GREATER MANCHESTER HUMANISTS

EXPLORING HUMANISM

AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

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Fourth presentation

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EXPLORING HUMANISM

AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Course Overview

PREFACE

This course is intended for anybody who is interested in Humanism and wishes to find out more about its principles and the activities of Humanists. It is designed to be interactive at every point.

The course folder: A course folder is distributed at the beginning of the course, which contains all the material needed for the discussions which will take place during the course. Participants are encouraged to read this material in advance so that they can bring contributions and questions to each session.

Procedure: The six sessions cover key aspects of Humanism, and are each divided into a number of sections. The general procedure is that after a brief introduction to the aspect being covered in the session, the course leaders alternate in leading participants through relevant discussions based on the material in the folder. One of the course leaders will generally provide a concluding reflection to relate discussions to Humanist principles. Specific procedures for some sessions are explained in the session plans.

Support material is provided for discussion or further study and reflection. It may take the form of a relevant document, or be an extended treatment of an element covered during the session.

Questions to consider are included at various points in the course material. Discussion will generally focus on the first one or two questions, and where there are additional questions these are intended for further reflection.

Feedback sheets (copy overleaf) are distributed at the beginning of the course, and course participants are invited to make comments at any point if they so wish. Such comments have already led to some valuable improvements, for example the inclusion of a feminist perspective. The course leaders will be happy to respond to any enquiries.

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FEEDBACK SHEET

We will appreciate any thoughts you may have to improve the course. Please jot down anything that occurs to you as we go through the course as well as a brief comment at the end of the final session. This framework should help, but feel free to add anything you wish.

A. Sessions or items that seemed particularly useful/enjoyable

B. Sessions or items that could be improved (and how!)

C. Any additional comments

Many thanks

EXPLORING HUMANISM: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SESSION 1

HUMANIST BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

SESSION PLAN

A. Introduction

Why we are here

An opportunity to browse some BHA and GMH literature

B. What do Humanists believe?

1.1 What makes a Humanist?

C. Disbelief in the existence of God

1.2 The existence of God: a spectrum of probabilities

1.3 Reasons for disbelief in God

1.4 Atheists and agnostics

D. Rational explanation and scientific thinking

1.5 Rational explanation and scientific thinking

E. Living the good life

1.6 Living the good life

F. Humanist celebrations

1.7 Humanist celebrations of rites of passage

Case study: conducting a Humanist funeral

Support Material

1.8 The Amsterdam Declaration 2002

1.9 Humanism as a philosophical belief

Procedure for this session

Most of the session will be spent in discussions, sharing ideas about Humanism and exploring some key aspects of Humanist thinking. The session will end with an example of Humanism in action, as a Humanist celebrant explains how he prepares for and conducts a Humanist funeral.

1.1 WHAT MAKES A HUMANIST?

What Humanists believe in:

- Thinking for ourselves
- Using evidence, experience and our reason to understand the world
- Living this one life well, working out meaning and purpose in life for ourselves
- Making ourselves and others as happy as possible
- Reducing unhappiness as far as possible
- Promoting human rights and freedoms
- Living cooperatively with people of other beliefs

What Humanists oppose:

- The idea that you cannot have a meaningful life without belief in god(s)
- The idea that morality derives from religion or god(s)
- Doctrines of belief (religious or not) and indoctrination into them
- Privileges or special laws for religions or religious people
- Discrimination, human rights violations, and oppression

What Humanists do not believe in:

- A god or gods: supernatural beings intervening in the world and taking an interest in human affairs
- Other supernatural forces or events – karma, divine miracles, etc
- An immortal soul and 'life' after death (in heaven, hell, or a reincarnated form)
- A divine 'plan' or ultimate purpose to the universe

Some quotations:

'I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of human beings.'
Pearl Buck, American humanitarian and Nobel Prize winning writer on China

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'The Humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love, and leaving a good legacy.' *Polly Toynbee, President of the British Humanist Association*

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'Humanism…implies the desire to think for yourself…to accept the results of free enquiry, whatever they may be, and to act in accordance with those results, in the light of reason and in cooperation with others, for the promotion of human happiness.'
Barbara Smoker, Humanist and freethinker, author of 'Humanism'

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'The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another.' *Simone de Beauvoir, French existentialist philosopher, feminist and author of 'The Second Sex'*

1.2 THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A SPECTRUM OF PROBABILITIES

(From Richard Dawkins: 'The God Delusion' pp 50-51. Dawkins notes that there is no way in which anyone can prove or disprove the existence of God, so what matters therefore is whether his existence is probable or not.)

1. Strong theist
100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C.J.Jung, 'I do not believe, I know.'

2. Very high probability, but short of 100 per cent
De facto theist. 'I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.'

3. Higher than 50%, but not very high
Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism. 'I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.'

4. Exactly 50 per cent
Completely impartial agnostic. 'God's existence and non-existence are exactly equi-probable.'

5. Lower than 50 per cent, but not very low
Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism. 'I do not know whether God exists, but I'm inclined to be sceptical.'

6. Very low probability, but short of zero
De facto atheist. 'I cannot know for certain, but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.'

7. Strong atheist
'I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung "knows" there is one.'

Questions to consider

Where do you stand on the spectrum? Why?

1.3 REASONS FOR DISBELIEF IN GOD

Those who have thought about and rejected religious belief often give one or more of the following reasons for this. You don't have to agree with all these reasons to be a Humanist – some will probably seem better or more relevant than others.

- They have considered the questions religions claim to answer and found religious answers unsatisfactory. (Often people don't really *choose* not to believe: they simply *cannot* believe in ideas they find incredible or false, and decide to face reality without what they see as myths or pretence or false comfort.)
- The existence of evil and suffering makes it impossible to believe in a loving, all-powerful, all-knowing deity, who would allow so much suffering in the world to be caused by nature and people. (For Humanists the only problem of suffering is how to reduce it!)
- Religions claim things to be true for which there is no supporting evidence, and encourage belief in the unbelievable and in superstition.
- Rigid religious codes of behaviour stifle our opportunity to think and act rationally and ethically. Ancient religious rules are unhelpful when thinking about new moral issues, where reason and the compassion that comes from empathy are more useful.
- Religious authority has been, and sometimes still is, used to justify oppression, discrimination and injustice - for example against women; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; the disabled; particular races; the non-religious; and members of other religious groups.
- Organised religions can cause deep divisions between people, communities and nations. Religious differences have been, and sometimes still are, a major cause of war, even when religious leaders preach peace.
- Religious authority is often used to justify a puritanical and pointless repression of pleasure.
- Religious beliefs and authorities often stifle free debate.
- Reliance on prayer and offerings to gods can prevent people seeking more active and effective solutions to their problems.
- Belief in life after death can mean that people have less motivation to fight injustice and misery in this life, and so endure suffering when they should be fighting it. The idea that there is a 'better life' in a 'better place' devalues this life and this world.

Questions to consider

Which of these reasons for disbelief do you identify with most strongly?

Are there any that you don't agree with?

NB This section on its own may suggest that disbelief in god(s) is sufficient to define one as a Humanist. Atheism or agnosticism is indeed necessary for Humanists, but it is not sufficient. Humanism is above all an ethical approach to life without a religious basis.

1.4 ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS

Humanists differ in the certainty with which they hold to disbelief in god(s) and in their hostility to religious belief. Sometimes this is a result of their upbringing, and those who have been subjected to religious indoctrination are often the most hostile, as well as the best informed, critics of religion.

Some Humanists do not like to call themselves atheists, because they think that the word implies absolute certainty about the non-existence of god(s), though in fact its derivation (a-theism = without god) suggests that it means living without god(s) rather than dogmatic disbelief. They may prefer to call themselves agnostics, which is not quite as vague and non-committal as is generally thought, agnosticism being the term coined by T.H.Huxley to describe the belief that one *cannot* have a certain knowledge about things for which there is no evidence. In practice, all Humanists live as if there is no god or other supernatural agency intervening in the world or taking an interest in human affairs.

No Humanists think that religious doctrines are likely to be true, but most uphold and respect the right of others to believe whatever they like, so long as they do not seek to infringe the rights and beliefs of anyone else, or expect everyone to agree with them.

Questions to consider

Are you an atheist or an agnostic? Why? What difference does it make to the way you live?

1.5 RATIONAL EXPLANATION AND SCIENTIFIC THINKING

Humanists do not believe in the authority of god(s), holy books or religious teachings. Instead they use evidence, experience and their reason to understand the world. Some important aspects of the rational approach are brought out in the following quotations:

'It is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.' *T H Huxley*

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'Logical thinking is the process in which one uses reasoning consistently to come to a conclusion…(T)he basis of all logical thinking is *sequential thought*. This process involves taking the important ideas, facts, and conclusions involved in a problem and arranging them in a chain-like progression that takes on a meaning in and of itself. To think logically is to think in steps.' *Audiblox website*

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'The scientific method (hypothesis – testing by experiment – observation – modified hypothesis – further testing by experiment, and so on) offers us powerful tools for understanding the world.' *British Humanist Association*

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'Science is one of the very few human activities in which errors are systematically criticised and fairly often, in time, corrected.' *Karl Popper*

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'The whole point about science and the scientific method is that it is a way of distinguishing truth from fiction…blind acceptance of authority is the very antithesis of real science, and…even if the most eminent person tells you that something is true, but the evidence says that it is not, you have to accept the evidence not the authority. All these intriguing and practical ideas, from black holes to digital television, have resulted from the application of scientific integrity and honesty to the study of the world, not from wishful thinking.' *John Gribbin*

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'Life on earth evolved and is still evolving; there is no evidence that it was created by a deity. Most educated religious people in the West today also believe in evolution – but many think that God is somehow guiding it. However there is no need for, and no evidence of, a guide. Natural selection (essentially random genetic variation, combined with the survival and propagation of the individuals best adapted to their environment) can and does occur without a designer, and over billions of years has led to the evolution of complex and intelligent life.' *British Humanist Association*

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Questions to consider

Which of these reasons for scientific thinking do you find most convincing?

Is the scientific approach adequate for all human purposes? What are its limitations?

Does science disprove the existence of God – not at all / possibly / completely?

1.6 LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

Humanism is a positive set of beliefs and attitudes. Opponents often dismiss it as a negative – 'Atheists are united only in what they oppose' – but Humanism is far more than this. It is a morality – an ethical approach to life – in its own right. This theme is developed throughout the course. Some of the features of a good life from a Humanist perspective are brought out in the following quotations:

'We develop meaning and purpose in life by identifying an emotionally and intellectually satisfying belief system.' *James Siddelley*

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'We should live the fleeting day with passion.' *Richard Holloway*

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'We can make our lives worth living with all the more intensity because we know that - like all things - they have a final and irrevocable end.' *Andrew Copson*

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'Always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.' *Immanuel Kant*

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'Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all.' *Linus Pauling*

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'Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishments after you are dead.' *Kurt Vonnegut*

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'Happiness is the only good: the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, and the way to be happy is to make others so.' *Robert Ingersoll*

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Questions to consider

Which of these statements do you identify with most strongly? Why?

1.7 HUMANIST CELEBRATIONS OF RITES OF PASSAGE

Most of us want to mark important events in our lives and to commemorate people we have loved when they die. For Humanists, a very important part of living a good life is to celebrate rites of passage with honesty, warmth and affection, using words and music that are personal and appropriate to the lives and people involved.

Humanist ceremonies can be arranged in a number of ways. In particular the BHA maintains a network of trained and accredited Humanist celebrants throughout England and Wales conducting funerals, weddings and civil partnerships, and naming ceremonies. The following notes relate to ceremonies conducted by a BHA accredited celebrant.

The philosophy behind Humanist ceremonies is one of celebration, based on shared human values, allowing all who attend to relate to what is said, whether they are religious or not. All aspects of the occasion are planned by the celebrant in close consultation with the family, and there are no religious references. Each ceremony is unique, and there are no special rules beyond basic legal requirements. Many people get their first experience of Humanism at one of these ceremonies, particularly a Humanist funeral: it is nearly always a very positive experience.

Funerals

A Humanist funeral is for those without a religious view of life and death, for whom a religious service seems an inappropriate way to say farewell. It will normally be the expressed choice of the deceased person, who may well share in planning the funeral. It will often take place in a crematorium, but if the funeral involves a burial rather than a cremation, it can be held at any site chosen by the deceased or their family, for example a woodland area. There will be no religious input, and readings and music will reflect and celebrate the interests and achievements of the deceased person.

Weddings and civil partnerships

Humanist weddings and civil partnership ceremonies can be held anywhere - in gardens, marquees, on boats, in castles, on beaches. They express the deepest feelings of a couple, and affirm a lifelong partnership. They can take any form that the couple wishes, with words and music that have real, personal meaning for them. However, for a marriage or civil partnership to be legal in England and Wales, couples must also have a civil ceremony conducted by a Local Authority Registrar.

Naming ceremonies

Celebrating the arrival of a new baby, a child or new step-children into your family and circle of friends is both a joyful and serious occasion. The Humanist alternative to a 'christening' is often held at a celebratory party, either in the family home or at a special venue. Parents may express their love for and commitment to their child, and their hopes for its future welfare and happiness. Relatives or friends are chosen to become 'guide parents' or 'special friends' (rather than 'godparents') and they can join in the ceremony, saying how they will be there for the child as he or she grows up. The ceremony may include poetry or prose readings and music.

Questions to consider

What readings or music would you choose for a rite of passage?

1.8 THE AMSTERDAM DECLARATION

This declaration made by the International Humanist and Ethical Union Congress in 2002 is the official defining statement of World Humanism.

"Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself. The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

1. ***Humanism is ethical.*** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

2. ***Humanism is rational.*** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.

3. ***Humanism supports democracy and human rights.*** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.

4. ***Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.*** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

5. ***Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.*** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

6. ***Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination*** and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.

7. ***Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living*** and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour."

1.9 HUMANISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEF

Human rights treaties and law talk of 'religion or belief', where 'belief' means something like 'worldview', 'philosophy of life' or 'lifestance'. It is well established that this includes Humanism, a positive non-religious 'belief'.

In a legal ruling in November 2009 the judge set out five tests to determine what would qualify as a 'belief'. He gave Humanism as an example meeting these criteria, which are:

- The 'belief' must be genuinely held
- It must be a 'belief' and not an opinion or view based on the present state of information available
- It must be a 'belief' as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life
- It must attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance
- It must be worthy of respect in a democratic society, not incompatible with human dignity, and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others.

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SESSION 2

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF HUMANISM

SESSION PLAN

A. A Humanist historical quiz

2.1 Contributors to Humanist thinking and action: a quiz

B. A five minute history of Humanist thinking

2.2 Time line

C. Key developments in the history of Humanism

2.3 The building blocks of Humanism: some key developments in the history of Humanism in the Western world

Support Material

2.4 Considerations of context

2.5 The contribution of women to Humanism

Procedure for this session

We are asking you to do some homework during the week before this session!

Please attempt the Humanist historical quiz, which is intended for your enjoyment as well as testing your existing knowledge. Please do so before you look at the 'key developments' in 2.3, because you will find the answers there!

For each of the four areas of Humanist thinking and action (which we have called 'building blocks' of Humanism), we will focus during the session on the key person noted below, with the aim of illuminating the area as a whole.

Rational explanation and scientific thinking – Charles Darwin

Freedom of thought and secularism – John Stuart Mill

Non-religious morality – Jeremy Bentham

Human rights – Mary Wollstencraft

You are invited before the session to select one other person - from whichever area interests you most - and find out a little about their contribution to the growth of Humanism. We hope you will feel able to share your findings during the session.

If there is anyone or anything that seems relevant to you but is not included in the course material, please feel welcome to mention this at an appropriate point in the session. We are trying to cover some 2500 years of human history, so have had to be selective! Finally, do please ask if you would like clarification of any item included in the survey.

2.1 CONTRIBUTORS TO HUMANIST THINKING AND ACTION: A QUIZ

We begin with a historical quiz that asks you to identify key contributions of 20 significant people in the history of Humanism, grouped in four major areas of Humanist thinking and action that we have called 'building blocks' of Humanism. They are shown in chronological order under each heading. Their contributions are listed in a random order below.

The task is to match the person to their contribution, and so gain an appreciation of the 'building blocks' of Humanism during the last 2,500 years.

1. RATIONAL EXPLANATION AND SCIENTIFIC THINKING

SOCRATES (Gr) .....
COPERNICUS (Pol) .....
GALILEO (It) .....
F. BACON (Br) .....
R. DESCARTES (Fr) .....
C. DARWIN (Br) .....
A. EINSTEIN (Ger/US) .....

2. FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SECULARISM

DIDEROT (Fr) .....
VOLTAIRE (Fr) .....
T. BRADLAUGH (Br) .....
J. S. MILL (Br) .....
G. HOYOAKE (Br) .....

3. NON-RELIGIOUS MORALITY

CONFUCIUS (Ch) .....
EPICURUS (Gr) .....
J. BENTHAM (Br) .....
T. H. HUXLEY (Br) .....

4. HUMAN RIGHTS

T. PAINE (Br) .....
M. WOLLSTONECRAFT (Br) .....
J. H. HUXLEY (Br) .....
F. BROCKWAY (Br) .....

1. Utilitarian philosopher: principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'
2. Author of 'The Rights of Man' and 'The Age of Reason'
3. Greek philosopher: find truth by questioning and analysis
4. Author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women'
5. French philosopher: 'Cogito ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am')
6. Compiler of first 'Encyclopaedia'
7. French satirist, radical critic of Church and Bible
8. First director of UNESCO, first President of the British Humanist Association
9. Founder, with Bertrand Russell, of CND
10. British scientist: originator of the term 'agnostic' - 'Darwin's Bulldog'
11. Greek philosopher of 'ethical hedonism': pursuit of happiness and moderation
12. British political philosopher: author of 'On Liberty' and 'Utilitarianism'
13. Organiser of Cooperative movement, originator of the term 'secularism'
14. British philosopher arguing for the scientific (inductive) method of thinking
15. Originator in the 15th Century of the 'heliocentric' theory of the solar system
16. Author of 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection'
17. Astronomer: discoverer of Jupiter's moons, confirmation of heliocentric theory
18. Chinese philosopher whose 'Sayings' incorporate much traditional wisdom
19. British politician who secured the right to be an MP without taking an oath
20. Scientist who developed the theories of general and special relativity

2.2 TIME LINE

THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS	Classical Athens and Rome (Confucius)	The Dark Ages	European Renaissance	Age of Enlightenment	Modern Era
	500BCE - 300CE	————	1400 1500 1600	1700 1800	1900 2000
RATIONAL EXPLANATION AND SCIENTIFIC THINKING	Socrates Protagoras		Copernicus Galileo Bacon	Newton Darwin Hume Decartes	Einstein Crick/Watson
FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SECULARISM	Cynics Stoics Marcus Aurelius		Leonardo Michelangelo Erasmus Luther	Diderot Holyoake Voltaire J S Mill Beethoven Bradlaugh	
NON-RELIGIOUS MORALITY	Epicurus Stoics Aristotle Zeno			Bentham T H Huxley J S Mill	
HUMAN RIGHTS			Locke	Paine J H Huxley Wolstencraft Marx Brockway	

2.3 THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF HUMANISM: SOME KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANISM IN THE WESTERN WORLD

Introduction

All aspects of modern life have their roots in the past – sometimes in the very distant past. This is true for all the thinking and action that are thought of as being 'Humanist'. We have picked out four major areas of concern to present day Humanists and tried to trace their roots to see how they have developed during the last 2,500 years. These 'building blocks' of Humanism are:

1. Rational explanation and scientific thinking
2. Freedom of thought and secularism
3. Non-religious morality
4. Human rights

This survey is very much a 'potted history': it picks out appropriate aspects, both in what is selected for comment and in what is said about the individuals and movements quoted. It is the course leaders' own survey and therefore subjective and open to debate. But we hope that it will shed light on the often very early origins of attitudes and concepts that many of you will recognise as 'Humanist'. However:

- **It is not a conventional 'chronological' history** - instead it draws on key developments over the last 2,500 years to help explain the Humanist aspects of the present day in the developed Western world. The survey is arranged in chronological order within each area: these can be seen as parallel, linked strands.
- **It is not a continuous story** - in each section, there is an enormous time gap from 'Classical' Athens and the Roman Republic (5th Century BCE - 1st Century CE) to the Renaissance period in Western Europe (late 13th to 16th Centuries). This intervening period is sometimes referred to as 'The Dark Ages', for which only limited source material is available for study. More importantly for our purposes, this was a time when knowledge in Western Europe was largely framed by religious doctrine and the authority of the Church. Independent thinking on morality and on the nature and meaning of life was discouraged and suppressed as 'heresy' and there was persecution of men and women with Humanist views.
- **It is not a global survey –** it is restricted to Humanism in the Western world, on the grounds that it is in Western Europe that Humanism developed over the last 500 years as a recognised belief system closely associated with 'Western' concepts of individual liberty and responsibility. Of course, there are elements of Chinese and Indian thought for example that can be seen as Humanist, such as:
  - the Confucian philosophy of moderation in behaviour to preserve social stability
  - Taoist philosophy's emphasis on the 'middle way' to a balanced understanding
  - Hinduism's emphasis on toleration and individual choice of deities
  - Sikhism's insistence on the equal value of all, irrespective of class or gender
  - Therevada Buddhism's non-theistic philosophy of enlightenment through self knowledge

1. Rational explanation and scientific thinking

Philosophy exploring the human situation (Athens, 5th Century BCE):

- 'Man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras)
- Free inquiry – questioning to discover truth (Socrates)
- Exploring human nature and behaviour through: history (Herodotus), tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), comedy (Aristophanes)
- Exploring the nature of matter – the atomist theory, development by chance happenings and necessary laws (Democritus); medicine based on observation and diagnosis (Hippocrates); 'heliocentrism' – sun at centre of things (Aristarchus)

Development of the scientific method (Europe, 15th - 17th Centuries):

- The scientific method of inductive thinking, establishing laws from observed events (Bacon 1620)
- A non-religious explanation of movements in the Universe based on observation: revival of the heliocentric theory (Copernicus 1542)
- Use of the telescope to make observations of planetary motion that proved Copernicus' theory (Galileo 1610)
- Scientific inventions and designs including armoured vehicles, gliders and helicopters (Leonardo da Vinci)
- Explanation of the working of the solar system – Kepler's laws of planetary motion (1606-1619) and Newton's law of universal gravity (1687)

The 'Age of Enlightenment' (Europe, 17th - 18th Centuries):

- 'Cogito ergo sum' ('I think therefore I am'): thinking is our essence, reason the only reliable route to knowledge: no divine ends to explain nature: Descartes (1644)
- Collation and publication of human knowledge – Encyclopaedists: Diderot (1750-65)
- Philosophical exploration of nature based on reasoning: Locke (1690) and Hume (1740) – 'Enlightenment' is using reason to shed light on areas of ignorance or darkness
- Skepticism and critiques of religion based on reason: Voltaire (1759); 'The Age of Reason' (Paine 1794) (NB both described themselves as 'Deists')
- Ideas of progress and the 'Perfectibility of Man': Godwin (1793)

Continuing development of scientific investigation and explanation (from 18th Century):

- Evolution by natural selection and the survival of the fittest: 'On the Origin of Species': Darwin (1858)
- 'The Descent of Man' – evolution of humans as one species descended from animal predecessors, undermining religious interpretations of human significance: Darwin (1871)
- DNA – evolution at the molecular level: Crick and Watson (1953)

2. Freedom of thought and secularism

'Democratic' thinking and practice in classical Athens and the Roman Republic:

- Democratic government for citizens in Athens (5th Century BCE) and the Roman Republic (5th Century BCE to Julius Caesar's dictatorship in 44 BCE), but not for women or the large slave population (though there were also anti-slavery movements)
- Free inquiry – questioning to discover truth: the Socratic method of inquiry – thesis/antithesis/synthesis (an initial explanation, rigorous analysis leading to an alternative explanation, resulting in a better but still provisional explanation)
- Independent thinking on the human situation from Socrates (5th Century BCE) to Marcus Aurelius (2nd Century CE) – Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics

Revival of independent thinking in the European Renaissance (late 13th - 16th Centuries):

- An explanation of the universe based on observation that removed earth and mankind from the centre and argued that the sun is at the centre instead (Copernicus 1542)
- Painting and sculpture glorifying the human body based on anatomical research (Michelangelo, Leonardo)
- Study of the classical, pre-Christian writers fosters reflection on the human condition outside of a religious framework (Erasmus, known as a 'Humanist')

A struggle for freedom of thought and expression:

- The Inquisition sought to suppress the 'heliocentric' theory and other 'heretical' thinking – trial and conviction of Galileo for heresy (leading to house arrest for the rest of his life)

Criticism of corrupt practices in the Church:

- Luther's belief in salvation for individuals, reading the scriptures in their own languages
- Luther's '97 theses' against indulgences (1517)

Political revolutions against aristocratic/Church dominated governments in Europe (from 17th Century):

- End of theory of the 'Divine Right' of Kings to rule in England: civil war, execution of Charles I, establishment of an English Republic under Cromwell (1648-60) and growth of independent communities of Christian radicals with a belief in equality (the 'Diggers' and 'Levellers')
- American and French Revolutions (1776-87, 1789-99): overthrow of colonial rule of George III, Declaration of Independence and American Constitution; execution of Louis XVI, Declaration of Rights of Man, setting up of National Assembly
- Parliamentary reform in UK (1832-1928): three Reform Acts extending male right to vote; campaign for women's right to vote – some women above age 30 entitled to vote from 1918, full universal suffrage for all adults over age 21 achieved in 1928

The Romantic Movement (from circa 1800):

- Celebration of freedom, the beauty of nature (the English 'Lake Poets') and individualism (novelists in all the main European cultures)
- Music: Beethoven – symphonies dedicated to Heroism (3rd), Freedom (5th) and Joy (9th); symphonies exploring nature – Beethoven (6th), Mendelssohn, Dvorak, Mahler; songs of Schubert and Mahler

The concept of liberty and freedom (from circa 1750):

- American and French Revolutions (1776-87, 1789-99)
- Freedom of choice based on use of reason, and liberty to act for your own welfare and fulfilment as long as it does not harm others (J S Mill - 'On Liberty' 1859)
- Freedom of thought and expression: publications for political freedoms (Richard Carlile 1840s)
- Freedom of belief about religion: 'atheism' and 'secularism' – religion should not interfere in worldy matters (Holyoake 1840), 'agnosticism' (T H Huxley 1872)
- Neitzsche: 'God is dead': we each create our own morality

3. Non-religious morality

Independent thinking (Athens, 5th Century BCE - end of Roman Empire):

- Happiness and contentment in agreement with nature (the Cynics: Diogenes)
- The fulfilment of human potential (Aristotle)
- Modest pleasures avoiding excess, and reciprocity in seeking the happiness of others as well as your own (the Epicureans: Epicurus)
- Wisdom through harmony with the order of the natural world through logical reasoning, and courage to stand for your beliefs (the Stoics: Zeno and Emperor Marcus Aurelius)

