

# The Humanist Alternative

The British Humanist Association

Price 6d



## THE BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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## THE BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

### OBJECT

To develop a movement which will spread Humanist ideas and organize its members for fellowship and common action in Great Britain.

In pursuance of this object the BHA will provide for the publication of books, pamphlets, and periodicals, arrange conferences and courses, promote campaigns, and form local Humanist groups.

### HUMANISTS BELIEVE

**That** man has only his own intellectual, moral, and social resources with which to face his problems, and cannot rely on any absolute authority or power.

**That** human life can be made worth while and sufficient in itself, and that scientific knowledge and social organization should be used to provide the greatest possibilities for all human beings to develop their potentialities.

**That** freedom of thought and civil liberties as defined by the UN Declaration of Human Rights ought to be upheld in any society in which they have been established, and ought to be worked for in any society in which they have yet to be established.



## WHAT HUMANISM MEANS TODAY

MANY PEOPLE TODAY are Humanists without knowing it. They do not know it because until now there has not been any organization in the United Kingdom calling itself 'Humanist'. It is to meet this situation that the Rationalist Press Association and the Ethical Union have jointly brought into being the BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION. Both these bodies have the same basic aims and their separate existence is largely an accident of history.

The Ethical Union was founded in 1896 when there were already many Ethical Societies, most of them working with Fabian and other progressive groups. The Rationalist Press Association was formed three years later in the rooms of the Ethical Union, Surrey House. Both these organizations have worked in close harmony, but the RPA, as its name suggests, concentrated mainly on publishing. Together they fulfilled the functions of a Humanist movement before it was generally recognized under this label—indeed, before there was such widespread interest in its ideas as has now been awakened, not only in this country but throughout the world.

### Forming a United Front

The fact that twenty-two nations were represented at the third Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union held in 1962 shows that Humanism is established as an international movement. It was an anomaly that British delegates to the Congress did not represent a society known as 'Humanist' because none existed. Nothing but confusion could result from a continuance of this ambiguity. Accordingly the Ethical Union and the RPA decided to form a united front. While retaining for practical reasons their independent status, the two organizations will use their respective facilities to promote the BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION. (Broadly speaking the RPA will be concerned with publishing and the EU with public relations.)

This means that all who join the BHA will be also entitled to apply for full membership of both the sponsoring bodies. All members of the BHA will receive without further payment copies of *The Humanist* (monthly journal of the RPA), the *Rationalist Annual*, and *Humanist News* (10 times a year). From time to time the RPA will publish books of special relevance to Humanists, some of which will be available in cheap members' editions.

The machinery of the Ethical Union will be used to form new Humanist groups throughout the country, where like-minded men

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and women can make social contacts, clarify their ideas, and participate where possible in local affairs. Regular conferences, courses, public meetings, and study groups will also be organized. In this way the Humanist movement will be enabled to make an impact on public opinion. With the long experience in these activities of the sponsors at its disposal the BHA will start fully fledged.

### The Decline of Religion

The time is ripe for this venture. The steep decline in Church membership reveals the hollowness of the claim that Britain is a Christian country. As Prof G. M. Carstairs said in his 1962 Reith Lectures: 'In our society there are still some people who sincerely believe in the teachings of the Christian Church, but the Church's own statistics show that they have become a minority group—a rather small minority.'

The truth is concealed by public lip-service to religion and the introduction of compulsory worship in schools. Some Christians realize as clearly as Humanists that the inevitable hypocrisy of such a public policy too often leads to cynicism and indifference. They would welcome greater honesty, whether it led people back to the Church or away from it.

The early rationalists and freethinkers were concerned to take people out of the Church. In these days of empty pews we have entered a new phase. The main appeal of modern Humanism is to those who do not in any case look to the Church for guidance and have so far been unable to find a satisfying alternative. The dogmatic framework of Christianity has been so shaken that sincere believers fall mainly into two classes: the very clever, who invent new and sophisticated reasons, and the very simple who do not require reasons. And by insisting that morality is impossible without a religious basis the Churches are partly responsible for the moral vacuum of which they complain.

Humanism is able to fill this void. Its immediate appeal is to all thinking men and women who seek reasonable guidance in the living of their lives but who cannot accept the traditional authorities. What primarily unites Humanists is not a set of propositions to be believed but moral values to be freely chosen. Humanism is a new way of life rather than a system of philosophy. Humanists may belong to different philosophical schools, but they are more concerned with changing the world than describing it.



Epicurus held that although the gods might exist they did not interfere. Fear of the gods, like the fear of death, must be banished from the mind.

Epicureanism spread and disturbed the authorities, who took the cynical view that superstition was useful to keep the masses quiet. Only a few fragments of what Epicurus wrote survive, but his system was superbly re-stated in the great poem of Lucretius.

Obviously, none of these ancient thinkers could have been a Humanist in the modern sense. Humanism was in the making. The secular process was unfolding. Different thinkers perceived different implications. The Greeks were concerned with problems of secular morality and blueprints for an ideal society. They had none of the otherworldliness of those religions which focused attention on the salvation of souls. The famous Oration of Pericles is one of the clearest expressions of classical Humanism.

