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Superstition and Witchcraft
Member Organisations



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INVITATION FOR ARTICLES

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Commemorating Francisco Ferrer

We know that IHEU has member organisations in several parts of the world but does that mean that they are all similar? Of course not. In the May 2009 issue, we read how different various Humanist ceremonies can be, and yet how similar. It is exactly so with the work of our members. We all agree with the Amsterdam Declaration and the minimum statement. All are in favour of separation of religion and state, but for some this is their main work, while others have different priorities. That is why we asked some of them to write about their activities. Though there are only a few MO's who're covered in this issue, yet we get a fair idea about their diverse activities. We thought this was a good way to learn more about and from other groups.

It is not always easy for Humanists to remain optimistic: while all sorts of "natural" violence like earthquakes, floods, heavy rains, are responsible for destroying villages and killing people, at the same time, terrorists commit suicide attacks and kill a lot of human beings, mostly innocent, and even small children. As the Geneva Convention comes under increasing attack, its provisions ignored, more wars are being waged. All groups are convinced that they have the right to use violence since they feel besieged by others. We know the consequences when everybody asserts his own might. It is one of the most difficult things to break that circle of violence. Nevertheless we must not give up and keep trying.

Humanism and peace are natural allies. Peace will also be the theme of our next congress in Oslo 2011 (more in the next issue). We are not naive, we know that a mere conference cannot result in peace across the world. But Humanists can give a strong signal that we do have a responsibility and that we won't run away from it. Conflict management could be a first step. Alas, some wars have escalated so much that a solution is very far away.

Francisco Ferrer, born not far from Barcelona in Spain in 1859, was executed 100 years ago. He was in favour of a republic, not a kingdom, and he defended the workers, the poor. He fought against the clergy that oppressed the people. He knew that for an open society, it was important for the people to be educated. Ferrer founded the Modern School. In Spain, at that time, schools were mostly run by the clergy, and they were against any scientific theory or cultural tendency which went against the rules and ideas of the church.

Ferrer installed a method that the clerics considered damned. His education was based on natural sciences

and rationalism. No religious dogma, but science. No competition, no marks, no special prizes for the "best", no humiliation. As a consequence of his anarcho-political ideas, he pleaded for education and instruction guided by the "principle of solidarity and equality." In Catholic schools at that time, pupils were punished and had to kneel for hours, and were beaten and humiliated. In the Escuela Moderna, on the other hand, the teachers had to take into account the spontaneous desire of students to acquire knowledge and permit them to learn at their own pace. The purpose of the school was not to make obedient citizens but to create human beings capable of forming their own rational convictions on every subject.

Ferrer had to go in exile to Paris, from where he returned to Spain. There was an attempt to kill the king. The bomb was thrown by a colleague of Ferrer. This was the excuse to shut down the school. At the same time it was a resurrection of the Catalans against Madrid. Churches and monasteries were set on fire and the army fraternized with the inhabitants. But it didn't last long. The bishops of Catalan protested "against the events and against those whom they declare responsible: the partisans of the schools without god, of the sectarian press and of the Anarchist groups which should be abolished". So Ferrer was captured and sentenced to death. Before the execution they transferred him to the chapel. But he did not give in: "He doesn't want to have anything in common with the black frocks". They denied him permission to sit in the hope that he would kneel. He did not.

In the morning of October 13 1909, he was executed. It was the clerical Spain that killed Ferrer. Murdered for building schools and not accepting those dogmas which kept people obedient.

In addition to the Centre d'Action Laïque in Belgium the Libre Pensée in France also commemorated the centenary of this assassination. Ferrer was already, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a human being who wanted individuals to be instructed in such a way that they could think for themselves. He was a great man.

Sonja Eggerickx



Rights of The Child

The February 2010 issue of the *IHN* will carry a special feature on Rights of The Child. Readers are invited to send in their contributions on this topic to editor@iheu.org.

Sad Demise Sir Ludovic Kennedy

IHEU condoles the death of broadcaster, author, campaigner, Humanist Sir Ludovic Kennedy. A detailed obituary will follow in the February 2010 issue.

What Nonsense!

Sangeeta Mall*

In the film 'Superstition Kills', which premiered at the World Conference on Untouchability at London in June 2009, there were gory scenes of blood-spattered walls when a woman was hacked to death for being deemed a witch. None of her neighbours intervened while the horrible act was being carried out, and the killers still roam the village, free and unchecked. This might be an extreme example of the lengths to which human beings are prepared to go in seeking explanations in the supernatural, but superstition is as much about the cynical exploitation of human weakness for profit as it is about blind belief. It is the outward expression of a human being's need to cede control of her life to someone or something else.

Who is superstitious? The poor? The illiterate? Villagers? Actually, people from every level of society, rich and poor, from every part of the world seem willing to surrender belief in their own autonomy in favour of belief in some non-existent power.