Philosophy and practice based on happiness and well-being (from 18th Century):

- American Declaration of Independence: right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (1776)
- Need for legislation to secure 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number': Jeremy Bentham (1832)
- Morality based on assessment of practical consequences using the pleasure/pain principle: Bentham (1832)
- Pursuit of happiness and higher pleasures – the concept of human dignity: J S Mill (1859)
- Reforming legislation based on investigation of situations and statistical analysis by Commissions in the spirit of Bentham. Victorian social reform (Factory Acts, Mines Acts, Climbing Boys Act, Health of Town Act etc) leading to the establishment of the welfare state: Lloyd George (1909-11), Beveridge (1940s), Attlee and Bevan (1945-51)
- Existentialism: reality lies in this world, and in making our own choices in life
- Contemporary concern with happiness as a purpose for government: Layard (2002)

Some concepts relevant to Humanism (19th Century):

- Secularism – religion should not interfere in worldly matters: Holyoake (1853)
- Agnosticism – the limits of knowledge in respect to the existence of gods: T H Huxley (1869)

4. Human rights

Theories of human rights (from late 17th Century):

- Locke (1690), Paine 'Rights of Man' (1793), Wollstonecraft 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' as rational beings (1792); American and French Revolutionary Declarations (1776, 1791); Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)

Putting human rights into practice (from late 18th Century):

- Feminism and women's equality (1792 - present day)
- Abolition of slave trade and slavery in British Empire: (1807, 1833)
- Utopian societies, Robert Owen, the Cooperative Movement: (1844)
- Critique of capitalism and exploitation, communism: Marx (1848, 1861)
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights UN (1948)
- European Convention on Human Rights (1950)
- Sex Discrimination Act UK (1975)
- Race Relations Act UK (1976) and Race Relations Amendment Act (2000)
- Human Rights Act UK (1998)
- Disabilities Discrimination Act UK (2005)
- Equality Act UK (2010)

Humanism and peace (from mid 20th Century):

- Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: Russell, Fenner Brockway (from 1958)
- Work for economic and social development, United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), first director Julian Huxley (1945 - present day)
- UN peace-keeping forces

Questions to consider:

Which of the four 'building blocks' do you find most helpful in appreciating what 'Humanism' is?

Take a look on www.humanism.org.uk/humanism at the pages dealing with the 'humanist tradition': which figures particularly inspire you?

2.4 CONSIDERATIONS OF CONTEXT

1. A story of struggle in dangerous circumstances at personal cost

Copernicus' fear for his life if he published his theory in his lifetime, and Galileo's trial and imprisonment when he did take this risk are highlighted, but it is worth noting that many other independent thinkers and activists were also punished. There will have been some who endured even worse fates. In particular:

- Gordiano Bruno was burnt at the stake for speculations on infinity at the time of Galileo
- a number of the individuals in the survey were imprisoned at various times: Tom Paine had to flee to France to avoid arrest for his publication of 'The Rights of Man' in 1792, and was then imprisoned and condemned to death during the French Revolution in 1793, escaping this fate only owing to the fall of Robespierre; George Holyoake was imprisoned for blasphemy, Richard Carlile for 'seditious libel', and Fenner Brockway for being a conscientious objector in the Second World War
- many ordinary people who took part in protests and meetings to achieve things they believed in were at risk; for example, eleven died in the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester as they attended a meeting for parliamentary reform in l817 and were cut down by the swords of the local forces as they tried to escape during the panic that set in

2. All these initiatives were part of much wider developments

- few of the 'modern' developments would have been possible without the printing press invented by William of Gutenburg in the 15th Century
- the industrial and technological revolutions beginning in the 18th Century made the later political revolutions possible
- many Age of Enlightenment thinkers depended on the support and protection of rulers of the age such as Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia, or on the freedoms created by the revolutionary movements in France and America, and by the reform movements in Britain
- in the most general terms, the developments in each area were interrelated and supported each other, which is why some names and themes appear in more than one list

2.5 THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO HUMANISM

Women have every human right, and many writers from Mary Wollstonecraft onwards have made this abundantly clear. But male dominance of cultural and public life has hidden this obvious fact until recent times. There were few prominent women except for royalty and saints in Europe until the modern era and hardly any of them were Humanists.

Little is known except by repute of possible exceptions. Few women achieved great fame in Ancient Greece. Sappho (c.620-c.570 BCE) was widely considered the greatest lyric poet of love and sexuality throughout Classical times, but sadly only fragments of her work remain. And Hipparchia, wife of the Cynic philosopher Crates (4th Century BCE), achieved much notoriety for dressing like a man and living on fully equal terms with her husband. She was also a philosopher herself: unfortunately, none of her writings survive.

Another major female figure from the pre-modern era is Hypathia, who was a leading scholar in Alexandria (c.360-415CE). She was head of a philosophical school and admired as a charismatic teacher and for her learning. A philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and scientist, she is credited with charting celestial movements and inventing a hydro-meter to measure the density of liquids. Tragically, she was brutally killed by a Christian mob. Had her writings not all been lost when the library at Alexandria was destroyed, she might well have an honoured place in history.

But in general, women's lives and achievements were restricted to the domestic sphere until the modern era. Independent-minded women began making significant contributions from the early 17th Century, initially in the arts, especially literature. Most significant among authors for Humanists is Marian Evans (1819-1880), who was as open about her lack of religious belief as she was aware of the need for a male pen-name (George Eliot) in an age that gave more respect to men than women in her field. She acted out her dislike of dogma as a young woman who faced great family tension by refusing to attend church. Eliot was later influenced by Unitarianism (a very Humanist religious community) and by 'The Religion of Humanity', an ethical way of life that was not based on super-natural beliefs. She also scandalised Victorian society by living openly with George Lewes who, separated from his wife who had deserted him, could not obtain a divorce.

Some of the major themes in George Eliot's writings are Humanist, such as the inter-dependence of human beings, and the search for values by which to live in a confusing and changing world. She was always interested in religion, but focussed on exploring the possibility of how to 'live a good life in a godless universe' – a defining aspect of Humanism. In her words, 'Wear a smile and make friends; wear a scowl and make wrinkles. What do we live for if not to make the world less difficult for each other?'

In the political world Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) was a pioneering figure with Thomas Paine in the development, or in her own words the 'vindication', of the rights of both men and women at a critical period of their evolution. She was a passionate defender of the French Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man, writing a scathing 'Letter to Edmund Burke' denouncing, in the name of the rights of common men and women, his defence of aristocratic privilege and power. She then wrote in 1792 an equally passionate and wide-ranging 'Vindication of the Rights of Women', which marks the start of feminist literature in Britain. From her time onwards, women have made significant contributions to developing theories of human rights, even if the forces of male dominance have made it necessary for a specifically feminist movement to develop.

Due to the social circumstances of the times, one way in which women contributed during the 18th and 19th Centuries was though collaborating with men - who were inevitably given the credit for work that was often a joint enterprise. An example of particular relevance to Humanists is the close working association between Harriet Taylor (1807-58) and J S Mill throughout a long friendship followed by marriage when her first husband died. She was regarded by Mill as an intellectual equal and he claimed that '*On Liberty* was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name.' Their relationship reinforced Mill's advocacy of women's rights.

A very significant contribution to publicising the needs of working women in Britain and improving their conditions was made by Annie Besant (1847-1933), who organised the workers in the London matchmaking industry and led them in a successful three week long strike against their dangerous and badly paid working conditions in 1888. For some years she was a leading member of the National Secular Society and with its President Charles Bradlaugh published a book on birth-control which caused great offence to the churches. The resulting scandal led to their prosecution but eventually the case was thrown out. In later life she became involved in Theosophy.

Marie Stopes (1880-1958) was a leading campaigner for women's rights and a pioneer in the field of family planning. Her book *Married Love*, published in 1918, was controversial and influential. She opened the first family planning clinic in the UK in 1921 and her work in this field is now carried forward by Marie Stopes International, which operates family planning centres in over forty countries. Her work was carried out in the face of strong criticism by both Protestant and Catholic churches, and there were calls for her prosecution. Marie Stopes was essentially a Humanist, but she also became a strong supporter of the now discredited eugenics movement of the early 20th Century.

Like Harriet Taylor, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) had a close working association and life partnership with a man – Jean-Paul Sartre – but in the changed social circumstances of the 20th Century published her work under her own name. Her role as an existential philosopher is significant in the Humanist tradition, not least through *The Second Sex*, which includes a detailed analysis of women's oppression and is a foundational tract of contemporary feminism.

It is interesting and important to note that modern feminism has been very critical of 'mainstream' Humanism. Karen Green points out that reason and rationality have been constructed by male philosophers in a way that excluded feminine traits such as the creative power of feeling and emotion, and that Humanism has retained this emphasis on the power of reason, and as such has been a male dominated philosophy. But together with Pauline Johnson, Green has re-emphasised the importance of compassion and emotion in Humanism, asserting that Humanism is a mixture of both reason and feeling. Green calls this 'a female version of rationality', and Johnson argues that the values embodied in this 'radical humanism' can provide a conceptual framework for feminism to contribute to the building of a diverse and just society in which men and women both play a leading role.

We hope this section does some justice to the contribution of women both to history and to the Humanist tradition, even though the rest of the course continues to reflect the male dominance of thought and action in all but recent times.

EXPLORING HUMANISM: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SESSION 3

HUMANIST MORAL VALUES

SESSION PLAN

A. Humanist morality

3.1 Some definitions of morality and ethics

3.2 Some key Humanist moral principles

B. Humanist principles for living in the 21st Century

3.3 Some components for a Humanist morality for our time

C. The foundations of Humanist morality

3.4 The foundations of Humanist morality

3.5 Some aspects of Humanist morality contrasted with religious beliefs

Support Material

3.6 A charter for compassion and the Golden Rule

3.7 Lives at risk on a railway track

Procedure for this session

There is a little homework again this week. Please read 3.1 before the session and give some thought to the 'questions to consider'.

3.1 SOME DEFINITIONS OF MORALITY AND ETHICS

The following definitions are taken from *Chambers Dictionary (2003).* The selection is guided by those phrases that point up the links and distinctions between the terms.

MORALITY: that which renders an action right or wrong: the quality of being moral: the practice of moral duties, apart from religion

MORAL: directed towards what is right: capable of knowing right from wrong: relating to conduct considered as good or bad; supported by evidence of reason or probability

ETHICS: a system of morals or rules of behaviour: professional standards of conduct

ETHICAL: relating to approved moral behaviour

So the two sets of terms have essentially the same meaning. However, one or the other is often preferred in a particular context. 'Morals' and 'morality' are more often applied to individual behaviour (eg 'sexual morality') and to doing what is right. 'Ethics' and 'ethical' are more often applied to group behaviour (eg 'business ethics' and 'medical ethics') and to systems of rules or principles.

From the Humanist perspective the most interesting points are that:

- the dictionary definition of 'moral' includes 'supported by evidence of reason or probability'
- one dictionary definition of 'morality' is 'the practice of moral duties, apart from religion'
- 'moral' conduct is related to what is considered right or wrong, good or bad

Two further definitions from *Chambers Dictionary* suggest that both terms are different from religious concepts:

- a 'moralist' is defined as 'a moral as opposed to a religious person'
- an 'ethicist' is defined as 'a person who detaches ethics from religion'

Four of these five points indicate that morality stands independent of religion. A religious morality or ethic is only one version of morality or ethics.

Questions to consider:

How do morality and ethics differ, if at all?

In everyday use are 'moral' issues more straightforward than 'ethical' ones – why do we have moral panics, and never ethical panics?

Why do religions claim that they alone have the right to define morality?

In what ways is Humanist morality different from religious morality?

How can Humanists respond to the accusation that their morality is 'inferior' to that of religious believers?

3.2 SOME KEY HUMANIST MORAL PRINCIPLES

We list here some broad principles of Humanist morality, which are developed in more detail later in this session. We will consider the practical application of these principles in Session 4 and return to them again in Session 6.

- we should try to live by the values - such as love, compassion, fairness and respect - that have developed because human societies and groups cannot flourish without them
- most of us can reason out right and wrong from the consequences of our actions, especially if we have sufficient information: we don't need god(s) to tell us how to lead good lives
- we should recognise that each society has evolved its own code of morality and laws, and that in most societies these will change as circumstances change
- our actions and laws should aim to promote well-being and happiness, and to prevent or decrease suffering and misery
- everyone should be free to act as they wish so long as their actions do not harm others
- we should be sensitive to the living environment and to people different from ourselves
- we should in general follow the two-part Golden Rule:
    - treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves in their position
    - do not treat others in ways we would not want to be treated ourselves in their position

Questions to consider:

Can we rank these principles in order of importance to Humanists?

Are the two versions of the Golden Rule sufficient as a guide to living? If not, how should they be amended or added to?

Are there any situations where the Golden Rule doesn't work?

Are there any other principles we need to create a morality appropriate for the 21st century?

3.3 SOME COMPONENTS FOR A HUMANIST MORALITY FOR OUR TIME

We will now try to frame a morality in the form of a list of principles that we feel create a Humanist morality relevant to human needs in the 21st Century. Below are some possible components, taken from a variety of sources.

