creating distractions which turn people away from the serious business of life - distractions which produce a tinsel happiness and cover a gnawing despair in the life of the average man or woman - cannot be underestimated." is certainly true of India. So is HG Wells' remark that we are in a race between education and disaster.

In fact, however, the existing patterns of education are not likely to provide adequate protection against what Lazarsfeld has called the "narcotizing dysfunction" of exposure to mass media. The 'unreal delights and the frenzied fascination' of the mass media have resulted in people becoming the irrational victims of false wants. Marcuse has argued that addiction to media tended to breed an absolute docility. Traditional education systems have not equipped us to withstand such powerful new influences. Methods of preventive education have to be devised to protect the minds of the young from the manipulations of mass media and mass entertainment. These methods will be heavily dependent on the current levels of general education and will have to draw their sustenance from the 'subsoil' of rationalism and freethinking present in any given culture. This is a very variable quantity, so each culture has to develop its own strategy. Oddly, cultures steeped in rigid orthodoxy enjoy a certain protection from the effects of mass media and mass entertainment. But, at best, this is like the protection offered by crustacean armour - it precludes further growth or evolution. The immunity offered by bigotry and fanaticism is worse than the disease.

In India, the situation is not yet alarming; but the trends are. The levels of education - both quantitative and qualitative - continue to be low. As the power of the media grows in a society with low education levels, popular culture goes into a downward spiral. Our politics has already taken on the character of a soap opera. Show business, sports, politics and commercialism - not to mention religion and even crime - are all tending to coalesce, creating a huge, fuzzy soft toy an infantile public loves to hug. In 'The Lonely Crowd' Reisman writes: "Glamour in politics, the packaging of the leader, the treatment of events by the mass media, substitutes for the self-interest of the inner-directed man, abandonment to society of the outer-directed man." This is a critical issue: and Humanism is essentially dedicated to the development of the inner-directed man. But this finds no place in Indian culture. Tutelage - total spiritual surrender to a guru - is a dominant theme in Hindu tradition. In Islam, no deviation is permitted from rigid adherence to the word of God as revealed to his Prophet. This is fertile ground for the growth of authoritarianism; and its ugly obverse - sycophancy and power-worship - so much in evidence in India. "At its worst", says Rosenberg. "mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our sense while paving the way to totalitarianism." We should do what we can to avoid this worst-case scenario.

- Vir Narain

DIVIDE AND RUIN: THE POLITICS OF GRIEVANCE

Some recent developments, such as the demand for reservations in the private sector and reservations for Muslims, raised fresh concerns regarding national integration. The promotion - and preservation - of national integration has been one of the principal objectives of the Indian Humanist Union since its inception. It was also the major concern of the founding fathers of the Republic - which itself was born out of a cataclysmic episode of disintegration. Unfortunately, in the first fifty years of the Indian Republic, we have witnessed a steady erosion of the nation's cohesiveness. The compulsions and temptations of electoral politics have seen to that. Divisive agendas and stratagems, promoting narrow sectional interests but disguised as ideologies, are being used by power-seeking demagogues to create their own constituencies and vote-banks. The exploitation of caste grievances and communal prejudices offers the handiest way to such people to mobilize a following.

It is, of course, true that the assumption of ideological disguise is made easier by the fact that, in most cases, there are plausible grounds for these grievances and resentments. A recent magazine article (on the problem of evil) has a striking description of the process. *"Put-upon people tend to "club" together, and club is the right word. Their enemies, the agents of their economic woes and the authors of intolerable blows to their pride, belong to another club, driven together by present prejudice and past subjugations of their own. Clubs, gangs, tribes, sects, cults, parties, movements, blocs: collections of people who have given their loyalty (hearts and minds, as it's often put) to a group whose reason for being is complaint and whose aim is redress and vengeance. Resentment is pursued like a hobby. The weak lie in wait for an opportunity to achieve justice through the infliction of reciprocal pains. They wait to be empowered.*

Injustices (and fancied ones are soon added to the real) are catalogued and kept fresh for future use by politicians who lie, bureaucrats who organize, preachers who rant, historians who colorize, and school-teachers who read and collect every calumny they can collect, preparing their children to carry on crime."

Historically, the biggest obstacle in the way of national integration in India has been its cruel and iniquitous caste system. Affirmative action, or positive discrimination, was needed to redress the age-old wrongs inflicted upon the scheduled castes. But affirmative action has its own contradictions and dilemmas. As Gary Peller, Professor of law at Georgia University, says: *"The familiar "dilemma" that surrounds affirmative action is that it requires the use of race as a socially significant category, although the deepest aims of integrationist ideology point towards the transcendence of race consciousness.'* As he further points out: *"Affirmative action has been characterized as temporary and only necessary to achieve integration, at which time equal opportunity can take over. And affirmative action has been defended on the grounds that its beneficiaries have suffered from a "deprived" background, so that putting a thumb on the side of minorities in the scales of social decisionmaking helps even out the otherwise rationalized competition for social goods".*

While the need for affirmative action to redress social inequalities cannot be disputed, the methods adopted to implement it need extreme care. Discrimination aimed at ending discrimination, known by various names: positive discrimination, protective discrimination, compensatory discrimination, has to be temporary in nature if it is not to defeat its own purpose. The long-term purpose of compensatory discrimination has to be, not merely the ending of discrimination (or inequalities) based on caste, but the whole system of dividing people on the basis of endogamous caste-based identity. Even a wise commentator like Marc Galanter seems to have missed the point here. He says: *"If secularism is defined in terms of the elimination of India's compartmental group structure in favour of a unitary society, then the compensatory discrimination policy may indeed have impeded secularism. But one may instead visualize not the disappearance of communal groups but their transformation into components of a pluralistic society in which invidious hierarchy is discarded while diversity is accommodated."* The fact is that meaningful national integration cannot be achieved without the disappearance of caste identities and caste distinctions. Steps which serve to perpetuate these distinctions can only divide and weaken Indian society.

ELECTORAL REFORM

There is perhaps no subject of national importance in India that has been more discussed, or less acted upon, than electoral reform. The reasons are clear: more than fifty years of experience have shown that some vital changes are required to ensure the efficiency and integrity of the electoral process; but those who have the power to bring about these changes - the political class - are the very people who have benefitted most from the prevailing system and would be least inclined to disturb it.

Regular free and fair elections, *under a just constitution*, represent the heartbeat of a democracy. The proviso about a just constitution is important. One could, for example, have free and fair elections under a theocratic constitution but there would still be no true democracy. Democracy and secularism have to go together. Fortunately, we have one of the soundest constitutions in the world, and a robust election machinery. But, in the process of political and social development, many ills have crept into the system - or have come to light - which could, if left uncorrected, undermine the very basis of our democracy. Already, in some of the larger States, democracy has degenerated into demagoguery. It has rightly been said: "*The triumph of demagogies is short-lived. But the ruins are eternal.*"

Dr Kashyap, with his vast experience and command of the subject, has brought out clearly what the ills are and what needs to be done. Paradoxically, the very ills which bedevil the electoral process today - the caste system, for example - may have been factors favouring the growth of western democratic transplant in Indian soil. The vast masses of Indian citizens, belonging to castes which had been oppressed for centuries, could see that electoral politics offered them the only way to secure redress. Pavan K Varma, in his book *Being Indian*, observes: "*The truth is that democracy has survived in India not because Indians are democratic, but because democracy has proved to be the most effective instrument for the cherished pursuit of power. A people stifling in the pressure cooker of a hierarchically sealed society embraced the machinery of democratic politics for the promise it held of upward mobility within the inherited framework of an undemocratic society.*"

It can be argued that vote-bank politics, which we rightly deplore today, helped to consolidate and energise the voters' involvement in the electoral process. It is not difficult to see that an electorate consisting mostly of atomised individuals would rapidly sink into apathy. There would be no flocking to polling booths. The situation now is that caste grievances and communal prejudices are being used by unscrupulous power-seekers to create their own constituencies and vote banks. So, when elections approach, every effort is made to widen existing differences in society, and to create fresh rifts where none exist. Thus every election tends to unravel the social fabric causing, in the long term, significant cumulative damage to national integration.

There is not much controversy about what needs to be done to improve the electoral system; and hardly anyone will disagree with the remedies suggested by Dr Kashyap. The real problem is: how are the reforms to be brought about? He says: "*That is the million dollar question, for which I really have no answer except to say that if freedom and democracy have to be saved, electoral reforms are a categorical imperative.*" But, unless an answer is found to this "million dollar question" all discussion of electoral reform is futile.

Only Parliament is empowered to change the system but, occupied as it is by the prime beneficiaries of the system, it can hardly be expected to initiate any meaningful changes. There is no point in inviting the cat to put the bell round its own neck. To a certain extent the judiciary can - and has - helped, but that cannot be expected to go far enough. In the ultimate analysis it is only public pressure that might have some effect; but electoral reform does not seem to be an issue on which a mass movement can be launched.

The relation between the electorate and the political class approximates to the relation between labour and management. Perhaps the voters can organise themselves into a union (Indian Voters' Union) which can agitate on a number of issues which involve the exploitation of the people by their elected representatives - aided and abetted by criminals and moneybags. The precise structure, scope and charter of the Voters' Union would have to be worked out - and it is entirely possible that, in working this out, the whole enterprise may be found to be infeasible. But, considering the importance of the issues involved, the exercise seems worth undertaking.

The working of democracy in India provides the widest possible canvas to witness the Indian traits pertaining to power, status and hierarchy. The absence of idealism and the rank display of opportunism that very

quickly became the hallmark of Indian politics were not accidental; they cannot be explained away by the distortions that inevitably accompany fledgling institutions; they cannot be attributed to one leader or one party; they were the result of a social consensus on the primacy of ends over means.

Pavan K Varma

FEASTING AND FASTING ON A SINKING SHIP

A recent article in Harper's magazine (*THE OIL WE EAT: Following the food chain back to Iraq*, by Richard Manning, February 2004) brings together some facts and figures which give a disturbing picture of the global future in food and energy, and raises a number of challenging ethical, economic and environmental issues. Manning focuses on the industrialised factory-farm system in the USA but, in a situation where every nation aspires to the condition of the US, this picture could become increasingly true of the rest of the world too. The current generation of humans - basically those living in high-consumption industrialised nations - are burning their candles (and others' as well) at both ends. At one end are the fossil fuels: the vast but limited store of solar energy accumulated in the earth over millennia. At the other there is today's solar energy, captured mainly by plants. Human consumption now accounts for some 40 per cent of the total energy being captured by plants. Two-thirds of this comes from just three grains - wheat, rice and corn. In rich industrialised countries most of the grain goes to feed livestock. In the USA, 80 per cent of the grain produced goes to raise livestock. Poorer countries are following suit. From 5 per cent in 1960, Mexico now feeds 45 per cent of its grain to livestock. In the same period, China has moved from 8 to 26 per cent; and Egypt from 3 to 31 per cent. They all have their poor and hungry who desperately need this grain but cannot afford it. So the grain goes to feed cattle which, in turn, are eaten mainly by the rich. It does not help that 10 kilograms of feed is needed to produce just one kilogram of meat.

Until recently, agriculture depended only on energy from the sun and natural nutrients from the soil. In about 1960, the earth's supply of unfarmed arable land ran out - no more expansion was possible. But, thanks to the development of hybrid seeds and the intensive use of fossil-fuel based chemical fertilisers, grain yields actually tripled. This was the green revolution. Manning says: "*With the possible exception of the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that has ever happened to the planet.*" One may not agree with this, but the increasing input of fossil-fuel energy in the production of food has potentially catastrophic consequences. In 1940, an average farm in the USA required an input of one calorie of fossil energy to produce 2.3 calories of food energy. By 1974, the ratio was 1:1. If we take food processing into account - and most food in the USA is processed - the situation is even more drastic. As Manning tells it: "*The grinding, milling, wetting, drying, and baking of a breakfast cereal requires about four calories of energy for every calorie of food energy it produces. A two pound bag of breakfast cereals burns the energy of a half-gallon of gasoline in its making. All together, the food processing industry in the United States uses about ten calories of fossil-fuel energy for every calorie of food energy it produces.*" If one considers the energy requirements of the meat industry, the figures are truly staggering. It takes sixty eight calories of fossil fuel to make one calorie of pork. Thirty five calories of fossil are needed to make one calorie of beef in the feed lots - and as much as 78 per cent of the beef in the USA comes from feed lots. Here is Manning's description of the state of the cattle in feed lots: "*The cattle spend their adult lives packed shoulder to shoulder in a space not much bigger than their bodies, up to their knees in shit, being stuffed with grain and a constant stream of antibiotics to prevent the diseases this sort of confinement invariably engenders.*"

Given these ruthlessly "efficient" practices, it is no wonder that the per-capita production of protein in the USA is nearly double of what an average adult needs per day. The excess protein is, of course, turned into fat. It is not surprising that obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the USA. Government figures estimate that 30 percent of all US children are overweight or at risk for being too heavy. Overall figures for the USA show that 58 million are overweight; 40 million are obese, and 3 million morbidly obese. Eight out of 10 over 25's are overweight.

An expert on food and energy at Cornell University estimates that, if all of the world ate as the USA does, all known global fossil-fuel reserves would be exhausted in just over seven years. Can one say that "happily" most of the world does not eat the way the USA does? Yet it is estimated that, in 1999, 31 million Americans were food insecure, meaning they were either hungry or unsure of where their next meal would come from. Of these Americans, 12 million were children. Worldwide, it is estimated that one billion people suffer from malnutrition. About 24,000 people die every day from hunger or hunger-related problems - three-quarters being children under five. So, what we have here is an uneasy co-existence of gluttony and starvation. As reported by Elizabeth Becker in *New York Times* (December 22, 2004) the Bush administration has reduced contributions to global food aid programmes aimed at helping millions of people

climb out of poverty. Aristotle was undoubtedly right when he said: *“The greatest crimes are caused by surfeit, not by want.”*

- Vir Narain

Note : Information on obesity and malnutrition has been obtained from the internet.

CONFUSING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Recent events in the liberal democracies of North Western Europe indicate that something has gone wrong in these States' handling of immigrant minorities. While part of the problem may be due to liberal asylum and immigration policies; the major problem has been a too-permissive approach to the demands made on grounds of religious freedom by the more orthodox elements in the immigrant communities. It can plausibly be argued that this mishandling was one of the contributory factors leading to the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. The fanatics who carried out the attacks had been trained, nurtured and sheltered in the West, but their loyalty was to their absolutist creed. For those who could read, the writing had been on the wall for some time. For example: after the US bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986, Muslims living in Belgium engaged in organized protest. The brutal murder of Vincent Van Gogh's grandnephew almost two decades later shows how Islamic zealotry has been gaining ground over the years. Hillarie Belloc rang the alarm bells year ago. He writes in his 1938 book, *The Great Heresies*: "Millions of people have forgotten all about Islam. They take for granted that it is just a foreign religion which will not concern them. It is, in fact, the most formidable and persistent enemy which our civilization has had. The story is by no means over; the power of Islam may at any moment re-arise." Harsh words, perhaps as prejudiced as they were prescient, but it cannot be denied that they apply to Islamic fundamentalism today.

The celebrated Jilbab case illustrated how well-meaning liberals can play into the hands of religious bigots. A Luton school girl Shabina Begum, aged 15, who wanted to wear to a jilbab (a long flowing gown covering the entire body) but was not allowed to do so, sued her school. She lost the case and appealed. The appeal court upheld her right to wear the Jilbab to school. This ruling perfectly fits the fundamentalists' agenda: involving the young in acts of divisive sectarianism, promoting the symbolic subordination of women (a prime concern of religious bigots), undermining the secular nature of governance. This agenda is being pursued in countries of the liberal West by religious bigots ostensibly for the furtherance of religious human rights but actually to promote separatism and fundamentalism. It has met with such success that other minority groups –such as Hindus and Sikhs – are also becoming aggressively touchy on "religious" issues. Sikhs went on the rampage in London against a play – *Bezati* – which they found offensive. Hindus protested against the use of Ganesha's image in certain commercial products in the USA. In this situation it has become urgently necessary to make a distinction between religious and cultural issues.

Regardless of what traditional religionists might claim, matters involving dress and diet belong to the cultural domain. Religion has essentially to do with belief - and thus non-belief as well. (Under Islamic law, however, there is no right not to believe: apostasy is to be punished by death). This, in the terminology of religious rights documents, is categorized as 'internal freedom'. The right of every one "either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest his or her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." has been classed as "external freedom". Many purely cultural issues tend to get included in this – not always innocently – giving religious activists a handy weapon for agitation and self-assertion. The important point here is that perhaps a very large majority of those who over the years have developed the theory and practice of religious freedom have been adherents of some traditional religion or the other. Their views on what comes within the domain of religion and what does not can be expected to be weighted in favor of religion. This needs to be reviewed from a Secular-Humanist perspective. From this perspective, religion is primarily a matter of private belief. Organized religion relies heavily on the idea of membership but, in terms of belief, this is at best of secondary importance. Taboos and prescriptions relating to dress and diet, and even rituals, essentially belong to the cultural realm. The public flaunting of outward symbols of religious affiliation, aimed at dividing civil society visibly along sectarian lines (thus promoting parochial attitudes), cannot be supported by a secular state. In this context, the lack of support from Humanists for the French ban on headscarves was a great disappointment.

Certain developments are lending increasingly urgency to the need for a Secular –Humanist review of religious and cultural rights. Migrations to the West from developing countries have assumed the dimensions of a flood and will probably soon become a tsunami. Unlike those who migrated in earlier years and had no choice except to adapt and grow roots in the host country, ease of travel and communications have ensured that the migrant now does not have to 'cut the umbilical cord'. He does not have to shed his cultural baggage and, emotionally, he remains a citizen of the 'mother country'. Encouraged by the numerical strength of fellow-migrants, he now insists that the host country adapts to him, brandishing rights the 'mother country' would not entertain for a moment. And given the nature of liberal democracy, and the

compulsions of vote-bank politics, the host country does adapt to him (literally: for *she* does not count). Divisive, faith-based sectarian policies are adopted: sectarian personal laws, denominational schools, modified uniforms, changing blasphemy laws. The result is that hairline cracks begin to appear in civil society, with a potential for fracture in due course if not treated early. The answer perhaps lies in assertive secularism, with religion occupying less and less public space, and multiculturalism that harmonises rather than polarizes.

-*Vir Narain*

Celebrating the Ordinary

Socrates famously said: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” It is unlikely that he meant that a person who has not examined his (or her) life would find it not worth living. Perhaps what he meant was that we cannot lead worthwhile lives unless we examine the meaning and purpose of our lives. Many wise men have examined life and found that it has come up short. Hobbes talks of “The life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” CP Snow tells us: “The individual human condition is tragic: for all its triumph and joys the essence of it is loneliness and the end death.” Bertrand Russell is even gloomier: “Briefs and powerless is Man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark.”

Socrates with his matchless rationality may have found life worth living – and giving up for an ideal – but, for the ordinary person the answer probably lies not in rational examination, but in love. Thus an alternative proposition could be: “Without love, life is not worth living.” Rationality, founded on facts, cannot sidestep the fact of suffering, and of death. Religion, with its myth of immortal souls, tried it with some success until humanity came of age. Reason has also to take into account the fact of love. In her excellent little book ‘The Sovereignty of Good’ Iris Murdoch has put the case eloquently. “Instances of facts, as I shall boldly call them, which interest me and which seem to have been forgotten or ‘theorized away’ are the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous, and the fact that love is a central concept in morals. Contemporary philosophers frequently connect consciousness with virtue, and although they constantly talk of freedom they rarely talk of love. But it must be possible to do justice to both Socrates and the virtuous peasant.”

H J Eysenck has very pithily characterized Humanism as “reason in the service of compassion.” But among humanists one can discern two distinct trends. There are those who give primacy to reason to purpose, and those who emphasise love and compassion. Over the years, the former have been gaining ground. A leading contemporary humanist thinker maintains that for the humanist the central concern is the meaning of life and then goes on to clarify that “The meaning of our lives is found in the plans and projects that we have initiated and are committed to.” Ambition and achievement provide the spur. In a shrinking and media-dominated world crowded with the unrelenting projections of celebrities and achievers the ordinary person feels dwarfed and frustrated. His own talents, his plans and projects, if any, begin to seem trivial and inconsequential. Inevitably, angst and alienation follow. In any case there is life before one reaches the stage of embarking on plans and projects. Life begins to acquire meaning as a child grows, and the growing child imparts meaning to the lives of parents and siblings and, later friends - as they do to his. This meaning is founded on love, and this love is essential for the emotional health and integration of the individual as well as the community. An emotionally secure person would be better equipped to deal with the intense, and often destabilizing, pressures of modern living. This emotional security has to be reinforced by education- Humanist education – since the comforting myths of traditional religion will no longer do.

The prime feature of this education will have to do with freedom of thought combined with humility and tolerance, reason, the scientific spirit, acceptance of uncertainty and of death. The Humanist position on all these is clear; but the radical departure from traditional religions is in the acceptance of uncertainty and the finality of death. As Iris Murdoch says: “Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of his acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves. The good man is humble...Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious, avaricious tentacles of the self.”

Can humility, and love for the ordinary, the day-to-day, be taught? Perhaps not, at least not directly. We have to learn to question power, laugh at ostentation, shun the grandiose and ignore the rich-and-famous. Folk literature and folk art showed the way in the past but are now in full retreat. The Flemish masters lovingly depicted everyday life. Literature does explore the lives of ordinary people. Walter da la Mare’s poem ‘Still life’ expresses the love of the ordinary beautifully:

Bottle, coarse tumbler, loaf of bread,
Cheap paper, a lean long kitchen knife:
No moral, no problem, sermon, or text
No hint of a Why, Whence, Whither or If;
Mere workaday objects put into paint—
Bottle and tumbler, loaf and knife....
And engrossed, round-spectacled Chardin's
 Passion for life.

-Vir Narain

Akbar the Great Secularist

Exactly four hundred years ago in the autumn of the year 1605 - on the night of Tuesday 26th October - the Mogul Emperor Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar died at Agra. He was a wise and tolerant ruler, generations ahead of his times and - what would be unusual even today - a freethinker. The Portuguese Jesuit, Jeronimo Xavier, who was present in Agra in the last months of Akbar's life, records that the king died more or less alone, with only "*a few people who remained with him, and some of them took the name of Maffamede. He never responded to them, he only took the name of God a few times, nor did he die in keeping with the custom of the Gentiles. As one never knew under what religion he lived, nor did one know under which one he died, since he made place for all the religions and took none of them for the truth, though his usual habit was to worship God and the sun.*" Writing during Akbar's lifetime, Father Monserrate, another Jesuit contemporary, expresses surprise that he had not yet been killed for his freethinking. "*(In spite of his very heterodox attitude towards the religion of Muhammad, and in spite also of the fact that Musalmans regard such an attitude as an unforgivable offence, Akbar has not yet been assassinated.*" The fact is that, with his firm rule but benevolent and informal ways, he was a much-loved monarch. Rafiuddin Shirazi, a Persian merchant, recounts: "*I saw him flying a kite on the roof of his own palace: his head was bare and he was wearing a lungi (loincloth). From this I was convinced that His Majesty was of an open bent of mind and extremely informal.*" Akbar had obviously transcended the love of pomp and glory so common in his age.

The remarkable thing about the boy who, barely in his 'teens, ascended the throne of the Moguls was the way in which he steadily transformed himself from a typical medieval despot into a wise and tolerant ruler who could set an example even today to some of the leaders of our liberal democracies. It is true that he built a pyramid of skulls after defeating Hemu; and had thousands of Hindus massacred after the battle of Haldighati. But it is astonishing how, as his power came closer to being absolute, he became more and more catholic and humane. By 1662, when he was barely twenty, the liberal phase of Akbar's reign had begun. There was a radical departure not only from his own early inclinations, but also from the traditions and practices established during the almost four centuries of Muslim rule in India before his reign. Discriminatory laws against non-Muslims, such as the *jizya* and Pilgrimage Tax, were repealed. Changes were brought about in Hindu as well as Muslim personal laws boldly introducing changes in marriage and divorce. The number of permissible wives was reduced from four to one, a second wife being allowed only if the first was barren. Minimum marriageable age was fixed at 16 (for boys) and 14 (for girls) for Hindus as well as Muslims. Circumcision for boys below 12 was forbidden. Apart from the abolition of *jizya* and pilgrimage tax, other changes were brought about that would be anathema to most regimes even today. Hindus and non-Muslims were free to profess any religion, carry on legitimate propaganda and build churches, synagogues, idol-temples and fire-temples. Hindus, forcibly converted to Islam, and Hindu women forcibly married to Muslims could, if they chose, revert to their religion and families. The death penalty for criticism of Islam or of the conduct of the Prophet was repealed. Taking a step that would have been unthinkable in earlier regimes (and perhaps also today in most Islamic countries) Akbar allowed conversions from Islam. Formerly this was treated as apostasy, to be punished by death. Akbar allowed Hindus the use of courts under Hindu judges. Under his patronage Hindu law digests were compiled by famous Hindu jurists.

An interesting case, recorded by Budauni, that has strong resonances in the context of the widespread violence being experienced in our day on the issue of blasphemy, was that of a certain Brahmin of Mathura. This person had, "*in the presence of witnesses, opened his foul mouth to curse the Prophet (on whom be peace!), and had shown his contempt for Muslims in various ways*". Shaikh Abdu'n Nabi, a noted theologian and minister in charge of revenue grants, kept pressing Akbar for permission to execute the Brahmin and the king's response was: "*Punishments for offences against the holy law are in the hands of you, the Ulama; what do you require of me?*" Clearly, the king was not in favour of such a drastic punishment. As Badauni records: "*At last, when the Shaikh's importunity exceeded all bounds, the Emperor said "Our answer is that which we have already given you. You know of it." No sooner had the Shaikh now reached his lodging that he issued orders for the execution of the Brahmin.*" Akbar was greatly agitated and called a meeting of eminent Muslim jurists to discuss the issue. The following advice seemed to have found favour with him, evidently much to the chagrin of hardliners like Budauni. "*The strange thing is that Shaikh Abdu'n Nabi should claim to be a descendant of Abu Hanifa (may God have*

mercy upon him!) according to whose school of theology the cursing of the Prophet by unbelievers who have submitted to the rule of Islam gives no ground for any breach of agreement by Muslims, and in no way absolves Muslims from their obligation to safeguard infidel subjects.”

