

Humanistically Speaking



October 2022

Speaking out for the non-religious. On values. On issues. On life.

Humanism PLC

Is Humanism top down or bottom up?

An Immigrant's Love Letter to the West
When Andrew Copson met the Queen
British humanists helping Africa
Can you resist peer pressure?
Humanists UK – a profile
Carl Sagan recommended
Trans debate continued

Image: Flickr

Humanistically
Speaking



send an email

YouTube



In this Issue

Come in, sit down, put your feet up...

David Brittain
Executive Editor



Contents:

2. Editor's Welcome
3. News Section
7. Emails to the Editor
9. Thought for the Day
10. Origins of Humanism
13. British and African Humanism
15. Grassroots Humanism
17. Conformity
20. Alone or Together?
21. What Are You?
23. Community Humanism
26. Maggie's Musings
28. The Little Fight & The Great Fight
30. Ethical Encounters
31. A Profile of Humanists UK
33. Harold Blackham
34. An Immigrant's Love Letter
35. Poet's Corner
36. Groups Map Page
37. Back Cover – Editors

This month, we have our regular Poet's Corner, Book Review, Ethical Encounters and a fascinating profile of Harold Blackham, who did so much to build international humanism in the mid-20th century. But our main theme is the future of humanism, and where better to start than a review of its history by David Warden. In his review, David explores several routes that, since the eighteenth century Enlightenment, led towards modern humanism. His report – in which he refers to a humanist 'religion' – may be controversial to some readers, so do tell us what *you* think. It is a fascinating report that traces humanism through the early ethical societies into the modern humanism that we all recognise today.

John Coss discusses Jaap van Praag's concept, suggested half a century ago, of 'The Little Fight and the Great Fight' that confronted humanism then, and still does. Anthony Lewis reflects on what humanism is for, and Maggie Hall challenges us with questions about what we mean by humanism.

Aaron Darkwood details what he calls the family of humanist organisations that all play their independent, but largely cooperative, parts, whilst Paul Ewans ponders Humanists UK – its objectives, its challenges, its successes, its shortcomings, and its work in progress.

Penny Morgan also makes a welcome return to the editorial fold with her thoughtful story about the dangers of human conformity. She asks how destructive our willingness to obey authority can be and invites us humanists to consider how non-conformist we think we are. We like to see ourselves as freethinkers, but how far are we really prepared to go to defy, or obey, authority? The answers may be challenging.

Finally, Mike Flood discusses community in humanism, which is an issue that I care very much about. I have long been an advocate of strengthening and developing local humanist groups, because that is the only effective way that I can think of, of building humanist communities. Whether Humanists UK pay attention to this issue or not, the long-term success of organised humanism depends on local humanist communities, and in the long term we ignore that at our peril.

CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by any associated Humanist groups or Humanists UK.



Humanist responses to death of Elizabeth II and accession of Charles III

Humanists UK

Humanists UK is deeply sorry to learn of the death of Her Majesty The Queen. Humanists UK Chief Executive Andrew Copson commented: 'Queen Elizabeth II gave decades of public service as our head of state. Her reign witnessed some of the most profound changes to the UK's society and throughout that time she acted as a reconciling force, speaking of her personal conviction to "respect and value all people of whatever faith and none." Although to many she is a symbol of the nation, she was also a friend, a companion, a mother, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. Our thoughts and condolences today are with all those who knew her personally and loved her.'

Dr Adam Rutherford, President of Humanists UK

"As President of [@Humanists UK](#), I am saddened by the death of Her Majesty the Queen, and wish to convey my condolences to all who loved her. She sought 'to respect and value all people of whatever faith or

none' - something we can all share on the basis of our common humanity." (Twitter, Sep 9)

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK and President of Humanists International

On the few occasions that I met her, representing [@Humanists_UK](#), she was gracious and interested and like many, I witnessed first-hand what a welcoming and inclusive presence she was and how people of all different beliefs and backgrounds warmed to her... "That [Charles III] should be a member of the Church of England is currently unavoidable (hopefully one day that necessity will change) but [his speech on 9th Sep] is a good symbolic statement by a head of state to include people of all beliefs... It's of a piece with his speech to the recent international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, where he was careful to include those with both religion and nonreligious beliefs and give support to open and liberal societies and to human rights" (Twitter, Sep 8 and 10).





Humanist News



Humanists support Reading Pride

Rick Field and Anthony Lewis, from Windsor Humanists, helped manage the stall at Reading Pride on Saturday 3rd September.

Mark Doyle and the Reading Humanists team had a very professional looking stall which generated a lot of interest all day. Many people signed up after completing the 'Are you a Humanist Quiz?'. Reading Humanists banner looked impressive and the team had a fun day interacting with so many people. The stall was open from before noon until close at 6pm. Free humbug sweets were a huge draw to the stall!



One of the difficulties we face as humanists is our lack of visibility. We have very few buildings of our own, no local offices, no centres and little contact in most towns and cities across the UK. You can't just 'drop in' and chat about a humanist event or challenges you face as a humanist.

We therefore need more of these outdoor events in order to get ourselves known, become a regular face, promote contact and become a voice on the national and local stage.

Many groups have meetings, socials and walks, but if you have a public-facing event like this, **WE WANT** to know about it. Do take a number of photos and send them to our email below. *Thanks!*





Humanist wedding goes ahead

In our September 2021 issue, we spoke to humanists Julian and Claire who explained their struggle trying to get married in a legal humanist ceremony in England. As we now discover they are indeed man and wife, we asked them how it went.

“We got married on 3rd September 2022, in a city that means a lot to both of us, surrounded by our loving family and dearest friends. At least, that’s the date that we’ll be sticking with. Our legally-binding ceremony actually took place across in a small registry office on 1st September because humanist marriages are still not legally recognised in England and Wales.

Despite our frustrations with the discrimination that humanists like us face when it comes to marriage law, we decided to make the best of it. Our two siblings witnessed our legal marriage and we even managed to slip in some of the vows from our humanist ceremony as part of the ‘promises’ section of the wedding. Afterwards, we joined our close family for a pub lunch. It was a lovely, calm day that brought our families together and gave us a trial run before the big day itself.

Our ‘real’ wedding day was everything we had hoped for. Our humanist celebrant, [Holly Austin-Davies](#), put together a beautiful, bespoke ceremony that encapsulated our



story and was praised by guests from a range of different faith and belief backgrounds. Julian’s parents – who, like many of their generation, had a religious wedding ceremony despite their non-religious convictions – even said that they would have loved to have had such a personal, humanist ceremony if it had been available to them.

We hope that a change in the law isn’t far away, and that other couples like us can have the deeply held humanist convictions that form the bedrock of their relationships recognised in law.”





Humanist News



Vote Humanist?

It's election time... well for some at least! Those of us in the lovely southern county of Dorset had the great pleasure of voting in your leader for a (fictitious) Humanist Party.

Four brave candidates stepped up, with varying policies, manifestos, and approaches, delivering opening speeches, selling their vision and debating the facts and questions posed.

A gripped audience looked on, bowled over by the choices, the direction and the huge responsibility they faced as they selected the new leader, and with it the new Prime Minister for the United Kingdom.

Ours was obviously for fun, but as we look on with so many massive issues our country and the world face right now, does anyone really have any answers? What would you do right now? Would you give money out to everybody for the next (predicted) eighteen months of the crisis? Would you nationalise the energy industry? Would you go back to coal? Why not get in touch and let us know below.



Who would you have voted for? Who won the election? [Watch here.](#) [Policies here.](#)



Ballot Paper
Humanist Party Leadership Election
HUMANIST PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTION

THE HUMANIST PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTION
WILL BE HELD ON 15th FEBRUARY 2014. THE ELECTION WILL BE HELD AT 7.00 PM. THE ELECTION WILL BE HELD AT 7.00 PM. THE ELECTION WILL BE HELD AT 7.00 PM.

Candidate Name	Vote or Mark
DANCEY, David	<input type="checkbox"/>
GARRWOOD, Justin	<input type="checkbox"/>
SILMAN, Cathy	<input type="checkbox"/>
WARDEN, David	<input type="checkbox"/>



Humanistically Speaking supports the democratic voice, but would a humanist party really represent us? Are we all of one voice in politics? Click icon left.



Dear David...

Emails to the Editor

Carl Sagan recommended

Hello David,

Another fine newsletter!

Since September's issue contained information about the brain, I can recommend to anyone who wants more detailed, but written for a non-scientific audience, Carl Sagan's book *The Dragons Of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence* (1989). I'm sure that most humanists will be aware of Carl Sagan. After reading this book, then progress to *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (1996).

Happy reading. I look forward to next month's *Humanistically Speaking*.

Neil Camp, *Epping, Essex*

Trans debate continued

Thank you for publishing my letter about 'The religion of gender identity'. In your reply, you captioned the person who goes under the name of Stephen Whittle as follows: "Stephen Whittle, Professor of Equalities Law at Manchester Metropolitan University, is biologically female but legally and socially he is a man, as is obvious". In that caption you differentiate between what the person is "biologically" and "legally and socially". May I ask to which of the three does "...he is a man, as is obvious" refer? From his chromosomes Whittle is "obviously" female. Since a law can make anyone anything (South African apartheid laws made Japanese people 'honorary whites'), what is obvious legally about calling Whittle a man? And what does

"socially" mean? What is visible of him when fully dressed gives the impression of a man; but naked?