The ten commandments (minus the religious bits)
- Honour your father and your mother
- Do not kill
- Do not commit adultery
- Do not steal
- Do not bear false witness against your neighbour
- Do not covet your neighbour's house, nor your neighbour's wife…nor anything that is your neighbour's

Bertrand Russell's 'liberal Decalogue' (selection)
- Do not feel certain about anything
- Do not conceal evidence
- Do not discourage thinking
- Meet argument with reason not authority
- Have no respect for the authority of others
- Do not suppress opinions
- Do not fear to be eccentric in your opinions
- Value intelligent dissent more than passive agreement
- Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient

Immanuel Kant
- Always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end
- Always act in a way that you could will others to act the same

What Humanists believe in
- Thinking for ourselves
- Using evidence, experience and our reason to understand the world
- Living this one life well, working out meaning and purpose in life for ourselves
- Making ourselves and others as happy as possible
- Reducing unhappiness as far as possible
- Promoting human rights and freedoms
- Living cooperatively with people of other beliefs

The Golden Rule
- treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves in their position
- do not treat others as we would not like to be treated ourselves in their position

The future
- Think globally
- Care for the future by preserving the environment

Questions to consider

What positive qualities underlie the list you have drawn up?

3.4 THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMANIST MORALITY

Introduction

This is an attempt to define the space for a non-religious morality, to argue the Humanist case that we can all be good without god(s).

It is often said by Humanists that we should not define Humanist morality in terms of religious morality. The argument is that to do this is to take up a negative approach that puts Humanists in a defensive position. Instead Humanists should celebrate their values in their own right. Many Humanists have been quite seriously asked by religious colleagues and friends: 'Have you Humanists got any morals?' That kind of question needs a robust reply without any reference to God!

However, it can be argued that Humanists are bound to be criticised from time to time from a religious perspective, so they need to be able to take on religious critics on their own terms. As we have seen in Session 2, modern Humanism developed in some ways (though not exclusively) from critique of religious arguments and attitudes, and there has been conflict between Humanist and religious views ever since. But it is Humanists who have been the critics for the last three or four hundred years.

The four foundations of Humanist morality

Humanist morality is grounded in the following fundamental ideas:

1. Morality has developed and continues to develop as part of human nature and experience
2. Morality depends on being able to appreciate consequences
3. Principles must be appropriately applied in context
4. The point of morality is to improve human wellbeing

Each of these themes is expanded on below, followed by a challenging question for discussion. They are further developed in 3.5, where they are contrasted with the views of religious people.

1. The natural evolution of morality

Human societies depend on nearly all their members respecting and cooperating with each other. Selfish behaviour damages everyone else. This has been the experience throughout history (and probably pre-history as well), and it is this experience that has created the powerful concepts of right and wrong. We don't need god(s) to understand them and respond to them.

Question to consider:

How can human beings work out universal principles from their own limited individual experience?

2. Appreciating consequences

We can all observe and make predictions about the results of actions by using our experience and reasoning power. We can see how our actions benefit or harm others, and as we view others as of equal value to us as human beings, this gives us a universal guide to behaviour. We can also use our reason to take the complexities of situations into account and to act appropriately.

Question to consider:

Can we guarantee that everyone will use their reason objectively and compassionately?

3. Appreciating context

Humanists live by universal principles and values, but recognise that these are applied in different ways in different situations at different times. As we have done in the past, we should use our reason and compassion to improve laws and behaviour, both to reduce suffering and to promote well-being. Believing there is only one unchanging set of rules for every situation can cause great suffering.

Question to consider:

Does this approach make morality relative to the situation, justifying whatever individuals think is best from their own point of view?

4. Promoting the wellbeing of others

Humanists believe that the only genuinely unselfish behaviour comes from a wish to act in such a way as to benefit everyone affected by our actions, making them happier. This is surely superior to a morality based on fear of punishment or hope of reward.

Question to consider:

Do our better instincts need the support of powerful sanctions to check human selfishness?

3.5 SOME ASPECTS OF HUMANIST MORALITY CONTRASTED WITH RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

It is only too easy to represent the views of religious people in a 'fundamentalist' way, whereas there are a wide range of views in most of the major faith systems. Quakers, Unitarians, liberal Christians of other denominations, and liberal Jews and Moslems, have strong reservations about the 'traditional' views of God. And many eastern religions, such as classical Buddhism, Jainism, and some traditions within Hinduism, do not include a belief in god(s) at all. The position taken by these groups on moral issues is often quite similar to the Humanist position.

However, there is a clear distinction between non-religious Humanism and 'mainstream' mono-theistic religions as to moral issues, and it is this distinction that is brought out here.

1. The natural evolution of morality

Humanists:

- think that concepts of right and wrong have some basis in our biology but have been developed further in all human cultures to meet fundamental human needs, especially concern and respect for others (to encourage cooperation) and empathy and kindness to others (to create happiness and contentment)
- see that societies depend on these concepts. Altruism brings with it a benefit to the wider society; while selfishness, which may benefit one person, can cause damage to others. It is human experience of this that has created the powerful concepts of right and wrong, good and bad. You don't need a god to understand them
- regard the similarities in many religious codes as an outcome of this process: they are not god-given, rather they reflect human needs, experiences, and shared values – the best of human nature and human culture

Religious people:

- argue that universally valid concepts cannot develop from individual experience, and that without objective standards you only have conflicting subjective experiences and feelings
- believe that religion provides the absolute objective standards human beings need to live good lives

Questions to consider:

Has morality developed and changed?

Is it the result of natural biological and cultural processes or must it be god-given?

2. Appreciating consequences

Humanists:

- assert that in most circumstances whether actions are right or wrong can be reasoned out from their consequences, which can be observed and predicted by almost all human beings
- argue that this universal reasoning power makes a universal standard for behaviour possible
- think that the consequences of public and individual actions should be calculated in terms of the happiness or suffering they cause or prevent
- claim this as a universal morality because it treats all human beings as of equal value and applies to everyone
- claim that Humanism is a morality that can resolve complex moral dilemmas because it takes circumstances into account and does not, like many religions, use a set of rules that can be applied too simplistically

Religious people:

- believe that reason is not as objective as Humanists claim, but can and has been used to justify subjective and deeply flawed arguments
- assert that this proves atheism does not create an adequate basis for morality: it has led to great evils, which following a universal standard of goodness would have prevented in the first place
- argue that if you seek a guide to living in calculating the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' you have to allow some bad actions to avoid worse ones; you still have no perfect solution to dilemmas
- observe that consequences do not give an absolute guide to action either. It all depends on which consequences you select

Questions to consider:

Can we establish morality *just* by looking at the consequences of behaviour?

Can rational arguments be misused just as effectively as religious ones?

When in history have rational arguments been used to the detriment of society?

When in history have religious arguments been used to the detriment of society?

When in history have Humanist arguments been used to the detriment of society?

3. Appreciating context

Humanists:

- recognise universally valid principles, and so are not 'moral relativists'. They distinguish these principles from customs and laws that change over time but are often seen as codes of morality (eg family structure, gender roles, treatment of minority groups, sexual behaviour and even diet)
- observe that some laws and customs have needed to change because the suffering they caused has been recognised, leading to eg: greater tolerance for new forms of family life; wider rights to vote; recognition of rights to divorce and to abortion; reduction of child exploitation and abuse; abolition of slavery; and outlawing racial and other forms of discrimination. Many further changes in law and behaviour are needed, eg for the effective conservation of other living species and of finite material resources, and in response to climate change and other environmental problems so as to secure humanity's future
- think that imposing unchanging absolute standards stands in the way of such improvement
- observe that absolute religious doctrine has caused great damage by its own consequences (eg the crusades and other religious wars; persecution of heretics by the Inquisition; the religious justifications for slavery, colonialism and genocide; and the recent troubles in Northern Ireland)

Religious people:

- accept that improvements in society are valid and necessary, and that churches have perhaps erred in the past, but believe that these problems are the result of human susceptibility to sin and the attractiveness of evil behaviour rather than a flaw in the doctrine itself
- believe that only an absolute standard and faith in it had the power to move people like Shaftesbury, Wilberforce, Nightingale and Fry to be inspired to campaign against social evils and lessen human suffering. It could be said they also believe this is grounded in a power for good that is god-given
- argue that any other basis for morality is 'relativism' and therefore inadequate. If morality is subjective, then everything is 'up to you', meaning there is no universal standard available by working from human experience

Questions to consider:

Is morality absolute or relative?

If Humanist morality respects the right of people to their different cultures and value systems, does this mean Humanists believe they are all equally valid?

4. Promoting the wellbeing of others

Humanists:

- look for inspiration for being good in promoting the well-being of all others they affect. This is particularly true when we live in a time of imminent irreversible environmental damage that has been largely caused by human activity, and can only be reversed by changes in human behaviour
- think that a morality directed towards universal human welfare and drawing on human qualities like sensitivity and compassion is superior to a morality based on avoiding hell fire or securing the joys of paradise, which is a morality based on fear and hope for oneself, and could be seen as selfish
- Believe in moral advancement based on using our reason and compassion to appreciate changes in the human condition

Religious people:

- believe that we need a stronger basis for living good lives than just compassion for other human beings. Sanctions are needed because human beings are selfish
- believe that the strongest basis for morality is a belief in an afterlife (or series of reincarnations) whose nature depends on how well you live in this one. Fear and hope are perfectly valid human concerns

Questions to consider:

What are the most effective reasons for being good?

Does the modern world require a new way of 'being good' beyond the traditional understanding of what this means?

3.6 A CHARTER FOR COMPASSION AND THE GOLDEN RULE

"Socrates maintained that people must ask themselves questions about their fundamental prejudices or they would live superficial lives because 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. A truly 'Socratic dialogue' between two people is a joint effort to discover new understanding. But there is little genuinely Socratic dialogue going on. All too often in a debate we have to defeat and even humiliate our opponents. And yet if there was ever a time when we needed an appreciation of how little we know it is surely now. A joint effort and a Socratic humility and openness to others is required if we are to meet the challenges of our time and create a just and viable world.

That is why we are launching the Charter for Compassion. Compassion does not mean pity: it means to 'experience with the other'. The golden rule, of treating all others as you would wish to be treated yourself, lies at the heart of all morality. It requires a principled, ethical and imaginative effort to put self-interest aside and stand in someone else's shoes.

The golden rule does not just advocate kind feeling but impels us to examine our presuppositions, change our minds if necessary, and submit our assessment of a dilemma to stringent criticism. One cannot act for the true benefit of the greatest number of people if not fully aware of the intricacy of a particular situation; this calls for an intellectual effort, an impartial investigation of the history of a problem, and an honest attempt to look into an opposite viewpoint – instead of simply relying on discussion that happens to chime with our own opinions."

- From 'At one with our ignorance' *Karen Armstrong, Guardian 11 November 09*

3.7 LIVES AT RISK ON A RAILWAY TRACK

'Denise's dilemmas'
(from Richard Dawkins 'The God Delusion')

These situations are exercises in logic rather than practical reality, but they point up some of the complexities in making moral judgements.

SITUATION 1
A runaway truck on a railway line threatens to kill five people trapped in a car stranded on a level crossing. Denise is standing by a set of points and in a position to divert the truck into a siding and save their lives. Unfortunately there is a man trapped in the siding.

Question: Should Denise throw the switch and save the five by killing the one?

SITUATION 2
The truck can be stopped and five lives saved by dropping a large weight off a bridge above the track. But the only weight available is an extremely fat man sitting on the bridge above the track admiring the sunset.

Question: Does Denise push the fat man off the bridge?

SITUATION 3
Denise can save the five in the car by diverting the truck onto a side loop that rejoins the main track just before their vehicle and happens to have an extremely fat man trapped on it who is heavy enough to stop the truck.

Question: Should Denise switch the points in this instance?

SITUATION 4
The diversionary loop has a large weight on it, enough to stop the truck. Unfortunately a hiker is sat in front of it enjoying his lunch and will certainly be killed if Denise switches the points.

Question: Should Denise switch the points?

A VARIATION ON SITUATION 2
Five hospital patients in a hospital ward are dying, each with a different organ failing. All can be saved if a donor can be found. There is an obviously healthy man in the waiting room, all five of whose organs are suitable for transplanting to these hospital patients.

Question: Should the healthy visitor be used to save the five terminally ill patients?

EXPLORING HUMANISM: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SESSION 4

HOW HUMANISTS HANDLE MORAL ISSUES

SESSION PLAN

A. Introduction

4.1 Some common aspects of moral issues

B. Some key moral issues

4.2 Abortion – perspectives, facts and issues

4.3 Euthanasia – perspectives, facts and issues

4.4 Sex and relationships – perspectives, facts and issues

4.5 Recreational drugs – perspectives, facts and issues

Support Material

4.6 Faith positions on abortion and euthanasia

Procedure for this session

After a short general discussion, participants will be divided into two groups. Each group, together with one of the course leaders, will consider in depth one of the moral issues listed above. They will be asked to select a spokesperson to report back to the whole group in plenary session.

We will then choose one of the remaining moral issues listed above for briefer consideration.

The session will close with general discussion and some overall reflections from the course leaders that tie the case studies to the course as a whole up to this point.

4.1 SOME COMMON ASPECTS OF MORAL ISSUES

We have chosen a number of issues to consider in depth as moral dilemmas for Humanists. They all raise fundamental concerns and matter to all of us because they can affect any one of us at any time. They are also issues on which almost everyone has strongly held opinions, and these often clash at a very deep level.

The matters that need to be considered in relation to these issues can be grouped under a number of headings, including:

- life and death
- individual autonomy and freedom
- happiness and well-being
- quality of life
- the legal position
- medical advances
- 'slippery slope' arguments
- religious arguments

For specific points relating to abortion see 4.2, and for specific points relating to euthanasia see 4.3. In both cases, the Humanist stance as set out in position papers produced by the British Humanist Association (BHA) is considerably different from the official position of most faith communities (see 4.6).

For specific points relating to sex and relationships see 4.4, and for specific points relating to recreational drugs see 4.5.