One thinks of all the lives that have been lost recently in Pakistan on charges of blasphemy.

If Akbar was well ahead of his times in matters of religion, he was surprisingly more so in his attitude towards animals. Abu'l Faz'l records in A'in-i Akbari: “*His Majesty cares very little for meat, and often expresses himself to that effect. It is indeed from ignorance and cruelty that, although various kinds of food are obtainable for man, he is bent upon injuring living creatures, and does not draw back from killing and eating. He seems to have no eye for the beauty inherent in the prevention of cruelty, but makes himself a tomb for animals. If His Majesty had not the burden of the world on his shoulders, he would at once totally abstain from meat; and now it is his intention to quit it by degrees, for the time conforming a little to the spirit of the age.*” First, Akbar abstained from meat on Fridays, then also on Sundays. To this he added the first day of every solar month, solar and lunar eclipses, days between two fasts and some feast days and the month of *Aban* in which he was born. His adoption of certain Hindu practices was remarkable. Whether in the camp or on the march, he only drank Ganges water. He abolished cow-slaughter. When asked by his second son, Prince Murad to recommend one or two books that he should carry with him on his appointment as Governor of Malwa that “might promote the intellect and discourage traditionalism”, Akbar's reply was: “*In the marshy land (shuristan) of tradition such a book is rarely to be found. But out of regard for him (Murad) the translation of Mahabharata, which is a strange tale, just now become available, has been sent.*” Akbar repeatedly expressed his scorn for tradition. Abu'l Fazl quotes him as saying: “*Commendation of the pursuit of reason and rejection of traditionalism shines far above this suppliant's (ie Akbar's) arguments. If following tradition was commendable, the prophets would have merely followed their predecessors.*”

Akbar's successors, lacking his vision, gradually eroded his splendid heritage. Jahangir, born of a Rajput mother, did largely uphold Akbar's secular policies, but was influenced by Muslim theologians to ensure conformity with Quranic Law. Basically his reign was a continuation of Akbar's tolerant and catholic policies. Shahjahan largely abandoned Akbar's tolerant religious policies. While the jizya was not reimposed, pilgrimage tax was revived, to be withdrawn later. Shahjahan forbade the construction of new temples, and the repair of old ones. The religious privileges of Christians were also curtailed. Hindus and Christians could no longer carry out conversions. Hindus marrying converted Muslim girls had to convert to Islam to escape punishment. One Dalpat of Sirhind, who was separated from his converted Muslim wife and children, was put to death on refusing to convert to Islam. Shahjahan resorted to widespread proselytisation. A criminal could get pardon on accepting Islam. Apostacy and blasphemy were made capital offences. Much worse was to come with Aurangzeb. His puritanical and intolerant policies hurt Muslims as well as Hindus - but the latter were, of course the prime targets. The destruction of temples, reimposition of the jizya and pilgrimage tax, discriminatory custom duties against Hindus ended the secular policies of Akbar., undoubtedly paving the way for the eventual dismemberment of Hindostan.

-Vir Narain

Humanism and the Hereafter

It seems that primitive man, everywhere and in every culture, had an instinctive belief in some sort of existence after death. For the primitive psyche perhaps there was no other way to come to terms with the dread and mystery of death. As the traditional religions evolved, elaborate myths were created, claiming that every man had an immortal soul that survived his bodily death. In a master-stroke (deliberate or otherwise) traditional religions linked the fate of this immortal soul with good behaviour in this life. Ordinary people, conditioned as they were from early childhood to adapt to regimes of earthly reward and punishment, readily accepted this vastly magnified scheme of reward and punishment that extended into eternity. Morality, which really had its roots in human nature, became a prisoner of reward and punishment. 'RAP morality' is perhaps a good name for it. RAP morality gave religion an iron grip on the lives of people. As Sam Harris says in his outstanding book, *The End of Faith*: "*Without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable. Clearly, the fact of death is unbearable to us, and faith is little more than a shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave.*"

Unspeaking atrocities were committed by the medieval Christian church in the name of saving souls. Russell tells us that "*The Spaniards in Mexico and Peru used to baptize Indian infants and then immediately dash their brains out; by this means they secured these infants went to heaven..*" and goes on: "*In countless ways the doctrine of personal immortality in its Christian form has had disastrous effects upon morals...*" The horrors of the Inquisition are too gruesome to describe. In our own time we have the phenomenon, in the Iran-Iraq war, of children being used for clearing minefields. They, and their parents as well as the commanders who let them get blown up, evidently believed that ample rewards awaited these children in paradise. (It must, however, be mentioned that reliable firsthand accounts of the use of children in human wave attacks are rare.) Suicide bombings are an everyday occurrence in Palestine and Iraq. So problems arising out of a belief in life after death are very contemporary and very real. And the tragic growth of suicide bombings has given them a wholly unexpected twist. How differently William Empson's *Ignorance of Death* reads today!

*Heaven me, when a man is ready to die about something
Other than himself, and is in fact ready because of that,
Not because of himself, that is something clear about himself.
Otherwise I feel very blank upon this topic,
And think that though important, and proper for anyone to bring up,
It is one that most people should be prepared to be blank upon.*

In most Humanist statements, there does not seem to be a pointed reference to the issue of life after death. This could be because the Humanist rejection of the supernatural also entails the rejection of the idea of an immortal soul or life after death. However, the Memorandum of Association of the Indian Humanist Union (June 12, 1960) does state: "*Though Humanism is not identified with any views about the factual question of life after death, it does not accept the goal of salvation. It is content to fix its attention on this life and this world. It is concerned with the preservation and furtherance of moral values in all relations and spheres of life, and with the building up of a better and happier human community.*" Narsingh Narain has elaborated this further: "*..There is no need for us, as Humanists, to consider the evidence for and against human survival. For whether we survive or not makes no difference to our practical ideals. Moreover, the craving for a future life is unhealthy, if only for the simple reason that our wishes can make no difference to whatever the fact may happen to be. Belief in a future life was not based on evidence. It was an expression of faith arising out of a certain mental background. The important thing is to outgrow that mental outlook, not to disprove survival, or to rule out faith altogether.*"

The problem is that, while this position will be seen by Humanists as being eminently logical and pragmatic, it will do nothing to induce the ordinary believer in traditional religions (to whom life after death is a fact) to re-examine his world-view. The Humanist Movement came into being to provide an alternative to traditional religions, and its main task is to address the major factors which have given traditional religions such a grip on their adherents. Of these, the two most powerful factors are: belief in a personal God; and life after death. Sam Harris is right when he says: "*What one believes happens after death dictates much of what one believes about life, and this is why faith-based religion, in presuming to fill the blanks in our knowledge of the hereafter, does such heavy lifting for those who fall under its power.. A*

single proposition - you will not die - once believed, determines a response to life that would be otherwise unthinkable.”

Humanism cannot afford to remain ‘blank’ (or agnostic) on this issue; just as it is not agnostic about a *personal* God. We must affirm that there is no scientific evidence for personal survival after death. However, death does not have to be equated with non-existence; although Hume (reportedly in a conversation) held that there is no more difficulty in conceiving my non-existence after death, than in conceiving my non-existence before birth, and no reason to be distressed by either. We can look upon our existence as being of two kinds: conscious, and consequential. While my conscious existence ceases with death, my consequential existence does not. This thought gives one responsibility and hope, and a sense of worth.

-Vir Narain

Ethical Issues in Affirmative Action

Few questions of public policy are as politically sensitive, socially divisive or emotionally charged as those of affirmative action, or positive discrimination. Affirmative action seeks to redress historical wrongs whose effects are seen to afflict identifiable groups of people even today. Given the background of its ancient caste system - highly stratified, highly iniquitous and highly persistent - India carries a larger (and more complicated and unwieldy) burden of such historical wrongs than perhaps any other nation or society. Caste remains a dominant factor in Indian politics even today; so it is not as if the redressal comes from a neutral or disinterested party. The victims and the beneficiaries (most intermediate castes are, in varying degrees, the victims as well as the beneficiaries!) of these historical wrongs are locked together in a complex - and often chaotic - process of democratic power-sharing and decision making. Emotive issues of guilt and grievance, retribution and atonement are pressed in the service of electoral politics. Political parties of all hues exploit divisions where they exist, and try to create them where they do not, to encourage the politics of group grievances and vote banks. Even political leaders who belong to groups which have been the beneficiaries of historical wrongs - ostensibly driven by ideology - are no less keen on the politics of grievance than those who belong to the wronged classes. As elections approach, communal passions and caste antagonisms, cloaked in the rhetoric of social justice, are whipped up for political gains. As Breytenbach said, and our politicians know by instinct, *"Humans are fragile. It is not difficult to bring out the worst in them"*.

In the scramble to secure benefits in terms of quotas and reservations, questions of fairness and equity, and issues of larger national interest, are being ignored. Irreversible changes have already taken place; and the pursuit of divisive policies for political gains seems to be gathering pace. Still, it may not be too late even now to look again at the ethical aspects of affirmative action.

Hardly any one disputes the need for affirmative action to redress historical wrongs. But sharp differences of opinion arise regarding the fairness or effectiveness of specific steps taken in the name of affirmative action. Perhaps the best starting point for our inquiry is Rawls' two principles of justice for institutions:-

First Principle (the **Liberty Principle**)

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all. Second Principle (the **Difference Principle**)

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls, A Theory of Justice, page 83) The Difference Principle has a direct bearing on affirmative action. Equality of opportunity is the key. If the victims of past injustice are to move towards greater equality of opportunity certain compensatory steps have to be taken. But first the victims of historical wrongs (not as individuals, but as groups) have to be identified, and the degree of deprivation or injustice for each group assessed. Unlike the situation in the USA - where blacks are a comparatively undifferentiated wronged group - the incredibly complex caste-differentiation in India makes it practically impossible to tackle this task in a fair manner. As compensatory action becomes more specific and precisely targeted, this requirement becomes more critical. Where more general and broad-based compensatory action is planned, the question of comparative deprivation or injustice tends to lose its salience. Here education is the key.

Even apart from the requirement of affirmative action, it is the responsibility of the State to provide free and compulsory education at the primary and secondary levels to all. Where adequate schooling (which is the minimum obligation of any State) is provided to the general populace; and extra resources are invested in the healthcare and education of deprived classes, the first critical step in providing equality of opportunity can be said to have been taken. As Robert Allen says; *"... a Rawlsian society would compensate the victims of injustice by redoubling its efforts at providing high quality, universal primary and secondary schooling. To someone in the original position this endeavor would appear highly desirable: since therein it is not known who would be educationally disadvantaged but for its existence. It would be*

understood as a safeguard against historical injustices such as racism, sexism, religious bigotry, homophobia, and poverty determining anyone's share of the primary goods, leaving nature and one's efforts as the deciding factors. Rawlsian affirmative action would begin at the schoolhouse." (Rawlsian Affirmative Action: Compensatory Justice as Seen from the Original Position: Robert Allen)

It is widely acknowledged that the Indian State has dismally failed in the area of primary and secondary education. It has failed similarly in providing primary health care. The biggest victims of this failure are the very groups who are to be provided relief and redress through affirmative action. Faced with this failure, and unable to remedy it (for remedial action requires the honest application of resources) the government has to take recourse to other means. The handiest tool is a policy of quotas and reservations. It has many attractive features: it is a great political stimulant, it has populist appeal, it diverts attention from the government's failure to provide adequate health and education to the poor and backward sections of society, and it relieves the government of the entire burden of affirmative action. This burden now falls on individuals belonging to purportedly privileged castes (regardless of their own personal situation) who are thus directly and personally deprived of positions which they would otherwise merit. One critical feature of the Difference Principle is that it clearly excludes a "zero-sum" outcome; where one person's (or group's) gain is another's loss. Another feature of Rawls' two principles is that he enunciated them as "*two principles of justice for institutions*".(emphasis added.) Where identifiable individuals are involved in a zero-sum exchange, as in the case of quotas and reservations, the ends of justice are clearly not met. The costs of atoning for collective wrongs in the past must be shared *collectively* by those who belong to groups that benefitted from the unfair dispensation at that time. It must not be left to 'innocent' individuals to pay the price. Affirmative action has to be at the *collective level*; and should never be allowed to 'degenerate' into a choice between two individuals. Affirmative action is based, at best, on aggregated data and statistical averages. But, as one commentator has said: "*it is individuals, not statistical averages, who gain or lose in admissions determinations and employment selections.*" An interesting example of this from the USA is the oft-quoted "coal miner's son" question. In India it translates into the creamy-layer question. "*Imagine a college admissions committee trying to decide between the white [son] of an Appalachian coal miner's family and the African American son of a successful Pittsburgh neurosurgeon. Why should the black applicant get preference over the white applicant?*"

Apart from the issue of injustice to individuals - which in itself is a decisive factor - there is the vital, and deeply ethical, question of social integration. To paraphrase US Supreme Court Justice Blackmun's observation in the famous 1978 Bakke case: **The legitimacy of caste preferences is to be measured by how fast using them moves us towards a society where caste doesn't matter.** The undeniable fact is that affirmative action through quotas and reservations will only serve to harden and perpetuate caste-divisions in Indian society. For affirmative action to succeed in its mission of achieving justice and social harmony there can be only one general prescription: The fruits of good governance - adequate health and education - must be made available to all. In addition, adequate extra resources must be provided in these areas to identifiable groups who are still suffering from the effects of past discrimination. Reservations and quotas should be the last resort, and should never be applied at the individual level to competitive positions.

-Vir Narain

Human Rights and Social Ills

The removal of social ills - such as discrimination on grounds of gender, race or caste; or domestic violence and child-abuse - cannot be accomplished without active intervention by the State. In a liberal democracy this has to be mainly in the form of adequate legislation and effective enforcement. But State action is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the eradication of social evils. In most societies in transition legislation tends to run ahead of changes in social attitudes and customs. Effective - in fact, draconian - implementation of the enacted laws is essential to bring about changes in social attitudes that have taken roots over generations. But, in a 'soft state' like ours, enforcement of the law is notoriously weak; while the hold of tradition, custom, superstition and religion remains strong as ever. The one instrument for weakening this hold: education, has seemingly been singled out for neglect by the Indian State. So, despite legislative measures, social evils of the vilest variety continue to plague Indian society: female foeticide, dowry deaths, child-labour, caste-violence, religious killings are just at the head of a long list.

It would, however, be wrong to bring these ills under the rubric of human rights violations. Most sources define human rights essentially as an issue between *governments* and individuals or groups. Thus: according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, human rights are "*the basic rights which every person has to be treated in a fair, equal way without cruelty, especially by their government..*" The Hutchinson Encyclopedia defines human rights as "*civil and political rights of the individual in relation to the state..*"

According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Human rights are political norms dealing mainly with how people should be treated by their governments and institutions.*" *How people treat each other is of course of vital importance, but such issues are distinct from lapses by governments in the area of human rights. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy observes: "Many political movements would like to see their main concerns categorized as matters of human rights, since this would publicize, promote, and legitimate their concerns at the international level. A possible result of this is "human rights inflation," the devaluation of human rights caused by producing too much bad human rights currency (Cranston 1973, Orend 2002, Wellman 1999, Griffin 2001b). The most basic idea of the human rights movement is not that of a right, but the idea of regulating the behavior of governments through international norms."*

In this context the "behaviour" of governments is, of course, not confined just to framing laws to eliminate social evils. The implementation (whether fully effective or not) of these laws, in good faith, is essential. It is not unknown for governments to act in violation of their own laws, or to condone and collude with such violations. This constitutes a clear breach of Human Rights. Poor implementation, by itself, does not amount to such a breach. In issues related to social practices and prejudices, attitudinal change is the key; and legislation can only play an enabling role. Given a 'soft state' and a tradition-bound society, implementation just has to be poor.

While some obvious cases - such as torture or custodial deaths - go unchallenged, politically sensitive questions are taken up as Human Rights issues by interested parties to "*publicize, promote, and legitimate their concerns at the international level.*" In recent years, the question of Human Rights has been gaining increasing prominence in international politics, providing the Great Powers with a handy tool to intervene in the internal affairs of other States. Someone has rightly described Human Rights intervention as a "*jemmy in the door of national sovereignty.*" Therefore representations in international fora against governments for human rights violations have to be resorted to with great caution and restraint. Here NGO's, domestic as well as international, have a crucial role to play. It cannot be claimed that in no case do domestic NGO's have a political, religious or sectarian agenda. In a liberal democracy nothing would prevent the NGO's from promoting the desired change through the normal democratic process of mobilising public opinion or invoking judicial intervention. When a domestic NGO seeks international intervention against its national government it follows that it has failed to muster the requisite public support or legal vindication for its stand. This factor has to be taken into account by the international NGO before it takes up the issue. This, of course, is true only when the domestic NGO is operating in a democratic setup. The situation in an authoritarian regime is entirely different.

The 'legislative' record of the Indian State in combating social ills perhaps cannot be faulted. But the laws remain on paper. The situation on the ground, the social reality, is deeply disturbing. Social evils, such as caste-discrimination, gender-bias, dowry-killings, female foeticide, human trafficking, child-labour, communal violence continue almost as if the State did not exist. For this the State deserves to be blamed, but mostly for incompetence - not *mala fides*. Indian society at large is perhaps even more to blame, for being unable to break the shackles of religion, superstition and venality.

-Vir Narain

A Pragmatic Approach: Narsingh Narain

We have thought it's appropriate to devote the first issue of this journal mainly to a clarification of our ideological position. While we do not wish to attach too much importance to creed writing and ideological discussion, it is necessary to avoid confusion and misunderstanding as far as possible. Experience gained during the six years of our existence has shown that this end is not easily achieved. For example, our Memorandum of Association lays down clearly that we, as a body, are not committed to any views about the existence or non-existence of God, but we do not accept revelation, prophets and incarnations. Yet followers of traditional religions continue to call us atheists, and freethinkers often ask us what proofs we have of the existence of God, as if belief in some kind of God was part of our creed. Another reason for stating our position in some detail is that it is not entirely in harmony with the prevailing view among perhaps the majority of Humanists that the rejection of supernaturalism is the most essential feature of Humanism. We consider supernaturalism a secondary matter. The fundamental points in our dissent from the traditional religions are the rejection of infallible authority, and the affirmation of the autonomous nature of morality and the value of life in this world.

For all practical purposes supernaturalism means belief in God. We do not rule out all concepts of God. We reject the anthropomorphic God of popular religion, but even this rejection is not, with us, a basic point on a level with the rejection of authority. It has been argued that if one is to postulate a God at all one cannot help thinking of Him in anthropomorphic terms. Paul Arthur Schilpp says: "Every Human conception - of no matter what - must inevitably be anthropomorphic." There is force in this argument. Charles Francis Potter, one of the pioneers of modern Humanism observed that to call a religion anthropomorphic "is no real condemnation, for, to think at all, man must think in man-like terms." Actually "anthropomorphic" (or "personal") is only a shorthand for the traditional concepts of God. The existence of God may be a matter of inference, but the nature of God can only be a matter of conjecture. It was natural to invest God with all conceivable attributes regarded as admirable, or which were displayed by earthly rulers. But our ideas of what qualities are admirable have been changing, and if the religions had not got wedded to the doctrine of the finality of their teachings, the God of religion today would have been very different from the God of our forefathers. Whether belief in any such God is consistent with Humanism can only be determined in the light of its practical implications.

The traditional ideas of God have to be rejected because, besides being unpalatable, they involve harmful consequences. Belief in revelation fetters freedom of thought and judgement and the religious justifications for human suffering tend to produce indifference towards it. Take the case of a child born blind. According to one group of religions we must accept this as part of the inscrutable wisdom of God. An American missionary in India (E. Stanley Jones) has written a book to show that "suffering is the gift of God." According to another group of religions we must regard the child's blindness as a punishment for misdeeds committed in a previous life. If suffering is a gift of God why try to relieve it? If the blindness is a just punishment, why try to interfere with it? Of course, these logical implications of the religious doctrines are not actually followed because our thinking is not consistent and our actions are only partly governed by logic. The Hindu *Karma* theory, though intended to establish the existence of a moral law in the universe, makes Divine justice worse than human justice since the person who is punished does not know what he is being punished for. Again, assuming the existence of God, religious worship, as David Hume said, "degrades Him to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with entreaty, solicitation, presents and flattery." If any one feels that, while such notions have to be dropped, there is reason to believe in the existence of God, and if one derives comfort from such a belief, that is not inconsistent with the Humanist Outlook, as we understand it.

In 1960, when the Humanist Union was formed, we issued an Explanatory Note and there were some comments on it in the *British Humanist* and in the quarterly journal of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Some extracts from these are being reproduced in this issue. We are also printing on page 2 (*page 167 in this issue*) a new Manifesto adopted by us in February last. We have tried to define moral and spiritual values in paragraph 2 of the Manifesto. The orthodox think that we have no right to use the word "spiritual" at all. On the other hand, many Humanists would shun the word because of its long dualistic associations. A. Eustace Haydon said: "I would like to drop the word 'spiritual' from our religious

vocabulary until it can be purged of its dualistic taint.” But there seems to be no other word to denote the qualities which we have called “spiritual”, and Humanists have not in fact been able to avoid using the word. The so-called Amsterdam Declaration of 1952, adopted at the inauguration of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, speaks of man as “a spiritual and moral being”. An official statement of the Indian Radical Humanist Movement describes the objective of the movement as “the reconstruction of the world as a Commonwealth of freedom brought about by the cooperative endeavour of spiritually emancipated men.” We have not, however, come across any definition of the word “spiritual” from the Humanist standpoint.

We have not done well as a society and even the starting of a small quarterly magazine after six years of existence is a venture. We are facing in India a general apathy towards all social movement. In our Explanatory Note, six years ago, we said that what we had to contend against was not hostility but apathy, and this has turned out to be only too true. In the latter half of the 19th and the early years of the present century there were some popular movements for religious and social reforms, such as those which paved the way for a rational and humanist movement in the West. But these have all dried up and it has become unfashionable to talk about religion and social reform. Political factors have had a good deal to do with this. Many of us saw foreign rule not only (or not so much) as a political challenge but as an insult to our religious and cultural heritage. As the movement for political freedom developed it became more and more allied to religious revival. The small beginnings of Indian Rationalism were smothered under an upsurge of patriotic fervour. The influence of Mahatma Gandhi, for all its salutary impact in other respects, did not encourage freedom of thought where religion was concerned. Gandhi galvanized the people to a high pitch of idealism by a rare example of self-sacrifice and devotion. But the people who were thus roused had not got beyond the medieval concepts of philanthropy and social justice. The enthusiasm for the political emancipation of the country was not matched by a corresponding enthusiasm for, or even any clear conception of, a new social order.

When independence came almost everybody seemed to assume that it was the business of the political party in power to usher in a new era of social justice and economic prosperity. Worship of power and authority is an old tradition, and in conformity with it we have made too much of our politicians and ministers, who often speak from a high moral pedestal. A common occurrence in the old days was that when a man of a low caste managed to acquire a kingdom, the priests would soon discover that he was really descended from a high-caste ancestor, who had concealed his true identity for political reasons. A purification ceremony would then be carried out and the Raja would resume his supposed high caste status, perhaps to revert again to the lower caste if he failed to retain the throne. This mentality, and the habit of looking up to the ruler for everything, persist. The moral consciousness of even our educated men - whether believers or non-believers - functions today in old and narrow grooves and is satisfied with occasional charity and almsgiving. Concern for social welfare, since it has little traditional roots, is regarded as a purely political matter. We have sought to remove social evils by Acts of Parliament which, after being passed, simply adorn our statute book. We have failed to realize that a new social order cannot be brought about by the politicians and the Government, though these have to play their part. It requires a new ethical passion in our hearts and the clearing away of many wrong and outmoded ideas. A body like the Humanist Union can only expect to make small gains in this direction, but these are well worth working for.

- Vir Narain

Dealing with Religion

When the International Humanist Movement came into being in 1952 its declared mission was to provide an alternative to “*traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other.*” Now that the Humanist Movement has passed the half-century mark, we need to ask ourselves how far we have succeeded in achieving this objective.

Is the world less afflicted today by religious intolerance and sectarian conflict than it was in the middle of the last century? Have totalitarian systems given way to democratic governments? And - most importantly for Humanists - if any progress has been made in these areas, what has been the contribution of the Humanist Movement? What strategies, if any, have we adopted for achieving our objectives and how effective have they been?

Before we try to find an answer to these questions, perhaps we should take a closer look at our objectives. Apparently the founder-members of the IHEU perceived, in their times, two major ills in the world which had to be dealt with: first, traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation, and secondly, totalitarian systems, taking note perhaps of the situation behind the Iron Curtain. The remedies for these two ills were: secularism for the first; and democracy for the second. The identification of these twin objectives was natural, and conceptually convenient, in the prevailing situation. However, the real adversary of Humanism, which underlies both the evils identified in the founding Amsterdam Declaration, is authoritarianism.

