

A Place for Humanism

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IN the first quarter of the 21st Century, we humans find ourselves at the confluence of a great many dilemmas, largely brought about by the acceleration of our evolutionary success. Over the past four centuries, our societies have brought forward their traditional beliefs, largely unchanged, from earlier millennia.

Science was added and technology has rapidly developed so that for most of us, our way of life has moved from rural and pastoral to urban and sophisticated; our communication systems and travel technology have led to a merging of cultures and greater competition for resources and material status; and now we have come to realise that our activities are damaging the biosphere of earth and we need to do something about it.

In grappling with the myriad of influences and the explosion of both information and mis-information, often difficult to distinguish, it is important to establish a frame of reference for intellectual and political discourse that is secure and impartial and accessible to all.

In past millennia, advanced civilisations began the questioning of their existence and of the world around them in formal ways. Using the tools and information and observations available to them, they formulated their various philosophies to answer the questions. That was the best they could do and it is not unreasonable to assert that it was satisfactory at the time – at least it was a start and it should have been the first draft of their books of knowledge. However, in a time when the recording of ideas was by means of marks on cave walls and fragile manuscripts, great value and eminence was accorded to the written word and so the valuable first drafts gradually became ‘dogma’, ideas set in stone and papyrus for future generations and defended and propagated by political means.

Today, regrettably, we still find intellectuals having arguments with ideas that were first imagined thousands of years ago – ideas that were based on poor observations and primitive concepts, heavily influenced by the superstitions of the time. If these ancient concepts had been handed down through an oral tradition only, they would be called ‘folklore’ and given no particular intellectual weight. However, as they appear in venerable texts, carefully protected, they seemingly assume a greater importance, somehow worthy of consideration in contemporary debate.

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We need to shine a light on this and realise that these ancient writings are well out of date and superseded by modern legal and scientific systems. The most important challenge is to face up to the reality that what might have been satisfactory more than a thousand years ago is of little relevance today and ought to be heavily modified in light of current knowledge or discarded altogether.

Still, the debates continue and with the willing cooperation of the faithless, often in the public gaze, who are drawn in to attempt to debunk faith-based dogma when they can only lose their arguments in the minds of the faithful. Subjection of faith-dogma to rational analysis is impossible to the faithful as its acceptance is rejection of their faith as the structure on which they have built their value system. Further, it is

damaging to the authority of the argument of the challenger as they are forced to refer to dogma, discuss dogma and in a strange way, unwittingly reinforce dogma in the minds of many of their audience.

Faith is a curious phenomenon. Consider a clergyman, born into an Anglican family in London, who is convinced that his is the true faith and all others are at fault. Now imagine that in a parallel situation, he was born into an Islamic family in Tehran and grew up to be an Imam, believing that Islam is the true faith and all others are misguided. It would appear that the seat of faith is ‘tradition’ and the influence that societies and parents and educators bring to bear on young people, subsequently reinforced by practice. Therefore, faith is an accident of birth and is without an absolute foundation. Faith is an associative property of human society, a common bond within a group or nation that is fiercely defended by its observers, even against the most compelling rational argument.

Faith groups put enormous effort into the education/indoctrination of young children because they know that the child, growing into an adult, will place the highest value on the earliest information they received. We seem naturally to give the greatest weighting to the ideas we hear first – it is a form of attachment, it becomes our own idea, we possess it, we want it to be true and we will defend it. Faith groups know this well and set up the schooling structures that allow them to have access to our children’s developing brains – the propagation of the faith.

An emerging global society, in seeking out a new frame of reference for assisting human living must make a fresh start; it must define its values on what it is, rather than what it is not. It should make no reference to divisive faith-based ideas or →

terminology; it should delegate that to the realm of myth and legend and folklore and superstition. Rather, it should plough a new furrow of the mind, centred on rational concepts and free-thinking.

For these reasons, I think the term 'Atheist' is outdated, simply because it defines itself in relation to theism. I believe we should go away from theism and leave it well behind us in our thinking. It is pointless having debates about the irrationality of faith because the faithful opponents to the debate cannot allow rationality to be considered. There is no persuasion, only frustration and the potential building of an opposition to rationality from those at the edges of faithfulness.

The alternative course is to define ourselves in a positive way – to say who we are and how we think and to set it out in a way that is reasonable and easy to understand. We can then have rational discussions with others, in a non-threatening way, in which we place our menu of ideas on the table and point out their attractiveness. Gradually, those traditionally faith-based but not so faithful may come to understand the merits of rational argument and begin a slow but steady transformation of society.

Humanism is a means by which this can be done. It defines itself by what it is, rather than what it is not. This is a much more expansive definition and announces a system of thinking pertinent to humans and for the benefit of humans and indirectly therefore for the benefit of everything that touches humans such as the entire Earth's biosphere. Humanism has a foundational statement in the Amsterdam Declaration and the principles contained therein are an appropriate reference frame for the continued development of a global society.

The historical association of theism with morality led to the misunderstanding that if you reject theism, you do the same with morality. This caused a significant problem for those who first described themselves as A-theist as the majority faithful were quick to rush to the conclusion that A-theist is also A-moral. It is important that this contortion of the facts be avoided in

gradually establishing a new order of secular and Humanist morality based around Humanist principles.

Humanists are becoming more visible as individuals look with a more critical eye at the motives and behavior of traditional faith-based organisations and gradually turn to rational analysis as a way of calibrating their values. Humanist organisations can assist in this by increasing their visibility to the public and taking public opportunities to highlight their principles in a non-threatening way.

It is important that in dealing with Humanist principles in public discourse, that no relation is made with faith-based ideas but rather that Humanism stands on its own merit and without comparative association with other versions of morality. In Ireland, the involvement of Humanists in important life events such as child-naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals brings the public up-close with alternative ways of handling human situations that were previously the preserve of the organised faith groups.

This type of activity needs to be widened into other spheres of public discourse to assist the public, in a friendly and non-threatening way, to understand that morality is not fixed for all time, that it has more than just one version, that it is not determined by an autocratic minority and that moral principles should be held up to scrutiny and changed when circumstances change and new information becomes available.

In the next decade or two, society will be faced with new situations that will require moral adjudication; situations that will have a real impact on the quality of human lives and their environment. The faithful will be out with their ancient dusty volumes of inertia to say "no" and "stop" and "not in my name" and if they hold sway, many others will be deprived of the best that human society can offer by way of enhancing the life experience.

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Humanist principles must be to the fore in the debates that are framed around new moral issues so that the outcomes that will be enacted into law will be those that favour the quality of life of members of society over the moralistic prejudices of the dogmatists.

Recent Irish history gives cause for confidence that when we approach a well-educated population in a pluralist society with a progressive moral question, there is the expectation that a rational debate can occur and that people can be self-guided to move towards the principles of Humanism despite fierce opposition from the traditionalists. □