Note that statements about the legal position relate to England and Wales – the law may be different in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Questions to consider at the end of the session:

Which Humanist principles underlie the Humanist stance in each case?

Do Humanist principles always lead to 'liberal' views on moral issues?

4.2 ABORTION – PERSPECTIVES, FACTS AND ISSUES

A Humanist stance (from a BHA position paper) is to:

- value happiness in life, and choice, and therefore accept the right to abortion
- believe the foetus becomes a person much closer to birth than conception
- choose the mother's interests and rights above those of the embryo or foetus
- value quality of life above the right to life if the two are in conflict
- argue for good sex and relationship education and easily available contraception to avoid the distress of unwanted pregnancies
- believe that abortions should be carried out as early as possible, and that barriers to achieving this should be removed
- believe safe abortion should be available on demand

The legal position:

- abortion is permitted up to the 24th week of pregnancy (this limit was reduced from 28 weeks in 1990, thus restricting the right to abortion)
- two doctors must agree that there is a danger to the life or physical or mental health of the mother or other children in the family
- there is no time limit to abortion if there is substantial risk that the foetus will be severely disabled or grave risk to the mother's life, physical or mental health

Some medical facts:

- with intensive support, a foetus is now often viable before the 24 week limit
- a foetus with disabilities may also be viable before 24 weeks
- diagnosis of disabilities, illness and gender is possible long before birth
- 80% of abortions take place before 13 weeks of pregnancy
- natural reproduction involves a high rate of embryo loss (perhaps 3 per live birth)

Pro-life groups wish to:

- reduce the time limit for legal abortion from 24 weeks to 20 weeks (or much less)
- prevent abortion of a seriously damaged foetus after 24 weeks
- impose a two week 'cooling-off' period before a final decision is made
- (sometimes) ban abortion entirely

Some issues to consider:

- when does human life begin? If at conception, is the morning after pill murder? If at birth and consciousness, should we allow abortions at any stage?
- where do you draw the line for abortion between conception and birth?
- is it justified to abort a foetus known to be severely damaged, but still viable
- is abortion after rape more justified than other abortions?
- whose rights are paramount - mother, father or foetus?
- where do contraceptive issues enter the debate?
- how can we avoid the need for 'back street' abortions?

4.3 EUTHANASIA – PERSPECTIVES, FACTS AND ISSUES

A Humanist stance (from a BHA position paper) is to:

- support the right to voluntary euthanasia out of concern for the quality of life and avoidance of unnecessary suffering and loss of dignity
- believe in personal autonomy, so that people of a sound mind are entitled to decide these matters for themselves, and advance decisions (formerly living wills) made when mentally competent should be respected
- recognise that proper safeguards are essential and believe they can be devised

Definitions:

Euthanasia is the intentional premature termination of someone's life, whether by direct intervention (active euthanasia) or by withholding life-prolonging measures and resources (passive euthanasia). Both active and passive euthanasia can be *voluntary* (in response to someone's declared wish, ie 'assisted dying'), *non-voluntary* (carried out in what is considered the best interests of someone unable to express an opinion, eg if they are in a coma) or *involuntary* (against someone's expressed wish, such as under the eugenic policies of the German Third Reich). Involuntary euthanasia is a euphemism for murder.

The legal position:

Refusal of treatment or nourishment is legal in the UK, as is treatment to alleviate pain that may hasten death as a side-effect. Neither is legally regarded as euthanasia. Advance decisions are in principle to be respected if someone is not in a position to make their wishes known. Active euthanasia by lethal injection or administration of drugs by a physician is illegal in the UK, but it is legal in Belgium and the Netherlands, provided strict procedures are followed. Assisted dying is legal, in restricted circumstances, in several jurisdictions including Switzerland, and hundreds of Britons have chosen or are choosing this course of action by travelling there. In February 2010, the director of public prosecutions issued guidelines applicable in England and Wales for deciding whether to prosecute in suspected cases of assisted dying, including help with travel to Switzerland.

Some medical facts:

- much medical thinking and practice is based on the right to life
- most people up to a century ago died quickly from injury or illness: medicine can now keep many people alive, often for long periods, in conditions that they find intolerable because of severe pain, loss of dignity and/or dependence on others

Some issues to consider:

- whose opinions matter most when a terminally ill person requests euthanasia?
- is there a slippery slope so that if euthanasia is legalised in restricted circumstances the conditions under which it is allowed will gradually be relaxed?
- how can the dangers of such a slippery slope be effectively guarded against?
- is euthanasia ever acceptable if patients cannot be consulted to give consent?
- should we campaign for voluntary euthanasia to be legal with safeguards?
- which is more important, sanctity of life or quality of life? Is this the only issue?
- if it is cruel to keep animals alive in misery, should we do this to human beings?

4.4 SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS – PERSPECTIVES, FACTS AND ISSUES

A Humanist stance is to:

- accept that sex is part of our nature, that it need not be confined to marriage, and that it is undertaken for pleasure, for bonding and occasionally for procreation
- stress the need for informed consent by both parties, due regard for relationships with others, and the avoidance of unwanted pregnancies and transmission of STDs
- treat others as we hope they will treat us, so a partner's happiness and sexual pleasure is as important as our own
- emphasise the importance of sex and relationships education in all schools
- support and recognise the validity of same sex relationships
- argue for easily available contraception and the acceptability of safe and legal abortion where it fails: every child should be a wanted child
- support marriage as a good structure for stable relationships in which to bring up children, but recognise that cohabitation can be an acceptable alternative
- accept the present arrangements for divorce
- urge both parties in a relationship that breaks down to make arrangements for good ongoing support of any children affected, preferably involving both parents

The legal position:

- the age of consent is 16 (but it is illegal for someone in a position of trust to have sex with under-18s in their care)
- divorce is available after one year of marriage on the ground of irretrievable break-down of the marriage, established by adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, or separation (for five years, or for two years if both parties consent)
- Civil Partnerships for same sex couples are equivalent to civil marriage
- rape is a serious offence, but due to low rates of reporting and prosecuting, perhaps only 1% of cases result in conviction, often for a less serious charge. The conviction rate is, however, higher for 'stranger-rape' (less than one-fifth of all cases)

Some medical and social facts:

- the contraceptive pill is highly effective and a great liberator for sexual freedom, giving power and responsibility to women: the morning after pill is less effective
- sterilisation is a very effective means of contraception but can be difficult to reverse
- latex condoms are reasonably effective if correctly used, and protect against STDs
- cohabitation is an increasingly common practice in all age groups. Nearly half of all births now occur outside marriage. About a third of marriages end in divorce
- the high rate of teenage pregnancies is a cause of concern, despite recent falls

Some issues to consider:

- why is sex such a cause of anxiety and guilt in our society?
- at what point do flirtation and seduction become rape?
- when does drinking or taking drugs exclude informed consent to sexual activity?
- what improvements in sex and relationships education are needed?
- is divorce now too easy?

4.5 RECREATIONAL DRUGS – PERSPECTIVES, FACTS AND ISSUES

A Humanist stance is to believe that:

- people should have freedom of choice and control over their own lives
- early help and treatment for needs is preferable to later punishment for crimes
- we should appreciate the consequences of our actions for ourselves and others
- public policy on the use of all drugs should be consistent and evidence based

The legal position:

- alcohol and tobacco are legal but their use is regulated to limit harm to others, eg as to drink-driving and secondary smoking; purchase by/sale to under-18s is illegal
- other (controlled) drugs are subject to the Misuse of Drugs Act. Possession and supply is illegal, with penalties varying by classification. Class A drugs include ecstasy, cocaine and heroin; Class B drugs include amphetamines and cannabis; Class C drugs include tranquilisers and some painkillers (non-medical use)

Some medical and social facts:

- alcohol and tobacco cause many deaths, far more than controlled drugs do
- mood alterations can be very damaging: alcohol can cause violent behaviour in public and private life; cannabis is linked to psychosis in some young adults and can affect reasoning capacity; ecstasy can cause depression and affect relationships
- some drugs, eg tobacco and heroin, are especially addictive and hard to give up
- there is no persuasive evidence of a 'slippery slope' from soft to hard drugs, but addiction can make damaging mood alterations permanent
- adulteration and misuse of illegal drugs is a major cause of the harm from their use
- drug misuse can cause much damage and distress to the immediate families of users
- the community incurs considerable costs through policing and enforcing the not very effective 'war on drugs', now replaced in some countries by decriminalisation
- much property crime is to finance drug habits, suppliers are powerful trading groups
- drug use and misuse (alcohol and tobacco as well as controlled drugs) is a significant factor in the demand for healthcare and social services
- drug misuse can result in people who could have made valuable contributions to society becoming unemployable, homeless or forced into crime or prostitution

Some issues to consider:

- what are the pros and cons of decriminalising some or all controlled drugs?
- what changes, if any, are needed in the laws on drugs?
- in what ways does drug taking damage the individual and society?
- how can the harm caused by drugs (including alcohol and tobacco) be minimised?
- on what basis should controlled drugs be classified?
- how can education contribute to reducing the problems caused by drug misuse?
- is drug taking criminal behaviour to be punished or a health problem to be treated?
- are restrictions on adult drug use only justified to avoid causing harm to others?
- can breaking the law by taking illegal drugs ever be justified?

4.6 FAITH POSITIONS ON ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA

(Extracts from the Manchester SACRE syllabus: 'Education in religion')

ABORTION	EUTHANASIA
Christianity A variety of positions in different denominations, from absolute rejection of abortion to acceptance in a number of specified situations.	A variety of positions, from absolute rejection on grounds of the sanctity of life that only God can give or take away, to acceptance to prevent suffering.
Judaism Mother's life has precedence at birth, but abortion is acceptable for medical reasons to Orthodox Jewry, also for social/emotional reasons to Reform Jewry.	We cannot precipitate death, but it is not essential to keep people alive in all circumstances.
Islam Only allowable if mother's life is at risk. Abortion is then seen as the lesser of two evils.	Euthanasia is forbidden: only Allah knows the reasons for suffering. The sanctity of life prevails.
Hinduism Life begins at conception, abortion is only allowable to save mother's life.	(no statement on euthanasia)
Buddhism Abortion is not allowable because it is the taking of life.	(no clear statement on euthanasia: there is both a respect for life and a duty to avoid suffering wherever possible)
Sikhism Abortion is rejected in almost all cases. Life begins at conception, is God's creation, so abnormalities of the foetus are not a sufficient ground for abortion. But some Sikhs accept abortion after rape, or on grounds of danger to the mother.	Euthanasia is rejected as only God has the right to give and take away life, humans should not tamper with God's creation. But equally there is a duty to sustain life.

Questions to consider:

What are the major points of difference from the Humanist position?

How would Humanists counter these arguments?

EXPLORING HUMANISM: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SESSION 5

THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE FOR HUMANISTS

SESSION PLAN

A. Personal perspectives and preliminary thoughts

5.1 Some preliminary thoughts
5.2 A Humanist position on the meaning and purpose of life

B. The meaning of life

5.3 What gives meaning to life for Humanists - some views and opinions

C. Spirituality

5.4 Is a 'spiritual' dimension necessary for life to have meaning?

D. The purpose of life

5.5 What makes life purposeful for Humanists - some views and opinions

Support Material

5.6 Meaning and purpose - some questions and suggested answers

Procedure for this session

At the start of this session, the course leaders will give brief accounts of what they feel gives their life meaning and purpose.

Participants are invited to contribute their own thoughts.

5.1 SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

The following quotations are provided to help stimulate thinking about meaning and purpose in life from a Humanist perspective.

Quotations

'Is man what he seems to the astronomers, a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling around on a small and unimportant planet? Or is he what he appears to Hamlet? Or is he both at once?'
Bertrand Russell - History of Western Philosophy

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'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.'
William Shakespeare - Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5

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'What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! … the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights me not.'
William Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 2 Scene 2

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'Negative Capability – that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.'
John Keats - letter written in 1817

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'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.'
Alexander Pope - Know Thyself

5.2 A HUMANIST POSITION ON MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

The meaning of life generally refers to the possible purpose and significance that may be attributed to human existence and one's personal life, and can be approached through a variety of related questions, such as *Why are we here?*, *What is life all about?*, and *What is the meaning of it all?*

Humanists do not believe in an overall meaning or purpose in life arising from super-natural sources, for three reasons central to their thinking:

- **they know that we are the product of evolution** and have each arrived on earth as the outcome of an untold number of random variations in inheritance over hundreds of thousands of years – and that is only the time of homo sapiens. We are here by chance, so there is no reason for us to think existence has any ultimate meaning

- **they do not believe in an afterlife**, which leaves nothing for individuals to aim for outside this life that would give them an overall purpose

- **they do not believe in a god** that could be the one, all-knowing authority that could tell us whether life has meaning or purpose

Rather, for Humanists the meaning of life is to be found in relationships between people, between individuals and their society, and with humanity as a whole and the entire biosphere. And in the broadest terms, the purpose of life is to further human flourishing.

As individuals, we can all hope that we will 'live on' in the memory of others and through our work and achievements. And perhaps we can fill our lives with meaning and purpose, and make them worth living with all the more intensity, because we know that like all things, they will have a final and irrevocable end.

Questions to consider:

- if this statement of the Humanist position is correct, what are the grounds on which we as Humanists do try and find some meaning and purpose in life?
- is 'a purposeful life' a more useful term for Humanists than 'purpose in life'?
- can our capacity for compassion act as a source of 'purpose' in life?
- does our reasoning capacity help us create meaning in life?
- is it more useful to find meaning in life and then 'purpose', or the other way round?