In a communication to the IHEU Board in 1966, Narsingh Narain wrote: “*It seems to us that the most objectionable feature common to all religions is not supernaturalism but authoritarianism, that is, attachment of finality and infallibility to their teachings....This authoritarianism is the more harmful and dangerous as it has not been confined to the religions; its influence has been much more pervasive ... authoritarianism and its offshoots, dogmatism and fanaticism, are to be found everywhere in the world today, and we feel that **the primary function of Humanism is to help in the transition from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian society in all spheres of life.***” (emphasis added) This formulation covers both the objectives - or tasks - set out in the Amsterdam Declaration. But it does involve a certain reorientation of the stated Humanist position, which focuses mainly on its opposition to supernaturalism and theism. This has crucially affected the Humanist Movement’s perception of its goals, and its response to religion; although thinkers as influential as Hermann Bondi have cautioned against it. Bondi says: “*I think in this country we are too impressed by the concept of God. Many religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism, don’t have a God at all. On the other hand, Communism in its heyday had a ‘sacred text’ which were the writings of Marx and Lenin, and you justified an argument by referring to these writings. So it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God - indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined. No, what makes a religion is a “revelation”. And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems - that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything.*”

Humanist Response to Religion

The Founding Declaration as well as Julian Huxley’s Presidential Address at the first International Congress were clear about the role and self-image of the Humanist Movement. Huxley said: “*As I see it, the world is undoubtedly in need of a new religion, and that religion must be founded on Humanist principles if it is to meet the new situation adequately. Humanists have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas. When I say religion I do not mean merely a theology involving belief in a supernatural god or gods; nor do I mean merely a system of ethics, however exalted; nor only scientific knowledge, however extensive; nor just a political social morality however admirable and efficient. I mean an organised system of ideas and emotion which relate man to his destiny, beyond and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing system of laws and social structure. Such systems of ideas and emotions about human destiny have always existed and will always continue to exist; they certainly include the theistic religions; and I believe we have nothing to lose by using the word religion in the broadest possible sense to include non-theistic formulations and systems as well. Otherwise we run*

the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions.”

It is more than fifty years since this eloquent plea was made, and the Humanist Movement has steadily moved away from Huxley’s vision of a new religion “*founded on Humanist principles.*” The very idea of Humanism being a religion - or being called a religion - has been rejected. The question “Is Humanism a religion?” conveys a deceptive impression of addressing a question of fact. In reality it is a matter of choice: it depends on how we choose to define religion. If we define religion in terms of its doctrines, such as belief in the supernatural, God and an afterlife, Humanism is clearly not a religion. In recent times Professor AC Grayling has been a strident advocate of this view. If we define religion in terms of its function, there is no reason why Humanism should not be called a religion. In declaring itself as an alternative to religion, Humanism clearly seeks to perform some of the functions that religion has served. As Narsingh Narain said: “*If we define religion (as I think we should) in terms of the function it has tried to serve, that is, of helping individuals to feel at home in an apparently hostile universe, and not in terms of beliefs and doctrines, such as supernaturalism, then we are perfectly justified in speaking of a humanist religion.*”

The practical - and strategically important - question is: “Given that Humanism aims to provide an alternative to traditional religions, which approach is likely to be more effective in helping those belonging to traditional religions to adopt a humanist worldview? Is the outright rejection of any resemblance between religion and Humanism likely to be more persuasive than an acknowledgement of the commonality of certain valuable human purposes and functions between them?”

As quoted above, Huxley felt that we had nothing to lose by using the word religion. “*Otherwise*”, he said, “*we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward...*” HJ Eysenck held that “*In rejecting religion altogether, humanism may be throwing out the ethical baby with the supernatural bathwater.*” For Einstein the true purpose of religion could be taken to be the emancipation of mankind from “*the shackles of personal hopes and desires, and thereby [the attaining of] that humble attitude of mind toward the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence, which, in its profoundest depth, is inaccessible to man.*”

But, in 1989, the IHEU Board decided that the words ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ caused contention and confusion and, some years later, a ‘Minimum Statement’ was officially adopted: “*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.*” All member organisations are required, under IHEU bylaw 5.1, to accept the IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism. The leading figures of the movement chose to coin the word ‘lifestance’ to describe Humanism. This coinage - the equivalent of life-posture - is not likely to inspire much enthusiasm among members of religious groups, or even among humanists themselves. One is reminded of Paul Kurtz’s advice: “*Any proposed definition that we wish to introduce must be based, at least initially, upon common usage... The battles for men’s moral allegiances are often won by affixing a label.*” ‘Lifestance Humanism’ now seems to be passing into usage, confirming Huxley’s apprehension: “*Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions.*”

While distancing itself from religion the Humanist Movement does not necessarily have to reject religion as an unmitigated evil. Such an approach would be neither factually correct nor practically helpful in achieving the Humanist objective of weaning the great masses of people from their dependence on religious beliefs. As Narsingh Narain said: “*...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name ‘religion’, so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups.*”

Over the last few years two things have become increasingly clear: the objective of providing an alternative to traditional religions has lost its salience for the Humanist Movement; and, to the extent to

which it does engage with traditional religions, it has mainly adopted an attitude of rejection and ridicule. The “sympathetic understanding” is missing; and this is likely to prove counter-productive. The following account of the discussions on Science and Religion held in November in the Salk Institute of Biological Studies in California could well be true of a Humanist gathering: “*By the third day, the arguments had become so heated that Dr. Konner was reminded of ‘a den of vipers.’ ‘With a few notable exceptions,’ he said, ‘the viewpoints have run the gamut from A to B. Should we bash religion with a crowbar or only with a baseball bat?’ His response to Mr. Harris and Dr. Dawkins was scathing. ‘I think that you and Richard are remarkably apt mirror images of the extremists on the other side,’ he said, ‘and that you generate more fear and hatred of science.’*” (See ‘*A Free-for-All on Science and Religion*’, George Johnson, *New York Times*, November 21, 2006.) A follower of a traditional religion whose faith is wavering is likely to be put off, rather than persuaded, by the smug and sneering attitude of some humanists.

In the face of the escalating sectarian violence in the world, some humanists still maintain, as Professor Grayling does in his article in this issue, that “*What we are witnessing is not the resurgence of religion, but its death throes.*” As against this there is Peter L. Berger, who once argued that religion will lose against western modernity, but now admits “*that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever*”. “*Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, and Buddhist movements*”, says James V Schall of Georgetown University, “*seem to have grown stronger not weaker during the supposedly skeptical 20th Century.*” Military history is replete with examples of defeats caused by under-estimating the adversary.

Strategic Options for the Humanist Movement

The Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 states: “*Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to.*” This rightly assumes that, once the basic Humanist values - freedom of thought, the autonomous nature of morality, acceptance of uncertainty - are absorbed, parochial attitudes and reliance on religious revelation and dogma would automatically be shed. Clearly this is a gigantic educational task for which even the single-minded application of all the human and material resources available to the Humanist movement may not be adequate. The simultaneous pursuit of other, even closely related, projects such as Social Welfare or Human Rights may not be affordable; although it can be argued that these also serve to spread awareness of Humanist values. But the counter-argument here can be that there already are a number of organisations devoted to these objectives. The IHEU’s statement that “*Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote humanist values world-wide.*” is to be seen in this light.

It seems that, at present, all the intellectual and material resources of the international Humanist Movement have to be focused on its primary mission of providing an alternative to dogmatic religions based on revelation. As mentioned earlier, this might involve a reorientation of the Humanist attitude towards supernaturalism and theism. It certainly would involve a clearer understanding of the emotional and psychological sources of the power that traditional religions have exercised over the minds and hearts of people. Without this understanding, it is highly unlikely that we shall make any headway. “*Humanists*”, Huxley said, “*have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas.*” There are indications that, in rejecting religion altogether, we are also denying that there are any ‘religious implications of our ideas’. “*There are six billion people in the world,*” says Francisco J. Ayala, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Irvine, and a former Roman Catholic priest. “*If we think that we are going to persuade them to live a rational life based on scientific knowledge, we are not only dreaming — it is like believing in the fairy godmother.*” He adds, “*People need to find meaning and purpose in life, I don’t think we want to take that away from them.*” A Humanist Movement which ignores the emotional and psychosocial needs of ordinary people can have no success in providing an alternative to traditional religions. Some Humanists, with “an irrational passion for dispassionate rationality”, tend to dismiss many religious ideas, such as the idea of the sacred, as irrational. But we must pay attention to Durkheim’s insistence that even the most apparently irrational religious ideas correspond to real needs of the social order. Also, following Durkheim, the idea of *membership* has to be taken seriously by humanists. “*It would not be absurd to suggest*”, says Roger Scruton, “*that the tie of membership is a function of*

religion in those communities fortunate enough to exist outside modernity.” It can be argued that even those whose faith has been eroded by what Walter Lippmann calls the ‘acids of modernity’ need the tie of membership if the dissolution of the moral community into a state of universal breakdown and anomie is to be avoided.

Of the religions based on revelation, the basic challenge to the Humanist world-view comes from the monotheistic ‘religions of the book’ of Abrahamic origin. With Zionism acting as a catalyst, there has been escalating hostility between evangelical Christianity and political Islam in recent times, inevitably leading to a hardening of religious orthodoxy, and bigotry, on both sides. The Humanist Movement is confined mostly to the West, but it would be difficult to claim that it has made any difference to the religious attitudes of the general populace. To be sure, there has been a decline in orthodox religiosity in the West; but it has to be attributed mainly to the advance of modernity. Walter Lippmann has described the process very effectively. *“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.”* Lippmann goes on to say: *“When men can no longer be theists, they must, if they are civilized, become humanists.”* Whether the Humanist Movement, as such, has been effective in gathering in its fold those whose faith has waned is difficult to say.

In dealing with the other monotheistic religion based uncompromisingly on a single book of revelation - Islam - the Humanist Movement faces seemingly impossible odds. It has next to no presence in the Islamic world. Belief in revelation is mandatory in Islam. For a Muslim, to deny it is to be guilty of apostasy, punishable by death. The aggressive policies of the West, and its blind support for Israel’s policies of revenge and retaliation have made matters worse. Confrontation with Iran and Syria will exacerbate the situation further. The best that the Humanist Movement can do in this situation is to strengthen its position in the West. For this it has to assume the role of a successor, not an enemy, of traditional religion.

- Vir Narain

Reject RAP Morality and RAP God

Since words are the only weapons with which the battles of ideas can be fought, those who are fighting for a new idea invariably start off with a disadvantage: their opponents are better armed with a well-established vocabulary strengthened by usage, custom and historical associations. New words may have to be coined, or old ones assigned a slightly different meaning, to express a new idea clearly. The survival and growth of the new word-idea combination depends almost as much upon the acceptability of the word as on the strength of the new idea. T H Huxley's 'agnosticism' (1869) and G J Holyoake's 'secularism' (1846) represent two successful innovations that have had a great influence on the development of Humanist thought.

In the Humanist discourse on morality, however, there still seems to be a need to develop an adequate vocabulary. Narsingh Narain says: "*We have to take note of two categories of good social behaviour, one being that which is motivated by hope of gain or approbation, or fear of loss or disapprobation.... and the other on a sense of values inherent in human nature and requiring no external sanction. The latter alone deserves to be called 'moral', I do not know any name for the former but will call it 'lawabiding' ... It is basic to our position that morality and lawabidingness should be clearly distinguished and disentangled from each other.*"

However, it does not seem appropriate to characterise behaviour based on hope of reward or fear of punishment as lawabidingness. A person can (and most people do) adhere to the law because they consider it the right thing to do, and not out of fear of punishment - and the question of earning rewards for adhering to the law does not even seem to arise. In fact, it can be argued that lawful and unlawful behaviour belongs to a different (though not entirely separate) domain from moral behaviour. Perhaps the most suitable word to describe good behaviour based on hope of reward or fear of punishment is 'Godfearing' morality; except that in current usage (and in dictionaries) it is generally used as a term of approbation. A Godfearing man is meant to be a virtuous man. Rap (reward-and-punishment) morality is clearer, and has no such flattering associations. Also, we should note the fact that the existing word 'rap' reinforces the intended meaning.

The concept of rap morality leads to its source: a rewarding and punishing God. When Einstein said: "The main source of the present-day conflicts between the spheres of religion and science lies in the concept of a personal God." he most probably meant a rewarding and punishing God. Others have used the terms 'anthropomorphic' God and 'interventionist God'. The term 'rap God' is more direct and explicit, and establishes an immediate connection with rap morality. Within the Humanist movement there has always been a certain amount of difficulty in evolving a common approach to the various ideas covered by words like atheism, non-theism and agnosticism. New words, such as apatheism and irrelevantheism, have also been suggested. Atheists mostly reject all concepts of God (including those of eg Spinoza and Einstein). Non-theists presumably ignore the question of the existence or non-existence of God; and agnostics declare that they do not (or cannot) know. A pragmatic Humanist position in this matter would be that the Humanist Movement, as such, ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, *except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs*. In other words: Humanism is not concerned with the God of the philosophers; and rejects the God of the moralists. There should be no difficulty in achieving near-unanimity among Humanists on this formulation.

The Humanist Minimum Statement could then be recast thus: "*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, in the sense that it ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs. It does not accept a supernatural view of reality.*" (Variations emphasised)

In Spring 1966 a Manifesto adopted by the Indian Humanist Union (article 5) stated: “*Belief in an anthropomorphic God, who listens to prayers, grants boons and gives rewards and punishments; and belief in revelation, prophets and incarnations are inconsistent with the Humanist outlook. Theism not accompanied by such beliefs, as well as atheism and agnosticism, are consistent with Humanism.*”

By giving a name to the type of God, and the type of morality, we reject we will make the task of clarifying the basic Humanist position to the followers of traditional religions a little easier.

-Vir Narain

Humanists and the Trap of Atheism

It is perhaps not surprising that the worldwide rise in religious antipathies - particularly among the Abrahamic religions: Zionism and evangelical Christianity versus radical Islam - is now being reflected in a growing stridency in the West among atheists and rationalists. On 5 November 2006, what is regarded as the first New Atheist conference, 'Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival', was held at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California. In April 2007, possibly as a counterpoint to the conference in California, a New Humanism Conference was held at Harvard. According to Doug Muder, who reported on the conference (*Does humanism need to be new?*, *UU World Magazine*, 6 Apr 2007), New Humanism sought to project itself as different from the new atheism: "*Positive. Friendlier. Less threatening.*" "*New atheism, of course, is its own new product.*" he says "*It rejects the meekness and tolerance of old atheism, which was content to let the advance of science whittle God down to size. Having witnessed the rise of fundamentalism, new atheists see religion as a dragon to be slain, not a senile giant they can allow to die in peace. In old atheist books, the quintessence of religion was the superstitious peasant or the charlatan cleric. In new atheist books it's the suicide bomber.*" Writers like Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion"), Daniel Dennett of Tufts University ("Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon"), and Sam Harris ("The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation") are popularising a provocative and militant form of anti-theism and portraying religion as an unmitigated evil.

Humanist position on atheism

Although it is perhaps true that a large proportion of humanists would describe themselves as atheists, the Humanist movement has never considered atheism (construed as a rejection of *all* concepts of God) as a necessary part of the humanist outlook. According to the Minimum Statement adopted by the IHEU: "*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic. It does not accept a supernatural view of reality.*" The sentence "It is not theistic." needs elaboration, and it has been suggested that it should be recast thus: "*It is not theistic, in the sense that it ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs.*" In other words, the Humanist movement, *as such*, rejects the God of the moralists, while it ignores the God of the philosophers as having no relevance to the conduct of human affairs. As declared in the Manifesto of the Indian Humanist Union in 1966, "*Belief in an anthropomorphic God, who listens to prayers, grants boons and gives rewards and punishments; and belief in revelation, prophets and incarnations are inconsistent with the Humanist outlook. Theism not accompanied by such beliefs, as well as atheism and agnosticism, are consistent with Humanism.*"

Hermann Bondi's advice

In an interview in 2002, Bondi cautioned against making atheism a central issue: "*I think in this country we are too impressed by the concept of God. Many religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism, don't have a God at all. On the other hand, Communism in its heyday had a 'sacred text' which were the writings of Marx and Lenin, and you justified an argument by referring to these writings. So it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God - indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined. No, what makes a religion is a "revelation". And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems - that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything. So in arguments with Christians, when you come to the word God you have already lost the battle. You must stress the revelation, that's where the real disagreement lies, because if you are driven to a position where you have to deny the existence of an undefined quantity you are in a logical absurdity.*" (Sir Hermann Bondi, talking to BHA News in Spring 2002. Emphasis added.) Surprisingly this sensible advice has largely been ignored.

Some advocates of atheism have devised elaborate arguments and definitions to avoid (perhaps not deliberately) falling into the trap mentioned by Bondi. For example, Ramendra quotes Hiorth as saying :

“Atheism is characterized by a deliberate (that is, chosen) absence of belief in the existence of gods. Some atheists go further, and believe that particular gods, or all gods, do not exist. Lacking belief in Gods is often referred to as the “weak atheist” position. Believing that gods do not (or cannot) exist is known as “strong atheism”. ” (See page 263) The distinction here is clearly between the *absence* of belief and the *denial* (or rejection) of a belief. There can be no question of a logical inconsistency where the absence of belief is involved; and what has been described as ‘weak atheism’ is better described as non-theism. The so-called ‘strong atheism’ which involves the proposition: “I do not know, or care, what your concept of God is, I hold it to be false.”, apart from getting into the logical absurdity against which Bondi had warned us, smacks of a dogmatism quite alien to the humanist ethos. As Williams wrote in Wired magazine: *“Unfortunately, the New Atheism seems to illustrate the adage that we are in danger of becoming what we hate, with an attention-grabbing rhetorical superstructure that far outstrips the scholarship and philosophical substance of its intellectual foundations.”* This can perhaps best be described as aggressive atheism.

Pragmatic approach

It is perhaps true that the most influential thinkers in the Humanist movement are also modernist philosophers; making it difficult for them not to take issue with the God of the philosophers. There is an element of truth in Roger Scruton’s observation: *“Modern people are frequently puzzled by the idea of God; and for the modernist this puzzlement becomes a god. (Hence the barely-concealed passion of the modernist when he addresses those questions which were once pre-empted by religion. It is this cryptoreligious passion that draws people to modernism: let us at least believe in our unbelief!)”*

Pragmatic Humanism is concerned with only those beliefs and attitudes which have a bearing on the conduct of human affairs. Belief in the existence of an anthropomorphic God who rewards and punishes, and responds to prayers, strikes at the very roots of the Humanist worldview, which is based on the autonomous nature of morality. The God of Spinoza, Whitehead or Einstein is of no interest to Humanists qua humanists. A total rejection of all concepts of God, being advocated so fervently by the ‘new atheists’, is not only logically untenable, but also *unnecessary - and essentially counter-productive -* from the humanist point of view.

“Rejecting rejection and denouncing denunciation are necessary steps, but will something bloom in this freshly plowed garden?” asks Doug Muder as he eloquently closes his report on the Harvard Conference. *“Inside the encrustations of hostility, pride, and other generic human weaknesses, humanism’s positive core presents the same challenge as ever: to combine sophisticated reason with naïve goodness, to celebrate the world as it stands before us, and to (gently and lovingly) coax it to be better than it ever has been. The what of humanism isn’t new and doesn’t need to be. But the how is something we have never gotten right. How do we unite communities without enemies? How do we organize without coercion? How do we love what is and yet strive for what can be? How do we dream without giving our loyalty to fantasy worlds and betraying the only world we can live in? And if a few people here or there manage to answer those questions in their own lives, how do we capture those answers in words and stories and images that anyone can understand? Maybe soon we’ll start seeing new answers to those questions. That would really be a new humanism.”*

But Humanism is not a matter of fluctuating fashions. Perhaps what we need is to go back to the large and tolerant vision of its founders.

- Vir Narain

THEOPOLITICS: FAITHS IN CONFLICT

Ever since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) nation-states have been the main protagonists in all major conflicts in the world. But, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europe was ravaged by a series of bloody wars over religious issues. There are strong indications now that religion may return to centre stage as the major source of conflict and bloodshed. Those who continue to look at the international situation through only the Westphalian prism may seriously misread the security problems confronting the world.

Noting the post-war resurgence of religion, Alexander Saxton says in his book, *Religion and the Human Prospect*: “Scientists, social scientists, clergy high and low, theologians, political leaders, mass media, all agree that the re-energising of religion has altered the course of history by rolling back - perhaps for ever reversing - the long secular trend that began with the scientific revolution and the age of industrialisation.”¹ Not every one is so pessimistic. According to Professor A C Grayling: “As private observance, religion will of course survive among minorities; as a factor in public and international affairs it is having what might be its last - characteristically bloody - fling.”² Then, again, there is Peter L. Berger, who once argued that religion will lose against western modernity, admitting “that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever”. The facts on the ground seem to suggest that Saxton and Berger were not exaggerating.

The Demographic Picture

As in geopolitics, a Hobbsean situation prevails in theopolitics as well. There is ongoing and chronic bloodshed between religious groups around the world, on a greater or lesser scale. The main theater for this bloodshed for some time now has been the Middle East. The major protagonists in this conflict are the three monotheistic, Abrahamic, religions - Christianity and Judaism on one side against Islam on the other.

Just as there are tensions and civil conflicts within States, there are internal divisions within these great organised religions, complicating the theopolitical picture. A look at the demography of religions (with more than 300 million adherents) would broadly show how the theopolitical situation stands today.

Christianity: 2.1 billion (33% of world population) 50% Catholic

Islam: 1.5 billion (21%) 83% Sunni

#Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: 1.1 billion (16%)

Hinduism: 900 million (14%)

Chinese traditional religion: 394 million (6%)

Buddhism: 376 million (6%)

(source: http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

Archbishop Carey has contrasted the demographic equation with the existing economic disparity between Islamic nations and the West: “The 22 member countries of the Arab League have a total population of 300 millions, larger than the US and almost as large as the EU before its expansion. They have a land area larger either than the United States or that of the whole of Europe. Yet, these 22 nations, with all their oil and natural resources, have a combined GDP smaller than the Netherlands plus Belgium or half of California alone.”³ Here we have numerical parity combined with desperate economic disparity and religious antipathy.

Significant changes in the demographic patterns, both in terms of numerical increase and geographical spread, are taking place. Recently, the Pew Foundation on Religion and Public Life and the Council on Foreign Relations co-hosted a roundtable to explore geopolitical implications of the growth, distribution and migration of Muslim and Christian populations. As its “event transcript” states: “Population momentum - rapid growth due to previously high fertility rates - is a critical issue in the Muslim areas of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia, yielding “youth bulges” that place substantial economic and political stress on those regions. In Europe, the Muslim diaspora has stimulated vigorous debates over cultural and political identity. At the same time, Christianity has literally “gone south,” exploding demographically in the developing world and augmenting ongoing sociopolitical turmoil in places such as West Africa. How might these demographic trends within the world’s two largest religions - Islam and Christianity - contribute to religious and political conflicts? Distinguished experts

Todd Johnson, Brian Nichiporuk and Philip Jenkins discussed these issues and their significance for U.S. foreign policy interests.”⁴ It was brought out that the proportion of the world’s population that is Christian and/ or Muslim had grown from about 40 per cent at the beginning of the 19th century to about 60 per cent. Between 1900 and 2000 the number of Christians in Africa rose from 10 million to around 360 million. According to some estimates, China may end up by being both the world’s largest Christian country and its largest Muslim one.

The Role of Diaspora

In the tensions and conflicts between organised world religions, the role of diasporas is becoming increasingly critical. Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and Europe, and tension between Muslim and Western cultures is growing. Large-scale migrations, especially from the Middle East, have created sizeable Muslim enclaves in what has so far been predominantly Christian territory. Advances in transportation and communications have ensured that the migrant populations no longer have to cut the cultural umbilical cord with their countries of origin. As their numbers reach a critical mass, assertions of religious and cultural identity become more strident. In Islam, particularly, the idea of citizenship has always been subordinated to the idea of membership of a worldwide and seamless Muslim Umma. This, coupled with the extraordinary power of the Muslim faith over the minds of its adherents, makes the assimilation of migrants in the host community very problematic. According to a Pew Forum Poll, young Muslims were almost twice as likely as their parents to attend mosque and identify themselves as Muslim first and Americans second. Even more worrying is the fact that 26 percent of them felt that terrorist suicide bombings could sometimes be justified.

The situation in Europe, with a much larger Muslim diaspora, is more serious. *“More and more European mosques are promoting hard-line Islamic ideology, including the demonisation of Jews, infidels and homosexuals, and contempt for Western culture and civilisation.”*⁵ As Brian Nichiporuk has commented: *“In the case of the Muslim diasporas in Europe and elsewhere, we have to keep in mind that most of the citizens of these diasporas are perfectly law-abiding, productive citizens, in excess of probably 90 percent across Europe. But there is a small fraction, an activist or a radicalized fraction, that can take advantage of these new technologies and the diaspora settlement patterns to form what one could consider a transnational radical Muslim identity, sort of a Salafist-Wahhabist transnational identity that supersedes state boundaries. This creates ripe recruiting for organizations like al Qaeda and Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is the transnational organization based in London that is now recruiting very actively in Central Asia. With new technologies, these diasporas can also find new ways to operate in innovative networks, which can involve NGOs, charities and medical organizations. They can lay the groundwork in Western Europe for insurgencies or terrorist acts in the Middle East or in other parts of the world by working with certain charities and NGOs.”*⁶

There is, however, no Christian diaspora (as distinct from minorities), in Muslim lands. This asymmetry complicates the situation for the West.

Leading Voices: Denouncing the Other

There is probably some truth in Ralph Peters’ comment: *“All monotheist religions have been really good haters. We just take turns.”* Expressions like ‘The axis of evil’ or ‘the Great Satan’ reflect a deep hostility based on more than a thousand years of history. According to a recent article in Britain’s New Statesman magazine: *“Puritanical yet wealthy, convinced of their God-given mission to the rest of the world, sure of a divinely inspired history,... Saudi Arabia and the United States are surprisingly similar in their mixture of religion, politics and interference in other countries’ affairs. Saudi Arabia has Wahhabi Islam, Middle America has evangelical Christianity. Historically, they hate each other. Yet both see themselves as exponents of the purest version of their faith. Both are suspicious of modernity. Both see no distinction between politics and religion.”*⁷ This comparison is likely to be seen by many as being unfair to the USA; but it would be difficult to deny that the polarisation that is taking place today is between Evangelical Christianity as represented by the USA and Wahhabi Islam as represented, and extensively promoted, by Saudi Arabia. The twist in the plot here is that the House of Saud - the rulers of the kingdom - are allies of the USA. There is open confrontation, however, between the USA and Shia Iran, which seems to be headed for even a possible armed conflict.

