

HUMANISM, INTER-FAITH AND FAITH COHESION – NADEEM A. BAKSH

Humanism is generally used to describe convictions which combine the absence of belief in the divine and supernatural with a positive ethical philosophy i.e. 'You can be good without God'.¹ It is a belief in people being able to live good lives without religious or 'superstitious' beliefs. It is an approach to life based on humanity as opposed to being based on any dogma or sacred text i.e. moral values are 'properly' founded on human nature and experience alone with decisions being based on the available evidence and the assessment of outcomes of actions as opposed to religious or superstitious beliefs. To be a Humanist there are no obligatory texts, rituals, meetings, clothing nor are there prohibitions regarding particular foods. Humanism is described as 'a way of thinking rather than a way of life, though, it recognises the way one thinks will inevitably affect the way one lives'.² Below is a summary of what Humanists believe.

Humanists:

- Believe in individual rights and freedoms — but believe that individual responsibility, social cooperation and mutual respect are just as important.
- Believe that people can and will continue to find solutions to the world's problems — so that quality of life can be improved for everyone.
- Are positive — gaining inspiration from life, art and culture, and a rich natural world.
- Believe that we have only one life — it is our responsibility to make it a good life, and to live it to the full.

(Source BHA Website)

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the largest of the organisations working to promote Humanism in the UK. Its work includes the provision of humanist weddings, baby-naming and funerals, campaigning for an end to religious privilege and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief,³ and publishing humanist perspectives on ethical and religious issues for schools and society.⁴ It also works to improve Religious Education, and campaigns against faith-based schools and the legal requirement for collective worship in schools.⁵ It represents the views of humanists to government and other organisations and the media. The BHA is a registered charity and the major stakeholders are the members, local and regional groups. The BHA has formal organisational links with affiliated secular societies and groups globally.

The BHA: Inter-faith and Cohesion

The BHA regularly participates in inter-faith committees and working parties such as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Task Force, the Religion and

¹ *A Short Course on Humanism*, BHA

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/>

⁴ Edited and compiled by M. Mason, *Resources on Humanism for primary teachers, Humanist Perspectives 1*; Resources on Humanism for secondary teachers, *Humanist Perspectives 2*. M. Mason, members BHA Exec. Cttee. and Education and Marketing Sub-Cttee., *A Short Course on Humanism* (revised 2006).

⁵ Campaigns, BHA Website.

Belief Consultative Group as well as those convened by the DfES and the QCA. The BHA is also a member of inter-belief organisations such as the Religious Education Council,⁶ the Values Education Council⁷ and the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education.⁸ In addition, individual humanists are members of local SACRES and other local interfaith groups.⁹ The BHA is also committed to Social Cohesion and welcomes the opportunities offered by participation in inter-faith organisations encouraging members to accept local invitations.¹⁰ However, the BHA does have certain reservations related to youth inter-faith programmes, inter-faith working definitions and activity themes. In particular the BHA is concerned with the Government's Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy focus on working with faith community groups.¹¹

The Humanist basis for inter-faith activity is succinctly explained in one of the BHA's aims; 'work with others for the common good'¹² which encourages 'understanding the beliefs of others'.¹³ Although, the BHA do not organise their own inter-faith groups, adult members are encouraged to participate and take up local invitations. However, due to Humanists having reported varied experiences in these groups — ranging from very positive to exclusion — the BHA tend not to get involved in youth-based inter-faith programmes.¹⁴

With reference to the BHA's concerns about inter-faith working definitions, activity themes and the Government's Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy focus on working with faith groups, the BHA cites extensive research showing that the majority of people in the UK — if they have religious beliefs — consider their religion as a relatively minor aspect of their identity.¹⁵

With this in mind the BHA recommend a redefinition of inter-faith working terminology, suggesting — as a starting point — replacing the term 'faith' with more inclusive terms such as 'World View' or 'Life Stance'. The BHA believes the current terminology has the implication of overemphasising faith in comparison with all the other factors that are important to people, often to the exclusion of other groups, in particular the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non religious people living in the UK.¹⁶

⁶ <http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/>

⁷ <http://www.vecuk.org.uk/>

⁸ <http://www.shap.org/>

⁹ BHA Website.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. and Interview 24 March 2006.

¹² BHA mission statement 2003 on the BHA Website.

¹³ M. Mason, *Creativity, culture and humanist spirituality: A humanist response to 'All our futures' and to some aspects of the school curriculum today*, REC seminar (2000).

¹⁴ Interview, 24 March 2006.

¹⁵ Response by the BHA to the Equalities Review Team, November 2005, p. 4: '61% of 13–15 year olds are either atheist or agnostic.' <http://www.edf.org.uk/news/BHANov%2005.pdf> EDLINES, *The Education Newsletter of The BHA, Summer 2004*, p. 1. '65% of 12–19 year olds are not religious': EDLINES, *The Education Newsletter of The BHA, Summer 2005*, p. 2. 'This survey found 44% referring to themselves as non-believers': EDLINES, *The Education Newsletter of The BHA, Winter 2005/6*. [More Statistics on religion and belief: http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentviewarticle.asp?article=1826](http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentviewarticle.asp?article=1826)

¹⁶ Interview, 24 March 2006.

Continuing with the issue of inclusion and as a shared example of good practice the BHA regard inter-faith activities as far more cohesive where non-religious themes are used, e.g. group activity where people of different beliefs are asked to discuss something unrelated to religion — particularly useful themes have included a complex mathematical equation, a poem, a film or piece of music. The BHA maintain such activities have been very successful in identifying commonalities leading to understanding and appreciation between people of different social, racial and belief backgrounds with the emphasis on a natural process of 'Human Cohesion'.¹⁷

The BHA believes that social 'human cohesion' requires a commitment by each individual to shared values, the norms of society, and the law of the land, and that this cannot be achieved without open and honest debate about behaviours, practices, and the boundaries on what is acceptable within the UK. The BHA is highly critical of the Government's current Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy, in particular, its focus on working with Faith Community Groups. The BHA suggests the strategy views society as distinct communities, not of individuals with multiple 'identities' who relate to a number of different groups in different contexts, and may also be discriminated against on a variety of grounds. This implies the Government's approach confuses religion and culture, and ignores the problems faced by the increasing number of people within minority groups who do not share the religious beliefs associated with that culture, or may hold more liberal views. Furthermore, the BHA makes reference to evidence that faith group leaders are often not representative of the views of the community they act for, and frequently use the opportunities that Government provides to influence the Government with their own agenda, and to reinforce their standing within their own community.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid. and Response by the BHA to the Equalities Review Team, November 2005. <http://www.edf.org.uk/news/BHANov%2005.pdf>

¹⁸ Response by the BHA to the Equalities Review Team, November 2005, pp. 38–40. <http://www.edf.org.uk/news/BHANov%2005.pdf>