5.3 WHAT GIVES MEANING TO LIFE FOR HUMANISTS – SOME VIEWS AND OPINIONS

All Humanists agree that life should have meaning, and that compassion and empathy are as important as knowledge and understanding for achieving a meaningful life.

All these elements can usefully be examined at three levels:

- self-knowledge and understanding of who **we** are, and what has made us what we are
- knowledge and understanding of **others** so we can assess their needs and how we have an impact on them
- knowledge and understanding of the condition of **humanity** and our responsibilities as human beings

Quotations

'We can find or create meaning in our lives, in our everyday purposes and relationships. The fact that something eventually comes to an end does not make it pointless or meaningless. It may well be that we have to create meaning and purpose for ourselves, finding them in the way we choose to live our lives and the choices we make. Humanists tend to be optimistic about the human capacity to solve problems, but think that life doesn't have a meaning, any more than a tree has meaning.'
The British Humanist Association

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'It is essential to humanism that it brings values and meaning into life.'
Jim Herrick

*

'We develop meaning and purpose in life by identifying an emotionally and intellectually satisfying belief system.'
James Siddelley

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'A meaningful life is one that has significance, one that has point, substance, purpose, quality, value and direction.'
James Hemming Essay winner 2009

'What does a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms.'
Albert Camus - The Myth of Sisyphus

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'We can take joy in a life well lived, and take comfort from the fact that our achievements will survive us for a while at least, and that those we loved and gave happiness to will remember us well when we are gone.'
Andrew Copson

*

'When the map of our life is complete, and we die in the richness of our history, some among the living will miss us for a while, but the earth will go on without us. Our brief finitude is but a beautiful spark in the vast darkness of space. So we should live the fleeting day with passion.'
Richard Holloway – Looking in the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning

Questions to consider:

If you could only choose one of these statements, which seems to best express your view as to the meaning of life?

Is anything missing that should be added?

Is it only knowledge and awareness that give meaning to life?

Are there different levels of meaningfulness?

5.4 IS A 'SPIRITUAL' DIMENSION NECESSARY FOR LIFE TO HAVE MEANING?

The concept of 'spirituality' is a matter of intense debate among Humanists, the source of some of our deepest disagreements:

- some Humanists self-identify as **materialists** and emphasise that nothing has reality beyond what can be measured and proved to exist. All feeling and emotion is a matter of chemical reactions or electrical currents in the brain
- other Humanists emphasise that **human life has a spiritual dimension**, that there is 'a world of the human spirit without a holy spirit'. This dimension is found for example in the cultural sphere: the world of the arts - painting, sculpture, music, opera, poetry, drama and novels; the enjoyment of nature and the wonder inspired by the universe; the inspiration of human courage and achievement. It helps give life another layer of meaning for Humanists who take this view
- many, probably most, Humanists maintain that both these positions are correct and that they are not in conflict with each other

Disagreement among Humanists about spirituality may arise because there are several different meanings that can be attached to the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality'. These include:

- a collage of everyday practices which give life meaning; this collage can include art, music, personal disciplines and practices, and religious concepts
- an openness, an opening up to other people and experiences
- a world of 'the human spirit' that includes emotions, enjoyment, compassion, inspiration and wonder
- the active use of our imagination and reason to find our own view of what life experiences tell us about meaning
- experiences of a supernatural nature

Quotations

'Spirituality is a path or journey away from the constraints of belief systems. It is therefore as available to atheists and Humanists as to religious believers. But Humanism's emphasis on rationality limits our capacity for spiritual experience.'
Nick Otten - talk to Greater Manchester Humanists: *'Is there an atheist spirituality?'*

*

'Religion is for people who are scared to go to hell. Spirituality is for those who have already been there.'
Robert Riatt - guitarist and songwriter

'As people open their lives to the possibility that there is more to life than them, something in them lifts their 'spirit', and they know that they are changing and the world they encounter is all part of a coherent whole . . .'
Alan Scantlebury – Chaplain, Bolton University

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'Concepts of good and evil, or awareness of right and wrong, are not supernatural in origin. They are part of our collective awareness, handed down to us in story, legend and history, and essential to realising our potential as human beings. They are driving forces towards meaning and purpose.'
Robin Grinter - Greater Manchester Humanists, in correspondence with Alan Scantlebury

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'Ethical Humanism is primarily an attitude about human beings, their worth and the significance of their lives. It is concerned with nature and the quality of living, the character and creativity of our relationships. Because of this concern, Humanism spontaneously flowers into a spiritual movement in its own right.'
Edward Ericson - author and biographer of Solzhenitsyn

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'Spirituality exists whenever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the cosmic scheme of things … We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love and creativity . . .'
Robert Fuller - Professor of Religious Studies

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'Spirituality is the sum of all the uniquely human capacities and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality, creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic and religious capabilities, all understood as embodied.'
Owen Thomas – American Theologian

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'Spirituality is a natural ... and an enduring phenomenon ... oriented to this life and this world and this time. It is part of the human condition.'
Noel Cheer - Sea of Faith, NZ

Questions to consider:

Is there room for spirituality in a Humanist philosophy and where would we find it?

If a spiritual dimension exists, in what sense does it contribute to meaning in life?

Do religious and non-religious people share the same breadth and depth of human experience?

Is spirituality anything more than human emotion?

5.5 WHAT MAKES LIFE PURPOSEFUL FOR HUMANISTS – SOME VIEWS AND OPINIONS

In 5.2, it was suggested that, in the broadest terms, the purpose of life for Humanists is to further human flourishing. This theme will be taken up in Session 6. The following quotations provide some further insights into the Humanist approach.

Quotations

'If you are a humanist, that means that you care about other human beings, and everything you do affects other human beings, so you have to think about that.'
Claire Rayner - journalist and Vice President of BHA

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'Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all.'
Linus Pauling - Nobel Prize winning scientist.

*

'Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society.'
IHEU (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

*

'Always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.'
Immanuel Kant, Eighteenth Century German philosopher

*

'Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead.'
Kurt Vonnegut - Science Fiction Author

*

Finally, four suggestions made by school pupils taken from a BHA educational resource - *What's it all for?* :

- to help my family grow up in a positive and fulfilling way
- to help reduce unhappiness and make a difference to people
- to acquire knowledge so that we can enjoy this one life even more
- to make sure that in some small way I have helped to make the world a more just and fairer place, and helped the environment

Questions to consider:

What do you consider the three most important purposes from these statements?

What sort of things should Humanists do in order to make life worth living at the present time?

Is Humanism stronger if it avoids using the term 'purpose' with its religious overtones, or should Humanists seek to reclaim the term?

Do particular purposes (like fighting racism) imply a longer term or wider purpose?

How important are (a) empathy and compassion and (b) knowledge and understanding, to having purpose in life?

5.6 MEANING AND PURPOSE – SOME QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. Is there any difference between the concepts of meaning and purpose?

The following definitions are taken from *Chambers Dictionary 2003*:
MEANING: that which is in mind and thought … purpose
PURPOSE: an idea or goal to which efforts are directed … a definite intention

These concepts are closely related, but significantly different. Purpose gives you a goal or a destination, but doesn't tell you how to get there. Meaning is 'a mental characteristic', the outcome of a process of trying to make sense of experience, which *will* tell you how to get to a destination but doesn't necessarily tell you what that purpose should be.

It's rather like making a map. You can make a map to find a clear route to a destination. But you don't have to have a destination to start with: you can make a map, survey the territory, and then choose one or more destinations.

So meaning *can* be defined as purpose because it is an independent process that gives understanding of your situation and can lead to a destination or several destinations. But purpose is *not* defined as meaning because it doesn't in itself give you an in-depth understanding of your situation.

2. Why should we try to find some meaning and purpose in life?

Suggested Humanist response: because we are thinking and feeling beings, and because our immediate situation is all we've got. Life matters, but it will end: what matters more is the quality of our own individual lives. That is where meaning and purpose come in. Not everyone worries about this, but it is almost a definition of being a Humanist to try to make some meaning out of life, and work out some set of purposes to guide one's life.

3. What is the relationship between meaning and purpose?

Suggested Humanist response: the search for meaning comes first, and then we decide our own purposes. This makes our purposes relevant to the circumstances we are in, and if circumstances change so will our understanding and so will the purposes that our reasoning power leads us to adopt.

4. How does a Humanist position on purpose and meaning differ from a religious one?

Humanism has no creed of beliefs, and no overriding purpose with a supernatural source, whereas all theistic religions lay down belief and purpose from above. They require you to believe in a particular god and hold out the prospect of attaining eternal life in Heaven as your purpose in life, to be achieved by following the principles and rules of living which that god has laid down. In the religious context your reasoning power may confirm your belief in god, but it is heresy to challenge your religion's view of the meaning of life.

EXPLORING HUMANISM: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SESSION 6

HUMANISM TODAY

AND

REVIEW OF THE COURSE

SESSION PLAN

A. Introduction: Humanism today

6.1 What Humanism offers today

B. Humanism and the individual

6.2 A deeper understanding of happiness and well-being

C. Wider human happiness and well-being

6.3 Humanism and British society

6.4 Humanism and our world

D. Humanist principles revisited

6.5 Statement of secular principles and values: personal, progressive and planetary

E. Open floor for reflection and review

6.6 Review questions

Support Material

6.7 Humanist organisations and campaigns

6.1 WHAT HUMANISM OFFERS TODAY

So far in the course, we have fleshed out the key aspects of Humanism as an ethical life stance, for which the purpose of life in the broadest sense is to further human flourishing. This final session is an opportunity to explore the value and responsibility of being a Humanist in the early 21st Century – not just for ourselves but for British society and humanity as a whole. In doing so, we will develop a little further some ideas which have been mentioned in earlier sessions, at three levels;

- at the personal level, the concept of happiness and well-being
- British society, what Humanists do now, and what else they might do in future
- global issues, in particular environmental problems and their consequences

These levels are, of course, deeply interrelated and Humanists have to be concerned with all three.

We have already tried in session 4 to identify Humanist principles that we can use to guide us in relation to issues such as abortion and euthanasia, drawing on the principles which we developed in session 3. In this session, we will use the same approach in relation to our situation in the early 21st Century as members of British society and as global citizens. We will then update our list of principles, drawing also on a recent statement of secular principles and values. A permanent record of our final list of Humanist principles will be provided to participants at the end of the course.

6.2 A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING

'The Happy Human'

All Humanists will agree that promoting human happiness and reducing human suffering are two key elements in living a purposeful life. One expression of this view is the British Humanist Association's logo 'The Happy Human' (see course title page).

The concept of Happiness

We have already seen in Session 2 that Jeremy Bentham argued the case for happiness as a purpose for lawmakers and John Stuart Mill analysed the importance of the quality of happiness that we achieve. There is now increasing interest among philosophers and other thinkers in the importance of happiness as a human concern, after a long period of emphasis on economic growth and productivity. *Happiness – Lessons from a New Science* by Richard Layard is a useful introduction.

Happiness and Well-being

Our Western culture may need to reconsider its view of happiness and well being. There has undeniably been an emphasis on pursuing happiness through individual consumption, pursuing wants far beyond the satisfaction of our needs. There is much evidence that this has not produced lasting happiness, and is also putting at risk the very survival of humanity. Without a new emphasis on quality of life and on human flourishing, our culture may prove to be terminally self-destructive.

Levels of Happiness

In *Happiness - The science behind your smile,* David Nettle points out that 'happiness' has a range of meanings and suggests that most usages can be classified into one of three levels:

Level 1: momentary feelings - pleasure and joy

Level 2: judgements about feelings – satisfaction, contentment and well being

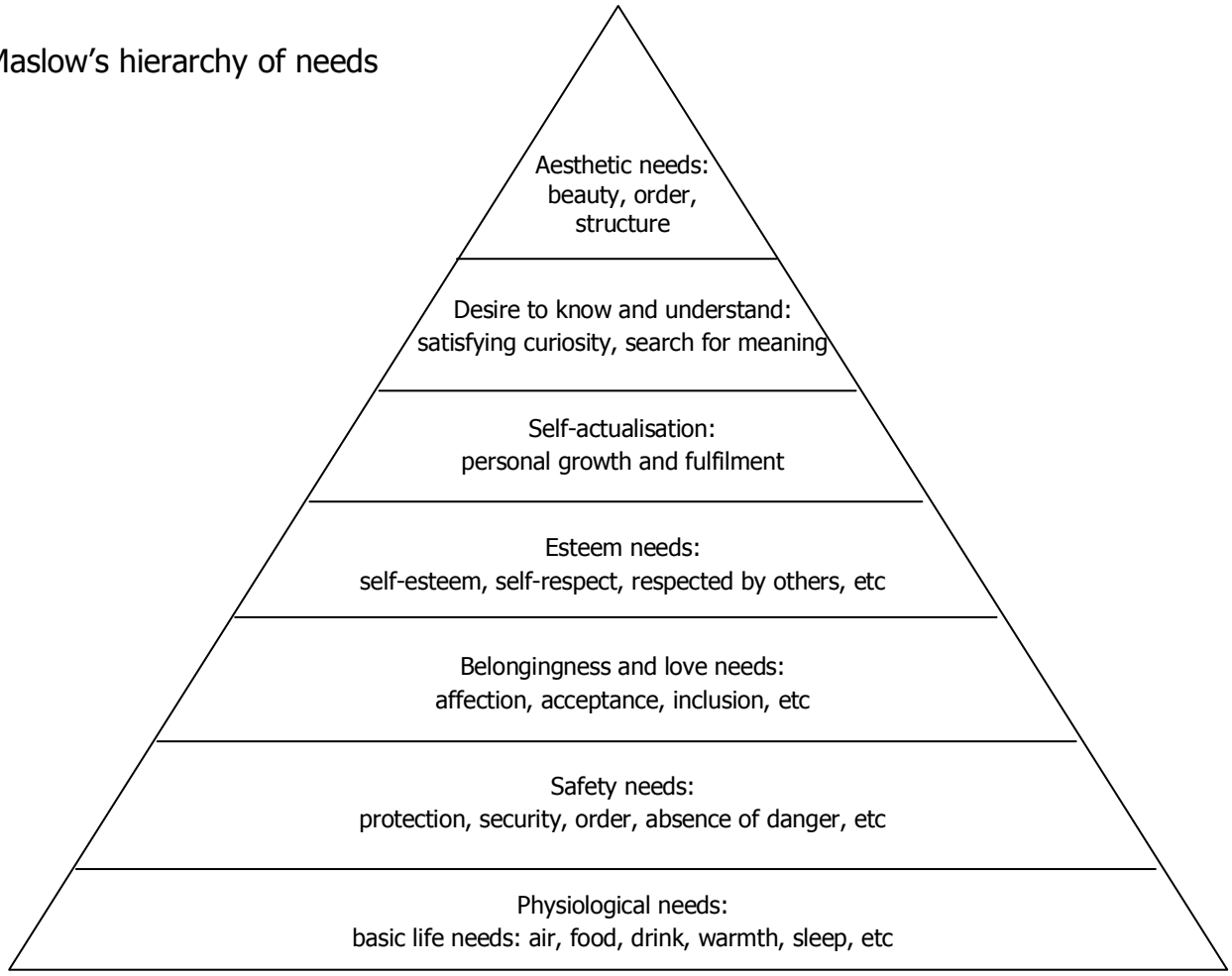
Level 3: quality of life – flourishing and fulfilling one's potential