Ayatollah Khomeini lost no opportunity to denounce the USA: *“The USA is the foremost enemy of Islam. It is a terrorist state by nature that has set fire to everything everywhere and its ally, the international Zionism does not stop short of any crime to achieve its base and greedy desires, crimes that the tongue and pen are ashamed to utter or write.”*⁸ President George W Bush characterised Iran as part of an ‘axis of evil’ *“arming to threaten the peace of the world”*. As a former Palestinian Foreign Minister reportedly recalls: *“President Bush said to all of us: ‘I am driven with a mission from God’. God would tell me, ‘George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan’. And I did. And then God would tell me ‘George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq’. And I did”*⁹ Just in case this is considered freakish, or unrepresentative of American attitudes, here is what another President of the USA, Calvin Coolidge, had to say during his inauguration: *“The legions which [America] sends forth are armed not with the sword but with the cross. The higher State to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favors of Almighty God We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligations to bestow opportunity and liberty upon less favored people.”*¹⁰

Geopolitical Framework

Given the current structure of international relations, it is inevitable that the interplay of theopolitical forces finds expression in geopolitical interactions. National boundaries and the territorial footprints of religions have only a limited correspondence. National interests, the interests of the ruling elites (which, more often than not, is not the same thing), and religious affiliations do not always match. So, most major Islamic nations receive financial and political support, as well as vast quantities of arms, from the USA. Too often, as in the case of Pakistan at present, these are opportunistic relationships which come apart as conditions change. The trail of the USA in recent history is littered with the lethal debris of these relationships. There is no sign - despite their experience with the Taliban and Al Qaeda - that American policymakers have become aware of the dangers of using the religious card to promote the geopolitical aims of the USA.

The case of Iraq shows how deadly a combination of messianic zeal, geopolitical aggrandisement and economic greed can be; and how unmanageable tribal and religious antipathies in traditional societies can become. Hans J Morgenthau’s advice seems particularly wise and prescient today: *“Intervene we must where our national interest requires it and where our power gives us a chance to succeed. The choice of these occasions will be determined not by sweeping ideological commitments nor by blind reliance upon American power but by a careful calculation of the interests involved and the power available. If the United States applies this standard, it will intervene less and succeed more.”*¹¹ The failed invasion of Iraq has served as an inoculation that has created a massive number of antibodies against the West in Islamic countries and, equally dangerously, among Muslims all over the world.

The lessons of that failure, however, do not seem to have been fully absorbed. Contingency plans are afoot for full-scale military engagement in the Gulf. To counter Iran, \$ 20 billion worth of arms are proposed to be supplied to the Sunni states in the Gulf region - Saudi Arabia and five others. *“We do expect Iran to fire at GCC states,”* says Anwar Eshki, President of Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, *“and we do expect the GCC to retaliate with its superior air and naval assets.”*¹² Theodore Karasik, a Middle East analyst at RAND Corp. outlines the military plans: *“In order to secure sea lanes and prevent the closure of the straits of Hormuz, which would be a primary objective, GCC and US forces will have to destroy or seize Iranian rigs used as SPODs (bases) and may also have to occupy some islands, including the three islands claimed by UAE.”*¹³ This situation could be translated thus in theopolitical terms: Evangelical Christianity, supporting Zionist Israel and at war with radical Islam worldwide, is arming and aiding Arab Sunni regimes in the Gulf region (the natural enemies of Israel) to counter the growing belligerence of the Shia state of Iran. At the same time, Shias and Sunnis and the American alliance are killing one another on a daily basis in Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, Arabs and Jews have been killing each other in Palestine.

Secularism is now disintegrating everywhere as the children of Abraham shed each other’s blood. Hilaire Belloc’s prophesy seems to be coming true. *“It has always seemed to me possible, and even probable,”* Belloc wrote, *“that there would be a resurrection of Islam and that our sons or our grandsons would see the renewal of that tremendous struggle between the Christian culture and what has been for more than a thousand years its greatest opponent.... And for my part I cannot but believe that a main*

unexpected thing of the future is the return of Islam. Since religion is at the root of all political movements and changes and since we have here a very great religion physically paralysed but morally intensely alive, we are in the presence of an unstable equilibrium which cannot remain permanently unstable.”¹⁴ Where will this tangled web of divided aims and loyalties, changing intentions and capabilities, lead? Perhaps we are already on Matthew Arnold’s darkling plain, “swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash by night.”

- Vir Narain

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HUMANISM AND HUMAN SUFFERING

In rejecting the concept of God - at least a rewarding-and-punishing God - Humanism also got rid of theodicy with all its contradictions and evasions. But the problem of suffering, identified in theodicy with evil, remains. The problem for Humanism now is not explaining or justifying suffering, but finding ways for the individual to cope with it. Bertrand Russell describes the situation: "... *all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears.*" Religion's way of tackling the problem - and a highly successful one, too - was to create comforting myths about God and an afterlife. Humanism refuses to offer any comforting myths. "*But play no tricks upon thy soul o man*", says the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, "*let fact be fact, and life the thing it can.*" Narsingh Narain says: "*Let us have the courage to accept the fact that the universe does not care for us or for the human race or for life. Let the tenderminded continue to hug the old delusions or invent new ones. For the tough-minded, stoicism is the only dignified answer.*"

Two important points need to be made here. The first has to do with the supposedly uncaring universe in which we live. To counter all the nonsense about a loving and caring, and intervening, God it was perhaps necessary to emphasise the indifference of nature to our collective or individual destiny. But the fact - apart from the inappropriateness of attributing 'human' feelings like indifference or hostility to natural forces - remains that we, and the world we live in, have been brought into existence and sustained by natural forces. The fact that we exist is proof enough that Nature is conducive to life, consciousness, intelligence and - miraculously - abstract thought. The pessimism generated by projecting nature as hostile or indifferent is not rationally sustainable. Narsingh Narain himself, in another context, talks of "*...the forces - whatever their nature - through the operation of which we have come into existence and by which our lives are sustained.*"

The second point has to do with stoicism as the answer to human suffering. If Humanism is to provide an alternative to traditional religions, the stated aim for which the International Humanist Movement was founded, greater attention will have to be paid to the problem of human suffering. One of religion's great values is the comfort it provides to those who suffer. Religion helps people to cope with the suffering caused by death, disease and bereavement, with the fear of these. As someone has said; "He who fears suffering, is already suffering from the thing he fears." Humanism is seen by many people as a 'fairweather faith' - a faith for the well-to-do and the well-adjusted intellectual. Stoicism in the face of death and bereavement is an ideal that only a miniscule number of people can be expected to achieve. Apart from its comforting myths, religion also has other features calculated to mitigate personal suffering: rituals and ceremonies, the bonds of community membership. Humanism, rooted basically in an almost exclusively rationalistic approach, has perhaps insufficiently explored the emotional and psychological possibilities of coping with personal suffering. Aaron Kheriaty, a psychiatrist, says: "*I think, in the end, we do need religious faith to adequately endure suffering. Consider the approach to suffering currently on offer from secular humanism, whose proposal is to someday eliminate all suffering through purely technological means. While this is not possible (and it will never be completely possible), the backup plan seems to be to eliminate the one who is suffering, by means of euthanasia or assisted suicide. This seems to me to be a rather primitive form of denial; it pales in comparison to notions of redemptive suffering found among many religious believers. If we are looking for pragmatic ways to "cope", non-religious answers to suffering appear rather pale and thin compared to religious responses that do not shrink from or ignore the reality of human suffering.*"

Kheriaty's depiction of the secular-humanist position does not seem to be fair. But here is what a Humanist website has to say: "*How do humanists deal with evil and suffering? Humanists don't necessarily believe in "turning the other cheek" or just accepting evils and injustices passively - this would just increase suffering by encouraging evil actions. But most rational people acknowledge the benefits of eventually forgiving and forgetting even the most terrible of wrongs. The desire for punishment or revenge can dominate the mind of the victim to an unhealthy extent, and revenge can simply perpetuate and multiply wrongs. There will always be some suffering in the world that we cannot do much about - and we have to learn ways of coping.*

Humanists do not believe that a deity will help us to end evil and suffering, but that we humans must all do what we can to alleviate and prevent them, because happiness is the ultimate good. The nineteenth

century American humanist Robert Green Ingersoll summed up this philosophy in *The Gods* in 1876: "...happiness is the only good; ...the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so."

So humanists believe that we should live, vote, choose jobs, relate to other people, spend and invest our money, in ways that respect other people's rights, minimise suffering, and increase happiness."

(www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentviewarticle.asp?article=1213). This "humanist" formulation, still couched in the idiom of theodicy, shows no feel for the real sources of human sorrow and suffering. Other humanist statements do not seem to do much better. One writer says: "*Why does humanism even need to address the question of suffering? Isn't it perfectly obvious that humanism ought to be against suffering, that humanists ought to seek to minimize it? What more is there to say?*" According to another: "*For humanists, it is through freedom, science, reason, love, and art that we achieve much of what it means to be human — and this, in turn, is what might allow us to overcome evil and suffering.*" The theologian Rudolf Bultmann, arguing that the scientific world-view could not succeed in reassuring mankind about the "essential uneasiness" of human existence says: "*The uncanniness, the riddle, the anxiety, the dread, the uneasiness are not foolish imaginings that could be removed by enlightenment, but rather belong essentially to our life. One does not become lord over the dread of death simply by considering death something natural, an instance of the universal necessity of dying . . . Each of us dies his own death and has to come to terms with death for himself.*" Perhaps even more difficult than coming to terms with one's own death is coming to terms with the death of those close to us.

While disease, death and bereavement have always been the primary, and irreducible, sources of grief and suffering, it is true that there has been a radical change in the way they impact peoples' lives today. Scientific knowledge has made sure that disease is no longer the dreadful mystery it used to be, and epidemics are a thing of the past. Increasing longevity has made untimely death very much rarer than it used to be - and each untimely death left a large number bereaved. People turn to religion when faced with the fear of death and bereavement. It can be argued that, among other things, improvements in health and longevity have helped to weaken the hold of religion on people.

The irreducible suffering caused by death and bereavement, however, remains; and Humanism has to find a way to help people to cope with it. For the lucky few who have the strength, stoicism is clearly the answer. Others will find solace in ceremonies, and in solidarity with a caring community. A stoic attitude to life can perhaps be taught, and humanist education should promote it. Rituals and ceremonies are so much a part of religion that humanists are wary of adopting them. There may be a need to overcome this inhibition. Humanism has yet to find a way of bonding that seems to come naturally to religious communities.

In our times the medical profession is perhaps the only one to address the problem of suffering directly. No easy answers seem to be available. As a doctor said at the end of his presentation on the subject: "*Patients come to the hospital in order to be helped and that informs the way their suffering is brought into play. Should we seek help ourselves as well? I don't think so. By whom? There is nobody for us to call upon. But I do know that ... it is crucial to refuse to help or to pretend to do so. No asking for help, no promising of it. How then to engage with the morality implied in the dis of dis-ability? For suffering is a non-good I do not want to get romantic about it, as if, finally, it were 'always good for something, somehow'. No. How to face the non-good and how to allow oneself to be faced by it? That is the question. Enough for now. And while usually one ends by saying, 'any questions?' it makes more sense on this occasion, to end by welcoming your answers.*"

-Vir Narain

FAKING INTOLERANCE FOR POLITICS AND PUBLICITY

Genuine intolerance mostly arises from ignorance and bigotry – but, howsoever deplorable, at least it is genuine. These days the temptations offered by divisive politics, a sensation-hungry media and a permissive system of public interest litigation are encouraging an increasing number of people to take to the streets or courts over trivial issues – supposedly hurting religious or nationalist sentiments – to gain personal publicity or political mileage. In recent times there has been an alarming increase in the number of such cases.

Artists, like MF Husain, have been vilified; writers like Taslima Nasreen and James Laine have been attacked; actors, such as Khushboo, have been sued for expressing their views. Film-makers like Aamir Khan and Gowarikar have been subjected to bans and boycotts. In a very recent case, arrest warrants were issued against Richard Gere and Shilpa Shetty for what some people alleged was an improper hug. Every year, there are threats of violence to prevent the celebration of St Valentine's Day.

Fortunately, Richard Gere's case has had the effect of provoking the Supreme Court into coming out strongly against frivolous complaints of this kind. "Filing of such frivolous complaints and issuance of arrest warrants on such complaints bring a bad name to the Indian judiciary", said a Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India. Justice Katju of the Supreme Court says: "these days unfortunately some people seem to be perpetually on a short fuse, and are willing to protest, often violently, about anything under the sun on the ground that a book or painting or film etc has hurt the sentiments of their community. These are dangerous tendencies and must be curbed with an iron hand. We are one nation and must respect each other and should have tolerance."

So those upholding tolerance, civil liberties and secularism now have to deal with two types of enemies: the genuine bigoted and aggressive ignoramus, and his counterfeit, the clever opportunist who cynically exploits democratic freedoms to gain personal publicity or political advantage. For the first type, education is basically the answer. As a former Attorney General of India says: "The crucial point is that tolerance cannot be legislated nor can it be enforced by judgments. .. Education has a vital role to play in this connection. Indeed the highest result of education is tolerance."

For the second type, a number of weaknesses in society and governance need to be addressed. Our main weaknesses seem to be : public apathy in the face of outrages against freedom of expression, support (tacit or otherwise) from political factions for motivated agitations, the tendency – especially of the lower courts – to countenance frivolous complaints and proneness of the media to resort to sensational reporting.

Public apathy is perhaps the most distressing of these as it implicates us all – and especially the intelligentsia. Taslima Nasreen's anguished cry fell on deaf ears and she eventually had to leave the country : "This is also the land where I have had to suffer and pay the price for my most deeply held and fundamental convictions, where not a single political party of any persuasion has spoken out in my favour, where no non-governmental organisation, women's rights or human rights group has stood by me or condemned the vicious attacks launched upon me. This is an India I have never before known."

The case involving James Laine, whose book, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, led to gross acts of vandalism against the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, was no different. As Laine noted in his piece in The Los Angeles Times (12 January 2004): "The vast majority of Indians are appalled at what happened in Pune. And yet no one has stepped forward to defend my book and no one has called for it to be distributed again."

The role of political parties has mostly been self-serving. Given the compulsions of vote-bank politics, the question of a principled opposition to acts of bigotry and intolerance does not even seem to arise.

As far as the lawcourts are concerned, changes are already visible in the handling of frivolous litigation. The imposition of deterrent fines for irresponsible litigation is bound to have a salutary effect.

The role of the media is somewhat ambivalent. It has a natural commitment to freedom of expression but, in its pursuit of sensational news it gives wide publicity to the antics of goons and bigots who attack freedom of speech – and wide publicity is what they are after in any case. Obviously, there can be no question of curbs on the freedom of the media; and in a commercially competitive situation self-regulation becomes a difficult proposition. It would be unrealistic to expect any significant change. As elsewhere in the world, ours is becoming a jaded society relentlessly pursuing entertainment and

sensation. For the media the most profitable course of action, in the words of TS Eliot, is to: “Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled/ With pungent sauces, multiply variety/ In a wilderness of mirrors.”

-Vir Narain

Humanist Thinkers in India

The Humanist Movement is the child of the Enlightenment and of liberal Christianity. It was born soon after what was undoubtedly the bloodiest and most brutal decade in human history. World War II had just ended, and the full horrors of the Holocaust were just beginning to dawn on the world. Europe had almost been over-run by Nazism and Fascism. Half of Europe was still in the grip of a totalitarian ideology, and all of it was a smouldering ruin. Six million Jews had died, but anti-Semitism was very far from dead. The Atomic Bomb had just made its deadly debut; and it seemed that any future war could spell the extinction of life on earth. The founders of the International Humanist Movement, undoubtedly shaken by these events, realised that, if the horrors of recent history were not to be repeated, something had to be done to loosen the grip of ideological and religious dogma on the minds of ordinary people. When the International Humanist Movement came into being in 1952 its declared mission was to provide an alternative to *“traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other.”*

While the Humanist Movement took roots in the West - it cannot yet be claimed that it has flourished - elsewhere, especially in the sandy soil of theocratic nations, it has not even germinated. In other words: the presence of the Humanist Movement is weakest where it is needed the most. This has had significant unintended consequences which this may not be the place to discuss.

India, however, presents a different, and much more hopeful, picture. India gave birth to three of the world's most liberal and tolerant religions - Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It has a rich, variegated and highly sophisticated philosophical tradition, and a pluralistic approach to matters of faith. For the average Indian, the transition to Humanism does not involve a total rupture from his traditional faith, as it does for those who have been brought up in the monotheistic, revelatory Abrahamic religions. In Islam the adoption of the humanistic, nontheistic, worldview would amount to apostasy, punishable by death. Even assertive atheism finds no hostile public reaction in India. The success of Gora's Atheist movement and the widespread adoption of the atheist label in South India show that the Indian environment is conducive to the growth of rationalism and humanism.

There is, however, hardly any reason for Indians to congratulate themselves on this score. Religion and society in India have been responsible for some of the worst crimes against humanity - Sati and the practice of untouchability being perhaps the two worst examples.

Raja Rammohan Roy can justly be considered a precursor of modern Indian humanists. As Narsingh Narain wrote: *“Rammohan Roy played a significant part in almost every sphere of public life, but in the field of social reform he is a unique and almost solitary figure in Indian history. For hundreds of years Hindu leadership of all kinds had been completely indifferent to such social evils as infanticide, polygamy, child-marriages and Sati... Rammohan Roy succeeded in getting Sati abolished not because he was able to carry the majority of Hindus with him but because he was able to gather just enough following to strengthen the hands of the British rulers who had been wanting to put an end to the cruel custom for a long time but were afraid to do so for fear of being accused of interfering with religious freedom.”*

While the practice of Sati has been practically abolished, discrimination based on caste still plagues Indian society, despite comprehensive legislation against it, and despite strong affirmative action on the part of the state. In recent times a large number of reformers have devoted their lives to eradicating this evil: Jyotirba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, BR Ambedkar and many others.

Manabendra Nath Roy, a prominent figure in the early years of International Communism, founded the Indian Radical Humanist Movement (IRHM), originally as a political party, but in 1948 he decided to convert it into a social movement. The Radical Humanist Association is one of the earliest members of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. The other prominent humanist thinkers in India have been: Periyar, Kovoov, Gora, AB Shah, Narsingh Narain, Ramswaroop Verma and Abraham Solomon. Dr Ramendra of the Buddhivadi Foundation has done a great job in critically appraising the views of some of

these prominent humanists - and we are serialising his work in this and the next two issues of our journal. Humanists, being freethinkers, can hardly be expected to agree with each other on all points, and there are many aspects of Dr Ramendra's analysis which some humanists may like to take issue with. But the important thing is to start a dialogue and debate in India on the basic ideas of humanism as seen from the Indian perspective. As Narsingh Narain wrote in the introduction to the August 1968 issue of this journal devoted to "Humanist Viewpoints": *"Some of us are inclined to regard such debates as useless and distracting. What is the point, it is asked, of indulging in abstract talk when so many urgent practical problems are crying out for a solution. Humanism, we are told, is already too much of a drawing room affair, a mere pastime for intellectuals and semi-intellectuals. The argument sounds plausible, but will not stand examination."* We are confident that Dr Ramendra's articles will bear this out.

- Vir Narain

R E T H I N K I N G O U R A I M S A N D S T R A T E G I E S

Humanists, secularists and rationalists everywhere are becoming increasingly concerned - even alarmed - at the role being played by traditional religions the world over in promoting instability and violence. Not long ago traditional religions seemed like an anachronism that would fade away with the growth of science and rationality. That has not happened. Science, as knowledge of the physical world, has hardly had any effect on the mindsets of millions of ordinary people. On the other hand technology, spawned by science, has had a profound effect on the way every individual on this planet lives. Among other things, technology has put enormous destructive power in the hands of individuals and small groups. Now a small group of fanatics - even an individual - can cause more death and destruction than a whole army could even a hundred years ago. With the tensions created by increasing migrations and interpenetration of cultures, such groups can pop up anywhere. In societies which are at the receiving end of these transitions there is an understandable sense of insecurity. Traditional religion is seen as an evil that has to be combated.

The International Humanist Movement came into being with the express aim of providing an alternative to “*traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other.*” Religion was not seen as an unmitigated evil, but perhaps as a necessary stage in the evolution of human society which now had to be outgrown. As Narsingh Narain said: “*...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name ‘religion’, so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups.*” Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear that the objective of providing an alternative to traditional religions has lost its salience for the Humanist Movement. Other issues and causes, undoubtedly worthy in themselves, have caused attention to be diverted from the main aim. To the extent to which it does engage with traditional religions, Humanism has mainly adopted an attitude of rejection and ridicule. The “sympathetic understanding” is missing. If the vast masses of people have to be weaned off their dependence on the myths and divisive dogmas of traditional religions, this sympathetic understanding is indispensable. Humanism has to see itself as a successor to traditional religions, not as an enemy.

In recent years, as the depredations of terrorists and fanatics have increased, leading humanists in the West have adopted a more and more hostile attitude towards traditional religions. If the minds and hearts of traditional religionists have to be won, this is bound to be counterproductive. But the new stridency that has arisen in the humanist movement seems to be receiving widespread support among humanists. In a recent survey, the ‘New Humanist’ magazine obtained the responses of 5,350 people to the question: “Are Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens a good thing for humanism?” The responses were as follows:

Yes, it’s time to get serious in our rejection of religion – 4,186 (78%)

Yes, they enliven the debate – 943 (17%)

No, their aggressive tone is unhelpful – 186 (3%)

No, they’re a menace to humanism – 35 (0%)

For a movement whose members are essentially freethinking individuals there has been a surprising lack of discussion, debate and dissent among Humanists on how to further our basic aims. There has also been a disappointing lack of introspection and self-appraisal. Two important questions come to mind. How effective has the International Humanist Movement been in pursuing, over the last fifty-five years, its goal of providing an alternative to traditional religions? How effective has it been in establishing an international presence?

As to the first question, some humanists - among whom one can count Professor A C Grayling - believe that religion is on its last legs. He says: “What we are witnessing is not the resurgence of religion, but its death throes.” He goes on: “As private observance, religion will of course survive among minorities; as a factor in public and international affairs it is having what might be its last - characteristically bloody - fling.” It is likely that most humanists, as well as religionists, will find this claim of “Mission accomplished” highly exaggerated.

As to the international presence of the Humanist Movement, the IHEU has 112 member organisations in 37 countries. Currently the UN has 192 member states. Only four Islamic states, Nigeria, Egypt, Bangladesh and Pakistan have member-organisations of IHEU. What their state of health is can only be guessed. It is perhaps fair to say that the Humanist Movement has mostly been confined to the West. A cynical friend once remarked that the footprint of the IHEU is more or less the same as that of NATO. A report on the 17th World Congress states: "There were no Africans present." Also: "There was no representation from the Islamic world." "The Indian contingent", it goes on, "was disproportionately small in comparison to the range and breadth of Humanist activity in that region." Yet the same report starts with a resounding claim: "If there's one thing the 17th World Humanist Congress is going to be remembered for, it is an agenda that truly encompassed the globe. It would not be an exaggeration to say that every region and every religion got its own space at the conference, and though the attendees, for obvious reasons, were mostly from the Western world, this did not get in the way of looking at issues that concern all of humanity. If this is not international, what is? And what bigger proof could there be of the IHEU's international status?"

Of the two areas of concern identified by the IHEU's founding document: "*traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other.*" Totalitarian Marxism-Leninism has all but disappeared, China now being in a category of its own. But the hardline adherents of religions which claim to be based on revelation, despite some of us being in denial, have been gaining ground. Evangelical Christianity and radical Islamism (and perhaps Orthodox Judaism, demographically insignificant but politically powerful) are now in almost open confrontation. As a recent article in the New Statesman says: "*Puritanical yet wealthy, convinced of their God-given mission to the rest of the world, sure of a divinely inspired history... Saudi Arabia and the United States are surprisingly similar in their mixture of religion, politics and interference in other countries' affairs. Saudi Arabia has Wahhabi Islam, Middle America has evangelical Christianity. Historically, they hate each other. Yet both see themselves as exponents of the purest version of their faith. Both are suspicious of modernity. Both see no distinction between politics and religion.*"

The Humanist movement, despite its strong presence in the USA, has been unable to stem the tide of rising Evangelism. Here is what Paul Kurtz had to say not long after 9/11 : "*Religious jingoism rules the day: Americans have rallied round the flag, and "God Bless America" has become America's theme song. Today the USA has become a virtual theocracy (de facto if not de jure).*" He adds: "*There are an estimated 1,350 sects and denominations, many with bizarre theologies. The established religion (Christianity/Judaism/Islam) is monotheism, the belief that God the Father looks over this land and guides its manifest destiny. The House of Representatives recently passed a nonbinding resolution 404-0 which permits the posting of "God Bless America" on all public-school buildings. There is almost no room for dissent, and the secularist and atheist viewpoint is all but ignored.*"

About Islam, Kurtz is equally realistic: "*The sword of Islam has advanced the ideological-theological message of the Qur'an and the Hadith over the centuries, and the jihad has been ferocious in many periods of history. With the decline of British, French, and European colonialism, some 56 Muslim countries came to life, everyone except Turkey a theocracy. A new impassioned missionary zeal has inspired terror and revolt, from Nigeria and Algeria to Egypt, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, the Kashmir, Malaysia, and Indonesia. That is the constant theme of Islamic history.*"

The conclusion seems to be that the International Humanist Movement has not made any significant progress towards achieving its basic goals. Where it is undoubtedly needed most - in the Islamic world - it is practically absent; where it does have a strong presence - in North America - it has failed to have an impact. Clearly, we need to rethink our aims and strategies. As of now, one is reminded of what Mathew Arnold had to say of the "Angelic Atheist" Shelley, describing him as "*a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.*"

- Vir Narain

Religion Red in Tooth and Claw

If the attack on the twin towers in New York was *jhatka*, slaughter at one blow, the attack on Mumbai, lasting about sixty hours, was something like *halal* - ritual slaughter as prescribed for the faithful. The reaction from the international community, as also within India - including the Muslim community - was firm and categorical: this cannot be tolerated. But, as usual, attention was focused on the knife in the hands of the demented butcher, ignoring his mind.