You also wrote, "His status as a man, for social and legal purposes, should of course be recognised and acknowledged, without denying the underlying biological realities". I am sure you know of Schrodinger's Cat. You seem to want Whittle and others to have two states at the same time; while telling everyone to ignore one and accept the other – however illogical that is.

I object to being lied to; and I strongly object to being told I must tell lies in order to fit in with an absurd law and 'not to cause offence'. How do such things accord with 'swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' on oath in court?

Regards, Eric Hayman

Editorial response

The Gender Recognition Act 2004 allows people to be recognised legally and socially in their preferred gender. Social transition means presenting in social contexts in your preferred gender in terms of clothing, pronouns etc. I understand that Stephen Whittle has also had phalloplastic surgery. It is a matter of courtesy, humanity, and legal requirement to respect someone's preferred gender if they have undergone transition as specified by law. This does not change the underlying biological realities in terms of gametes, chromosomes etc. but so what? If you think the 2004 law is absurd it can of course be repealed democratically. DW



Myers-Briggs “bullshit”

I enjoyed most of Anthony Lewis’s article “Cognitive Diversity” and wholeheartedly champion his notion that there are differences in the way people perceive the world and we ought to become more aware of that fact. Unfortunately, his recommendation to use the Myers-Briggs test to do so is essentially promoting a pseudoscientific management fad. Scott Barry Kaufman – a renowned personality researcher and host of #1 rated The Psychology Podcast – summed this up in a recent tweet: “Why the Myers-Briggs is bullshit.” Kaufman was linking to an article in *Areo* magazine that began: “It is a thriving multimillion-dollar-a-year industry. And as any psychologist worth their salt will tell you, it’s mostly bullshit. Here’s why.” The author then went through eight strong reasons for this assessment:

1. It is based on Carl Jung’s ideas
2. The test lacks predictive validity: it is not good at predicting outcomes in the real world
3. Human personality falls along continua, not into discrete categories
4. The types used by the MBTI have arbitrary boundaries
5. The Myers-Briggs has poor reliability
6. The Myers-Briggs misleadingly implies that there are big differences between types and minimal differences within a type
7. When you turn a continuous variable into a categorical one, you throw away information
8. The MBTI doesn’t measure neuroticism

This quote near the end of the article perhaps sums up why people still champion the Myers-Briggs: “People seem to want to read themselves into things. Like horoscopes, the Myers-Briggs test seems to exploit this fact by

offering people personality descriptions that contain Barnum statements. A Barnum statement is a strategically vague description that says little of substance, but is written with just the right amount of ambiguity, so that people can read into it and conclude that it describes them beautifully. It is named for the famous showman P. T. Barnum, who supposedly said that there’s a sucker born every minute.”

Far better in the field of personality research are the Big Five personality traits. These have been scientifically validated over decades of research and there are loads of free tests available for them online. Please consider one of those in your quest for understanding more about cognitive diversity.

Ed Gibney, North East Humanists

But it works...

Anthony Lewis writes: I used all the different personality models: the Big 5, Transactional Analysis, NLP, in addition to the Myers Briggs as a corporate leader in a global business. All are based mainly on statistical correlations, so all suffer from the same limitations, but all can be useful if used correctly in the right context. There is ongoing academic research into the Myers Briggs, and many AI developers use variants of the model as it has a theoretical basis in information processing - see this recent defence in [Psychology Today](#) in 2020. I found that the Myers Briggs model had the most impact and more readily resonated with the people and teams I was leading. It is important to understand that the types are on a sliding scale and are not precise measurements as we are dealing with human behaviour. Why not try it out with your life partner who, you will probably find, is your Myers Briggs complement! The Myers Briggs may not work theoretically, but it works empirically!





The Queen is Dead... Long Live the King!

When Queen Elizabeth II died there was an outpouring of national, even worldwide, grief reported (some say orchestrated) by the media. I suspect we all had a sense that there was history in the making. This sense of change led to my personal reflection on the whole issue. I am a republican by nature, so whilst I had no personal negative feelings about Her Majesty, I am not a fan of any culture that entitles a family to luxury and public celebrity as a birthright. So I did feel a tad jaundiced at the seemingly endless reporting of the event – her reign, what she meant to us, and what a great loss her passing is to us all. Moreover, a long line of personal friends, politicians and religious figures were trotted out to share with us all their memories and, occasionally, their outpourings of personal grief.

Now, don't get me wrong, I don't doubt that she was a thoughtful, loving, funny, and generous lady – but I'm sure there must be many ladies like that. Moreover, I didn't know her, and she had little impact on my life that I'm aware of. So I hope it doesn't make me a callous monster if I say that as a humanist, whilst I regret the loss of anyone to their family, it has to be said that she had a good life, had the best care available, had many friends, was well travelled, and she was, after all, 96 years old.

But as a humanist, I did feel encouraged – just a little – by our new King's occasional nod to 'those of no faith'. (Or perhaps I am clutching at straws?) Having said that, I still winced a



little when he promised to be defender of 'the one true Protestant faith', and protector of the right of anyone to their own faith. It's not that I have a problem with protecting the right to one's faith, but because there was no mention there of people of no faith, and that is just as relevant. This may seem to be a small matter, particularly to the faithful, and maybe to you, too. I'm not suggesting that those of no faith in the UK will be persecuted, but they are persecuted in other countries. Moreover, it has been a hard, ongoing struggle even in the UK for folk like us to fight against discrimination – such as the right to marry as humanists, or the right of the terminally-ill to end their lives, or even the right to have any real influence in our children's religious education.*

Barack Obama had no trouble adding "and those of no faith" when he swore his presidential oath to the American people. But having said that, Charles does seem to have left the door slightly open for us non-believers, and I do hope this is a positive note for the future. This is a time of great change, and – republican though I am – I do think the Royals have a part to play in recognising humanism.





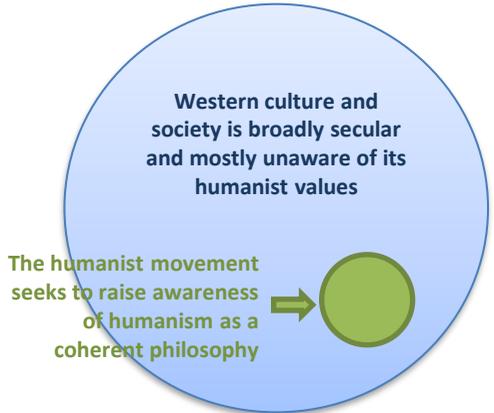
Origins of Humanism

by David Warden

No one, as far as I know, has yet written a comprehensive history of humanism. This may be because the subject matter is so slippery and elusive. What exactly do we mean by the word ‘humanism’?

Should we, for example, include the history of rationalism, secularism, atheism and free thought more generally? What about other definitions of the word ‘humanism’, and other words which, in the past, have broadly meant what we call ‘humanism’ today? It’s not an easy task.

One way to cut through the confusion is to assert that the word humanism today broadly refers to a set of values and attitudes which emerged quite strongly in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. This was a European and American cultural and intellectual movement which turned against the church and towards science, empirical knowledge, human rights, and the possibility of progress and human happiness in this life. If this assertion is reasonably accurate, then a history of the Enlightenment would provide you with an early history of what we call ‘humanism’. You could try *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680-1790* (2020) by Ritchie Robertson.



The organised humanist movement is nested inside a secular culture which is broadly humanist in nature, despite anachronistic claims that it is based on a ‘Judaean-Christian’ heritage.

I think that would be a good start, but the organised humanist movement germinated in the nineteenth century, when it became increasingly obvious that the ‘rational’ underpinnings of Christianity and other religions were crumbling, due to the advance of secular knowledge. Darwin himself knew that his theory of evolution posed a direct challenge to the traditional account of human origins.

What bothered some thinkers in the nineteenth century was this: if religion goes, what will hold society together and what will inform ethical values? For some, the answer was ‘Nothing. We’ll get along just fine without religion’. Others were not so sure. Without ▷



Want your own copy sent directly to you via email?

Contact Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com type in SUBSCRIBE

some form of 'ethical religion', what would there be to stop humans from descending into nihilism and barbarism?

This question remains open today. Most people seem to get by OK without any form of religion. They behave decently and they help their neighbours when they are in trouble. They give to charity and they generally try to live a good life. But when they ponder the big questions, such as 'What's it all about?', many people are all too likely to resort to any number of irrational belief systems and superstitions in order to ward off existential terrors and fears about their own mortality. Others may simply go all out to earn as much money as possible and live a life of selfish hedonism.

"Many humanists cling to the most inflexible and supernaturalist definitions of the word 'religion'"

Humanism, I will argue, has always been an attempt to cultivate some form of rational or ethical religion. Many humanists will want to contradict me at this point, because they cling to the most inflexible and supernaturalist definitions of the word 'religion'. But the history of the humanist movement makes this plain and incontrovertible. I myself lead a humanist group in Bournemouth which, to all intents and purposes functions as a 'secular church', in that we espouse a coherent set of beliefs about human life and the origins of the universe, we try to follow ethical values, and we have created a community of like-minded people who try to do good in the world. We even have our own piano and singing group although we do not sing hymns and we certainly do not pray to a god. Our beliefs are firmly grounded in science and rationality. But we are following in a tradition of 'ethical

religion' which was first conceptualised by nineteenth century thinkers such as Auguste Comte and Felix Adler and which still flourishes in contemporary movements such as Sunday Assembly.