Abraham Maslow: the 'Hierarchy of Needs'

Maslow (1908-70) was a founder of Humanistic Psychology. He identified a 'hierarchy of needs' – see diagram overleaf - ranked according to urgency, intensity, and priority, with the higher needs tending to emerge only when needs lower in the hierarchy are satisfied. He regarded the lower four levels in the hierarchy as 'deficiency needs', and the higher three levels as 'being or growth needs'. He recognised that the satisfaction of all these needs rests on pre-conditions, including freedom to speak and to defend oneself, and justice, fairness and honesty in society.

Maslow also developed the idea of 'self-actualisation' - becoming everything that one is capable of becoming - which is very close to Nettle's 'self-fulfilment'. He tried to apply this theory to the idea of world improvement. He argued that we become increasingly devoted to the happiness of others as we satisfy our own basic needs and as we begin to achieve our full potential. He did however recognise that there is a danger that we become too concerned with our own personal development!

Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Quotations

'Most of us want to be happy, and perhaps increasing the amount of happiness in the world is a worthy enough purpose.' *(BHA: A short Course in Humanism)*

*

'Create all the happiness you are able to create; remove all the misery you are able to remove...And for every enjoyment you sow in the bosom of another, you shall find a harvest in your own bosom' *Jeremy Bentham, English political philosopher*

*

'Happiness is the only good: the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, and the way to be happy is to make others so.' *Robert Ingersoll, US politician and orator*

Questions to consider

Does our view of happiness need revision to incorporate well-being, and are there elements in the Humanist philosophy that can contribute to this?

How can popular views of happiness as an individual concern be modified, and can Humanists contribute to this process?

How do we assess our own happiness?

Is it possible to over-analyse happiness? Does it make us focus too much on our own condition and not that of the wider world around us?

6.3 HUMANISM AND BRITISH SOCIETY

Introduction

Our focus here is on how Humanist concern for individual human happiness and well-being can be applied more widely. Following our overall analysis of Humanist morality as a concern to live with love and compassion for others in as wide a compass as possible, we will now explore what is being done by Humanists and what could be done to effectively promote human flourishing for others in our society and for future generations.

A useful approach to the complexities of our present situation may be to focus on the Humanist principle of helping to tackle UNhappiness as a way of promoting happiness. There are unfortunately many aspects of injustice and inequality in our national life that create unhappiness, tension and long-term damage. Poverty concentrated in particular geographical areas and lasting throughout generations, religious extremism generated by fundamentalism and resulting in indiscriminate violence, and environmental damage caused by climate change are relevant examples at the present time.

What Humanists do now

The activities of Humanist organisations in Britain are described at some length in 6.7. We will focus here on The British Humanist Association and the local groups affiliated to it. On its membership cards, the BHA now states that 'We promote Humanism, campaign for an open society and a secular state, and work with others of different beliefs for the common good'. The main ways in which it currently pursues these objectives are:

- the provision of Humanist ceremonies (see 1.7)
- lectures and publications giving a Humanist perspective on ethical issues
- the provision of educational material on Humanism for schools
- work for the inclusion of Humanist perspectives in the school curriculum
- campaigns against the growing influence of religious bodies in education
- campaigns on social issues such as equality, abortion and euthanasia

The BHA's current campaigns are listed in 6.7(2).

Local Humanist groups have similar objectives (see 6.7(5) for the Objects of Greater Manchester Humanists). They provide on the ground support for the activities of the BHA and hold regular meetings on issues relevant to Humanists. Many are involved in providing Humanist input to the syllabus for religious education in state schools, with individual members visiting schools to make presentations on Humanism as an ethical life stance. Some local groups undertake voluntary or charitable work as a Humanist group.

What Humanists might do in future

It is sometimes said that Humanists talk a lot but do very little compared with many religious groups. Of course, many individual Humanists belong to community organisations of a non-religious nature. But perhaps in the future we might aspire to do some things through organisations with an avowedly Humanist identity and ethos. In this connection, two recent developments could be very relevant.

First, in their recent book *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that more equal societies produce more contentment and happiness. Sweden and Japan score well, the UK and the US less well. Perhaps the BHA should add its voice to campaigns for the adoption of public policies that reflect this insight.

Second, there is growing recognition that continual increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) may not in the future be the best way to enhance human flourishing. For example, Bhutan has adopted Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the criterion of progress towards the 'good society'. If the proper aim of society is to enhance human flourishing, should Britain also adopt Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the criterion of progress – or as an additional criterion? (The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance.)

Questions to consider

What should be the priorities for future Humanist activity? Should the BHA extend its campaigns to cover the wider issues raised here? How should the BHA relate to campaigns of other organisations?

How can Humanism make a distinctive contribution to strengthening the values that underpin our secular society?

Is developing better individual people (eg through more Humanist education) the most effective way to develop a better society?

6.4 HUMANISM AND OUR WORLD

Humanists have long worked and campaigned for international co-operation and peace through the United Nations and CND, and for human well-being through UNESCO. More recent initiatives include support for Humanist schools in Uganda – by both individuals and organised Humanism. The European Humanist Federation (EHF) represents humanists and secularists at the European institutions – the EU, European Parliament, the OSCE and – in conjunction with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) – the Council of Europe, while the IHEU takes the lead for Humanists in global matters. The BHA contributes to the work of the EHF and IHEU, but focuses mainly on UK matters: it is probably fair to say that global issues do not feature very highly on its agenda.

The issue of climate change in particular has made us all aware of the global dimension to many problems facing the world. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond argues that the most serious problems fall into four main groups:

- destruction or loss of natural resources – loss of natural habitats such as forests; decline of food supplies; loss of biodiversity; soil erosion and salination
- ceilings on natural resources – fossil fuels; freshwater
- harm from human activities – toxic chemicals; alien species; atmospheric gases, in particular greenhouse gases contributing to global warming
- population issues – growing numbers, rising per capita impact on the environment

Unless we find ways of addressing these problems in relatively pleasant ways of our own choosing, they will be resolved in unpleasant ways such as war, genocide, starvation, epidemics and societal collapse.

Religious fundamentalism is another major cause of tension in the world today, perhaps the one currently creating the most danger of conflict. The concepts of jihad ('holy war') and 'the clash of civilisations' and the levels of intolerance and conflict they breed reveal how extremisms feed on each other. The fears and hatreds created by religious extremism have reduced freedom in almost every society

Questions to consider

What should the stance of Humanists be on these issues?

Does Humanist morality help us engage with these issues?

Do Humanists need to expand their ethical awareness to include future generations?

How might Humanists use their principles to help to bring about the resolution of environmental problems?

To what extent should Humanists endorse the precautionary principle (acting to avoid serious or irreversible potential harm in the face of risks to health or the environment in conditions of scientific uncertainty)?

Should the BHA and Humanist groups take a more pro-active role in campaigning for long term thinking and changes in policy as a response to the problems now facing the world?

6.5 STATEMENT OF SECULAR PRINCIPLES AND VALUES: PERSONAL, PROGRESSIVE AND PLANETARY

The following extract is taken from the website of Paul Kurtz (http://paulkurtz.net), where there is an extensive discussion of the thinking behind each point. (Note: the writers of the course do not find the term 'Neo-Humanism' helpful, but we think that the ideas behind it are.)

Preamble:
Our planetary community is facing serious problems that can only be solved by cooperative global action. Fresh thinking is required. Humanity needs to reconstruct human values in the light of scientific knowledge. We introduce the term 'Neo-Humanism' to present a daring new approach.

The Next Step Forward:
There are various forms of religious and non-religious beliefs in the world. On the one end of the spectrum are traditional religious beliefs; on the other 'the new atheism.' Not enough attention is paid to humanism as an alternative. This Statement advocates non-religious secular Neo-Humanism.

Neo-Humanists:

1. aspire to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to religious believers who share common goals;
2. are skeptical of traditional theism;
3. are best defined by what they are for, not what they are against;
4. wish to use critical thinking, evidence, and reason to evaluate claims to knowledge;
5. apply similar considerations to ethics and values;
6. are committed to a key set of values: happiness, creative actualization, reason in harmony with emotion, quality, and excellence;
7. emphasize moral growth (particularly for children), empathy, and responsibility;
8. advocate the right to privacy;
9. support the democratic way of life, tolerance, and fairness;
10. recognize the importance of personal morality, good will, and a positive attitude toward life;
11. accept responsibility for the well-being of society, guaranteeing various rights, including those of women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; and supporting education, health care, gainful employment, and other social benefits;
12. support a green economy;
13. advocate population restraint, environmental protection, and the protection of other species;
14. recognize the need for Neo-Humanists to engage actively in politics;
15. take progressive positions on the economy; and
16. hold that humanity needs to move beyond egocentric individualism and chauvinistic nationalism to develop international 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.

6.6 REVIEW QUESTIONS

To conclude the course, here are some review questions for discussion in the final session and for subsequent reflection.

- What are we taking away from the course?
- Are we Humanists?
- Have we changed any of our views since coming on the course?
- Are we more or less respectful of others' views than when we started the course?
- What contributions can the Humanist movement make at the beginning of the new millennium?

6.7 HUMANIST ORGANISATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

1. A brief historical survey

Humanist organisations in Britain have a reasonably long history, although until some fifty years ago they were known as 'ethical' or 'freethinking' groups. A number of ethical societies were formed during the 19th Century which joined into an *Ethical Union* in 1896. There were seventy of these societies by 1915 but their number subsequently declined and only one survives - the *South Place Ethical Society* (SPES), founded in 1793 and now a very active centre of Humanism and free thinking. In the 1950s there were moves for merger of the Ethical Union, SPES and the *Rationalist Press Association* (RPA), which could trace its origins back to 1875. However, difficulties of various kinds prevented merger though the three bodies continued to work together. Eventually, in 1967, the Ethical Union changed its name to the *British Humanist Association* (BHA). The first President of the BHA was the internationalist Sir Julian Huxley with Harold Blackman as Secretary. Later, in 2002, the *Rationalist Association* was formed as a charity to continue the work of the RPA, in particular the publication of the *New Humanist*, which has been continually published under a variety of names since 1885. A separate secular movement developed during the 19th Century, leading to the formation of the *National Secular Society* (NSS) in 1866, with Charles Bradlaugh as its first President. The *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU) was founded in 1952, and the *European Humanist Federation* (EHF) in 1991.

2. The British Humanist Association

The BHA has developed into a powerful and respected voice for Humanist concerns in our cultural and political life. The current President is the journalist Polly Toynbee. Among the long list of its distinguished supporters are the philosopher and author A.C.Grayling, novelists Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett, bio-geneticist Richard Dawkins, writer and presenter of *Women's Hour* Jenni Murray, and actor and writer Stephen Fry. The Humanist Philosophers Group includes members from all over the UK who advise the BHA on ethical matters and relevant issues of public debate. And the BHA has a strong political presence supported by the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, a cross-party group of Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords of all three main parties, as well as members from the Crossbenches in the Lords, with over 100 members.

The BHA supports affiliated local and other groups. It has developed a network of celebrants who conduct humanist funerals, weddings and civil partnerships, and baby namings. It publishes a great deal of material giving a humanist perspective on ethical and religious issues, and works for the inclusion of humanist perspectives in religious education and other aspects of the school curriculum. The BHA is also heavily engaged in campaigns against the growing influence of religious bodies - these currently include:

- opposition to faith schools that are exempt from inclusive religious education
- ending religious worship in school assemblies
- promoting the teaching of Humanism as a non-religious value system in schools
- ending the statutory place of bishops in the House of Lords
- ending exemptions in legislation that allow religious organisations running public services such as schools to discriminate on grounds of religion in employment, and to provide services in a distinctively religious way
- opposing indoctrination and all forms of fundamentalism
- support for legalisation of assisted suicide with appropriate safeguards

Affiliated groups often help with BHA campaigns. The BHA also works in alliance with other organisations, on occasion with the NSS. It belongs to ACCORD, a coalition for inclusive schools whose other members include the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Socialist Education Association, and the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement.