Our editorial 'Bamiyan and the "Triumph" of Education', written shortly before 9/11, (see page 59) brought out the havoc being played with the minds of young Muslims by thousands of madrassas spread all over the sub-continent. In fact these jihadi factories, mostly Saudi-funded, are not confined to Islamic countries. They are all over the world.

Also as usual, while the real culprit is religion, the brain-washed young terrorist is made the scapegoat. Religion is let off the hook on the plea that the fanatics have misinterpreted the basic teachings of their religion. India's highly respected religious scholar, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, needs to be quoted at length here. "Terrorism will persist in one form or another until the ideology of violence is countered with another ideology based on peace. But let us first understand the ideology of violence that is resulting in terrorism. This ideology is that Islam is a political system and that it is the duty of all Muslims to establish the political rule of Islam in the world. This kind of thinking was not prevalent during the time of Prophet Muhammad or his early companions. It is a later invention. This was developed over the last few centuries by a handful of people and has become widespread in the Muslim world today. This has led to present-day violence. A large number of Muslims, especially many among the youth, have become obsessed with this ideology and are trying to establish the political rule of Islam, thinking it to be their ticket to paradise." He goes on to say: "After studying Islam by making reference to its original sources - the Quran and Hadith - one can say with certainty that the political interpretation of Islam is an innovation and the real Islam, as followed by Prophet Muhammad and his early followers, is based on peace compassion and tolerance."

One could take Maulana Wahiduddin's word for this; but here is what the Ayatollah Khomeini - whose knowledge of the Quran would be difficult to dispute - had to say: "Those who follow the rules of the Koran are aware that we have to obey the laws of *qissas* (retribution) and that we have to kill... War is a blessing for the world and for every nation. It is Allah himself who commands men to wage war and kill." Here are two learned men believing in the same revelation, but coming to two diametrically opposite conclusions. The fact is that almost all scriptures contain contradictory material and can be quoted to support a large number of different positions. Given the undeniable fact that the Muslim world has many legitimate, and serious, grievances it is natural - especially for the young - to turn to the part supporting *quissas*.

The fact, emphasised repeatedly by Hermann Bondi, is that unless the whole idea of revelation is firmly rejected, we shall not be able to loosen the grip of religious violence around the world. This cannot be done without the secularisation of education; and the secularisation of education cannot be accomplished without the secularisation of the State. Unfortunately, while theocratic states show no sign of moving towards secularism, secular states in the West have started pandering to religion. In the UK, faith-based schools have been established, and Sharia has been included in the judicial system. According to an official estimate, almost 1,600 madrassas operate in Britain, teaching Arabic and the Koran on weekday evenings to about 200,000 children. There are an estimated 35,000 madrassas in India. Many of these teach comprehensive skills to students of both sexes, as approved by the country's education department, but the foundation still is a literalist reading of the Koran.

So long as the worldwide network of madrassas remains, there will be a steady supply of fanatical young men - and women - ready to kill, even if they kill themselves in the process. Here is what Vali Nasr, an authority on Islamic fundamentalism, had to say in an interview:

What you're saying is that, if we wanted to look for the causes of what's happened — Al Qaeda and the movement worldwide — we would have to look to the schools, to the educational system which Saudi Arabia has fostered in the Islamic world?

... In order to have terrorists, in order to have supporters for terrorists, in order to have people who are willing to interpret religion in violent ways, in order to have people who are willing to legitimate crashing yourself into a building and killing 5,000 innocent people, you need particular

interpretations of Islam. Those interpretations of Islam are being propagated out of schools that receive organizational and financial funding from Saudi Arabia. In fact, I would push it further: that these schools would not have existed without Saudi funding. They would not have proliferated across Pakistan and India and Afghanistan without Saudi funding. They would not have had the kind of prowess that they have without Saudi funding, and they would not have trained as many people without Saudi funding.

Education is the key. But there is no indication that any one has a plan to starve the roots of terrorism through education, although that is the main long-term solution. In the mean time we shall keep reaping the bitter fruits of fundamentalism while fire-fighting to limit death and destruction.

- *Vir Narain*

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*

Nuclear Renaissance or False Dawn?

Nothing is closer to the core concerns of Humanism than the protection of Human Rights and the Environment. In fact, in certain cases, issues of environmental concern become issues of human rights as well. The use of nuclear fission for generating power is one such case. Even one nuclear accident can have a direct and catastrophic effect, not only on the current generation of human beings - leave aside other forms of life - but on future generations as well. In this, the hazards of nuclear power-generation are qualitatively different from those, for example, of transportation and industrial pollution. But there is no dearth of spurious comparisons between the risks, say, of fatalities on the road and the risks associated with a nuclear accident.

The issues are highly technical. But the human consequences of even a minor miscalculation are so drastic that matters cannot be left in the hands of experts alone. And there is some truth in the saying that, for every expert, there is an equal and opposite expert. Even very eminent authorities can sometimes be seriously off the mark. Lord Kelvin, for example, said in 1896: "I have not the slightest molecule of faith in aerial navigation other than ballooning." The British Secretary of State for War had this to say in 1910: "We do not consider that the aeroplane will be of any possible use for war purposes."

As one commentator has put it: "Who should we ask whether it is wise to build nuclear power plants? Who should we ask what is the best for our society? The answer may make you rub your eyes: We should ask ourselves! Important decisions in our life - and the question about nuclear power plants is such an important decision - must not be delegated to others. ...**We can and must always make important decisions ourselves.** This is the key issue. Only the details and the less important things like "how do I make a lot of money?", we can leave up to the experts like bankers, energy analysts, etc..."

Howsoever technical the arguments for and against the use of nuclear energy may be, the essential issues of human concern do not lie outside the scope of the intelligent and enquiring layman.

There is ample evidence to show that the whole life-cycle of nuclear power-generation - from uranium mining, reactor operation and spent-fuel handling through decommissioning and final disposal of nuclear waste - is fraught with high risks. But growing fears of global warming, and the part played in it by carbon emissions, have driven large numbers of environmentalists to abandon their earlier opposition to nuclear power. Some of them have become its strongest advocates. We have, for example, James Lovelock, described as 'one of the great thinkers of our time' (*New Scientist*) and 'one of the environmental movement's most influential figures' (*Observer*). In his book *The Revenge of Gaia* (p 116) he says: "A television interviewer once asked me, 'but what about nuclear waste? Will it not poison the whole biosphere and persist for millions of years?' I knew this to be a nightmare fantasy wholly without substance in the real world. I also knew that the natural world would welcome nuclear waste as the perfect guardian against greedy developers, and whatever slight harm it might represent was a small price to pay. One of the striking things about places heavily contaminated by radioactive nuclides is the richness of their wildlife. This is true of the land around Chernobyl, the bomb test sites of the Pacific, and areas near the United States' Savannah River nuclear weapons plant in the Second World War. Wild plants and animals do not perceive radiation as dangerous (nor, apparently, do some 'environmentalists'! ed) and any slight reduction it may cause in their lifespans is far less a hazard than the presence of people and their pets." It is hard to believe that this was not written tongue-in-cheek.

Uranium Mining

Briefly, the core issues in uranium mining are: Uranium and its decay products, buried deep in the earth, are brought to surface. Radon gas produced in the mine causes lung cancer. Leftover piles of materials or 'uranium tailings' contain over a dozen radioactive materials. There is no perfect storage of these radioactive materials to prevent them from finding their way into the soil, water, plants, animals, fish and humans. Apart from the usual risks of mining, uranium miners worldwide have experienced a much higher incidence of lung cancer and other lung diseases. There are several studies indicating an increased incidence of skin cancer, stomach cancer and kidney disease among uranium miners. Yet, on April 15, 2004, the Supreme Court of India dismissed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on the hazardous impact of

the uranium waste disposal by the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) at Jadugoda, East Singhbhum District of Jharkhand.

Despite opposition from local people - mostly tribals - the Indian Government is going ahead with plans to develop uranium mines in a number of states including Meghalaya, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. It is a cruel quirk of geology that 80% of the world's uranium is mined from the lands of the Indigenous People. In India 100% of our uranium comes from Indigenous lands in Jharkhand and Meghalaya. As one report says: "It is not just a coincidence that 90% of the miners who are deputed underground are Adivasis."

One survey finds high levels of deformities and cancer near Jadugoda uranium mine. In a shocking revelation, the Indian Doctors for Peace and Development (IDPD) external link has come out with some facts regarding the health hazards faced by miners working in the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL). The survey was undertaken by an organisation affiliated to Germany-based International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) in association with Jharkhandi Organisation Against Radiation (JOAR).

According to the survey, more children - about 9.5 per cent of the newborns - are dying each year due to extreme physical deformity, primary sterility is becoming common with 9.6 per cent of women not being able to conceive even three years after marriage. Cancer deaths in nearby villages are about 2.87 per cent and 68.33 per cent people are dying before the age of 62. (*The Telegraph March 2, 2008*) www.wise-uranium.org/umopjdg.html

Reactor Operations

The main hazards of reactor operations have to do with safety and security. It is important to make a distinction between safety and security; although the close relationship between the two must be borne in mind. Safety concerns safeguards against breakdowns, accidents arising out of negligence or mismanagement; and minimising the damage caused by natural disasters. Security relates to protection from deliberately hostile actions such as sabotage, terrorist attack or attacks by missiles or bombs.

Safety. While there have been progressive improvements in reactor design, the fact remains that nuclear power plants are vulnerable to accidents resulting in meltdown or other large radiation releases due to human error, worn out or defective parts and natural disasters such as earthquakes or flooding. Even without an accident or attack, nuclear power plants threaten public health by routinely releasing radiation into the soil, water and air. The Indian experience in this regard has not been encouraging. Early in 1995 a seminar on 'Nuclear Energy and Public Safety' was held in Delhi, co-sponsored by the India International Centre and some other organisations. A book, titled *Nuclear Energy and Public Safety*, edited by Dr Vinod Gaur, was published after the seminar, with contributions from about twenty eminent scientists, academicians and others. The picture that emerges from this, as summed up in the Preface, is disturbing. . Talking of "sloppy technology and management practices" it says: "The devastating fire at Narora, the major flooding of Kakrapara, and the collapse of the containment dome at Kaiga are recent examples of failures, details of which remain unavailable to the public, causing deep concern about the hazard potential of our nuclear installations. This situation supports a lax technological culture through immunity from public exposure at the expense of public anxiety, and clearly underlines the wisdom of creating public transparency of plans and designs and of hazards and failure analyses reports of large and crucial public utilities, as practiced by most democratic nations."

A report written a decade later remains far from reassuring. Talking of India's reactors it says: "Safety systems have been inadequate in many facilities. For example, the two reactors at Tarapur shared emergency core cooling systems for a long time in violation of standards that required each reactor to have its own system. The reactors at Madras and Rajasthan had been operating for many years without high pressure core cooling systems, which would be needed if coolant is lost during an accident. The need for such systems has been known since the 1970s but the Madras reactors, built in the mid-1980s, were operating without them until 2004". (*Nuclear safety: A poor record, Ashwin Kumar, India Together, 4 Oct 2008*)

Security. Security relates to protection from deliberately hostile actions such as sabotage, terrorist attack or attacks by missiles or bombs. Even if it is

conceded that adequate safeguards can be instituted to prevent any catastrophic outcome in case of accident, negligence, mismanagement or natural disaster, vulnerability to enemy action still has to be taken into account - particularly for states like India, which live in a troubled neighbourhood. As Mycle Schneider says: “The idea of encouraging and promoting nuclear energy seems even more surprising in countries that are beset by armed rebel groups, many of whom have demonstrated stunning levels of unscrupulousness toward their fellow citizens. Some people have labeled civilian nuclear facilities “pre-deployed nuclear weapons.” The phrase becomes particularly significant in this context” A single successful attack on a nuclear plant can be incalculably catastrophic. In his landmark book on the subject: *Nuclear Plants as Weapons for the Enemy: An Unrecognized Military Peril*, Bennett Ramberg points out that any country that possesses nuclear energy facilities gives its adversaries a quasi-nuclear capability to use against it.

Along the same lines Gerd Rosenkranz of the Heinrich Böll Foundation says, “It is a brutal fact that a state whose actual or potential enemies have nuclear power plants can spare itself the arduous path of building its own atomic bomb. Attacking the enemy’s civilian power stations is as good as having a bomb of one’s own because a commercial nuclear power plant holds, in order of magnitude, more radioactivity than is released by exploding an atomic bomb; long-term radioactive contamination from a “successful” attack on a power plant would be much more drastic than that from a bomb. ” “The core of a typical nuclear plant” says Martin Zuberi “contains about 1,000 times the radioactivity released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. A high explosive bomb used against it would acquire the attributes of a nuclear weapon without its blast effect. According to an environmental impact statement of the U.S Nuclear Regulatory Commission a large truck bomb used against a nuclear reactor in a highly populated area could produce 130,000 deaths. An ordinary conventional explosive could thus be turned into a large radiological weapon.”

Within a nuclear power plant perhaps the most vulnerable part is the spent fuel pool. Spent fuel pools for boiling water reactors are located above ground. This can make these reactors even more vulnerable. Conventional explosives, by causing a breach in the pool water connections can cause a fire worse than even a reactor meltdown. As one report says, “If a fire were to break out at the Millstone Reactor Unit 3 spent fuel pond in Connecticut, it would result in a three-fold increase in background exposures. This level triggers the NRC evacuation requirement and could render 29,000 square miles of land unin-habitable.”

Waste Disposal

It is almost universally acknowledged that the problem of long-term radioactive waste storage has not yet been fully solved. Several countries have considered using underground repositories. Spent fuel rods are now stored in concrete casks close to the nuclear reactors. Plutonium, which contained in the fuel rods, is extracted in COGEMA La Hague site (France) and Sellafield (Great Britain). In this process great amounts of radioactive waste have in the past been dumped in the sea. The practice of ocean floor disposal is now banned. The only long-term way of dealing with waste today is by geological storage; but the experience with the Yucca mountain proposal shows that this is not practicable - apart from not being desirable. “Following six decades of attempting to find a “safe” and dependable way of storing radioactive waste from nuclear plants,” says David Kyler “ experts still have no solution. These materials will remain a major public health threat for thousands of years. The more such materials we use, transport and store, the greater that threat becomes.” (for the *Journal Constitution*, November 02, 2008)

Decisive Factors

It can be argued that each of the following three factors, *on its own*, is sufficient to rule out, *for the present*, the widespread use of nuclear energy for power generation:

Irreversible environmental damage caused by uranium mining.

Security of nuclear power plants from sabotage/ hostile attacks.

Problems of long-term waste disposal.

The operative phrase in the above formulation is ‘for the present’. As technology advances, reliable solutions may well be found for these problems. For example, advocates of ‘Fast-neutron Reactors’ claim: “As today’s thermal reactors reach the end of their lifetimes, they could be replaced by fast reactors. Should that occur, there would be no need to mine any more uranium ore for centuries and no further requirement, ever, for uranium enrichment. For the very long term, recycling the fuel of fast reactors would be so efficient that currently available uranium supplies could last indefinitely.” (William H. Hannum, Gerald E.

Marsh and George S. Stanford, Smarter Use of Nuclear Waste, *Scientific American*, Dec 2005). It is also claimed that the problem of waste disposal will be very greatly reduced. However, the problems of security have not been touched upon. These are likely to remain.

As an Editorial in the *New Scientist* (12 Apr 2008) says: “We should have learned that compromising public safety for economic gain is a dangerous game. Ploughing ahead with a vast reactor-construction programme without finding a solution to the waste problem and without knowing how to deal with the additional risks of high-efficiency fuel seems irresponsible. History is full of similar compromises that were later regretted, if we only care to remember.”

- *Vir Narain*

Secularism: Theories and Practices

Faced with the word, the reader cannot be blamed if he is unable to suppress a yawn. The meanings and implications of secularism have been worried to death. But the idea has acquired such urgency in our times, many times more than when it was introduced by George Holyoake (1846), that we have to persevere in our attempts to clarify it as fully as we can. At the time when the word was coined, almost all nation-states had one dominant religion. Very few were democracies, and even they generally had one dominant religion. Theocracies and authoritarian rule were the norm. This ensured that religion-based civic unrest was generally kept in check.

The situation has changed dramatically in the last sixty years or so. Spectacular developments in transportation and communications, and the compulsions of global economics, have led to massive migrations from developing nations to the West. But these same developments have ensured that migrant communities no longer have to 'cut the umbilical cord' from their parent cultures and communities. As the immigrant communities grow, they inevitably acquire numerical weight in the democracies to which they have moved. Some religions/cultures - the two are inextricably mixed - find assimilation in the host country easier than others. Those who belong to the less miscible cultures, finding themselves at odds with local culture and customs, take recourse to assertions of separate identity, to appeals for religious and cultural rights. As they reach a numerically 'critical mass', these claims become more strident. Vote-bank politics sets in, straining the secular nature of the polity of the host country. The problem of secularism in the West, then, is how to cope with increasing religious/cultural heterogeneity in their society.

The Indian Situation

The situation in India, however, is different. Unlike the West, India has lived with ethnic, religious and cultural diversity for centuries; although it is this heterogeneity that led to its dismemberment at the end of the colonial era. Thanks to the staunch secularism of leaders like Nehru and - in his own, unique way - Gandhi, post-partition India adopted a secular constitution. Pakistan and Bangladesh chose to become Islamic republics.

It is one thing to have a secular Constitution; it is quite another to have a secular polity and a secular society. A secular Constitution is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a secular state. Secular politics is essential. Sectarian and communal politics inevitably vitiate the secular nature of the state. In India, the compulsions of vote-bank politics have ensured that the religion/ caste calculus plays an important part in the functioning of all parties. Every political party takes recourse to playing the religious or caste card in elections and government-formation. Thus Indian politics is far from secular. Similarly, Indian society cannot be described as secular either. Caste and religious prejudices abound, leading to frequent outbursts of violence. This startling statement by one of India's foremost jurists, Fali Nariman, shows the extent to which caste still contaminates Indian society: "Today, the greatest problem with our courts, high courts particularly, is the problem of caste. If you are a lawyer belonging to a particular caste appearing before a judge of such and such caste, you will either lose or win depending upon your caste."

But who, or what, can be described as secular? A State is secular when it makes no distinction between individuals of different faiths, and even of no faith. It is secular when it does not allow individuals to exercise special privileges - in dress and diet, for example - by virtue of their faith. The same criteria apply to institutions and authorities other than the state.

A political party is secular when its membership is open to all citizens and it professes (not only in its actions, but also in its nomenclature) no affiliation with, or sympathy for, any particular faith. An individual is secular if : (a) He believes in a secular state and (b) , regardless of his own faith (or absence of it), respects the *rights* of other individuals to profess and articulate their faith. But he is under no obligation to respect their *faith*.

The situation, then, is that while the Indian State derives its legitimacy from the Constitution, it derives its character from its polity and society. It can be argued that some features of the constitutional situation, such as the non-implementation of a Uniform Civil Code as enjoined in the Directive Principles, or the perpetuation of caste-based reservations, detract from its secular nature. These departures from the secular principle are exploited by communal and casteist parties to pursue their divisive and generally grievance-based politics.

As it is, Indian society is deeply religious, and enjoys (a word not to be taken too literally in this context) great religious diversity. In addition, it is divided into a myriad castes and subcastes governed by strict rules prohibiting intermarrying or interdining. Tolerance levels are low. Any number of young couples have been killed for breaking the marriage taboos. Recent events of organised violence against the Christian minority, not to mention the heinous murder many years ago of Staines along with his sons, are a blot on the character of Indian society.

While the central government has maintained a credible secular record, in many states ruled by religiously-inclined parties there has been blatant discrimination against religious minorities. That such parties still continue to get the support of the electorate illustrates the point that there are no adequate safeguards against majoritarian misrule in our Constitution. A strong centre could have provided some corrective. But shaky coalition governments at the centre seem to have become a permanent feature of the Indian political scene.

- Vir Narain

The situation, then, is that while the Indian State derives its **legitimacy** from the Constitution, it derives its **character** from its polity and society. It can be argued that some features of the constitutional situation, such as the non-implementation of a Uniform Civil Code as enjoined in the Directive Principles, or the perpetuation of caste-based reservations, detract from its secular nature. These departures from the secular principle are exploited by communal and casteist parties to pursue their divisive and generally grievance-based politics. Before every election they exploit divisions in society which already exist and create new garner votes. We have to ponder the long-term effects of this situation.

National Integration after Six Decades

As we approached the sixtieth anniversary of the Republic, a discussion on 'National Integration After Six Decades', jointly organised by IHU and IIC, was held in the India International Centre on 31 October, 2010. The panel speakers were three eminent persons from different fields: Mr Mukul Kesavan, Professor of History from Jamia Millia; Mr Prashant Bhushan, Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court of India; Mr Rudolph Heredia of the Indian Social Institute.

In my opening remarks I said: "In November 1949 the Constituent Assembly adopted the Indian Constitution which of course was formally introduced later but that was the day - 26 November 1949 - that the Constitution was adopted formally and given to us. A great Constitution there is no doubt about it. Thanks to the staunch secularism of people like Nehru and - in his own way, as Dr. Heredia has also written - Mahatma Gandhi himself, post partition India adopted a secular constitution while Pakistan and Bangladesh chose to become Islamic Republics.

For India it was clear that secularism was the only cement to hold together this great and disparate nation. Our record of 60 years shows that we have had to face great odds but, by and large, we can say that secularism has met with more success than failure. But this may be a good time to review after 60 years where we stand and where we are likely to go and see if there is any need to intervene and alter the course of events. Of course, in this story of success and failures, I think it is more productive to pay greater attention to our failures because that is where corrective action is needed.

As I see it the chief impediments in the way of our national integration are casteism and communalism, linguistic regionalism, and class disparity. There may be some more that one could add to the list but to me it seems that these are the three main factors which have acted against national integration. I also feel - it is subject to discussion - that many of these arise due to the nature of our electoral politics, because periodical elections tend to unravel the social fabric. Political parties widen divisions where they exist and find new ones where they do not."

Professor Kesavan, giving an insightful historical overview, speaks of India's "strange nationalism". He says: "It is not a nation that seeks to valorize homogeneity. It is not a nation that puts great store by the idea of uniformity: quite the opposite. It actually valorizes or celebrates the notion of diversity." Of course, while celebrating diversity, it has to be recognised that it gives scope to divisive forces such as communalism, linguistic chauvinism and aggressive regionalism. Nehru was acutely aware of this, as Kesavan himself has pointed out.

Prashant Bhushan draws attention to the actual sociopolitical situation on the ground. We have a secular Constitution, he says, "But in actual practice what we are seeing being practised on the ground is that there are large communities - whether they are Muslims or Christians, minorities of all kinds, the Dalits - who are facing enormous discrimination and who are facing enormous hardship in this country. This is one fact, and the other is that as yet we have achieved very little by way of actual understanding across communities."

In my view, three factors seem to be mainly responsible for this. One: that there are inadequate safeguards in the Constitution to prevent majoritarian misrule. Secondly; the electoral process relies heavily on divisive politics; and thirdly: the policy of widespread reservations promotes - and perpetuates - the fragmentation of society along caste/ communal lines. This, however, is a highly controversial issue.

Rudolph Heredia, rejecting a Hobbesian view of the world, asks: "National integration for what?" And answers: "The freedom struggle was for national integration for peace, for progress, for harmony, for enrichment and that is why it privileged diversity over homogeneity and uniformity. There were practical and political exigencies that helped this, but I think there was a vision behind it and I think it was essentially a Gandhian and socialist vision." He touches on the question of identity, and on peoples' perception of the Other. "... the kinds of identities that are being privileged today in India are exclusive identities and at the end of this road there cannot be anything other than violence. Now why do we construct identities negatively? I think we need to examine this a bit once again."

Part of the problem, I think, is that our policies have converted the relations between 'carriers' of different identities into a zero-sum game. What one caste/ community gains in terms of privileges, another loses. Inevitably, the Other is seen essentially as a rival claimant. How much better it would be if

everyone had a reasonable share of the fruits of good governance. But that requires the honest application of resources, which is perhaps a tall order.

The issue of class struggles was not explicitly touched upon, but the recent escalation in Maoist violence has brought into sharp focus the threats that it poses to national security and integration. A defining characteristic of the State is that it has a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within its own territory; and a failed state could well be defined as one which has substantially lost this monopoly. The most drastic steps are needed to ensure that this does not happen to the Indian Republic.

- *Vir Narain*

Neo-Humanism: What is to be Done?

Paul Kurtz's statement on Neo-Humanism opens up an excellent opportunity to re-examine what Humanism and humanists stand for. His neo-Humanists have sixteen recommendations - almost a maximum statement as compared with the IHEU's Minimum Statement. But the Minimum Statement, in a sense, is exclusivist: membership of IHEU is open only to those who accept this statement. On the other hand, Neo-Humanists, according to their first recommendation, "aspire to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to religious believers who share common goals." Membership does not seem to be an issue here.