Auguste Comte

One of the earliest pioneers of organised humanism

The most ambitious attempt to create a rational religion was Auguste Comte's 'Religion of Humanity'. Comte, who was born in Montpellier in the south of France in 1798, was an Enlightenment philosopher. He embraced empirical science and industrial progress but he detested the anarchy of the French Revolution and craved a political system which would deliver order, progress, happiness and harmony. He admired the Catholic Church as a social construct, but he was convinced that its theological basis had decayed beyond recovery. What was needed, he believed, was a fully scientific replacement for Catholicism. He called it 'Positive Religion' or the 'Religion of Humanity'. Its basic idea is that individual human beings should devote themselves not to God but to *Humanity* – a progressive project spanning continents and centuries. Comte realised that the concept of Humanity was a bit too abstract, and therefore he proposed that Humanity should be symbolised by a portrait of a woman with a child, and he selected Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. The influence of Catholicism is obvious.

The Religion of Humanity had some followers in London and elsewhere. A small number of Positivist churches and communities were established in Newcastle, Sunderland, ▷



Batley, Hartlepool, Leicester, Birmingham, and Manchester. Liverpool had its own Temple of Humanity in Upper Parliament Street, but it went into decline in the 1920s with average attendances of about thirty. It finally closed in 1947 and was taken over by the Mormons in 1949. In 1961 the editor of the *Humanist* magazine described Comte's brave attempt to found a Religion of Humanity as an unfortunate failure. Positivist societies and churches were established in other countries including France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Brazil. The flag of Brazil to this day incorporates the Positivist motto 'Order and Progress' and the Positivist movement in Brazil appears to remain active. Comte himself was memorialised in Paris with an elaborate statue at the Place de la Sorbonne which still stands.



Felix Adler

Humanists UK is a continuation of the nineteenth century ethical movement, founded by Adler in 1876

A more direct predecessor of modern humanism was the movement started by Felix Adler in 1876. Adler, an immigrant to New York from Germany, had intended to follow in his father's footsteps and become a rabbi in Reform Judaism. But at the age of twenty-five, he changed course and created the Ethical Culture Movement. His ideas were summed up in the slogan 'Deed not Creed'. He attracted a large following in subsequent years, sometimes lecturing to audiences of two thousand people. His basic proposal for the structure of an ethical society meeting is not that dissimilar to humanist group events today: 'The exercises of our meeting are to be simple and devoid of all ceremonial and formalism. They are to consist of a lecture

mainly, and, as a pleasing auxiliary, of music to elevate the heart and give rest to the feelings... We propose to entirely exclude prayer and every form of ritual.' The Ethical Society, Adler argued in 1905, is 'like a Church in maintaining, and emphasizing the importance of maintaining the custom of public assemblies on Sunday' for the purpose of being a 'center of good works', as a 'hearth at which the spirit of charity may be kindled' and as a 'school of moral idealism'. Adler preferred not to use the word 'humanism' when it came into fashion half a century later, although after his death in 1933 his followers accepted that the movement did indeed belong to the international humanist movement which established itself in the twentieth century.

The first ethical society to be founded in England, in 1886, was the London Ethical Society and by 1906 there were Ethical societies in Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, Portsmouth, Cardiff, Sheffield, Liverpool, Leicester, Manchester, Bradford, Plymouth, Cheltenham, and elsewhere. Around sixty societies and groups were launched but few of them were to survive the adverse social conditions brought about by the 1914-1918 War.

Conclusion

The humanist movement has reinvented itself several times over the course of two centuries, but it usually returns to the same basic model: groups and societies which are based on a coherent ethical and secular philosophy and which provide communities for like-minded individuals. They are a precious inheritance and they deserve to be nurtured.

Further reading

The Religion of Humanity (1986) T R Wright
The British Ethical Societies (1986) Ian McKillop
The Ethical Movement in Great Britain (1934) Gustav Spiller



How British and African Humanism are Connected

by Lynda Tilley



Born in an African country colonised by the British at the time, I was surrounded by Christians and raised as one myself. I can't remember when I first heard the words 'Humanism' or 'Humanist', but I never gave them much thought because, with hindsight, the words meant nice, kind-hearted people doing good deeds, and there were plenty of Christian people around me who were like that.

After giving up my belief in God, I was agnostic before identifying as an atheist, but not completely – the anger and nastiness some atheists exhibited, like being patronising and judgemental towards the religious, made me uncomfortable. Some even admitted that they'd kill if they ever had to, to get what they wanted – like a change in leadership, for example. I just couldn't identify with them, godless or not!

When I came across the 'ten values of humanism', I was overjoyed because I identified with them all. Most importantly though, they covered many elements of 'Ubuntu', which relates to the connection which most Africans have with each other and with the world around us. Ubuntu, which roughly translates as 'a person is a person, through other human beings', has always formed the basis of African life, morals and family structures. It's not something we study or are taught - it's just THERE.

We are born knowing it, it's instinctual for most of us: supporting each other as a family



An anthropologist proposed a game to the children in an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each others' hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: "UBUNTU! How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"

'UBUNTU' in the Xhosa culture means: "I am because we are"

Image: [Captor Horizons](#)

and families supporting each other in communities; knowing that we are only as strong as a unit as the weakest person, so it's our job to support and strengthen that person; mutual responsibility for our environment, animals, food and water sources; giving any excess we have to others who don't have much and expecting nothing in return; respecting our elders and heeding their advice; and, as adults, setting good examples for both our and others' children, so that they grow up knowing values such as truth, kindness, work ethic, tactfulness and honesty.

Each African tribe and country has its own name for Ubuntu because it's what our culture has always encompassed. Most of all, maintaining a close knit, supportive family unit is vital. In the past we had no divorces or orphans in our communities, and with ▷



Lynda Tilley is a founding member of *United African Humanists* and she is on the Advisory Board Africa for *Humanists Global Charity*.



Image: AZ Quotes

In Africa there is a concept known as 'ubuntu' – the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others.

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela

Africa's abundance of land, edible vegetation, medicinal herbs, animals and water we never knew poverty, starvation or sickness.

Here's the uncomfortable part – our 'Ubuntu' (or 'Humanism') was threatened and weakened by horrors like the slave trade and the colonisation of much of our continent by the British, who brought with them their Bibles, built schools enforcing their religion and Bible-based rules outlawing ancient, cultural practices like polygamy, or practising our own belief systems and rituals – the very things that formed the heart of who we were as people were now 'sins', and we needed forgiveness.

Further damaging our humanist values and way of life, many of our people were killed, imprisoned or forced apart, and had to give up land and important ancestral burial grounds and objects of great importance culturally for shrines or celebrations. Items we carried for protection, passed down through generations and depicting our history in their intricate carvings, were also stolen from us. We no longer had a connection between the living and the dead. We felt true fear for the first time. Despite having to live like this for generations, it never killed our humanism. We knew that not all colonists were guilty of these things and many of them

were humanists like us. They had people, as did we, who were anything but humanist.

There's been an awakening in Africa in recent years, as the boundaries enforced to split us as people are destroyed as we reach out to each other, thanks to the internet. We realise how countless numbers of us continent-wide have turned from religion and gone back to who our ancestors once were. The fact that it's mostly British humanists supporting our humanist communities here is significant. As is the fact that it's British humanists building, supporting and funding THE MOST IMPORTANT thing of all here – humanist schools. Because it's only education that will one day set all our people free. British humanists are giving us the key to unlock the chains their ancestors put on us.

It's British humanists who are giving me a platform to write about African humanism and I believe we are all unknowingly starting to build a bridge connecting us in unity – Africa and the UK. Just as other continents are connecting too. One day, when we're all long gone, these bridges will connect our entire world as one people, one family, one species – whose lives all began a long time ago, on our beautiful African continent.





The local impact of grassroots humanism

by Anthony Lewis



I recently got asked the question “What is humanism for?” Humanism at its core is a modern philosophy for living a good life without the need to believe in gods and the supernatural. But Humanism, for me personally, has also been about connecting authentically with other non-religious people where I live. We founded Windsor Humanists in 2015 to be a recognised voice for the non-religious in East Berkshire as a Partner Group of Humanists UK. We have over 400 people following us on Facebook and Meetup plus we have about eighty contacts on our email distribution list.

Before Covid we regularly got over twenty people at our monthly meetings but at the moment we are lucky to get ten turning up. So the pandemic has had a big impact on our numbers. We are active in our various local Inter-Faith Groups and we sit on our local SACREs. We attend the ‘One Slough’ and ‘One Borough’ community liaison meetings to discuss local issues directly with Councillors. Local faith leaders are nearly always represented at these sessions so just by sitting at the same table we are a reminder to everyone present that over 53 per cent of people in the UK are now non-religious. It’s amazing how many local community activists and Councillors are not aware of this.