3. The National Secular Society

The NSS was founded in 1886 and has a narrower agenda than the BHA. It seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where human rights always take precedence over religious demands. So it campaigns for a secular state, the disestablishment of the Church of England and an end to all religious privileges and indoctrination, including state funding.

Both the BHA and the NSS oppose religious privilege and indoctrination. However, this is essentially the only concern of the NSS, although its general principles include Humanist elements. By contrast, the primary purpose of the BHA is to promote Humanism and support and represent people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

Perhaps the most significant difference in belief and policy relates to education. The NSS totally opposes religious education in state schools, whereas the BHA wants a broad 'beliefs and values education' but is prepared meantime to work for the incorporation of Humanism into the local RE Syllabuses drawn up by the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education in local authorities with responsibilities for education.

4. The International Humanist and Ethical Union

The IHEU was founded in 1952. Its headquarters are in the same building in London as the BHA, which is an affiliated member. The IHEU is the world union of over a hundred humanist, rationalist, ethical, free thought, secular and atheist organisations in some forty countries. It is an International Non-governmental Organisation with consultative status within the United Nations and the Council of Europe; in particular, it does valuable work in the UN Human Rights Council. It campaigns for freedom of expression and against practices like untouchability, and supports victims of religious persecution. It organises regular international conferences: the World Humanist Congress is now held every three years. The 2002 Congress formulated the Amsterdam Declaration (reproduced in 1.8).

The IHEU's brief definition of Humanism is worth quoting. 'Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that all 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, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.'

In a publication to mark the IHEU's 50th anniversary, Vikas Gora argues that Humanism must develop as a way of life with commitment to address the real issues that matter to people, such as poverty, social justice, and developing an eco-friendly life-style and alternative sources of energy. He stresses the need for education that enables people to develop a questioning spirit and their faculties for critical enquiry and addresses their psychological needs, and argues for turning our attention from war to peace, so as to provide the necessary resources and research.

5. The European Humanist Federation

The EHF was formed in 1992 and brings together over 40 humanist and secularist organisations in half as many countries. Its main work is to represent the interests of non-religious people to the European institutions. At the EU it is recognised for dialogue under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which results in meetings with the presidents of the Commission, Council and Parliament. It is a key member of the advisory board to the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics and takes part in the NGO activities of the Fundamental Rights Agency. It takes an active part in Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe annual human rights conferences, speaking in the intergovernmental plenary sessions and running side-meetings. It is active similarly, in cooperation with the IHEU, in the NGO activities at the Council of Europe and engages with members and committees of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. It has developed thoughtful approaches to the many questions relating to the place of religion in a democratic society and submits papers to conferences and enquiries. Its website maintains a full record of all its work and has copies of all such papers and speeches.

6. Local Humanist groups

There are currently over 60 local Humanist groups in England, Wales and Northern Ireland affiliated to the British Humanist Association. In addition, there are some 20 student groups and a number of special interest groups. All of these groups are independent and autonomous. (The Humanist Society of Scotland is the national body in Scotland and has a number of local branches.) Local groups engage in educational events (including talks, debates, introductory courses), social events, local campaigning and activism, promotion of Humanism, and voluntary or other charitable work. All welcome new members.

Greater Manchester Humanists (GMH) is the affiliated local group for Greater Manchester and surrounding areas. GMH were founded in 1992, though under a different name: an earlier group was active in Manchester from the 1950s until the mid-1970s. Like a number of other local groups, GMH are also affiliated to the National Secular Society. The range of our activities is indicated by the Objects listed in the group constitution:

a) Support and represent Humanists;
b) Foster public awareness and knowledge of Humanism;
c) Foster and support education in Humanism, in particular through SACREs;
d) Facilitate the provision of Humanist ceremonies;
e) Campaign on issues of concern to Humanists;
f) Advocate secularism;
g) Provide opportunities for like-minded individuals to explore issues relevant to Humanism;
h) Provide Humanist fellowship.

GMH have good working relations with other local Humanist groups in the North West, including Chester Humanists, Lancashire Secular Humanists, Liverpool Humanist Group, and Humanists of South Cheshire and North Staffordshire. From time to time we work in a coalition of several groups, for example to organise public events such as the talk by Prof A C Grayling in Shrewsbury in 2009 to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Together with the Lancashire and Liverpool groups we are planning for a regional conference in 2011.

6. Contact information for Humanist organisations

British Humanist Association
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HD
020 7079 3580
info@humanism.org.uk
humanism.org.uk

European Humanist Federation
Campus de la Plaine ULB-GP 237
Avenue Arnaud Fraiteur
B-1050 Brussels – Bruxelles
0032 2677 6811
admin@humanistfederation.eu
www.humanistfederation.eu

International Humanist and Ethical Union
Address as BHA
iheu-office@iheu.org
iheu.org

Rationalist Press Association
Address as BHA
020 7436 1151
webcontact@newhumanist.org
newhumanist.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association
Address as BHA
0844 800 3067
info@galha.org
galha.org

National Secular Society
25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL
020 7404 3126
enquiries@secularism.org.uk
secularism.org.uk

South Place Ethical Society
Conway Hall
Red Lion Square
London WC1 4RL
020 7242 8037
library@ethicalsociety.org.uk
www.ethicalsoc.org.uk

Greater Manchester Humanists
c/- 1 St Aldates
Stockport SK6 3DU
0161 430 3463
secretary@gmh.humanist.org.uk
gmh.humanist.org.uk

Other local groups and special interest groups
See humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups or contact the BHA

APPENDIX 1: A SELECTED BOOKLIST

Many of these books are relatively short and all are reader-friendly - though dealing with challenging concepts. Most are available via Amazon, and there are interesting Customer Reviews on the Amazon website.

Julian Baggini	Atheism: A Very Short Introduction
Simone de Beauvoir	The Second Sex
BHA	What is Humanism?
BHA	The Case for Secularism
Simon Blackburn	Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics
Richard Dawkins	The God Delusion
A.C.Grayling	What is Good? : The Search for the Best Way to Live
Karen Green	The Women of Reason: Feminism, Humanism and Political Thought
Richard Holloway	Godless Morality
Pauline Johnson	Feminism as Radical Humanism
Alistair McGrath	Dawkin's God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life
Richard Norman	On Humanism
Ben Rogers (editor)	Is Nothing Sacred?
Bertrand Russell	Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects
Bertrand Russell	What I believe
Peter Singer	How are we to live? - Ethics in an age of self-interest
Barbara Smoker	Humanism (available through the BHA)

Two rather more analytical texts:

A.C.Grayling	Towards the Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights That Made the Modern West
Peter Singer	Practical Ethics (1979) (Detailed, controversial and wide-ranging, with useful chapters on moral dilemmas including abortion and euthanasia)

APPENDIX 2: A COURSE GLOSSARY

These notes are written to give a definition relevant to Humanism of some terms used in the course. They are given in alphabetical order for each session, and are the course writers' definitions and commentary on how the terms are used in the course material.

Session 1

Atheism – 'a' (no) and 'theism' (belief in a god). Certainty that there is no god.

Agnosticism – 'a' (no) and 'gnosticism' (knowledge). Uncertainty about the existence of a god: we cannot know whether one exists or not, even if we feel that this is so unlikely that in practice we act as if there is not.

Doctrine and Indoctrination – teachings that are accepted as the 'truth', found in the sacred texts of religions and in authoritarian political systems; imposing these teachings on all who belong to that religion or political party.

Evolution – the change in the inherited characteristics of a population of living things through successive generations: descent with modification. The accumulation of small changes over many generations can lead to substantial changes in a population and the emergence of new species.

Natural selection – the process by which characteristics that increase/reduce the chance of survival and reproduction become more/less common in a population, acting at many levels from individual genes to entire species.

Religious privilege – powers given to religious groups and organisations by law that allow them special rights (eg exemption from discrimination laws) and powers arising from past history that give them special opportunities to influence lawmaking (eg places for bishops in the House of Lords).

Supernatural – outside or above nature, experiences that cannot be explained by using our reason, beyond proof. (Not the same as 'spiritual'.)

Session 2

Atomist theory – belief of the Greek thinker Democritus that all matter is made up of small basic particles that he called 'atoms', each incapable of further division.

'Cogito ergo sum' – the phrase coined by the French thinker Rene Descartes in the 17th Century 'I think, therefore I am'. This is the classic statement of a basic Humanist belief, the basis for 'rationalism' (See Session 5 – 'Rationalism')

Existentialism – a modern philosophy that says that it is individual people who have the responsibility to make meaning of their lives, and that philosophy should focus on the existence, thoughts, emotions, actions and responsibilities of individual people. This requires freedom, and is not necessarily selfish. Most of us live in an existential way. Many, but not all, existentialist thinkers do not believe in the existence of God. (See Session 4 – 'Personal Autonomy' and Session 5 - 'Personal Reality')

Heliocentric theory – the theory that the Earth goes around the Sun, replacing the theory upheld by the Church that the Earth and Mankind is central to creation. Its publication in 1542 marked the beginning of the scientific revolution of the 15th and 16th Centuries in Europe. It was proposed by Copernicus and proved by Galileo.

Inquisition – the Roman Catholic body that defines the beliefs of the faith. In mediaeval and early modern times it punished independent thinking and behaviour ('heresy'), often by burning at the stake. Sometimes called the 'Holy Office', it still exists as the 'Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith' (its recent head was Pope Benedict XVI).

Philosophy – the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, the search for understanding. Can be very academic, but the search for meaning in life that most people undertake is also a form of philosophy.

Rationalism – reliance on reason as opposed to dogma as the tool to explain issues and to approach human problems and dilemmas.

Renaissance – the 're-birth' or reawakening of interest in knowledge for its own sake in Europe in the 14^{th}-16^{th} Centuries, after the thousand year long period of religious authority in the 'Middle Ages' or 'Dark Ages'. Inspired by the rediscovery of Greek learning, it was the product of secular thinking, produced great art and literature and saw the beginnings of modern science.

Scepticism – doubt: a refusal to accept anything proclaimed by authority, especially at first hearing, and a determination to test the accuracy of any claims or interpretations.

Scientific method – taking an initial explanation or procedure (the hypothesis), testing it by experiment and observation, modifying it by further testing, and proposing a new explanation or procedure. This is a continuing process, and so does not produce absolute truth. (See below - 'Socratic method')

S**ecularism –** a non-religious approach to life and government, free from religious concepts and authority. A secular state like France, America or Turkey is completely independent of any church by allowing no legal powers to religious bodies.

Socratic method: thesis, antithesis and synthesis – The educational procedure used by Socrates in Greece. He encouraged his students to begin with an accepted explanation (a 'thesis' or 'hypothesis'), develop and argue for an alternative or opposing explanation (an 'antithesis'), and develop a new explanation that combines the best parts of both (a 'synthesis'). (See above - 'Scientific method')

Session 3

Altruism – unselfish behaviour, considering the well-being of others, acting to benefit another person without expecting the kindness to be returned. (See below - 'Reciprocity')

Empathy – the ability to relate to others and gain some understanding of their feelings and values. It is close to sympathy, but more thoughtful, and so can be defined as sympathetic understanding. (See below - 'Subjectivity')

Ethics – codes that guide the behaviour of professional groups (eg medical ethics and business ethics).

Fundamentalism – an extreme position in a belief system, insisting on basic simple 'truths' and interpretations, and rejecting any changes in doctrine. Similar to 'absolutism'. Typically leads to conflict.

Morality – principles that guide individual behaviour (often imposed by society).

Moral advancement – general improvement in the human condition, as a result of people thinking more generously, understanding things better and taking the needs of others more fully into account.

Moral relativism – the claim that there is no absolutely valid morality, that all cultures have their own version of what is moral, and so all moral codes and practices are equally valid whether other people like them or not. Often associated with 'multi-culturalism'. (See next entry)

Multi-culturalism – the mixing of cultures arising when large migrant communities retain a distinct identity, and the belief that this is beneficial to society as a result of the mutual learning that takes place when cultures interact.

Objectivity – looking at things in a detached and unemotional way, leaving aside one's personal feelings as far as possible. (See Session 2 - 'Rationality')

Reciprocity – action according to mutual advantage: 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours'. (See above - 'Altruism')

Subjectivity – looking at things from one's own perspective, bringing one's personal feelings into an assessment. It is the opposite of 'objectivity', and is not necessarily damaging: it can convey a feeling for a situation, and assist sympathetic understanding. (See above - 'Empathy')

Session 4

Eugenics – a development of evolutionary theory, an attempt to improve the human species or more often particular races by a breeding programme that would select out the 'fittest'. Eugenics is linked with racism, and in the form of 'Social Darwinism' has been used to justify the existence of a dominant class.

Hippocratic oath – the pledge made by doctors that they will observe absolute integrity concerning the welfare of their patients and absolute confidentiality as to any information provided in consultations.

Personal autonomy – individual freedom, responsibility for our own decisions, living our own lives free from outside pressures. (See Session 2 - 'Existentialism')

Session 5

Materialism – the belief that there is nothing in life beyond material existence and material explanations of experiences as the result of economic laws, the operations of physics or chemical reactions. There is no such thing as spirit, and everything can be measured and calculated.

Personal reality – what is meaningful and real for us as individuals: our own view of the world. (See Session 2 – 'Existentialism')

Spirituality/spiritual dimension – the belief that there is a dimension to life that is additional to material existence. It is not necessarily religious, nor is it necessarily 'supernatural' because it is seen as a valuable and normal part of human nature and experience. (See Session 1 - 'Supernatural')