Not all the neo-Humanists' recommendations are central to the humanist theme, but that is in keeping with their advocacy of inclusiveness. As one moves down the list of recommendations, the distance from the central concerns of Humanism seems to increase. Neo-Humanists, in the second recommendation, are "critical of theism". This is a shade stronger than the Minimum Statement according to which humanism "is not theistic". The recommendations that follow cover a whole range of what might be called 'liberal concerns': critical thinking, evidence and reason, moral growth, right to privacy; democratic way of life, tolerance and fairness, green economy, population restraint, environmental protection and the protection of other species. Finally there is an exhortation to "develop transnational planetary institutions to cope with global problems—such efforts include a strengthened World Court, an eventual World Parliament, and a Planetary Environmental Monitoring Agency that would set standards for controlling global warming and ecology."

This is a very ambitious programme, and one that almost all humanists will support. But a cynic would probably observe that a recommendation is basically a call for action by someone else! In any case, the *raison d'être* of the Humanist Movement, as restated in the Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 - "Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion." - has not been touched upon.

What is to be done

The question on which the Humanist Movement must focus most of its attention, however, is: What is needed to be done to provide an alternative to dogmatic religion?

The first step is to **identify broadly** the kind of people to whom this alternative can be most effectively offered. Clearly, there is no point in targeting the 'true believer' dogmatically anchored in his faith. "The true believer", as Arthur Koestler said, "moves in a vicious circle inside his closed system: he can prove to his satisfaction everything that he believes, and he believes everything he can prove." He will only react violently to any suggestion that there can be an alternative to his faith. The person who is most likely to embrace an alternative worldview is someone who finds it difficult to reconcile the myths and dogmas of his faith with rationality and the findings of science, a person for whom the "acids of modernity" - to quote a phrase used often by Walter Lippmann - have dissolved the shackles of faith.

The second step would be to **present the alternative** in terms that appeal to those who are disenchanted with the traditional religions and are looking for a worldview that does not conflict with modernity. Not many formulations - not the Neo-Humanist Statement, nor the Minimum Statement of the IHEU serve (or are perhaps even intended to serve) the purpose. There must be many statements by humanist organisations which would appeal to those who are looking for an alternative, but the following statement from the Humanist Association of Ireland* seems to serve the purpose admirably.

"Humanism is a view of life that combines reason with compassion. It is for those people who base their interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. In this, Humanism continues a tradition which has existed for over 2,500 years and which still flourishes today. Humanism encompasses atheists and agnostics, but is an active philosophy in its own right and not simply a negative response to religion."

To this it must be added that the Humanist Movement offers a worldwide fellowship of those who believe that reason, in the service of compassion, can fulfil the human needs that religion might have served in in past ages. Humanists are bound together emotionally by compassion, and intellectually by rationality and a commitment to freedom of thought. .

The next step would be to **work out our strategy**. For this it is crucial that the attitude of Humanism to religion is clarified. As Narsingh Narain said: "...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of

the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name 'religion', so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups." "In the great moral systems and the great religions of mankind", says Walter Lippmann, "are embedded the record of how men have dealt with destiny, and only the thoughtless will argue that the record is obsolete and insignificant." There has, however, been an increasing tendency among influential humanists/ atheists to treat religion with rejection and ridicule. This is likely to be counterproductive. Humanism has to see itself as a successor to religion, not as an enemy.

In singling out 'dogmatic religion' the Amsterdam Declaration clearly indicated that all religions are not to be tarred with the same brush. **Each religion has to be dealt with according to its role** in promoting anti-humanistic values. Humanism, for example, has no issue with Confucianism, Jainism or Buddhism. Most other religions are becoming increasingly harmless as secularism gains ground worldwide. Not much needs to be done here.

At present the two most formidable challenges to secularism are from Islam - especially political Islam - and the Roman Catholic Church. The latter has been badly bruised by recent scandals. But the number of avowedly anti-secular Islamic states in the world, and the inroads being made by them in the West, shows that there is a formidable task ahead for Humanism.

The humanist movement has to concentrate on secularism, democracy and human rights - particularly those aspects of human rights which have a bearing on religious freedom. The valiant efforts of Roy Brown in countering the attempts of OIC countries to vitiate the functioning of the UN Human Rights Council need to be specially applauded. But, outside the UN, hardly any attempts have been made to actively counter the growing strength of anti-secular forces. The Humanist Movement has next to nil presence in the Islamic countries - where it is needed most - because it would not be tolerated there. How to ensure this presence is a great challenge. Only just a handful of small groups of courageous people are working at great risk to their lives.

Perhaps the most comprehensive plan of action comes from the Manifesto of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain* who are not only breaking the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam but also taking a stand for reason, universal rights and values, and secularism. The council's aims, as stated by them, are:

1. Universal rights and equal citizenship for all. We are opposed to cultural relativism and the tolerance of inhuman beliefs, discrimination and abuse in the name of respecting religion or culture.
2. Freedom to criticise religion. Prohibition of restrictions on unconditional freedom of criticism and expression using so-called religious 'sanctities'.
3. Freedom of religion and atheism.
4. Separation of religion from the state and legal and educational system.
5. Prohibition of religious customs, rules, ceremonies or activities that are incompatible with or infringe people's rights and freedoms.
6. Abolition of all restrictive and repressive cultural and religious customs which hinder and contradict women's independence, free will and equality. Prohibition of segregation of sexes.
7. Prohibition of interference by any authority, family members or relatives, or official authorities in the private lives of women and men and their personal, emotional and sexual relationships and sexuality.
8. Protection of children from manipulation and abuse by religion and religious institutions.
9. Prohibition of any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state or state institutions to religion and religious activities and institutions.
10. Prohibition of all forms of religious intimidation and threats.

This deserves the full support of the International Humanist Movement.

-Vir Narain

*<http://www.humanism.ie/website/hai-aims-and-objectives>.

Secularism as a Human Right

Basically, the proposition here is that freedom of religion and belief, which is a key human right, is meaningless unless it is recognised that the right to live in a secular society is also a human right. There can be no 'freedom of religion' unless there is equality between religions. And secularism is all about the equal treatment of all religious - and non-religious beliefs - by the state.

The "normative core" of the human right to freedom of religion or belief has been condensed to eight components. These are listed below (No 1, 2 and 4 with explanatory notes).

1. Internal freedom. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, this right includes freedom for all to have, adopt, maintain or change religion or belief.

2. External freedom. Everyone has the freedom, alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest his or her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

3. Non-coercion.

4. Non-discrimination. States are obliged to respect and to ensure to all individuals within their territory and subject to their jurisdiction the right to freedom of religion or belief without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour sex, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or other origin, property, birth or other status.

5. Rights of parents and guardians.

6. Corporate freedom and legal status.

7. Limits of permissible restrictions on external freedom.

8. Non-derogability.

The idea that States shall treat impartially all religions, or belief systems - the essence of secularism - finds no mention here. As prominent Humanists Gogineni and Gule have rightly observed: "For a state to fulfil its obligation under international law to secure freedom of religion or belief for all citizens, the state should be neutral towards, and treat equally, all religious and belief communities." **Where the state fails to maintain this neutrality, it is in violation of human rights.**

It is also true that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a state to remain secular unless its politics is also secular. Indian politics is far from secular. The caste and communal calculus plays a huge part in candidate-selection, election and government-formation by political parties. The leaders of caste and communal vote-banks are wooed by all parties. The caste leaders are placated by promises of reservations, and the religious leaders by appeasement gestures of various kinds.

Globally, there are a large number of states - mostly Islamic - which are avowedly non-secular. But even in states which have a secular constitution, such as India, there are frequent violations of secular norms. High office-holders travel to places of pilgrimage and worship at public expense. Religious ceremonies are performed at inaugurations. Some religious pilgrimages, such as the Haj, are subsidised by the government. Obscurantist subjects are introduced in education syllabi. Hardly anyone complains. It is for the National Human Rights Commission to act suo moto in such cases.

But before the NHRC can take up such matters, the right to live in a secular society has to be explicitly recognised as a human right. The definition of 'Human rights' adopted in the Human Rights Act of 1993 is: "human rights means the rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the International Covenants and enforceable by courts in India."

Continuous attempts are being made by the Commission to address various Human Rights Issues. Some of these issues are being monitored as Programmes on the directions of the Supreme Court. These are:

Abolition of Bonded Labour

Functioning of the Mental Hospitals at Ranchi, Agra and Gwalior

Functioning of the Government Protective Home (Women),

Right to Food

A large number of programmes are being undertaken by the NHRC on its own. Significantly, none of these has any connection with Freedom of Religion or Belief. This is largely because India's secular constitution has left hardly any room for grievance by religious communities. Paradoxically, Secularists have genuine grounds for complaint. In practice, the secular nature of our constitution is under constant assault by political parties with religious affiliations. The compulsions of vote-bank politics make sure that the secularists are left out in the cold.

Secularists, Humanists and Rationalists have a special responsibility to counter such tendencies. Apart from bringing to light the violations of the secular principle by the state (as Narendra Nayak has done in his article 'Religion and State Merge in Karnataka'), recourse should also be had to the National Human Rights Commission.

Vir Narain

Saving Their Innocence

It cannot be denied that modern industrial society has an almost superstitious faith in the power of advertising. And it would be difficult to deny that it has good grounds for this faith. There is hardly any limit to the credulity and suggestibility of the general public. Not very different from the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who famously claimed: "Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

But, when it comes to the effect on children of exposure to the media, there is almost total denial. Riding on phenomenal advances in electronics, the power of mass media, entertainment and advertising has grown out of all proportion within less than a generation. Unresisting adults as well as vulnerable children are being assailed by the media night and day. Perhaps it would be more accurate, given their insatiable appetite for entertainment, to say that they are *fed* relentlessly by the mass media - and the same fare is available to all. What is this fare? Chiefly consumerism, sex and violence. The effects on adults are bad enough; but at least they have brought it upon themselves. The sad thing is that there is no effective way to segregate or protect the children.

In his article 'Media Exposure Linked to Child, Teen Health, Behavior Problems' Daniel J. DeNoon says, "From obesity and social isolation to early sexual initiation and aggressive and violent behavior, 15 new studies link exposure to media images with a broad range of negative health, behavior and lifestyle issues in children and teens. Moreover, the studies found that the harm begins early in the preschool years and continues through adolescence" ..

It's a "major public health issue," say Dimitri A. Christakis, and Frederick J. Zimmerman, University of Washington, Seattle, in a news release. They note that electronic media "are among the most profound influences on children in this country" and that "this intersects with many other issues that are critically important to child health, including violence, obesity, tobacco/alcohol use, and risky sexual behaviors."

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry warns that the overwhelming amount of violence seen by the typical child can desensitize him to violence by reducing his natural feelings of shock at real acts of violence, and by eroding his ability to empathize with victims. Violent video games also allow children to participate in what the American Academy of Pediatrics calls "virtual violence," where they have an interactive role in creating the violent images they handle. "The fact that the child gets to act out the violence, rather than to be a passive observer, as when viewing television or movies, is especially concerning to experts," says the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

The National Television Violence Study, the largest ongoing scientific study of television violence in the US, has concluded that violence tends to be sanitized, sensationalized and glamorized on television.. This distortion of the true nature of violence has negative effects on child behavior. Dr. Barbara Wilson, senior researcher, states that, "Younger children have difficulty distinguishing televised fantasy from reality, and are therefore at increased risk of imitating cartoon violence."

According to this same study, witnessing television violence causes children to: 1. Become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others; 2. Have heightened fear in the world; and 3. Demonstrate increased aggression and violent behavior toward others. According to another research finding such kids get trapped in a vicious circle. When they watch violent TV by themselves they become more aggressive, and their aggressive behavior makes it harder for them to have friends. So what do they do? They watch more TV — becoming even more socially isolated, and even angrier. "Here we have violent, isolated kids, stewing and waiting for a moment to become aggressive," says David S. Bickham, of Harvard's Center on Media and Child Health. "These are kids who are likely to become bullies, or be victims of bullies because they are isolated, and waiting for a moment when they can lash out."

The promotion of unbridled consumerism is almost as harmful as that of violence. According to Wikipedia, consumerism is the "equating of personal happiness with the purchasing of material possessions and consumption." Nearly all forms of media are filled with both overt and hidden messages encouraging us

to buy and consume..Psychologists and academic experts have attributed depression, anxiety, and other emotional disorders with consumerism. Children are obviously more vulnerable than adults to such effects. .Reports have indicated that, on an average, families in the US have their TV on for 6 ¾ hours per day, potentially giving their TV a larger share in a child's education than their school teacher. According to The Sourcebook for Teaching Science, the average child views 1500 hours of television per year compared to spending only 900 hours per year in school.

As the reach and power of the media grows in the developing world and, equally significantly, as democracy and freedom of expression spread, the problems now being faced in the West will be encountered all over the world. The fact seems to be that no workable liberal or democratic solution has been found or is in sight. Our commitment to freedom of expression will continue to protect those who are ready to sacrifice the public good for commercial or political gain.

Early upbringing in a caring and nurturing nuclear family may offer some protection. "Rather than prepare children for a grim reality," Diane and Michael Medved argue in their landmark book *'Saving Childhood: Protecting Our Children from the National Assault on Innocence'* "the intact family should hold them safely, until, as adults, they've gained the power and foresight to help solve the difficult problems created by well-intended liberal permissiveness." The defence of innocence, the Medveds conclude, is tri-fold: give children security, encourage their sense of wonder and feed them optimism. But the 'intact family' referred to by the Medveds is becoming more and more scarce. The nuclear family is fast disintegrating. The nurturing, caring and stable atmosphere that the infant requires, even before he starts getting exposed to the media, is available only to a very small percentage of families.

We are forced to ask ourselves some questions: "Are we, as parents and responsible adults, failing our children? In the quest for what we fancy is the good life for us, seeking freedom and fulfilment for ourselves, have we abandoned the well-being and healthy development of our children? And have we not made the situation worse by failing to contain abject poverty and widespread destitution, and by failing to control violent conflicts of which, again, children are the main victims? The answer, sadly, to all these questions is: yes.

Vir Narain

Reflections on Ethical Resoluteness

The central message in the three episodes covered in Professor deSouza's excellent lecture is that of ethical resoluteness. It is not a controversial message. Everyone agrees that we must have the courage of our convictions that we must not compromise on our core principles. So why is it necessary to talk about something on which there is universal agreement? There is a good reason: while everyone agrees that we should act according to our firmly-held convictions, only small percentages are able to do so in actual practice. One word that is surprisingly missing from our discourse on ethical behaviour is *akrasia*: a Greek word denoting weakness of will; acting in a way contrary to one's sincerely held moral values. To a greater or lesser extent we are all prone to *akrasia*. The examples - incredible but true - set by persons like Socrates, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or Suu Kyi need to be held up to us periodically to strengthen our resolve.

The idea of ethical resoluteness, however, does put out several threads of enquiry that are worth pursuing - hopefully without getting tied up in knots.

The nature of the convictions being uncompromisingly followed assumes great importance. Are these convictions always right? The most telling example is that of the suicide bomber. To some, and it would not be easy to refute them, this may represent the ultimate in ethical resoluteness: courting certain death in pursuit of an ideal. Someone delivering an inspirational lecture on ethical resoluteness in Teheran would probably cite Ayatollah Khomeini, who said "Those who follow the rules of the Koran are aware that we have to obey the laws of *qissas* (retribution) and that we have to kill... War is a blessing for the world and for every nation. It is Allah himself who commands men to wage war and kill." How many lives have been given up, and taken, pursuing the ethics enunciated here.

Possibly with this difficulty in mind, Professor deSouza (replying to a question from the audience) said: "I think resoluteness is basically to a core of principles that actually are constitutive of a decent society" Mere resoluteness is not enough. The cause - or course of action - has to be ethically right ie, following Professor deSouza, "constitutive of a decent society". But the Taliban will argue (and in many cases quite sincerely) that that is exactly what they are fighting for so resolutely: a decent and God-fearing society. Clearly, ethical resoluteness can be a deadly weapon if the ethics are wrong or misguided. But who is to decide what is wrong or misguided?

Before this question is pursued further, another line of enquiry - which, as we shall see, has a bearing on Humanism - insinuates itself into the discussion. This has to do with dogmatic certainty. While not all acts of ethical resoluteness may involve dogmatic certainty, it would be difficult to deny that ethical resoluteness, so uncompromising as to lead one to kill, and to give up one's own life - through fasting, self-immolation or the explosives belt - implies a total (one could say: dogmatic) certainty as to one's beliefs. Humanism, on the other hand, is opposed to dogmatic belief-systems. HE Bell perhaps expressed it best when he wrote: "Only reason can convince us of those three fundamental truths without a recognition of which there can be no effective liberty: that what we believe is not necessarily true; that what we like is not necessarily good; and that all questions are open." Narsingh Narain said: "I would go so far as to say that it is better that a man should hold a wrong belief undogmatically than a true belief dogmatically." The native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er as much by an open mind as with the pale cast of thought. In the balance, we welcome it.

We now revert to the question: But who is to decide what is wrong or misguided? The followers of traditional religions - especially monotheistic religions of the book - feel that they are on safe grounds here. Their scriptures are a sure guide to what is right and what is wrong in the eyes of God. Total certainty as to the rightness of his beliefs is, therefore, not an issue with the true believer, so his ethical resoluteness is basically a function of the strength of his will, his courage. Humanists, and others not so firmly committed to traditional religions, are unable to enjoy this kind of certainty and may not be prepared to kill or be killed for their beliefs. So ethical resoluteness - at least in its extreme forms - is much more likely to be prevalent among the followers of dogmatic religions than among humanists and secularists. There is a demographic imbalance here; the followers of traditional religions far outnumber humanists or secularists. The high incidence of suicide-bombings and sectarian violence in certain parts of the world bears this out.

Since, for a true believer, it is not the strength of his convictions but the strength of his will that stands in the way of his taking extreme steps to follow the dictates of his religion, one is driven to the conclusion that *akrasia* may be a blessing in disguise after all. This is a knotty problem: if everyone

followed his inner convictions to the hilt, there would be perpetual conflict. This suggests that ethical resolve and ethical evolution must go hand-in-hand, but with ethical evolution in the lead. The chief obstacle to ethical evolution - at least as Humanists see it - is dogmatic religion. It is no wonder that the International Humanist Movement was founded to provide an alternative to dogmatic religions, which means an alternative to God-fearing morality.

While ethical resolve has been highlighted in the episodes chosen, an equally important thread common to the three protagonists is compassion. In fact, in all ethically crucial issues, compassion (compassion for all, not for one's fellow-believers only) must play a large part. Every Humanist pondering on these episodes will draw his own conclusions; but a little reflection will bring out four basic features of the Humanist outlook: the autonomous (not God-given) nature of morals; the primacy of ethics - ethical resoluteness being an instrumental value; the primacy of compassion in ethics and the primacy of reason in realising ethical values. This last being summed up beautifully in HJ Eysenck's celebrated phrase: "Reason in the service of compassion".

Vir Narain

Promoting Non-Violence

Most organisations have goals that they pursue and goals that they promote. The former come within their core concerns whereas the latter belong to their areas of interest- for their intrinsic or instrumental value. While providing an alternative to dogmatic religions remains the stated goal of the Humanist movement, it has rightly taken an active interest in Human Rights (even sidelining, some would argue, its primary objective), Secularism and Democracy. Environmental concerns also find a place. Nonviolence, however, does not seem to have figured at all in the statements or resolutions of the IHEU. The only instance where non violence and the IHEU seem to have been mentioned together was when Taslima Nasreen, well known Bangladeshi Humanist and former IHEU NGO Representative at UNESCO, Paris, was awarded the prestigious 2004 UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence. This was acknowledged by the IHEU thus: "IHEU congratulates a Humanist colleague who has fearlessly defended free speech, freedom of conscience and Human Rights through her writings and speeches." The promotion of tolerance and non violence, for which the award was given, finds no mention. While this was undoubtedly inadvertent, it does reflect a certain indifference of the IHEU to what one would expect to be close to Humanist concerns. Some other humanist organisations – such as the 'Humanist Movement' (<http://humanistmovement.org/>) have adopted non violence as a major plank.

As a consultant NGO, IHEU has had strong ties with UNESCO. The UNESCO has involved itself in promoting non violence through education, for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence. The education for a culture of peace is founded in UNESCO's constitutional mandate to build peace "in the minds of men". Its website on Non-Violence Education declares "It is a fact that we live in a world with conflicts: war, torture, ethno-cultural rivalries and violence. Against those problems there is a slow but growing recognition of the value of non-violence to solve them. This fundamental human aspiration developed as a comprehensive theory by Mahatma Gandhi can be identified in many examples throughout history."

An International Forum on Education for Non-Violence, held in the Portuguese town of Sintra in the Summer of 1996, proposed some guidelines for a plan of action for the UNESCO Interregional Project for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence in Educational Institutions. UNESCO has a long list of international organisations which are partners in this project. The IHEU does not figure in this list, possibly because this is basically an educational programme committed "to the long-term and continuing process of developing a culture of non-violence and cooperative learning in schools and other educational institutions as an important contribution to a global movement for a culture of peace." But the leaders of the Humanist Movement – like Julian Huxley – have always laid great stress on the centrality of education.

However, education is only one of the means by which non-violence needs to be promoted. The ethical significance of non-violence is such that it has to be an integral part of the Humanist agenda. In the West, when attention is paid at all to non-violence, it is in terms of conflict-resolution and international peace. The 1986 Humanist World Congress calls for non-violent equitable solutions to national and international conflicts and condemns anti-terrorist military strikes and terrorism of all kinds. There is not a great deal of enthusiasm for other aspects of non-violence, such as abstention from injury to other animals. It is possible that, to the Secularist, the religious origin of the concept of non-violence - ahimsa in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions - has negative connotations. Ahimsa is a binding code of conduct implying a ban on hunting, butchery, meat eating, and the use of animal products provided by violent means. The question of moral duties towards animals and of negative Karma incurred from violence against them is discussed in detail in some Hindu scriptures and religious lawbooks.

This may be one reason why the Humanist project does not include the promotion of non-violence as such. Where this idea is touched upon at all, the terminology - significantly - is different. A basic set of eight moral principles for Humanism, suggested by Resnik includes: "Non-malificence: Do not harm yourself or other people."

The project to promote non-violence must include a substantial effort in the cultural sphere. The depiction - and, too often, valorisation - of violence in the media is bound to have a negative effect. The obsessive preoccupation with violence - the more gruesome the better - in our media is bound to have an effect on even adult audiences. Yet, the Supreme Court of the USA has expressed its inability to curb the content of violence even in video games meant for children. According to a report "The U.S. Supreme Court ruled our children are free to be exposed to the most violent video games. A California law that protects youngsters from these games was rejected. The

companies that make these games are free to sell what are often first shooter, bloody war games to children of all ages. It's their free speech right under the First Amendment".

The report goes on to say: "Two wars of choice in a decade of an all-encompassing war on terror have militarized the psyche of the nation. There has been no call for any real sacrifice on the part of the majority of citizens. Those calling the shots, the financial and political leadership, have enjoyed a windfall of war profits. They bank on oil futures and privatize our army to doubly protect their interests. The soldiers are the ones who suffer the most, along with the economy that serves the general public. These soldiers are being acclimated from childhood, made accustomed to violence, and then recruited in part by war video games. All age restrictions to this subliminal training are shot down now by the nation's highest court."*

In this situation, should Humanists remain mute spectators?

Vir Narain

A Comic Blunder?

I do not believe - indeed I deem it a comic blunder to believe - that the exercise of reason is sufficient to explain our condition and where necessary to remedy it, but I do believe that the exercise of reason is at all times unconditionally necessary and that we disregard it at our peril.

Peter Medawar*

Whereas all Humanists - possibly without exception - reject a morality based on a rewarding and punishing God, there is no such consensus regarding the source of the moral impulse. The view of David Hume and T.H. Huxley that the roots of morality are to be found in the emotional nature of man is accepted by a large number of Humanists but, with the increasing stridency of the rejection of religion and theism, the claim that reason and science can provide a sufficient basis for moral values has been gaining ground. The problem here - apart from the fact that many humanists seem to have an "irrational passion for dispassionate rationality" - is the difficulty of giving up the quest for certainty. As against a morality based on scriptures and therefore the word of God, a morality based on something as vague and indefinable as human nature clearly lacks authority. Science, it is claimed, could provide a firmer foundation. (Ironically, though, science itself acknowledges the tentative nature of its findings; and its advance is ensured by this acknowledgement.) Walter Lippmann says: "The prestige, which once adhered to those who spoke by revelation, has passed to scientists. But science, though it is the most reliable method of knowledge we now possess, does not provide an account of the world in which human destiny is the central theme."

Medawar (himself a scientist and Nobel laureate) held that science cannot answer questions having to do with first and last things - the ultimate questions - and that "no conceivable advance of science could empower it to do so." Lord Hailsham says: "...science can say much about means. But what can it say about ends? In its nature, physical science owes its triumph to the study of what can be seen, calculated, observed and verified by experiment." "If values exist, they exist," he goes on to say, "and must be discussed without recourse to that salutary discipline." According to Feynman: "the moral values seem somehow to be outside the scientific realm". Stephen J Gould postulates two non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA): "The net of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral values and meaning." This applies as much to secular humanism as to religion.

One criticism of Western Humanism has been its excessive reliance on what Iris Murdoch has called "the unadorned promptings of reason". "We know too much", said Bertrand Russell, "and we feel too little." According to Tom Kitwood: "There are disturbing parallels between the schizoid state and the style of moralism that has been pervasive in western culture, where goodness has been so strongly associated with intellect and will, so little with feelings. It would seem possible that a person might be profoundly schizoid, and yet have an exceedingly sophisticated theoretical morality." The early leaders of the Humanist Movement were prominent intellectuals who had found an intellectually satisfying alternative to dogmatic religions. But the vast masses of people whose faith in traditional religions has been eroded by what Lippmann has called the 'acids of modernity' need an emotionally satisfying alternative. If the Humanist Movement has to gather within its fold those who have become disenchanted with traditional religions, the strong emotional needs which religions have satisfied cannot be ignored. But, in line with Kitwood's thinking, in rejecting religion, there has been a tendency in Western Humanism to throw out the emotional baby with the irrational bathwater.