At a personal level, I have also made new



Windsor Humanists' logo

friends through being involved with Windsor Humanists, with *Humanistically Speaking*, and through working with neighbouring humanist groups in southern England through our membership of the South Central England Humanists Network. Humanists UK provided me with excellent free training as a school speaker and I have now been into over twenty locals schools to talk about humanism, science, and homosexuality. I find this truly inspirational and life affirming, especially in such a diverse area which includes Slough. I doubt I would have ever done any of this without the support of Humanists UK and getting involved with local humanism. Humanism has helped me connect to my local area and I now feel I finally belong here after twenty-five years of living here!

Humanists UK, like most national organisations, is facing fierce competition in the new ‘attention economy’ driven by social media. The cacophony can be overwhelming at times across today’s online media. HUK has about 1,000 active volunteers (half of whom are celebrants) and forty permanent staff, ▷



Reaching the thirty million is an ever-increasing problem, with pride events, stalls and pub meetings still being our prime engagement arenas



and its overall membership and supporter base has grown to some 100,000. It remains an impressive and effective lobbying and campaigning organisation, punching well above its weight on the national stage. But where are the remaining thirty million non-religious people in the UK? Why are they not joining Humanists UK? Is it because many are just too busy to get involved? Does it reflect the fierce competition for everyone's attention at the national level? Does it possibly indicate that Humanists UK is too narrowly focused?

It's likely that this very large non-religious diaspora reflects the diversity in the wider UK society, so many will be divided by the same issues such as Brexit, party politics, profession, employment, cultural background, income and educational attainment. This diversity means it's important that humanism remains at its core, in public consciousness, a philosophy for living a good life without the need for religious faith, and avoids becoming identified with particular political allegiances or stances.

I believe that local humanist groups offer Humanists UK a way of reaching out to this broad non-religious constituency which a national campaigning organisation would struggle to reach or even understand. By

their very nature local groups will reflect the diversity present across the UK, just by being locally focused. Also, local groups are about people connecting with each other face-to-face in the real world rather than in the virtual world, and so they sit below the 'wave base' of the online attention economy.*

I'm also involved in a few local charities and have observed how most depend on a handful of dedicated volunteers to continue to exist. What this means is that an individual can quickly have a significant impact in their local area, for example by setting up a grass roots local humanist group! Windsor Humanists demonstrates the impact which even a small new group can have in its local area. I urge anyone to just get stuck in and set one up where you live if there is not one already there—you won't regret it! Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had hundreds of small grassroots humanists groups being spontaneously set up across the UK by people who want to connect with other non-religious people where they live?

Finally – I joked recently at a humanist meeting that if you get twenty humanists in a room you will have twenty different opinions about everything. Someone quipped straight back: "Only twenty?"





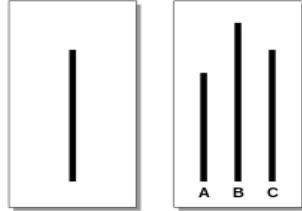
Conformity

Penny Morgan explains our strong inclination to think and behave as others do...

We're all subject to peer pressure and social influence as the following classical experiments demonstrate – although the research has itself been subject to criticism.

Solomon Asch's deceptively simple drawn lines experiment (1951) involved having people who were 'stooges' pretend to be regular participants alongside those who were actual, unaware subjects. The task was for each member of the group to say which of three lines matched a target line in length. Those who were 'in' on the experiment would behave in certain ways to see if their actions had an influence on the actual experimental participants. He found that participants conformed to the incorrect group answer about one third of the time. Many factors influenced the level of conformity such as whether answers were in private or not, how many confederates were in the group, whether of 'higher' status, how difficult the task was and so on. But according to some critics, individuals may have been motivated to avoid conflict, rather than an actual desire to conform to the rest of the group.

Another criticism is that the results of the experiment in the laboratory may not generalise to real-world situations. Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment (1973) attempted to avoid the latter criticism by converting a university basement into a mock prison. Twenty-four participants (students) were randomly assigned to the roles of



Which line (A, B, or C) matches the line on the left? Would peer pressure affect the evidence of your senses?

prisoner or guard. 'Prisoners' were treated like every other criminal – being arrested at their homes without warning and taken to the local police station. They were fingerprinted, photographed and 'booked'.

Then they were blindfolded and driven to the basement set out as a prison, with barred doors and windows, bare walls and small cells. Here, the de-individualisation process began. They were stripped naked, deloused, had all their personal possessions removed, were given prison clothes and bedding, and referred to by number only. Zimbardo, a flamboyant Prospero-type character, acted as prison warden.

Within hours, guards adopted their perceived stereotypical role with alacrity, bullying and dehumanising prisoners. As the prisoners became more submissive, the guards became more aggressive and assertive, demanding ever greater obedience. The prisoners were dependent on the guards for everything, so they tried to find ways to please the guards, such as telling tales on fellow prisoners. The contrast between total control and ▷



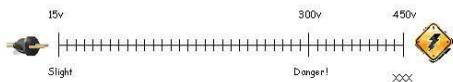
complete helplessness was stark. So acute was the distress of some prisoners, and so excessive the aggression of the guards, that Zimbardo had to end the experiment after six days instead of two weeks.

Do people readily conform to the social roles they're expected to play? The 'prison' setting suggested that situational factors, rather than dispositional ones, played a major role. Decent people may do indecent things when placed in certain situations. The experiment raised many ethical issues.

Stanley Milgram's study in obedience (1963), also a classic, also controversial, was devised to examine justifications for acts of genocide offered by those accused at the World War II Nuremberg War Criminal trials. Their defence, often, was based on 'obedience' – that they were just following the orders of their superiors. The experiments began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.

Ostensibly, it was a word-learning experiment. The 'learner', with electrodes attached to his arm, was taken alone into a room. The 'teacher' and researcher, wearing a lab coat, went into the room next door containing an electric shock generator with graded volts marked up to 450v in 15v steps. Only the teacher was unaware of the true nature of the experiment.

The teacher was told to administer an electric shock every time the learner made a mistake in the word-learning experiment, increasing the level of shock each time. There were thirty switches on the shock generator marked from 15 volts (slight shock) to 450 (danger – severe shock).



The learner gave mainly wrong answers (on purpose), and for each of these, the teacher administered an electric shock. When the teacher refused to administer a shock, the experimenter gave a series of prods to ensure they continued in spite of the learner's screams.

How many teachers delivered the maximum voltage? Sixty-five percent, but, of course, no shocks were really delivered.

Later research suggested that the degree to which people are willing to obey the questionable orders of an authority figure depends largely on two key factors:

- How much the individual **agrees** with the orders
- How much they **identify** with the person giving the orders

Despite valid criticisms, the research undoubtedly showed that people are highly influenced by authority and obedient, although thirty-five per cent of subjects in Milgram's study refused.

Conformity has been shown in a broad range of domains, and social psychologists have long understood that individuals adopt the beliefs and behaviours of the surrounding group, including religious beliefs. But do conformity pressures merely lead individuals to alter what they say they think or believe, or do they produce a true change in private judgments?

Do humanists think of themselves as conformists or non-conformists? Most people believe that they are non-conformist enough to stand up to a group when they know they are right, but why not ask friends (humanists and non-humanists) what they think the percentage conforming might be in Milgram's research?



Aaron Explores

Going it alone or joining the humanist movement...



If you identify as a humanist, you remain at the centre of your world as a self-directed person. But you can, if you wish, connect with one or more levels of organised humanism. They are working together to give humanists a collective voice.

There's no formal hierarchy in the humanist movement. You can be a part of everything or nothing and everything in-between. Some people attend their local group, volunteer regionally, help with national and international campaigns, whilst others are content just reading about humanism or doing their bit individually. Every option is okay – we're all individuals.

Most people would likely find **LOCAL HUMANISM** in a local group. These can be independent, or partners or branches of Humanists UK. Groups provide interesting talks, social gatherings, walks and learning opportunities, as well as providing members with a local voice, for example on school governing boards and SACREs, and through school visits and talks.

Some areas have **REGIONAL HUMANISM** in the form of a network and/or regional events. These consist of groups working together, to share resources, and work to build humanism in their wider geographical area.

NATIONAL HUMANISM, such as Humanists UK and Humanist Society Scotland, seeks to



You can be a lone humanist if you prefer, or connect up with others at various levels in the wider humanist movement

influence government policy, promotes humanism via national media, and creates online and printed resources for individuals and groups to use. Humanists UK also manages specialised sections such as Defence Humanists, LGBT Humanists, Young Humanists, support for apostates through *Faith to Faithless* and other networks and groups. They also train celebrants, pastoral care volunteers, and school visitors.

GLOBAL HUMANISM, in the form of Humanists International, works to bring humanism together in all its forms right across the globe – campaigning, informing, and helping those in need have a voice, especially through its internationally-respected *Freedom of Thought Report*.

Humanists love to communicate with each other, with groups having Meetup pages, newsletters, Facebook pages and more.



Aaron is a former 'Humanist of the Year' at Dorset Humanists for his energetic volunteering.



Humanists UK has a newsletter also, but in recent years a new **HUMANIST VOICE** has been launched in the form of *Humanistically Speaking*! As you know, this is a free monthly resource, downloadable and accessible, open to anybody regardless of faith or belief and not requiring a membership.

At a more personal level, individual humanists also have a wide range of books they can choose from, magazines in various countries, videos and YouTube sites promoting all aspects of humanism. Often it can be difficult for a person leaving faith, or someone who belongs to a religious family, to diverge from an expected path in life. Joining a group or belonging anywhere may be difficult, but a variety of options exist for them to step into humanism as loudly or as quietly as they feel comfortable. And, of course, kindred organisations exist, such as the National Secular Society and Atheism UK, all of which help to give a louder voice to non-believers.