### Dangerous Thoughts

Science never took root in India, where even philosophy was pre-occupied with individual salvation rather than the pursuit of objective truth. In China science developed up to a point and the germs of Humanism can be found in the teaching of Confucius. For three thousand years the great concern was with human relations. According to Prof H. G. Creel: 'Confucius was not only willing that men should think for themselves; he insisted upon it. . . . He believed that humanity could find happiness only as a co-operative community of free men.'

Nothing could be more removed from the rigid uniformity imposed on Europe when Christianity became the official religion. Humanism reappeared at the Renaissance. In art there was a return to the Greek delight in the beauty of the human form and in philosophy to the Greek ideal of balance and harmony—'the complete man'. More far-reaching consequences came from the scientific revolution started by Galileo. The lineaments of Humanism could be discerned under the thin coating of formal orthodoxy in the writings of Montaigne, Cervantes, and Erasmus. The more daring speculations of Bruno sent him to the stake.

Open scepticism remained dangerous. Thomas Hobbes had to be circumspect, and even in the eighteenth century David Hume veiled his criticism of religion in bland irony. The path to agnosticism and atheism followed a roundabout route via Deism and Unitarianism. Thomas Paine in England and Voltaire in France rejected dogmatic Christianity but retained belief in 'the God of

the Philosophers'. But their passion for social justice and affirmation of the rights of man and the principle of toleration was Humanism in action.

### Pioneers of Reform

Tributaries of the older Humanism merged into a broad stream during the period known as the Enlightenment. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concepts of human equality and political democracy appeared. Part of the blame for the French Revolution was laid by Macaulay and Bruntière on what they thought were misunderstandings of Chinese institutions. Some of the French *philosophes*—e.g. Condorcet, D'Holbach—were frankly atheists and materialists.

Of more practical significance was their conviction that human nature was indefinitely improvable—not perfectible, as is sometimes alleged—and that the aim of government should be the happiness of the people, as indeed Confucius had taught. These democratic notions were embodied in the American Declaration of Independence. In England, under pressure of the Industrial Revolution, they gave rise to the long series of reforms which made the nineteenth century a laboratory of social change.

Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism gave this resurgent Humanism a concrete programme based on the axiom that actions, laws, and institutions must be judged by consequences and that the final test was whether they increased the general happiness. The right method was to use political machinery and to plan social reform after careful study of evidence. Bentham was the father of Royal Commissions and the begetter of the Welfare State.

John Stuart Mill and the English radicals still further developed the democratic principle which is fundamental to Humanism. Mill was also a pioneer of the emancipation of women and birth control. The ferment of Humanist ideas compelled a critical examination of all laws deriving their sanctions from moral theology. Hence the institution of a Divorce Court, the triumphant battle for birth control by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, and the less successful fight against the Blasphemy Laws.

### The Secular Process

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw what has been called 'the landslide of Victorian Unbelief'. The advance of science and



Biblical criticism destroyed what was left of the traditional framework of religious orthodoxy. Darwinism brought man into the scientific picture. If Natural Selection was how evolution worked, there was no room for design in Nature. T. H. Huxley coined the word 'agnosticism' to describe what was also known as 'rationalism' or 'Scientific Humanism': namely, the attitude that it is wrong to believe anything for which there is no good evidence.

These controversies went beyond mere intellectual debate. They were reflected in literature. The distress at the threat to religious faith was expressed in the poetry of Tennyson and Clough. The loss was flamboyantly accepted by Swinburne, urbanely by Edward Fitzgerald, stoically by A. E. Housman. The spirit of a new Humanism animated the novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and George Meredith, and later the plays of George Bernard Shaw.

In the eighties a number of ethical societies (federated in the Ethical Union) responded to needs which the Churches could no longer meet. The National Secular Society carried its message to the man-in-the-street. At the turn of the century the Rationalist Press Association prepared a campaign through cheap books which did much to mould the minds of a new, largely self-educated public. The importance of concerting these efforts in a unified movement was obvious once it was clear that moral leadership was passing from the Churches.

The British Humanist Association represents a new phase in the secular process which began with the origin of western science. Now that religious dogmas seem to so many to be dissolving in the acids of modern criticism the task of Humanism has become constructive. The secularization of thought is a prelude to the secularization of life and society. In the words of Sir Julian Huxley:

*'There have been two critical points in the past of evolution, points at which the process transcended itself by passing from an old state to a fresh one with quite new properties. The first was marked by the passage from the inorganic phase to the biological, the second from the biological to the psychosocial. Now we are on the threshold of a third. As bubbles in a cauldron on the boil mark the onset of a critical passage of water from the liquid to the gaseous state, so the ebullition of Humanist ideas in the cauldron of present-day thought marks the onset of the passage from the psychosocial to the consciously purposive phase of evolution.'*

## AFFILIATIONS

The BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION is affiliated to the following organizations:

THE INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST &  
ETHICAL UNION

THE UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION

THE NATIONAL PEACE COUNCIL

THE HOWARD LEAGUE FOR PENAL  
REFORM

THE ABORTION LAW REFORM  
ASSOCIATION

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CIVIL  
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