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Celebrating life and being human

by Halima Fradley.



It was Alexander Pope who stated "to err is human, to forgive divine" in his work An Essay on Criticism.

This is generally taken to mean everyone is human and makes mistakes, but when we forgive someone, we are acting in a godlike way. But are we?

Humanists may argue that forgiveness is part of the very essence of being human.

As our society becomes ever more secular, many people look around for a greater truth and meaning to life outside organised religion.

But instead of looking for an external solution, perhaps truth and meaning is within themselves. This is what is known as humanism.

Humanism is a movement which is growing rapidly, not just in the UK but around the world.

Followers believe it is possible to live a good life without adhering to any religion or succumbing to foundless superstition.

They say our values come from our innate human nature and through experiencing the effects of our actions on others.

This is backed up by the idea that, as social beings, life is a lot more pleasant for all concerned if we co-operate with each other with a sense of collaborative responsibility.

Fundamental to this concept is the absence of a belief in God and in any form of afterlife. Although those who are fervently religious might take the view that this devalues human life and gives it a lack of purpose, humanists argue that we all have but one life here on earth and it is up to us to make the most of it and enjoy it as much as possible.

This is not a blanket permission to run amok in a hedonistic fashion, but more a way of

living responsibly and thinking rationally about what is right and wrong.

In fact, the humanist creed, if there could be said to be such a thing, would be 'treat others as you would like to be treated yourself', which precludes any selfish or harmful behaviour.

This automatically leads to the concept of conscience, which a religious follower would say was a feeling arising from a wish to do God's will.

Humanists, in contrast, say this comes from our own human nature and our need to get along with each other for the good of society and our species.

Alec Leggatt and David Savage are the chairman and former chairman of the Farnham Humanists group, which is linked to the British Humanist Association (BHA) and other groups across the world.

"If you go back to the dawn of human history, someone must have thought we needed a code of conduct and from that stemmed a sense of morality," said Alec.

"People were superstitious and they looked to the sun and moon for a controlling influence, but then decided they needed a superior, unreachable being who they could worship and look to for guidance.

"We're hard-wired to look up to a superior. It all starts in childhood when we look up to and obey our parents and this need continues into adulthood."

This inherent desire for guidance, protection and explanation should not be underestimated. It has led to the development of religious belief throughout every culture in the world.

But humanists say that just because a large number of people believe something to be true, doesn't make it so.

Widely held beliefs, such as the once almost unanimous conviction that the world was flat, can be shown to be wrong.

Today, the need to have a religious label is still deeply entrenched in the human psyche.

In the 2001 census, 15.5% of people said they had no religion, but this would mask a much larger number of people who would describe themselves as Christian, for example, and yet have no involvement with Christianity practically or emotionally.

The growing popularity of 'alternative' spiritual activities demonstrates that many feel formal religion fails to satisfy, but leaves a gap to be filled.

Alec continued: "We try to have a moral code, and there is a huge amount of overlap between humanism and the great religions. It is what we consider to be the mythology of religion that gets in the way."

David agreed: "We have a multicultural society these days and the belief in human morality cuts across all religious beliefs. There may be areas of conflict between the religions, but this morality is a common thread.

"In any case, religion doesn't stop someone from doing bad things. Prisons contain the same proportion of religious and non-religious people as society. Conversely, you find that non-religious people give as much to charity, possibly even more, than religious people.

"Quite simply, people don't do bad things because they don't want to feel bad afterwards. Conscience is not a voice from God, but our own human nature. This is the fight — counteracting the belief that if you're religious you're automatically moral, and if you're not religious then you must be amoral."

Humanists are often described as atheists or agnostics, words which generally have negative connotations. However, these are not accurate descriptions because not all atheists or agnostics are humanists.

"We try to get away from the negative and concentrate on the positive," said Alec. "Besides, these are just meaningless labels. As Jonathan Miller (a humanist) said, there's no word to describe the fact he doesn't believe in Father Christmas."