Do I need humanism in my life?

Not necessarily, but many humanists enjoy that sense of belonging, being part of something bigger than themselves. If you have no religious beliefs and live by a decent set of moral values with a questioning outlook

on life, then you're probably already a humanist. Whether or not you want to take up the badge, wear it, advertise it, keep it to yourself or just not own it at all, is entirely your choice.

Many atheists or agnostics are entirely happy just going about life being who they are, with no connection to anything. Many don't know there is anything to be connected with. But humans are a social species, and we enjoy communication and connectedness. Humanists by their very nature are often natural learners, craving information and constantly asking "WHY?" The big questions in life are areas humanists love to discuss, explore, research and find out more about. This is why talks, presentations, courses and learning opportunities appeal to humanists and are a regular feature in groups up and down the country.

Is humanism just a godless church?

That depends how you define church I guess. I would use the word community myself, in that there's no prayer, no supernatural belief, no fixed rules (beyond the common courtesies) or punishments, no heaven or hell and no priests in fancy costumes. Some groups have a choir, but communal singing isn't compulsory!

As people lose their religious faith (as is happening more frequently) and as more people grow up without a religious faith, they may well still desire a community to go to, to be part of, to feel a sense of belonging. Humanism can offer that, but it's also nice to hold conversations on all manner of topics with rational thinkers with a scientific mind, where the answers are not along the lines of "Well, God did it". Twenty-first century humans need more than that in my opinion.



What are you?

By Mike Flood

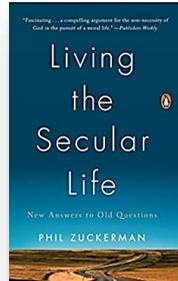


At Milton Keynes Humanists January meetup we focused on the question of 'identity'. We started by asking our members if they could define themselves in just four words. It's challenging. Try it!

Most included 'humanist' in their selection, or chose words that brought out humanist values or aspirations (kind, compassionate, tolerant, etc.). One of our older members chose 'student' as one of hers... Humanism was on my shortlist, but if I'd been given a fifth word, it would have been 'Aweist' (pronounced awe-ist) because 'Humanist' doesn't fully represent what I am at heart.

We owe the existence of this highly evocative but rather ugly word 'Aweist' to Phil Zuckerman, Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. Zuckerman studies religious people professionally and teaches courses on religion, and, as he explains in *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (2015), he often found himself confronted by people enquiring after his beliefs. "What are you?" they would ask, and 'Atheist', 'Secularist' or 'Humanist' didn't quite fit the bill.

Zuckerman is an 'atheist', but the term doesn't express what he believes, only one small part of what he does not. On one occasion when he used the moniker he was rebuked: "You can't tell me that you don't believe in anything... You have morals, you try to live an ethical life!" He protested that



Author Phil Zuckerman has coined the word 'Aweist' to express his sense of wonder

he believed in lots of things: "...adequately funding schools and hospitals, fostering free speech, combating violence, fostering the environment, participating in philosophical discussions about the nature of morality, etc." As he explains in his book, the label 'atheist' doesn't capture the joy of living or the "deep sense of the profound mystery that is existence, the beauty that is creativity, and the power that is justice".

Zuckerman found the term 'agnostic' no better. When "I ponder the existence of certain existential questions and cosmic mysteries," he explains, for example about whether or not a God or Gods exist, "I often have an emotional reaction beyond that of mere dry puzzlement or cold contemplation... sometimes I experience or feel existential questions and mysteries more than I simply ponder or contemplate them." The tag 'agnostic' "neither adequately captures nor satisfactorily conveys that experiential or emotional dimension", for example, when "thinking about life, death, being or the universe."





How about 'Secular Humanist'? – someone who “positively advocates an optimistic belief in the potential of humans to solve problems and make the world a better, safer, and more just place... someone who believes in reason, science, and rational inquiry and is committed to democracy, tolerance, open debate, human rights, etc.” For Zuckerman, this is preferable, but as he says, “when describing what I am, I want to capture something else, something slightly more personal than the values, ideas, and practices that I support and advocate. I want to describe what I feel and experience. After all, when I first heard my eldest daughter's heartbeat in that small doctor's office in Eugene, Oregon, I didn't feel like a 'secular humanist.' What I felt was tearful joy and wonder... [Indeed], when I think of the most important, memorable, and meaningful moments of my life – moments that define who I am and give me my deepest sense of self – I find that the title of 'secular humanist' leaves a bit to be desired.”

Being in awe is not a perpetual state of being – as Zuckerman says “I don't constantly walk around with my mouth wide open, my jaw slack, and my eyes brimming with tears of wonder and elation. My heart isn't constantly expanding nor is my spine perpetually tingling. However, I do regularly experience awe. It is a feeling I both cherish and enjoy. And it definitely constitutes a significant part

of my perspective on – or orientation to – life and living.” Being an 'aweist' is to embrace and experience “joyful exuberance without theistic assumptions”.

I never tire of the spectacle of leaves turning brilliant red, orange and yellow in the autumn, and whilst my training in organic chemistry gives me some appreciation of what's going on, I'm still in awe. I can also experience awe when witnessing a tiny spider spinning its web of silk, or a murmuration of starlings wheeling overhead, or a menacing lightning storm, or the faint glow of the Milky Way in the sky at night – or when I think just how remarkable it is that humans can stand upright (one of James Lovelock's [Seven Wonders of the World](#)). Like Zuckerman, I make no attempt to identify the source of such sensations; I am perfectly content to explain these experiences in strictly psychological or neurological terms. Not believing in a supreme being does not render this world any less wondrous, lush, mystifying or amazing. As Einstein wrote: “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.”

So, if we're serious about wanting to promote humanism, perhaps we need to look again at our preoccupation with reason and science, and stress a little more that we also relish mystery and that we *don't* have answers to many of the Big Questions – how did life originate? What is dark energy? Why was there a Big Bang? Maybe then we might find more people identifying with humanists and humanism and appreciating what in essence our movement is all about.



Community Humanism



By Mike Flood

Over the last decade the number of local humanist groups in the UK has declined dramatically. By contrast, organised humanism at the national level seems to be thriving. What's going on?

Ten years ago the British Humanist Association reported almost 90 local groups: 32 partners, 18 affiliates and 38 AHSs (Atheist, Humanist & Secular Student Societies). Today, Humanists UK reports there are just over 40, including eight that have opted to become Humanists UK branches. These figures are for England, Wales & Northern Ireland. Humanist Society Scotland has another six groups. Over the same period, the support base of the BHA/Humanists UK has grown steadily, from the low tens of thousands to “in excess of 100,000 members and supporters”, with Humanist Society Scotland boasting over 16,000 members. We don't have reliable figures for local group membership, but it is likely to be small by comparison.

But don't panic (for the moment). The decline in local groups appears to be primarily due to the demise of the AHS, presumably due to Covid. There's not one recorded on Humanists UK's [map](#) of local groups. That said, there is anecdotal evidence that a number of local groups are struggling. Two years of lockdown hasn't helped. But what else might be causing the apparent malaise? With some 53% of the population now [saying](#) they have 'no religion', you would think 'selling humanism' would be like pushing on an open door.

Many, perhaps most, local groups have limited resources and an ageing membership, but could we be doing more to publicise our meetings or make them more attractive? Difficult to know when people today have so much on their minds, and many of those who do identify as non-religious don't see any point in joining a group or going to a group event – or even using the label 'humanist'!

For its part, Humanists UK has done well to raise the public profile of humanism: humanist ceremonies and celebrity public lectures have proved popular, and the ▷



executive team has been successful in raising money. The charity had a turnover last year in excess of £3 million (much of it provided from legacies) and a staff of 30. On the campaigning front, Humanists UK has played an important part in helping abolish blasphemy laws in England and Wales and providing support for apostates and those seeking asylum. It has also championed marriage equality and the legalisation of same-sex marriages, and the introduction of compulsory Relationships & Sex Education in schools (in England), with state schools effectively banned from teaching Creationism. It has also contributed to the important work of SACRE representatives and school speakers; and hospitals are now required to provide pastoral care for non-religious patients. All good stuff.

Is a change in direction needed?

But is it now time for a change in direction? It would be great to see “legal recognition for humanist marriage across the UK” and “blasphemy laws abolished in Northern Ireland,” but are these aims *really* of more concern than addressing the infodemic of misinformation (which undermines reason & truth, two of the pillars of humanism), or the development of artificial intelligence (which has huge implications for jobs, human rights and social justice), or the fallout from climate change? These issues don’t even merit a mention in HUK’s new [5 Year Plan](#)?