Julian Huxley was a notable exception to this, and it is worth quoting from his Presidential Address at the inauguration of the IHEU: "As I see it, the world is undoubtedly in need of a new religion, and that religion must be founded on Humanist principles if it is to meet the new situation adequately. Humanists have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas. When I say religion I do not mean merely a theology involving belief in a supernatural god or gods; nor do I mean merely a system of ethics, however exalted; nor only scientific knowledge, however extensive; nor just a political social morality however admirable and efficient. I mean an organised system of ideas and emotions which relate man to his destiny, beyond and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing system of laws and social structure. Such systems of ideas and emotions about human destiny

have always existed and will always continue to exist; they certainly include the theistic religions; and I believe we have nothing to lose by using the word religion in the broadest possible sense to include non-theistic formulations and systems as well. Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions.” (Emphasis added). Huxley’s idea of Humanism as a new religion has been dropped by the Humanist Movement. The preferred word now is ‘life stance’. This, of course, has nil emotional resonance; and doubtful etymology. But, whatever the label, few will disagree that Humanism has to be “... an organised system of ideas and emotions which relate man to his destiny, beyond and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing system of laws and social structure.”

The choice between these two alternative views regarding the foundation of values and morality - science and rationality on the one hand, and the emotional nature of man on the other - is not merely an academic question.

It is bound to have a profound effect on the character and future course of the Humanist movement.

Vir Narain

Democracy's Self-inflicted Wounds

It is an inherent feature of democracy that it carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. In this respect democracy is to society what free will is for the individual. It necessarily includes the capacity for chaos, for evil. The ability of an individual to do harm is circumscribed by various factors, internal and external: his conscience, fear of punishment, of social ostracism. Happily, for most citizens, the internal factors are sufficient to prevent harmful behaviour. Where these break down there is, of course, punishment enforced by law.

For groups - citizens in the aggregate - the situation is different. As a psychologist has observed: "When people are part of a group, they often experience deindividuation, or a loss of self-awareness. When people deindividuate, they are less likely to follow normal restraints and inhibitions and more likely to lose their sense of individual identity. Groups can generate a sense of emotional excitement, which can lead to the provocation of behaviors that a person would not typically engage in if alone." As a gathering grows from group to crowd to mob (there are echoes of the famous 'heap paradox' here) the process of deindividuation becomes more severe. Not only are the restraints dictated by the individual's conscience weakened, the group's behaviour can be reinforced by a kind of 'quasi-idealism'. As Bertrand Russell says: "Men combine in groups to attain more strength in the scramble for material goods, and loyalty to the group spreads a halo of quasi-idealism round the central impulse of greed. Trade unions and the Labor Party are no more exempt from this vice than other parties and other sections of society, *though they are largely inspired by the hope of a radically better world.*" (emphasis added).

In a functioning democracy (the case of a dysfunctional democracy is probably different) the actions of groups of citizens who aim to bring about a radically better world have to be within the freedoms and restraints enshrined in the Constitution. To that extent, the Constitution is the conscience of the nation. **Any group of citizens or any movement, howsoever high-minded it may claim to be, which - intentionally or otherwise - undermines or denigrates or bypasses the Constitution can rightly be accused of violating democratic ethics.** Of course, a distinction has to be made between the great organs of the Constitution - the Legislature, the Judiciary and the Executive - and the men/ and women who happen presently to be occupying positions in them. These people cannot be treated as immune to public scrutiny and criticism, and they have, in fact, lately come in for damning criticism from the public. The state of our legislatures and judiciary does give cause for great concern.

The Legislature

According to one newspaper report: "...the 15th Lok Sabha, which is midway through its five-year term, has sat for only 72% of its allotted 800 hours. Since mid-2009, when it began its term, it has passed only 57 of its 200 bills planned. At least 175 of the bills passed until the end of this year's monsoon session were debated for less than five minutes, with some bills passed in a mere 60 seconds." The report goes on "A spate of scandals involving ministers, politicians and officials that came to the fore over the last couple of years has stoked public anger on a scale not seen before, triggering mass protests against corruption and the political class. This rage is being fueled further now by the political class holding hostage all work in parliament. The paralysis of parliament has not gone down well with an increasingly weary public. The status upgrade that the legislators have given themselves is adding salt their wounds." But, the report adds, "India's parliamentarians are too preoccupied with perks and privileges to even notice the gathering clouds."

The Judiciary

The state of the judiciary is no less disturbing. As a report in Foreign Affairs (May/June 2010) says: "Some experts have estimated that at the current rate, it would take 350 years for the courts in Mumbai, India, to hear all the cases on their books. According to the UN Development Program, India has 11 judges for every million people. There are currently more than 300 million cases pending in Indian courts, and cases remain unresolved for an average of 15 years. Someone who is detained while awaiting trial in India often serves more than the maximum length of his or her prospective sentence even before the trial date is set. The International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London found that nearly 70 per cent of Indian prisoners have never been convicted of any crime. Even those who are not held in custody before

trial face difficulties: some courts are so far away that it is too costly or logistically challenging for the poor to reach them, and the cases are decided in their absence. In India, like in many countries in the developing world, judges and magistrates sometimes solicit bribes in exchange for favourable verdicts or, in other cases, to continue the case indefinitely.”

Conclusion

It is especially at this time of legitimate outrage and anger that the people of India must reaffirm their faith in the Constitution that they have given unto themselves. They must also acknowledge that the parliamentarians who are causing such outrage were chosen by them. And they must resolve to be more discriminating while voting in future. Otherwise the tale of our self-inflicted wounds will never end.

Vir Narain

Reservations: Time for a Harm/ Benefit Review

There are strong ideological and practical reasons for supporting, through a policy of reservations in education and employment, those who have traditionally been victims of caste and communal discrimination. Equally, there are strong ideological and practical reasons for the belief that discrimination on the basis of caste and community, whereby benefits are extended to one caste or community at the direct cost of another caste or community (a zero-sum situation), is not only unjust, but also counterproductive. It is generally accepted that 'reverse discrimination' is a medicine with significant side-effects. But there are different perceptions on whether the benefits outweigh the side-effects.

Almost twenty years have passed since the policy of reservations based on the Mandal report has been in force. Irreversible changes have taken place, and an ideological debate would serve no practical purpose at this stage. What is urgently needed now is a pragmatic and empirical analysis of the results - intended and unintended - of the policy of reservations. Opinions regarding the merits or demerits of reservation have to be suspended so that an objective assessment of its effects can be made. Attention has to be focused exclusively on the practical outcomes that can be attributed to the policy of reservations. There will in all likelihood be enough ground for controversy and contention here, without getting embroiled in ideological issues.

Hopes and fears

Those who support reservations hope for certain practical outcomes. Chief among these is the empowerment and economic betterment of the groups favoured by reverse discrimination. Empowerment could be in terms of a greater share of political power and a greater share in the State's power structure - such as jobs in the police and administrative set up. Economic betterment would follow, given adequate competitive advantage in enrolment for education and employment. Presumably most - if not all - advocates of reservations also desire the eventual disappearance (abolition is perhaps not an appropriate word as it suggests an imposed solution) of the caste system. They hope that increasing power and prosperity would result in the hitherto backward castes joining the mainstream of Indian society. Caste, then, would either disappear, or at least shed its hierarchical character. There would be no lower or upper castes.

Those who do not support reverse discrimination fear that, as more and more groups make competing claims for the benefits of reservation quotas, there would be increasing division and antagonism between castes and sub-castes. This would be exacerbated by a political process which relies heavily on vote-banks, which widens divisions where they exist, and creates new ones where they do not. This would lead to the progressive - and acrimonious - fragmentation of Indian society. They also fear that policies based on caste-identity will inevitably result in perpetuating a caste system beset with increasing disharmony. There is also a fear that lowering the criterion of merit in favour of certain groups would inevitably lead to a decline in the general standards of efficiency and professional competence.

The situation on the ground

To what extent have these hopes and fears been realised in actual practice? While looking for an answer to this question it has to be kept in mind that not all socio-political or socio-economic changes - for better or for worse - that have taken place over the last twenty years can be attributed to the policy of reservations. It must also be noted that not all the recommendations of the Mandal report were implemented at the same time. The recommendation of reservations for OBC's in government services was implemented in 1993. The recommendation of reservations in higher educational institutes was implemented only in 2008.

Empowerment. The assessment of socio-political and socio-economic benefits - issues of empowerment and economic betterment - can best be made in quantitative terms. This would require extensive and rigorous surveys; but a few examples can be given. According to a report in the Economic Times: "*If consumption defines our economic status, it seems there is not much difference between the country's 'General (non-SC/ST)' category population and Other Backward Castes (OBC). It may sound unbelievable, but the annual per capita consumption expenditure (APCCE) for OBCs is Rs 15,436, which*

compares reasonably well with Rs 16,923 for the general category.” (Shailesh Dobhal Economic Times Jun 2, 2006.) This could be an indication of economic betterment.

Employment. Regarding employment, as in mid-2008, there was still a backlog of 28, 670 OBC vacancies in government jobs. According to another report: “Nearly 17 years after the implementation of 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs on the basis of the Mandal Commission recommendations, a mere 6.87% of those employed in various union departments in Groups A, B, C and D services belong to the group. Thus a significant 20% posts across categories and departments reserved for OBCs remain unfilled raising doubts on the effective implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations.” (17 yrs after Mandal, 7% OBCs in govt jobs D Suresh Kumar, TNN Aug 31, 2010.)

Inter-caste relations. **As far as far as the adverse socio-political effects of reverse discrimination are concerned, the approach has to be mainly qualitative. More and more groups have been agitating for inclusion in the reserved category. This is resented by those who are already enjoying the benefits of reservations. A recent example is the bad blood, and violence, between Gujjars and Meenas in Rajasthan. The agitation by Jats in Haryana, where they lay down en masse on rail tracks to disrupt traffic for days, is another example. Every election - and in our system elections are becoming increasingly frequent - gives a fresh impetus to competing claims. There is competitive bidding (a virtual auction) .between political parties for promising higher reservations to target groups. The politics of group grievance and greed takes over.**

Dilution of merit. As far as fears regarding the dilution of merit are concerned the results of reverse discrimination can only be deduced. Talking of reservations in colleges of engineering and medicine a commentator says: “Shourie reports that of the 20,000 who wrote the exams for the 700 seats available in Kerala medical colleges, a "forward caste" candidate had to rank 412 or higher to get a seat, an Ezhava "backward caste" candidate had to rank 1605 or higher, a Muslim OBC 1752 or higher, a Latin Catholic 2653 or higher, a scheduled caste candidate 4409 or higher, and a scheduled tribe candidate 14,246 or higher!”

What Pandit Nehru wrote to all Chief Ministers in 1961 has become even more true today: “Narrow, cynical, sectional calculations are what propel our politicians today. There was a time when everything was judged by one Talisman alone: the interest of the nation as a whole.

I have referred above to efficiency and to our getting out of our traditional ruts. This necessitates our getting out of the old habit of Reservations and particular privileges being given to this caste or that group. The recent meeting, we held here, at which the Chief Ministers were present, to consider national integration, laid down that the help should be given on economic considerations and not on caste. It is true that we are tied up with certain rules and conventions about helping Scheduled castes and tribes. They deserve help, but even so, I dislike any kind of Reservation, particularly in service. I react strongly against anything, which leads to inefficiency and second rate standards. I want my country to be first class country in everything. The moment we encourage the second rate, we are lost.

The only real way to help a backward group is to give opportunities for good education. That includes technical education, which is becoming more and more important. Everything else is provision of some kind of crutches, which do not add to the strength or health of the body.”

Who should do the review?

The all-important question now is: who should carry out a harm/benefit analysis of reverse discrimination? Government and political parties are not in a position, for obvious reasons, to conduct an objective study. The task has to be undertaken by independent research organisations, and by academic institutions. But there are grounds to believe that, at best, this would remain an academic exercise. The social and political momentum of the policy of reservations is such that, even if the serious adverse effects of the policy can be demonstrated, no significant corrective action can now be taken. Even so, it is in the best national interest that the facts on the ground should be recorded. And even marginal corrective actions could have an impact in the long run.

Vir Narain

Humanist Ceremonies or Secular Rites of Passage

Humanist Societies in the West have institutionalised the celebration of various rites of passage for Humanists. In India, although we have a rich cultural-religious tradition of marking our life-events, no secular substitutes have been developed. It is not easy to divest our traditional forms of celebration of their religious content and yet retain their deep emotional appeal. That may be reason why so far no organised attempt seems to have been made in this direction by Humanists in India.

The title 'Secular Rites of Passage' broadens the scope of the subject by including non-Humanist secularists as well. Religions have always played a very important role in providing to the community emotional support in moments of grief, and giving form and colour to celebrations of joy during important events like marriages, births and naming ceremonies. Religion and culture are almost inseparable in these ceremonies; and some secularists may feel that there is no way of adapting the traditional ceremonies to the requirements of secularism. The religious flavour of our cultural practices will remain.

This brings to the fore an important general question: To what extent should our adopting Humanism, and moving away from our (generally inherited) traditional religions, lead to a weakening of our ties with our culture? There is a genuine dilemma here. Religion and culture are almost like Siamese twins. It can be argued that - even if one could be separated from the other - culture is almost as divisive as religion. To others, so long as the obvious religious elements, such as invocations, prayers and scriptural readings are excluded, the retention of traditional ceremonies may be acceptable.

Marriages

The main rites of passage in India are those that relate to marriage and death. As far as marriage is concerned, civil marriage ceremonies (or, rather, procedures) are available for secularists. These are entirely colourless, but can be embellished as the parties wish. In the West authorised 'celebrants' conduct Humanist marriages. As a British Humanist Association write-up says: "*In England and Wales, most couples who choose to have a Humanist wedding or partnership ceremony complete the legal formalities and obtain a civil marriage certificate at a Register Office first. But they regard their Humanist wedding or partnership ceremony as the one which truly marks their life-long commitment to each other. This is the ceremony which is special to them and their guests, at which they make their vows and during which they choose to exchange rings.*

Humanist wedding celebrants in the BHA's Humanist Ceremonies network are friendly, trained and experienced. They meet with the couple before the ceremony, to consult, answer questions, discuss ideas and to prepare a script especially tailored for the couple. They can advise on ways of handling small details that help to make such occasions a big success. They can help prepare the couple so they feel relaxed, confident and ready to really enjoy their special day." In Scotland, Humanist wedding and civil partnership ceremonies have legal status. It is doubtful that, in India, Humanists would want separate Humanist wedding ceremonies or would want 'celebrants' to perform them. In fact, some might feel that this, in some ways, puts Humanism in the same bracket as traditional religions where the priestly class performs such rites.

Death

The major difficulty for Humanists - in India at any rate - arises in dealing with funerals and subsequent ceremonies in a secular way. During the cremation itself, at the burning *ghat* or the crematorium, one can easily do away with the usual chanting of religious mantras and other rituals. The cremation is followed, on the fourth, tenth or thirteenth day, with a memorial get-together where devotional songs are generally sung. Tradition does not require any speeches to be made. The question for the Secularist is whether to follow this custom at all and, if it is followed, what form it should take. Most Secularists will probably not favour devotional songs. Music, however, remains the key element in marking the solemnity of such memorial meetings. Many Humanists feel that an anthology of secular songs and poems should be compiled for use on such occasions. Hindi and Urdu, and no doubt other regional languages too, are rich in non-devotional poetry dealing with life and death. Kabir's *Babul mera naihar chhoto jaye* and Zauq's *Laayi hayat aye kaza ley chali chalay* are outstanding examples.

Poetry and Music

In Hindi, the poetry of Kabir Das (1398 - 1448) is profound and simple at the same time. Kabir's life was not only a remarkable symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity but also of the irrelevance of caste. He was born in Benaras at the end of the fourteenth century into a class of low-caste weavers who had recently converted from Hinduism to Islam. There are numerous fanciful legends about Kabir's origins and his birth. What is of special interest to Secularist is his remarkable rejection of religious and caste identities. As Wendy Doniger puts it: "With the social identity of a Muslim and both the earlier background and the belief system of a Hindu, being a weaver, he wove the woof of Islam onto the warp of Hinduism (or, if you prefer, the reverse) to **produce a religion of his own that emphatically distanced himself from both.**" (Emphasis added). Given the age in which he lived, Kabir was a remarkably secular figure.

In devising Humanist and Secular ceremonies the main task seems to be to draw upon the rich tradition of Indian poetry and music to mark the solemnity of our rites of passage. The ghazals of urdu poets of the nineteenth century, such as Ghalib and Zauq, also provide rich material.

Vir Narain

Determinism, Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Determinism is bound to remain one of the more intriguing problems in philosophy as well as science. As the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy says: "... *there is no agreement over whether determinism is true (or even whether it can be known true or false) and what the import for human agency would be in either case.*"

The determinist position is that, in a universe governed by the strictest natural laws, all events arise naturally and inevitably from causative factors which follow these laws. Determinism, thus, affirms the *inevitability of the actual*. It is difficult to see how this can be disproved conclusively - even in theory.

As far as the physical-inanimate - world is concerned, the determinist position has been seriously challenged by the discovery of indeterminacy at the level of subatomic particles. But this seems to be in respect of what can be *measured* and what can be *predicted*. But what *actually happens*, whether or not we are able to predict or measure it, is the crucial issue. Refuting Einstein's famous saying that God does not play dice, Stephen Hawking has this to say: "*But even this limited predictability disappeared, when the effects of black holes were taken into account. The loss of particles and information down black holes meant that the particles that came out were random. One could calculate probabilities, but one could not make any definite predictions. Thus, the future of the universe is not completely determined by the laws of science, and its present state, as Laplace thought. God still has a few tricks up his sleeve.*" It would be rashly presumptuous of a layman to question Hawking, but one cannot see how the inability to make definite predictions can affect *what actually happens*. Determinism is about what actually happens.

Extrapolating from the behaviour of subatomic particles to the phenomena of the macro world does not seem to be justified. But extending indeterminism to mental events - leading to free will - can plausibly be justified on the grounds that all mental events involve subtle events at subatomic levels. The question of free will leads to issues of moral responsibility. And these two issues are of direct interest to Humanism. There are those who believe that determinism is incompatible with free will and moral responsibility. As Kant says: "*If our will is itself determined by antecedent causes, then we are no more accountable for our actions than any other mechanical object whose movements are internally conditioned.*" But David Hume, a leading proponent of the "compatibilist" position, held the view that freedom and moral responsibility can be reconciled with (causal) determinism.

Bertrand Russell's view on determinism and moral responsibility (from his *Elements of Ethics*) are worth quoting at length. "*The grounds in favour of determinism appear to me overwhelming, and I shall content myself with a brief indication of these grounds. The question I am concerned with is not the freewill question itself, but the question how, if at all, morals are affected by assuming determinism.*" He goes on: "... *among physically possible actions, only those which we actually think of are to be regarded as possible. When several alternative actions present themselves, it is certain that we can both do which we choose, and choose which we will. In this sense all the alternatives are possible. What determinism maintains is that our will to choose this or that alternative is the effect of antecedents; but this does not prevent our will from being itself a cause of other effects. And the sense in which different decisions are possible seems sufficient to distinguish some actions as right and some as wrong, some as moral and some as immoral.*" Finally: "*It would seem, therefore, that the objections to determinism are mainly attributable to misunderstanding of its purport. Hence, finally it is not determinism but freewill that has subversive consequences. There is therefore no reason to regret that the grounds in favour of determinism are overwhelmingly strong.*"

Galen Strawson has another view. For him, whether determinism is true or not, no-one is ever ultimately morally responsible for his actions, His 'Basic Argument' is:

1. You do what you do, in any given situation, because of the way you are.
2. In order to be ultimately responsible for what you do, you have to be ultimately responsible for the way you are - at least in certain crucial mental aspects.
3. But you cannot be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect at all.
4. So you cannot be ultimately responsible for what you do.

Among Humanists, opinion about determinism seems to be divided. In Corliss Lamont's 10 Points for Humanism listed in his 'Philosophy of Humanism', the fourth point is: "*Humanism, in opposition to all theories of universal determinism, fatalism, or predestination, believes that human beings, while*

conditioned by the past, possess genuine freedom of creative choice and action, and are, within certain objective limits, the shapers of their own destiny."

Barbara Smoker, on the other hand, believes that most Humanists are determinists. *"Believers in a good and almighty god generally believe in human freedom of will for how, otherwise could human beings be given total blame for their 'sins', let alone for the evils of the world? Most humanists, however, insofar as the old 'free will/ determinism' argument lingers on are determinists. This does not mean that they deny all human freedom and responsibility, but it does mean that we are less free than we feel we are, since our actions are determined (caused) by the genes we were born with (heredity) and the things that have happened to us in life (environment) for what else is there to cause them?"*

What do we mean by free will? Is there any action that can demonstrate the existence free will? All creatures act to follow an impulse. Is a moth circling a flame acting freely? *"Spinoza compares the feeling of free will"* we are told by Will Durant *"to a stone's thinking as it travels through space that it determines its own trajectory and selects the place and time of its fall."* One has to accept Galen Strawson's contention that there is a fundamental sense in which free will is impossible. By "fundamental sense" most probably he means that it is impossible to establish free will by objective criteria.

The important thing is to recognise the essential subjectivity of free will. A person is convinced that his actions follow his own decisions and impulses; he is not aware of any outside forces pushing him. In instances where he acts 'in spite of himself' - as in cases of compulsive disorders - he cannot be said to be exercising his free will.

Lastly, no serious discussion of determinism can be complete without taking a view about the nature of time. *"Physics, particularly 20th century physics, does have one lesson to impart to the free will debate; a lesson about the relationship between time and determinism"*. Newtonian time, the time of our everyday experience, has been superseded, but no universally accepted model seems to have emerged so far. Einstein says to a friend: *"People like us ... know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."* In this picture of the universe - Einstein and Minkowski's block universe - the past, present and future, as perceived by us, exist together in another dimension. In Einstein's words: *'From a "happening" in three-dimensional space, physics becomes (...) an "existence" in the four-dimensional world.'* Like the frames in a celluloid film, the past, present and future already (if that is the appropriate word) exist. Each observer's 'now' travels along the film to create his particular experience of time. Our universe is inescapably indexical.

This picture of time is highly repugnant to those who see it as negating free will. *"And if I am going to be told", protests JB Priestley, "that my idea that I make choices, take action, interfere, possibly change the future, is all an illusion, then I shall want to know how this block universe, this frozen history, came into existence, who coloured it, and what is the point of this vast, idiotic conjuring trick. A consciousness that is no more than a policeman's lantern moving along a back alley - and indeed much less, because no action can follow from it - is not worth having."* Maybe there is no point - or it is up to us to see the point.

Humanists, as rationalists, believe in the Sovereignty of Fact. But where the fact is not ascertainable, rational and constructive assumptions have to be made. One might call it the Regency of Assumptions. Since neither determinism nor free will can be proved to be a fact, **Pragmatic Humanism, must assume that every person bears moral responsibility for his or her actions.** Any other course is bound to have disastrous social consequences.

Vir Narain

Discriminate Secularism: A Mohs Scale for Religions?

The phrase 'Discriminate Secularism' is likely to be seen as an oxymoron by those who believe that impartiality between various religions is a defining characteristic of secularism. But this is true only in the case of State-or public- secularism. In other contexts, where there may be a requirement to appraise the comparative attributes of various religions, the original meaning of secular as 'non-religious' applies. It would not be correct indiscriminately to tar - or gild - all religions with the same brush. As Narsingh Narain said: "...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name 'religion', so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups." This sympathetic understanding must, of course, extend to all religions - even to the ones that are most antagonistic to humanist values.

The Amsterdam Declaration of 2002, the official defining statement of World Humanism, states: "*Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.*" This is more specific than the Amsterdam Declaration of 1952: "*This congress is a response to the wide spread demand for an alternative to the religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand, and totalitarian systems on the other.*"

Freedom of thought is a prime Humanist value: dogmatism is its very opposite. Some religions are more dogmatic, and therefore more intolerant, than others. These religions, in other words, are more 'hard' (dogmatic and intolerant) than others. The Humanist Movement, to achieve its objectives, has to identify the religions which offer the greatest resistance to its efforts to advance Humanist values. For this it is necessary to grade religions according to their 'hardness'. One could take the cue from Moh's scale of hardness of solids; talc is 0 and diamond is 10. The ordering is determined by which substance can scratch another substance. This is particularly apt in the case of dogmatic religions, which are forever engaged in abrading each other.

At the bottom of the scale would be the 'softest' religions - perhaps Jainism and Buddhism. Above these, there are several major religions whose numerous denominations could occupy different positions on the scale. The top positions probably go to certain denominations of the three Abrahamic religions. Gore Vidal (who passed away recently) once wrote: "*The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric bronze age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved - Judaism, Christianity, Islam.*" This is in line with Ralph Peters' comment: "*All monotheist religions have been really good haters. We just take turns.*"

With 2.2 billion and 1.7 billion respectively, Christianity and Islam have the largest number of adherents in the world. Certain denominations of these two religions - Catholics in Christianity and Wahhabis in Islam - can fairly be put on top of the list for dogmatism and intolerance of other faiths. The Unitarians and Sufis perhaps have a place on the soft end of the scale.

What, one might ask, is the point of this classification? First: it helps to remind us of our original commitment. To quote from an earlier editorial in this journal: "Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear that the objective of providing an alternative to traditional religions has lost its salience for the Humanist Movement. Other issues and causes, undoubtedly worthy in themselves, have caused attention to be diverted from the main aim."