For many, the sticking point of humanism is the lack of belief in life after death.

The idea that we cease to exist in any form, including spiritual, after our death can be hard to accept and can give a feeling of pointlessness.

But humanists take the opposite view — that life is for the here and now and should be cherished, valued and enjoyed, and we should help others to achieve the same.

"People who have near-death experiences usually value life more afterwards," said David. "They realise this is the life you have. We agree and say the purpose of life is to be happy."

This celebration of life is carried through into humanist ceremonies, an alternative to the conventional religious ones which many people settle for despite their lack of faith.

Last year, there were more than 7,000 humanist ceremonies in England and Wales, the vast majority, more than 6,000, being funerals. As people become more aware of humanist ceremonies, these figures are likely to increase.

Local humanist groups and their parent British Humanist Association are campaigning for trained members to be allowed to legally officiate at weddings.

Humanist celebrants can only speak at weddings, so a couple might also have to visit a register office to formalise their marriage.

Alec added: "We don't look at life after death, and at a funeral we don't send a soul on to another existence.

"Instead, we look at a person's life here on earth and the contributions they have made to other people's lives. It's more about the celebration of life than the finality of death.

"In the same way, when we are asked to visit hospitals and hospices, such as the Phyllis Tuckwell, we talk to the patient about their life, its joys and sorrows and their relationships with others."

David added: "A humanist funeral offers people a choice free from religion or belief. We can give them a ceremony which is meaningful to them and a comforting way to say goodbye."

The notion that there is no such thing as a soul has led humanists into some interesting areas of moral conflict, including that of embryo research where there is a strong body of objection on religious grounds.

"Religion still impacts on our lives in a number of ways, whether we want it to or not," said David.

"A lot of people want to see more humanity. For example, something like embryo research should be discussed around its merits of benefit to human lives, not on religious doctrine.

"We would like to see a reduction in religious influence in Parliament with the abolition of the automatic right of bishops to sit in the House of Lords where they can affect the law purely on the basis of their religious belief."

Alec added: "We are not against religion per se, but we are against discrimination brought about by religious beliefs.

"We believe that single-faith schools which only admit children of a particular religion should be abolished and that all schools should be inclusive for all children.

"Our young people need to know about all the options available to them, so they can make informed choices as adults, rather than receiving indoctrination."

Alec said: "We ask the same questions as religious believers, but we look for answers based on reasoning and evidence. We are also willing to accept that for some questions there may be no answers.

"We're finding more and more people are asking questions and giving up religion, but it is vital that there is a replacement morality. This is where humanism has its future, but it could take a generation or two for it to happen."

The Farnham Humanists group covers West Surrey and NE Hampshire. Contact David on 01252 794021 or visit the website at www.farnham-humanists.org.uk.

A fitting way to say goodbye

A Farnham woman spoke of her experience of the humanist funeral which she organised

for her husband at Guildford Crematorium as a very personal way to say goodbye to him.

"He was a totally non-religious man and I thought it would be a sham to have a religious ceremony. It would have made me feel a fraud and I knew he wouldn't have wanted it.

"Although we hadn't discussed funerals during his life, I felt the obvious choice was a humanist ceremony.

"A great deal depends on the eulogy and on the person conducting the ceremony, in this case Alec Leggatt, who was marvellous. I had no idea how it was going to go, but afterwards lots of friends and family said what a wonderful service it was and how they would like something similar for themselves.

"The ceremony was just right. The eulogy was just right and so was the music, which of course was non-religious. I wrote the eulogy with help from Alec and some books which give guidance and suggest pieces of poetry and quotes. We chose music my husband would have liked. A lot of work was put into it, but it was important to get it right.

"We ended with a joyful piece of jazz and the whole service was tailored to my husband. It was all about him rather than his relationship with God. It couldn't have been bettered and I am certain that I would like the same kind of funeral for myself when the time comes."

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