Humanists UK ‘too top-down’

I would also echo others’ comments that Humanists UK has become too top down: it currently operates its local branches from its London base along with its various networks – Defence Humanists, Faith to Faithless, Humanists in Business, Humanists in Government, Humanist Teachers, Humanist Councillors, Humanists in Law, Non-Religious

Pastoral Support – and (‘volunteer led’) Humanist Climate Action. But it provides very little practical help or support to the local groups with which it has partnership agreements. In return for our annual subscription, Humanists UK does, as noted, provide a map on its website with local groups’ contact details, also public liability insurance for group meetings, and technical support and cloud storage facilities, but it has replaced the popular GRAMs (Group Representative Annual Meetings) with ‘Humanism in Action’ meetups, which are run like training webinars and provide little opportunity for informal discussion – and local activists have so much to offer... *

As one of our members commented: “You get the best out of people if they feel they are being valued for who they are and what they can do. Humanists UK doesn’t seem to subscribe to this idea and shows no interest in what is actually going on within the groups.” Indeed, partner groups don’t currently merit a mention at Humanists UK AGMs or in overviews of the year, or in the Annual Report & Accounts. And last year it chose not to renew the Director of Community Services’ contract and took on someone who has been primarily tasked with growing the branch network. What help, if any, he provides to partner groups remains to be seen.

Local groups help build social capital

I think local groups deserve better: we take the humanist message out into the community, and we help build social capital through regular meetups, book groups and other activities (such as participating in Remembrance Day events) and we support members in need. Most groups do not have the capacity or desire to campaign to order (as is required of Humanists UK branches) ▷





Poetry Evening 'Rhyme & Reason'

although members are often actively involved in advocacy work and can and do write to their MPs and speak in local schools and to other groups – and many hand out Humanists UK materials or actively promote Humanists UK events or their social media postings. This is not easy work, and we can't fall back on rituals and traditions like people of faith – and we don't have beautiful historic buildings that tell the bigger story of humanism and heritage... As Alain de Botton argued so eloquently in his book *Religion for Atheists*, some aspects of religion could usefully be applied in secular life, but humanists have yet to work out how to do this. Sunday Assemblies did introduce fun rituals for non-believers, but the initiative doesn't appear to have taken off, at least outside [London](#).

Zoom has been a lifesaver for groups and a real help for people who can't travel or are vulnerable and need to isolate. And we are seeing members of local groups attending each other's events online as well as collaborating through regional initiatives like the South Central England Humanists Network. And then there's *Humanistically Speaking*, which is providing a much-needed platform for airing views (as here), stimulating discussion and debate, and exploring challenging moral issues from a humanist

perspective. These are difficult times and people have a lot to contend with. If local humanists are to contribute by helping people 'live well' in an age of AI, 'truth decay', ecocide, environmental degradation and climate chaos, we will need to make sure that our version of humanism is relevant and useful – and that's useful to *all* sectors of society, including younger generations and people of faith. And we will need to focus more on partnership and collaboration so that we can build a stronger, more resilient base.

If you have thoughts on humanists' campaign priorities, please get in touch – and while you're at it, how about making contact with your nearest local group to say 'hello' ? I'm sure that would be appreciated!

Mike Flood is Chair of Milton Keynes Humanists, and the Future of Humanism Group (which is looking into the issues raised above), but he has written this article in a purely personal capacity after consulting with colleagues.



Asking the Questions



There are some basic questions to be asked before any meaningful discourse can even begin regarding the future of humanism. What do we mean by “humanism”? What makes a humanist? What is humanism for? What does it do for people? Perhaps a good place to start is an examination of how humanist outreach is, or could be, done.

In organisations like Humanists UK and Humanists International, outreach consists of courses, books, leaflets, reports and online materials. These are designed to appeal on an intellectual basis and are very effective in achieving that. The problem is that you need to have heard of humanism to be interested in exploring it in the first place. There is a distinct need for outreach at basic “grass roots” level, but humanist organisations are limited by lack of resources and cash in a way that religious organisations are not. Religions have buildings, cash and dedicated full-time workers. There is clearly a need to find ways to appeal to the general public and spread the idea that humanism is for everyone, not just middle-class intellectuals.

Perhaps the next question to ask is what can humanism offer, compared with organisations such as, for instance, the Salvation Army, Christian Aid, CAFOD, and the Trussell Trust?



Dorset Humanists has tried to do their bit for the community, by buying food for a local foodbank

These are well-known for “on the ground” humanitarian aid and, as far as the general public is concerned, the fact that most of these organisations have sprung from religious origins is of little or no importance.

So what is happening at the “grass roots” level, in local humanism? What do humanist groups do in their local communities that other local people would know about or be interested in? Is the average person in the street going to be interested in going to a lecture once a month? How many of them would be interested in attending a lecture on anything, let alone something of which they have never heard and of which they are not likely to have any understanding? Do some local groups do much more than preach to the converted?

Why doesn’t humanism appeal to the working classes? Because if they have heard of it at all they think it’s an intellectual philosophy and nothing to do with their everyday lives. Perhaps we need to develop a kind of “everyday humanism”.* ▷



Perhaps the next question in our investigation should be how do religions spread? In the past this was often by the sword, subjugation or expedient politics. Humanism clearly cannot use these unethical methods, but we can ask what persuades people about religion. Is it the actual belief, the doctrines, or the other things that religions have to offer – belonging, community, a “spiritual home”, charity, friendship? A good friend of mine, who is a highly intelligent retired Senior Lecturer at a major UK university, has suffered from severe long term mental health problems. He tells me that he has found attending his local church a great help, not because he has any belief in God, but because he likes the people. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here.

I think another pertinent question would be do people understand the difference between atheism and humanism? What sounds best to a person that has just invited you along to their church? “No, I’m afraid I don’t do church. I’m an atheist.” Or “No, I’m afraid I don’t do church. I’m a humanist.” The first just tells them you don’t share their belief in a god, from which they may even infer that you think they are stupid for doing so, but the second tells you that there is something you do believe in, even if they’ve never heard of it before and don’t know what it is. It also gives you an opportunity to explain it if they’re interested, which they usually are, whereas that dreaded word “atheist”, with all its historical connotations of rebellion against God and modern ones of antitheism, immediately throws up a barrier to dialogue.

Now here’s a thought. Most people in the UK now are non-religious, and aren’t most non-religious people really humanist? Whenever I have talked to another non-religious person and explained what humanism is I have seen a light dawn and got a response such as “Well,

that’s me!” However, the fact that someone might realise there’s a name for what they already are does not necessarily mean they will want to immediately start joining organisations like Humanists UK, Humanists International or local humanist groups. They are quite happy to just go about their everyday lives in a humanist way, just as they had been doing anyway, because humanism is not an organisation but an attitude to life. Are we really worried about promoting humanism, or are we more concerned with promoting our organisations? Isn’t it enough that people are finding their own paths to a humanist approach to life, without necessarily feeling the need to attach a label to themselves or become activists?

I realise that I have now posed many questions without necessarily offering answers, but then if we had all the answers to begin with there would be no need for any contemplation of these issues in the first place. I merely suggest that these are questions with which we can begin our enquiries. One question I do have an answer to: How many humanists are there, really? Answer: probably a great many more than anyone knows.



Can humanism learn from the Salvation Army?

Image: Dreamstime.com (free to use)





The Little Fight and the Great Fight

By John Coss

The idea of ‘the little fight and the great fight’ was first proposed over 50 years ago by Dutch humanist Jaap van Praag, when he was President of the IHEU (now Humanists International), and developed by Peter Derkx in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism*. (See ‘the two fights’, which can be down-loaded [here](#) from the 14+ information section.)

The little fight is concerned with religious privilege in society and religious hostility towards the non-religious, as regards individuals and society as a whole, so the focus is on the legitimate interests of humanists themselves. The great fight is concerned with the more universal challenges that must be overcome for the good of humanity and the world.

The difference between the two relates to the kind of activities undertaken, rather than their scale. For example, the great fight is not only about major issues such as climate change, but also relates, for example, to helping a few people cope with difficult circumstances, whether or not they are humanists, e.g. [StreetCare Scotland](#). And, of course, the little fight can relate to major matters, such as whether people can choose to be humanists or humanist organisations can even exist.

Where humanists need to focus mainly or entirely on the little fight, they may be regarded as anti-religious and face hostility from religious groups and even the state. But in more favourable circumstances, humanists will be



Jacob Philip (Jaap) van Praag played a prominent role in establishing the Dutch Humanist League and Humanists International

able to give priority to great fight issues such as human rights for all, world peace and justice, and climate change and other existential issues. This will often involve working in cooperation with others, including religious groups, with humanism widely accepted as a valid life stance.

Which fight is the priority for humanist organisations and individual humanists varies according to circumstances. In a [recent talk](#) to Dorset Humanists on *Global Freedom of Belief and the Work of Humanists International*, Andrew Copson (at 17.30 – 23.45) presented a graphic showing the position of humanist organisations in various countries on a spectrum ranging from *Fighting for Acceptance* through *Campaigning for Secularism* to *Promoting a Life Stance*. The little fight will obviously be the main or ▷



only focus of humanist activities in countries in the first group: it will remain important for humanist organisations in the second group of countries, but great fight activities will become more significant the closer a country is to the third group, where they are the main concern of individual humanists and humanist organisations.

The UK is shown in the *Campaigning for Secularism* category, just short of *Promoting a Life Stance*. This indicates that we still have some way to go before the legitimate interests of humanists are fully acknowledged and respected, as shown by the little fight activities listed opposite. Nevertheless, it seems to me that humanism in Britain is no longer identified mainly by contrast to religion, but is rather seen as a world view that is in many ways shared by the liberal religious, in contrast to non-liberal world views.