Secondly: It helps to determine our priorities when dealing with various religions. It helps us to shed the habit of tarring all religions with same brush as typically summed up by Dawkins: "*I think there's something very evil about faith.*"

Thirdly: having determined our priorities when dealing with various religions, it helps us to strategise better. One way to strategise is to treat this on the principles of geopolitics, treating the major traditional religions as nation-states. In any case, in the real world, religion (especially the Abrahamic religions on which we have to focus) and geopolitics are inextricably mixed up. This complicates matters for the Humanist movement considerably. Whereas one of the main protagonists in this situation; the Roman Catholic Church, is an easy target for the Humanist movement, the other major - and arguably more formidable - protagonist: Radical Islam, is almost totally out of reach. (Except possibly in the United Nations, where significant work, ably led by Roy Brown, has been done). The result is that the Humanist movement, confined to the West, keeps skirmishing with the various Christian denominations - some of them harmless - while it is almost totally absent from the Islamic world. There is no evidence that there is -

or indeed can be - any plan to remedy this situation. However, inexplicably, there are hardly any efforts being made to contain the growing influence of radical Islamic diaspora even within the West.

Lastly, it can be argued that certain developments, especially the rise of hardline New Atheism, with its indiscriminate condemnation of all religions, can undermine the efforts of the Humanist movement to achieve its objectives. According to Michael Ruse: "... *there is the nigh-hysterical repudiation of religion. As with religions themselves, the implication is that those who fail to follow the New Atheist line are not just wrong, but morally challenged.*" This itself borders on dogmatism. Hermann Bondi's advice bears repetition here. Bondi says: "... *it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God - indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined. No, what makes a religion is a "revelation". And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems - that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything.*" (Emphasis added). We have to focus on the book - its fallible nature and mortal origins - if we are to deal effectively with the religions of the book. God can be left alone.

Vir Narain

Humanism and Sexual Morality

Sex is not a topic that is discussed very often in Humanist seminars and symposia. The Conference on Sex and Secularism in Montreal in August 2012 (report by Susan Sackett on page 192) provided an excellent opportunity to deal with a subject that is as tricky as it is important. Three sub-themes were chosen for the conference

1. Liberating human sexuality from taboos, myths and prohibitions.
2. Addressing LGBT issues.
3. Gender discrimination practiced by some of the world's major religions.

Issues of gender justice, homosexual rights – which are all related to human rights – are, of course, of great significance too. But the central concern for Humanism is with moral values; and the moral dimensions of sexuality need special attention. As Walter Lippmann wrote many years ago: “Just because the rule of sexual conduct by authority is dissolving, the need of conventions which will guide conduct is increasing. That, in fact, is the reason for the immense and urgent discussion of sex throughout the modern world. It is an attempt to attain an understanding of the bewildering new experiences to which few men and women know how to adjust themselves.”

It is true that traditional religions tended to equate morality almost exclusively with correct sexual behavior. Given the inescapable link between sex and reproduction – and the far-reaching consequences of this link - this was understandable. The enormous power of the sexual urge made it necessary to hold out threats of dire punishment to transgressors. Religious morality is in any case based on rewards and punishments. Even this, it must be admitted, has had limited success.

One great revolution of our times: the success of contraception, combined with the practice of abortion where contraception fails, has radically changed the situation. (We must not ignore the fact that perhaps a little less than half of the world's population still remains largely untouched by this revolution. That has its own implications: one part of the world is plagued with teenage pregnancies, whereas the other part is plagued with honour killings.) This is a development of the greatest significance. For the first time in evolutionary history, mating has been effectively delinked from reproduction.

In terms of the evolutionary time-scale, we are still in the very early stages of this revolution. As one ‘Book of Facts’ tells us: “If the duration of man's evolution, now estimated at 1,750,000 years is likened to a single year, then the earliest of all recorded civilisations began after 5 pm on December 30.” The evolution of the human psyche - as that of many other species, including the primates - has taken shape over the millennia within the family as a biological unit. Human mastery of contraception, and fertilization, if not handled wisely and with restraint, could lead to the breakdown of the family, resulting in an unpredictable disorientation of the human psyche. But, very long-term effects apart, we may already be in the midst of a moral crisis. Humanism, however, does not seem to recognise this crisis of sexual morality as a special case. Barbara Smoker tells us: “Sexual morality is just one facet of general morality, not a special case.” She goes on: “In the sexual field, as in everything else, the the general humanist moral principle applies: as long as you are not harming anyone else or imposing your will on anyone else, what you do is your own business. But it is certainly very immoral to risk conceiving a baby that you do not want and cannot look after, for that baby is your responsibility.” For those to whom the options of contraception and abortion are readily available this last argument is not likely to carry much weight – especially when we take into account the recklessness associated with youth..

It would be unfair, however, to ascribe recklessness to youth alone. Possibly as a reaction against the excessive emphasis placed by the traditional religions on sexual morality, Humanism has tended to underestimate the power of the sexual impulse. But we have seen in very recent times, in cases involving heads of states, highly-decorated Generals, heads of international bodies and celebrities in general, that even the most sophisticated and otherwise mature individuals are unable to exercise the self-restraint expected of them.

It is safe to assume that the behavioural problems displayed in later life arise from the attitudes developed during adolescence. It is therefore necessary to concentrate on the emotional – and moral – development of the adolescent. The external constraints which have operated in the past: fear of God, parental authority and the fear of natural consequences, have greatly lost their power. We are, of course,

well rid of religious indoctrination and notions of sin and punishment. But where is the wisdom and restraint, needed now more than ever, to be grounded? There is no clear answer.

“One billion adolescents face some circumstances that make their sexual health and sexual morality a daunting new reality that demands serious and creative attention” says Daniel C. Maguire, a Professor of Ethics and Moral Theology. The following passage from his article ‘Sex Ethics and One Billion Adolescents’ gives a disturbing overall picture: “Puberty is arriving earlier and in many places marriage occurs later. Records from family bibles at the time of the American Revolution indicate that girls’ average age of menarche was 17. A hundred years later it was 15. Speaking still of conditions in the United States, Debra Haffner writes: “Today, the average age is 12.” Some studies report instances of even earlier menarche. Add to this delays in the age of marriage. “The average age of marriage has increased from 20 for girls and 23 for boys in 1950 to 25 for girls and 27 for boys in 1998. More than half of teenagers today begin to have intercourse while they are in high school, and most will have several sexual partners before they get married.” These changes are not limited to the more affluent United States. In a study on adolescent sexuality in Nigeria and Cameroon, Andrea Irvin writes: “Throughout the world, adolescence has been undergoing significant changes during the last several decades. Age at onset of puberty has been declining in most regions as a consequence of improved nutrition, while age of first marriage has been rising, especially for females in early-marrying societies.”

It is clear that in many situations faced by the young the general principle of “do no harm” as suggested by Barbara Smoker may not even be applicable. Nothing is farther from the minds of two youngsters who are attracted to each other than the idea of doing harm, yet her advice “what you do is your own business” would probably be unhelpful. Further, as Maguire says: “The revolution in communications, including film, television, and the internet has led to a revolution in the availability of highly eroticized materials, easily accessible by adolescents. Notably new also is the “missing parent syndrome,” with indications in the United States that as much as “40 percent of young adolescents’ time is unstructured, unsupervised and unproductive.” Adolescents today are often the children of parents who matured during “the sexual revolution” of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and studies indicate that the age of a mother’s first intercourse is related to the age of the daughter’s first intercourse. Single parent families are now more common the United States and elsewhere and the indications are that girls from single-parent families tend to have sex at younger ages.”

Clearly, the young need guidance. With the decline of authority, divine or parental, the only recourse is to conventions. ‘But’ as Walter Lippmann says “sexual conventions are not statutes, and it is important to define quite clearly just what they are. In the older world they were rules of conduct enforceable by the family and the community through habit, coercion, and authority. In this sense of the word, convention tends to lose force and effect in modern civilisation. Yet a convention is essentially a theory of conduct. Therefore, although it may be that no convention is any longer coercive, conventions remain, are adopted, revised, and debated. ...In any event they are as necessary to a society which recognises no authority as to one which does.”

There is an urgent need for Humanism to recognise the seriousness and complexity of the question of sexual morality, and to work towards the development of a strong convention, especially for the guidance of the young. It would require a great deal of work to determine how best this can be done.

Vir Narain

Our Life-promoting World

[W]e see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; from the great night without, a chill blast breaks in upon our refuge; all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears.

Bertrand Russell was a courageous and defiant man who would not hesitate to discard a comforting belief - perhaps even if he suspected that it was true. Along with other humanists, he wanted people to have the courage to give up the comforting religious myths about a caring and loving God and face life as it was. As Narsingh Narain said: "Our ancestors solved the problem of pessimism (in so far as they did solve it) by convincing themselves about a future life guaranteed by the existence of a merciful and all-powerful God." So "... belief in gods produced an unintended result by restoring that optimism which is natural to life but had suffered disturbance as a byproduct of man's mental evolution. It was more necessary to regain that optimism than to achieve external results. A life weighed down with chronic fear and anxiety would lack the spirit and the power to face and survive misfortunes. In comparison the lessening of the severity of the misfortunes themselves was not so important." Russell conceded that: "... belief in God still serves to humanise the world of nature, and to make men feel that physical forces are their allies."

It is very important, but practically impossible, to avoid using words such as hostile, friendly, pitiless, uncaring etc. when discussing the relationship of man with nature. It is perhaps best not to attempt it here. Russell talks of "humanity amid hostile forces". Carl Sagan says: "'The universe seems neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent.'" Narsingh Narain says: "Let us have the courage to accept the fact that the universe does not care for us, for the human race or for life."

I shall argue that there is an element of exaggeration here; perhaps as a reaction against all the religious nonsense about a loving and caring God. If humanity was surrounded by hostile forces, as suggested by Russell, it would not have survived even for a nano-second. The anthropic (a needlessly anthropocentric misnomer) principle cannot be lightly dismissed. The very existence of life shows that the laws of nature are pro-life which, of course, entails being pro-death as well.

"The philosophy of nature" says Russell "must not be *unduly terrestrial*; for it, the earth is merely one of the smaller stars of the Milky Way. It would be ridiculous to warp the philosophy of nature in order to bring out results that are pleasing to the tiny parasites of this insignificant planet." (Emphasis added). But these tiny parasites are, as far as we know now, the only living beings in this unimaginably vast universe. And size is not everything. Isaac Asimov tells us: "Man's three pound brain is the most complex and orderly arrangement of matter known in the universe." In any case, we cannot escape being terrestrial when dealing with the relationship of life with nature, with the philosophy of life. The Philosophy of Life is a subset of the Philosophy of Nature.

According to Russell, "Optimism and pessimism, as cosmic philosophies, show the same naïve humanism; the great world, so far as we know it from the philosophy of nature, is neither good nor bad, and it is not concerned to make us happy or unhappy. All such philosophies spring from self-importance, and are best corrected by a little astronomy." Even if optimism and pessimism are 'cosmic' philosophies: they have an exclusively human context and deal with human attributes. A little biology - rather than a little astronomy - might be more helpful in understanding the relationship between life and nature.

The astonishing facts of evolution which has produced so many, and so diverse, near-perfect forms of life; the incredibly complex immune systems which are constantly fighting to protect *each individual creature* from infectious disease; the delicately poised and infinitely complex ecosystem which holds these life-forms in balance and, above all, the miraculous emergence of creatures which are capable of abstract thought, all point to the life-promoting processes of nature.

The pessimistic view that nature is hostile or indifferent to life as such is not supported by the facts of science. Also, this view promotes an unhealthy man-versus-nature mindset: nature is to be conquered or subdued.

Narsingh Narain quotes Colin Wilson as saying: "... the task of Humanism is to attempt to destroy pessimism wherever it appears". This is an important task which is becoming more difficult with the

passage of time. Increasing urbanisation and industrialisation - among other conditions of modern living - are leading to unprecedented levels of angst and alienation. Presenting a needlessly gloomy picture of nature does not help.

As the half-full/ half-empty glass cliché shows, pessimism and optimism represent two mutually exclusive attitudes which are not necessarily fact-dependent. Only a robust and positive attitude in the face of adversity can enable us to cope with the vicissitudes of human life. As Narsingh Narain says: "Let the tender-minded continue to hug the old delusions or invent new ones. For the tough-minded, stoicism is the only dignified answer." Even without the idea of an uncaring or hostile nature, the challenges to man's fortitude are enormous. If this idea no longer seems to conform to the facts as we know them now, it should be discarded.

Iris Murdoch's observation: "Anything that consoles is fake." is largely true. But the belief that nature supports life is not a consoling myth. Even down to the level of the individual, as our immune system shows, nature is at work to preserve life up to a point. Inevitably, it withdraws this support in the fullness of time. This shows nature's triune character. *Homo Sapiens* must avoid becoming *homo ingratus*.

Humility and Humanism

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire

Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

TS Eliot, East Coker

I think it can rightly be claimed that the Humanist Movement essentially represents a revolt against certitude. For the early man, in the face of mysterious happenings, unexplained phenomena and hidden dangers, the quest for certitude was a basic psychological necessity – essential for survival. In our times the growth of scientific knowledge has changed all that. Mystery and dread of the kind that the primitive man faced have been taken out of our everyday lives; but the habit of assertive certitude, and its offshoots, authoritarianism and intolerance, remain. Where this habit has survived almost intact is among the followers of traditional religions, but others are not immune to it. Not even Humanists.

Narsingh Narain wrote: *“It seems to us that the most objectionable feature common to all religions is not supernaturalism but authoritarianism, that is, the attachment of finality and infallibility to their teachings. The latter’s ancestry is not traceable to the primitive man’s personification of the forces of nature, but to the formation of an authority-accepting centre in the human mind, as part of the mechanism of psychosocial evolution, and its subsequent exploitation alike by rulers, priests and others. This authoritarianism is the more harmful and dangerous as it has not been confined to the religions; its influence has been much more pervasive — authoritarianism and its offshoots, dogmatism and fanaticism, are to be found everywhere in the world today, and we feel that **the primary function of Humanism is to help in the transition from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian society in all spheres of life.**”*

One distinctive feature of Humanism is its emphasis on the tentative nature of all knowledge. As Clive Bell said: *“Only reason can convince us of those three fundamental truths without a recognition of which there can be no effective liberty: that what we believe is not necessarily true; that what we like is not necessarily good; and that all questions are open.”*

This is intellectual humility; and it is an indispensable part of the Humanist outlook. On the other hand, we have the ‘true believer’. *“The true believer”,* Arthur Koestler said, *“moves in a vicious circle inside his closed system: he can prove to his satisfaction everything that he believes, and he believes everything he can prove.”* For the true believer anyone who holds a different belief is by definition wrong, deluded. It has to be admitted that this attitude can be found among traditional religionists as well as Humanists and atheists. *“This glow of conviction”* says Michael Ruse *“is directly antithetical to humanism in the more generous sense, but it dogs ‘Humanism’.”* Thus, he adds, *“One finds the enthusiasm of the true believer, and **this encourages a set of unnerving attributes: intolerance, hero-worship, moral certainty and the self-righteous condemnation of unbelievers.**”* (emphasis added)

Don Evans says; *“As with religious and secular humanism, there seem to be two mind sets in approaching and understanding of religion: (1) religion is an intrinsic part of human nature and can no more be expunged from that nature than sexual desire or the need for society, and (2) religion is an unnatural imposition on human nature which should be dispensed with.*

Humanists today are far from resolving this conflict of approaches, although it is possible that further developments in psychology and anthropology may shift the balance one way or the other. Humanists in the first camp, whether religious or secular, are far more tolerant of religious manifestations generally, and are more concerned with preventing excesses and abuses than with achieving total abandonment of religion. Humanists in the second camp, often considerably more vocal, seem to have a perpetual grudge against anything religious and seem to be in a constant state of warfare against any and all signs of religious sentiment.”

There are indications that “Humanists in the second camp” are gaining ground. They see religion as an unmitigated evil. A leading functionary of the International Humanist and Ethical Union declares: *“The*

humanism of the twenty-first century has to be an angry humanism.” Christopher Hitchens says: “*Religion looks forward to the destruction of the world....*” and goes on: “*It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion.*” This kind of strident humanism provokes a response in kind. According to R Joseph Hoffmann: “... *by the early years of the twenty-first century movement humanism gave birth to a more uncompromising form of radical secularism in the form of the new atheism with its anti-God and oddly Orwellian postulate: All religion is evil. Some religions are more evil than others. Before God can be disbelieved in, as Christopher Hitchens argued in God is Not Great, he has to be roused from his slumber, bound, tried, and humiliated for his atrocities. If he is not available, his avatar, the Catholic Church, will do.*

Movement humanism as it has evolved is not really humanism. Or rather, it is a kind of parody of humanism. A better name for it would be Not-Godism. It's what you get when you knock at the heavenly gate and no one is home.”

Walter Lippmann was undoubtedly right when he said: “*In the great moral systems and the great religions of mankind are embedded the record of how men have dealt with destiny, and only the thoughtless will argue that that record is obsolete and insignificant.*” Humanism must not cast itself thoughtlessly in the role of an enemy of religion. It is a successor of religion; and has, in fact, been born of what Lippmann has called the “higher religions”.

Acknowledging Akrasia

*What I had not foreseen
Was the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away.
Stephen Spender*

Akrasia is a Greek word denoting weakness of the will: the inability to act according to what one knows to be right. Yielding to temptation is an instance of *akrasia*. Procrastination is another; but that can be discussed later.

Most moral transgressions result from *akrasia*. Even if we know what to do (or not to do) we are unable to act accordingly. In the moral regime of the traditional religions the question of what is to be done or - more importantly - not to be done was already settled. All traditional religions have their commandments or equivalent. The main problem, then, was: how to overcome *akrasia*, weakness of the will? Clearly, for most people, only strong incentives and disincentives could do the job. Mostly, fear of punishment greatly strengthened the resolve to conform. So an elaborate scheme of rewards and punishments was devised, and this undoubtedly helped to reduce moral transgressions to a very large extent. RAP (reward-and-punishment) morality ruled in all religions and, it must be admitted, was fairly successful

Two basic questions

Humanism, in undertaking to provide an alternative to traditional religions, had to find answers to two basic questions: "How do we know what is right or wrong behaviour?" and "How do we ensure that we do the right thing?" We shall not here deal with the first question, beyond pointing out the extreme difficulty of finding for it a satisfactory answer. Walter Lippmann has brought this out very effectively. *"The teachers of theistic morality, when the audience is devout, have only to fortify the impression that the rules of conduct are certified and the elders, are what they claim to be. When he has done that, there are no radical questions to be asked. But the by God the invisible King. The ethical problem for the common man is to recognise the well-known credentials of his teachers. In practice he has merely to decide whether the priest, the prince, and the elders, are what they claim to be. When he has done that, there are no radical questions to be asked. But the teachers of humanism have no credentials. Their teaching is not certified. They have to prove their case by the test of mundane experience. They speak with no authority, which can be scrutinized once and for all, and then forever accepted. They can proclaim no rule of conduct with certainty, for they have no inherent personal authority and they cannot be altogether sure they are right. They cannot command. They cannot truly exhort. They have only human insight to guide them and those to whom they speak must in the end themselves accept the full responsibility for the consequences of any advice they choose to accept.*

Yet with all its difficulties, it is to a morality of humanism that men must turn when the ancient order of things dissolves. When they find that they no longer believe seriously and deeply that they are governed from heaven, there is anarchy in their souls until by conscious effort they find ways of governing themselves." To this a further difficulty must be added: that there are not - and perhaps ought not to be - any "teachers of humanism". We are all on the same footing.

Conscience: the starting point

Since *akrasia* involves an inability to do what one believes to be right, the starting point for exploring how to deal with it has to be one's sense of right and wrong. Without going into how it arises, every individual almost without exception develops - starting from early childhood - a sense of right and wrong. This is his conscience, and *akrasia* comes in the way of his acting according to it. Humanism has rightly banished the time-tested method of reward and punishment from the moral domain. Punishment now

operates only in the legal domain. The further effects of this on law and society need to be explored. But humanism is left now with almost no recourse to ensure moral behaviour. At the same time, it has rightly been said: *“That we are morally weak, that we yield to temptation, that we fall short of our ideals, is indisputable.”*

With external sanctions ruled out, it is to the inner resources of the individual, now freed from the fear of punishment, that we have to turn. It is not easy for an individual to cope with this freedom. As Kotarbinsky said: *“Men are like deep-water fish - accustomed to strong external pressure, so when they reach shallow waters they perish, burst by internal forces.”* Modern society, almost by definition, has to be permissive. *“Being modern is being ‘advanced’ and being advanced means being rich, free of the encumbrances of familial authority, religious authority and deferentiality. It means being rational and being rationalised.”* says Edward Shils. *“If such rationalisation were achieved, all traditions except the tradition of secularity, scientism and hedonism would be overpowered.”* With the fading influence of the traditional religions and RAP morality we reach the “shallow waters” of the permissive society. What Edward Shils feared seems well on its way to being achieved.

Enkrateia and asceticism

As opposed to *akrasia*, *enkrateia* is often defined as self-control, but a much better definition is self-governance. In the absence of external sanctions it is only one’s own ability to resist the impulse to act contrary to one’s conscience that can prevent transgressions. Having liberated men from the grip of RAP morality, humanism must turn to the task of strengthening the individuals’ capacity for self-governance. *Enkrateia* - one’s will-power - has to be strengthened. Asceticism (a word that is in bad odour with humanists owing to its association with the more extreme aspects of traditional religions) is perhaps the most reliable way of achieving this. As Walter Lippmann says: *“The modern world, as it has emancipated itself from its ancestral regime, has assumed almost as a matter of course that the human passions, if thoroughly liberated from all tyrannies and distortions, would by their fulfillment achieve happiness. All those who teach asceticism deny this major premise of modernity, and the result is that the prevailing philosophy is at odds on the most fundamental of all issues with the wisdom of the past.”*

According to one writer: *“Will power is like a muscle – it increases with increased use. Asceticism is basically a training course for the muscle of will power.”* According to another: *“If all acts of willpower reflect a single strength, then training any individual act of self-control should strengthen all acts of self-control. Indeed, this is what research shows. Committing to small, consistent acts of willpower in any domain—from improving our posture to watching our finances—can increase overall willpower.”*

“Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day.” says William James, *“That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test. Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and possibly may never bring him a return. But if the fire does come, his having paid it will be his salvation from ruin.”*

William James was a strong advocate of developing self-discipline as a habit. He says: *“There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.”*

Clearly, the habit of self-control has to start from childhood. Here the key is disciplined upbringing within the framework of liberal humanism as against easygoing humanism.

Vir Narain

EDITORIAL
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Since *akrasia* involves an inability to do what one believes to be right, the starting point for exploring how to deal with it has to be one’s sense of right and wrong. Without going into how it arises, every individual almost without exception develops - starting from early childhood - a sense of right and wrong. This is his conscience, and *akrasia* comes in the way of his acting according to it. Humanism has rightly banished the time-tested method of reward and punishment from the moral domain. Punishment now

operates only in the legal domain. The further effects of this on law and society need to be explored. But humanism is left now with almost no recourse to ensure moral behaviour. At the same time, it has rightly been said: *“That we are morally weak, that we yield to temptation, that we fall short of our ideals, is indisputable.”*

With external sanctions ruled out, it is to the inner resources of the individual, now freed from the fear of punishment, that we have to turn. It is not easy for an individual to cope with this freedom. As Kotarbinsky said: *“Men are like deep-water fish - accustomed to strong external pressure, so when they reach shallow waters they perish, burst by internal forces.”* Modern society, almost by definition, has to be permissive. *“Being modern is being ‘advanced’ and being advanced means being rich, free of the encumbrances of familial authority, religious authority and deferentiality. It means being rational and being rationalised.”* says Edward Shils. *“If such rationalisation were achieved, all traditions except the tradition of secularity, scientism and hedonism would be overpowered.”* With the fading influence of the traditional religions and RAP morality we reach the “shallow waters” of the permissive society. What Edward Shils feared seems well on its way to being achieved.

Enkrateia and asceticism

As opposed to *akrasia*, *enkrateia* is often defined as self-control, but a much better definition is self-governance. In the absence of external sanctions it is only one’s own ability to resist the impulse to act contrary to one’s conscience that can prevent transgressions. Having liberated men from the grip of RAP morality, humanism must turn to the task of strengthening the individuals’ capacity for self-governance. *Enkrateia* - one’s will-power - has to be strengthened. Asceticism (a word that is in bad odour with humanists owing to its association with the more extreme aspects of traditional religions) is perhaps the most reliable way of achieving this. As Walter Lippmann says: *“The modern world, as it has emancipated itself from its ancestral regime, has assumed almost as a matter of course that the human passions, if thoroughly liberated from all tyrannies and distortions, would by their fulfillment achieve happiness. All those who teach asceticism deny this major premise of modernity, and the result is that the prevailing philosophy is at odds on the most fundamental of all issues with the wisdom of the past.”*

According to one writer: *“Will power is like a muscle – it increases with increased use. Asceticism is basically a training course for the muscle of will power.”* According to another: *“If all acts of willpower reflect a single strength, then training any individual act of self-control should strengthen all acts of self-control. Indeed, this is what research shows. Committing to small, consistent acts of willpower in any domain—from improving our posture to watching our finances—can increase overall willpower.”*

“Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day.” says William James, *“That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test. Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and possibly may never bring him a return. But if the fire does come, his having paid it will be his salvation from ruin.”*

William James was a strong advocate of developing self-discipline as a habit. He says: *“There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.”*

Clearly, the habit of self-control has to start from childhood. Here the key is disciplined upbringing within the framework of liberal humanism as against easygoing humanism.