This means that there are increasing opportunities to work with religious groups for shared ends, an example of which is the participation of Humanists UK in the [Accord Coalition](#). Of course, many people are not particularly interested in religion or humanism, but humanist organisations are perhaps more welcome partners than religious groups for entirely secular organisations: for example, Humanists International often works with Amnesty International on matters of mutual concern.

There is also scope for informal groups of humanists to work on matters of shared concern that seem to them to be neglected or ignored by organised humanism. An example is Mike Flood's Future of Humanism Group, in relation to emerging global problems such as climate change and the growing use of artificial intelligence, with profound social, moral and ethical implications.

Some current examples of each kind of activity in the UK

Little Fight activities

- the campaign for humanist marriages in England and Wales to be legal
- repeal of Northern Ireland blasphemy laws
- ending compulsory Christian worship in non-religious state schools
- removing the right of some Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords
- campaigning for disestablishment of the Church of England in England
- enabling fair treatment by the Home Office for humanist asylum seekers
- individual humanists supporting the Uganda Humanists Schools Trust

Great Fight activities

- campaigning for assisted dying
- Humanist Climate Action – campaigning for sustainable living
- the ACCORD coalition – working for inclusive education
- Humanists Scotland: StreetCare Scotland – helping people in need on the streets
- campaigning on human rights issues
- charities supported by local groups e.g.:
Dorset Humanists – Mosaic
North East Humanists – Comfrey Project
Stockport Humanists – Stockport Without Abuse
- Individual humanists supporting or involved with, for example, Amnesty International, CRISIS, Friends of the Earth



Want your own copy sent directly to you via email?

Contact Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com type in SUBSCRIBE



Ethical Encounters

Paul Ewans explores moral questions



Most of us dislike being criticised and, as a rule, we should not harm someone without good reason. So when are we justified in criticising someone?

It seems that a utilitarian calculation must be at least part of the answer. Given the particular circumstances, will criticising someone do more good than harm or will it merely cause resentment without achieving anything? It would clearly be wrong to criticise someone with a broken leg for not running fast enough. Conversely, it would usually be right to criticise someone when the consequences of holding back would be bad overall. So we should generally intervene if someone is doing something dangerous, especially if they are presenting a threat to others.

But it is often not at all clear whether people are justified in offering criticism or not. According to the fable, a man and his son, who were going to market with their donkey, were criticised when the man rode the donkey with his son walking alongside, were criticised again after they had changed places, and were criticised for a third time when they both rode – ‘Oh, look at that poor donkey!’ Perhaps when it is not obvious what is best, the person concerned should be left to decide for themselves what to do.

We usually accept that people have a right to criticise by virtue of their status or position.

Parents have a right to criticise their own children, and teachers are expected to be critical of their students when this is appropriate. The purpose of criticism is often to teach something to someone or to improve their behaviour. Other reasonable objectives include encouraging someone to adopt better values or acquire better habits.

Of course, some people take it upon themselves to be critical of strangers. The formidable abortion law reformer Alice Jenkins invariably challenged anyone she saw dropping litter in her neighbourhood and, if the miscreant observed that they didn't want the item they had dropped, Jenkins would say: ‘Well, Ealing doesn't want it either’. But we are often wary of such people, condemning them as ‘busybodies’, just as we often distrust those who offer criticism ‘as a matter of principle’.

Those with particular responsibilities, interests or expertise may well have a duty to criticise, but the rest of us should probably consider the likely consequences before we offer an opinion.



Humanists UK

A profile by Paul Ewans



◁ A Humanists UK campaign standing up for freedom of choice of people living with terminal or incurable suffering

Humanists UK now has 100,000 members and supporters, some 30 staff, over 600 volunteers and an annual budget of around £2.5 million. What does it do with these resources?

The core aim of Humanists UK is to promote humanism as an ethical and fulfilling way of life based on reason and humanity. A humanist life is seen to be one in which scientific method, evidence and reason are used to discover truths about the world, and in which human welfare and happiness are at the centre of ethical decision making. Kindness is seen as being central to such a life, and reason, compassion and tolerance are also especially valued.

In practice, Humanists UK promotes humanism by lobbying government and other official and non-official bodies, by raising awareness of humanism among the general public, by campaigning on specific issues both by itself and together with other organisations, and by providing services to humanists and other non-religious people.

Schools and Education

A major part of Humanists UK's efforts are devoted to religion and education. There has been an increase in the number of faith

schools in recent years, and about one third of state-funded schools are now of a 'religious character'. Humanists UK resists proposals to create new faith schools and tries to bring about improvements in those that do exist – and with some success. The number of schools operating a discriminatory admissions policy appears at last to be declining, there is now a ban on the teaching of creationism in state schools, and evolution has been added to the primary National Curriculum in England. Humanists UK remains concerned to see humanism and other world views included in the subject matter of religious education, and for relationships and sex education to be compulsory in all schools. The law continues to require daily acts of 'collective worship' in maintained schools in England and Wales* but, after years of lobbying by Humanists UK, the government now seems prepared to address the problems posed by unregistered, illegal religious schools.

When dealing with the vexed question of religion and education, Humanists UK strives to engage with faith schools and their parent bodies in a thoughtful and positive way. It trains its members to give talks in schools, supports a humanist interfaith dialogue officer and encourages humanists to sit on the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) which advise local councils.



* Collective worship in other parts of the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland) - see Wikipedia link [here](#)

Towards a Secular Society

Humanists UK advocates a secular society in which the state is neutral on matters of religion and belief, an issue of increasing importance given that a majority of the population are now non-religious. To this end, Humanists UK campaigns for the disestablishment of the Church of England and against the presence of bishops in the House of Lords. However, it is unlikely that these anomalies will end short of comprehensive constitutional reform.

Humanist Marriages

Humanists UK has made significant progress over the status of humanist marriages. Such marriages are now legally recognised in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Jersey and Guernsey. But in England, Wales and the Isle of Man, those wanting a humanist marriage must still have a separate civil ceremony to make their marriage legal. Although it would be a simple matter for government to put this right, they have failed to do so – for reasons which remain obscure. Humanists UK continues to train celebrants to conduct humanist marriages, baby-naming ceremonies and funerals.

Rights and Freedoms

Humanists UK campaigns to support and defend fundamental freedoms, notably freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of speech and expression. To this end it campaigns against the blasphemy laws in Northern Ireland (blasphemy ceased to be an offence in England and Wales in 2008 and Scotland in 2021) and also campaigns against the exclusion of humanists from the BBC's *Thought for the Day*.

In general, Humanists UK aims to promote a

rational, secular approach to public ethical issues across the board, but in practice has focussed on those issues which are particularly important to humanists. These include women's sexual and reproductive rights, campaigning against so-called 'conversion therapy' or 'gay therapy', same-sex marriage, assisted dying, the use of human tissue in scientific research, the state funding of homeopathy, conscientious objection, the shortage of organs available for donation, aspects of animal welfare, and the genital mutilation of children. A high priority for Humanists UK recently has been to defend the Human Rights Act against a threat to abolish it.

Supporting Non-Religious People

Humanists UK aims to ensure that everyone has appropriate access to pastoral support in prisons, hospitals and the armed forces, and maintains the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network to train the required personnel. Both prisons and NHS bodies now formally recognise the need for non-religious pastoral support which is now being provided by more than 250 trained people. Defence Humanists was formed in 2010 to represent humanists in the armed forces, and Humanists UK subsequently achieved representation at the annual Remembrance Ceremony at the Cenotaph in Westminster.

Humanists UK has many achievements to its credit, but much remains to be done and new problems can always arise as the threat to the Human Rights Act shows.





By John Coss

Humanists in profile Harold Blackham

Continuing our series of profiles of Humanists who are not as widely known as they should be, including distinguished men and women not generally known to be Humanists.

“Faith without works is not Christianity, and unbelief without any effort to help shoulder the consequences for mankind is not humanism.”

Harold Blackham (1903-2008) is widely recognised as the architect of the modern humanist movement in Britain. He was the first Executive Director of the BHA (now Humanists UK), from 1963 until he retired in 1968. He was President 1974-77. And he was the co-founder, with Dutch philosopher Jaap van Praag, of the IHEU (now Humanists International) in 1952, and its secretary until 1967.

Blackham first became involved in organised humanism in 1933 as assistant to Stanton Coit at the West London Ethical Society/Ethical Church. In 1934 he became secretary of the British Union of Ethical Societies, the forerunner of Humanists UK.

After his retirement, he continued writing, lecturing, and officiating at humanist funerals into his nineties. Education, especially moral education, was one of his lifelong interests and in 1975 he co-founded the Journal of Moral Education, which is still published. This led to the formation of the Social Morality Council and his work with Dr James Hemming, a fellow humanist and educationist.

Blackham inspired and contributed to pioneering practical work in sheltered housing, adoption and non-directive counselling (he co-founded the British Association of Counselling), even as he continued to develop the

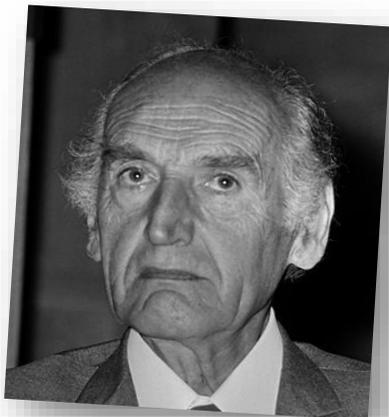


Image from [Wikipedia](#)

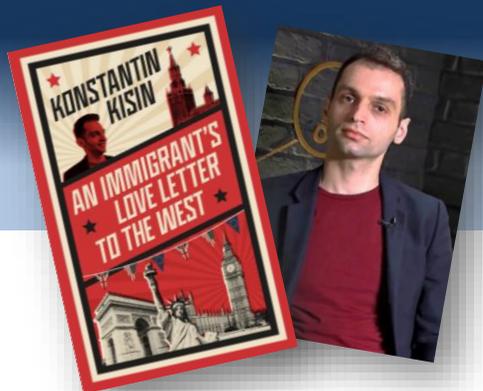
“Humanism is about the world, not about humanism... Humanism is an idealisation of the world, a striving for the attainment of what is fully possible, both on the scale of civilisation itself and in the venture and relations of personal life.”

philosophy of humanism. He was the author of a number of books, including *Humanism*, *Objections to Humanism* and *Six Existential Philosophers*.

Blackham described his personal philosophy as Epicurean, with ‘a resourceful, self-dependent, realistic, constructive attitude to life’, though others have seen him as more of a Stoic. His long and productive life, committed to a variety of progressive causes, is a monument to the humanism he espoused.

For more on Blackham, see links below.





Book Review by Antony Lewis



Konstantin Kisin, author of *An Immigrant's Love Letter to the West* (2022), is a comedian and co-host of the YouTube channel *Triggernometry*. He grew up in the USSR, the son of Russian and Ukrainian Jewish parents, and he came to the UK as a refugee at age 13. This is his first book and it's as funny and provocative as you might expect. He delivers a powerful defence of Enlightenment humanist values such as liberal democracy and individual freedom. The book is a brutally honest and unswerving broadside against most things 'woke' and it will be an uncomfortable read for many adherents of the new dogma of self-loathing that currently grips our institutions.

The first section of the book is a critical look at socialism, based on his family's experiences in Soviet Russia. It starts with the title 'The West is Best' just in case you were in any doubt about where his sympathies lie. The second section explores the various woke 'non-negotiable red-lines' in the areas of racism, free speech, comedy, immigration, and capitalism. He observes that much of this discourse is in fact one gigantic exercise in 'gaslighting all of us to believe that we are a swirling mass of slavery, subjugation, racism, militarism and genocide'. The last section ends with a humorous look at what a 10-point manifesto to destroy the West would look like

– for example, 'get your political opinions from celebrities' and 'make sure everyone believes that the truth is a lie'.

By far the most powerful parts of the book are when he is talking about his direct experience of living under communism. His grandparents survived the gulags and when released they lived with their former guards as neighbours. Many gulag guards committed suicide after Khrushchev's famous speech denouncing Stalin in 1953. The cognitive dissonance was too much to bear for many. Kisin reminds us that in the USSR you could be 'factually correct but politically incorrect' – the origin of our concept of political correctness.

Kisin asserts that Marxism, communism, socialism and its modern variants are a set of bankrupt ideologies that sound good on paper but which never deliver the promised Utopia. The USSR considered itself 'a trailblazer and prided itself on pursuing equity at all costs'. But 'socialism's answer to poverty is the equivalent of helping wheelchair users by cutting everyone else's legs off'. At least 20 million people died in the gulags, and some 10 million in the Holodomor famine in Ukraine, to create this 'glorious socialist paradise'.

Kisin warns darkly that the 'woke' equivalent of the USSR commissars are already deeply embedded in our institutions and organisations as diversity champions and equality tsars. Although created with the best of intentions he fears these roles will expand beyond their initial remit to challenge us all 'to check our thinking'. We have been warned.



Poet's Corner

By Alex Williams



Echo Chambers

I'm in an echo chamber of deniers
Regurgitating reasonable views
Expostulating logical positions
Brandishing their weaponised IQs
Demolishing old theocratic highways
Developing new secular avenues
Investigating alleyways and by-ways
In search of ethical, progressive clues.
Like ants we work on solidly together
To build a nest to withstand any weather.

Buzzing blithely through their daily tasks
Above our heads the bees swarm to their hive
Bound together by a higher calling
The secret truth through which they grow and thrive.
It's such a comfort knowing you belong
Feeling part of something great and good
Something that out-scales you, out-survives you
Helps you find your way out through the wood
A sacred space where it can be assumed
That everyone there is just like you are: doomed.

Secular Verses (2021) by Alex Williams is a collection
of original poems inspired by secularism, atheism,
and humanism. Available [here](#)
More info: www.thedialup.blogspot.com



Humanistically Speaking Coverage

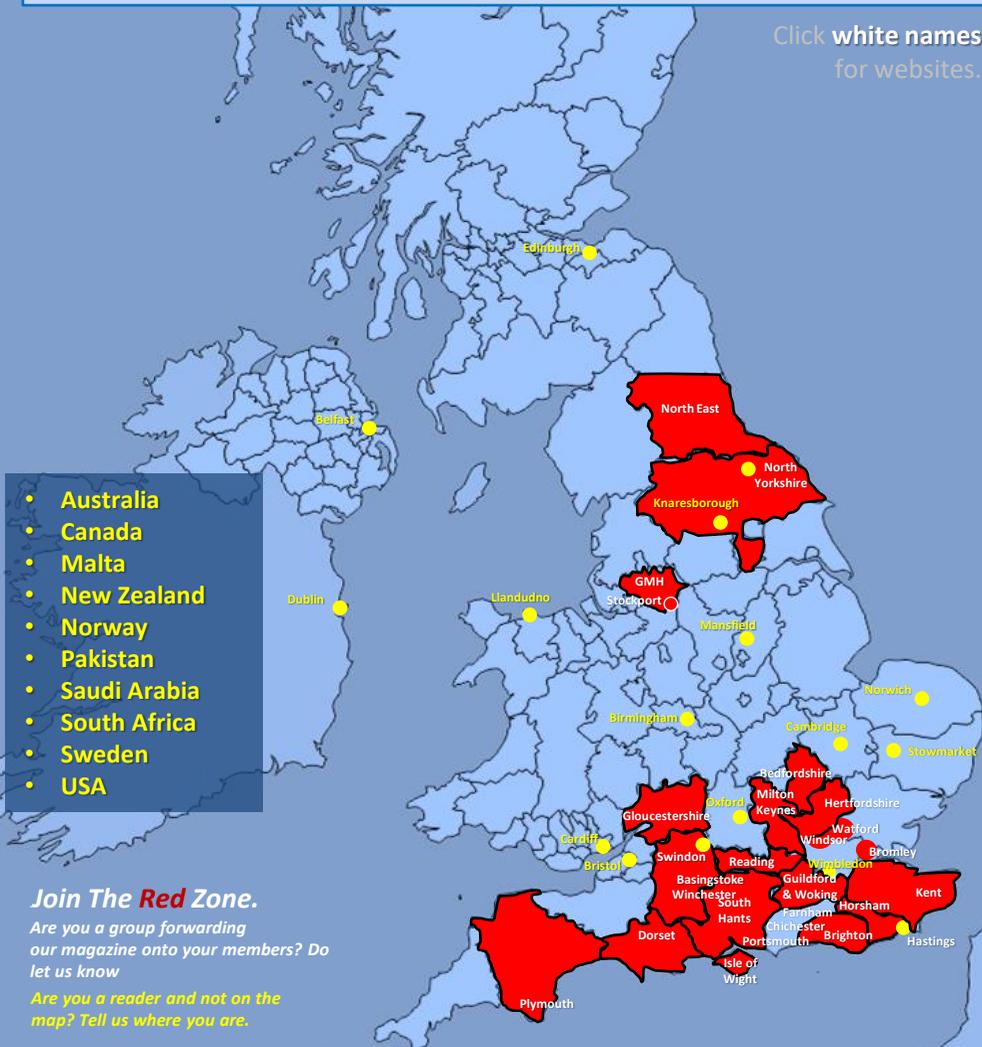
A guide to those groups sharing our magazine

Our readership spreads wider than our map. Please see our [WEBSITE](#) for full details.

Why not see if your group wishes to join us? simply email us at

Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com type in SUBSCRIBE in the subject box.

Click **white names**
for websites.



- Australia
- Canada
- Malta
- New Zealand
- Norway
- Pakistan
- Saudi Arabia
- South Africa
- Sweden
- USA

Join The Red Zone.

Are you a group forwarding our magazine onto your members? Do let us know

Are you a reader and not on the map? Tell us where you are.



Do you live in a town where you think a group could flourish?
Contact us and we will see what can happen with the Network's help.

Humanistically Speaking

A free magazine created for and by Humanists

Humanism is an ethical non-religious worldview. It's about tolerance, kindness, knowledge, and friendship. Although Humanistically Speaking is for Humanists, everyone is welcome to read and contribute, regardless of faith or belief.



Click the 'Happy Human' symbol above to learn more about Humanist values

***Humanistically Speaking* is brought to you by a volunteer team of editors**



David B



David W



Aaron



Maggie



Paul



John



Alex



Lynda



Anthony



Penny

In addition, we have our vital back-office support team of:
Sean (Webmaster) Phil (YouTube video editor), Tony (Administrator),
Barbara (Treasurer), Alan (Business advisor) as well as several staff yet to be found.