Rocket scientists choose an 'auspicious' time to launch rockets;

doctors say a prayer before starting a complicated procedure on a patient; marriages, deaths and births are attended by a number of irrational rituals that are only there to turn a simple fact of biology into an elaborate process of belief in the eternal; heads of state derive their power not from some material authority but from a 'higher' being, and attribute a change in their fortunes to factors beyond their understanding.

Superstition is the answer human beings devise for difficult questions. The answers may be wrong, in fact, they almost always are, but there are no marks for this test so it's all right. There is nobody to challenge the wisdom behind wearing a charm around one's neck or believing a woman to be a witch. And the clinching argument for irrationality is that there's no proof that it doesn't work. It doesn't seem to matter to believers that there's no proof that it does, that there is no merit whatsoever in wearing a charm, or getting up from the left side of the bed, or hanging the sign of the evil eye outside your front door. As long as there is enough reinforcement in society that some 'cosmic force' is controlling one's life, the foundation of superstition will continue to remain strong. And there are reinforcements aplenty.

Virtually every newspaper feels obliged to carry a daily horoscope. Every social networking and leisure website has an astrology link. Every popular magazine and newspaper contains advertisements for astrologers, soothsayers and the like.

One of the most popular pieces of fiction internationally is a book called Linda Goodman's Sun Signs – masquerading as a work of non-fiction.

All superstition is dangerous. It might be argued that there isn't any real danger in hanging the sign of the evil

eye outside one's front door. No, there's certainly nothing life-threatening about that. The danger lies in the willingness to countenance the irrational in our daily life. Not many of us would indulge in wanton murder to ward off an evil influence. But if a cat is deemed to be inauspicious, what are the chances that we would be perfectly happy to have the neighbourhood stray killed?

How many men believe in the perfectly ghastly precept that having sex with a virgin enhances virility? The flesh trade is replete with minors who are brought into its fold precisely to satisfy that need. The Catholic Church frowned upon masturbation and linked it to mental illness, leading to untold misery amongst believers. The violence wrought by Islamists seduced by Quranic myths about the appropriate punishment for non-believers and rewards for true believers now threatens almost the entire world.

The Western world has to some extent been able to counter superstitious beliefs. One of the key factors in this progress was education. Schools have, by and large, taught secular values to children. Through systematic education in rational thinking, religious instruction has been forced to take a back seat. But this good is now being undermined by rabid propaganda by the Christian Church and Islamic clerics, both insisting on bringing their religions back centre-stage in education. And

governments seem to be naively falling into the trap of encouraging religion in the name of promoting multiculturalism.

However, it is the Third World which needs almost a surgical intervention to combat superstition. Superstitious beliefs and practices are rampant in this part of the globe. In fact, Western evangelists and faith healers find far easier pickings in the developing world than in their own countries, where the general public has consistently moved away from mumbo-jumbo. In both Asia and Africa, lack of development and universal education have led to a situation where even the law-enforcement machinery tends to look the other way if a crime is committed in the name of superstition. In India, superstars and politicians shamelessly frequent temples where animist rituals like sacrifices are practised, when they should be in the forefront of the movement to ban these places. The governance machinery of an entire state has been roped in to propagate the benefits of cow urine, an essential ingredient of most Indian (ayurveda) medicine.

In Africa, the terrible crime of infanticide is committed to ward off evil spirits. Potions and medicines containing human and animal body parts are available in plenty, and the fear of provoking evil spirits prevents peace-



Sangeeta Mall

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loving people from protest against these practices.

The battle to fight superstition is an arduous and, at times, losing one. One would think that with increasing wealth and education, superstitious beliefs would be on the wane. One would be wrong. As incomes are increasing, people have access to larger funds to propitiate gods and spirits. The proliferation of private channels on television has given rise to an irresponsible media code where everything is up for grabs. Gods and godmen, and regressive practices are glorified in the name of entertainment. In the name of rescuing culture from the clutches of the West, home-grown practices of all hues are revered.

What is the way forward in such a situation? Firstly,

access to education is the biggest weapon for countering superstition. Rational thought can be inculcated only when children are taught critical thinking and learn to connect cause and effect – in science classes and by explaining the many observations and experiments that scientists have conducted over the years to enable us to understand the physical world. Secondly, secular and Humanist organisations must engage actively with the state and establishment machinery to outlaw overtly superstitious practices such as animal and human sacrifices, and treat the latter on par with any other kind of murder. These two steps are by no means enough to inculcate the spirit of enquiry in human beings, but they can at least be a start to true enlightenment.

Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? Humanism's Challenge to Peddlers of Superstition

Babu Gogineni*

Starting May this year, IHEU's International Director Babu Gogineni has been involved in a series of well publicised television challenges and debates with astrologers, numerologists, 'astro-psychologists' and Government legal advisers. These encounters gave him and his colleagues an opportunity to debate ideas and public policy, expose pseudo-science and superstition, and helped raise awareness for the Humanist and Rationalist point of view. – Ed.

Astrology's False Notions

The notions of astrology – be it Hindu astrology or that being practised in the west – are false as they have no basis in reality. Astrology has so far not been able to predict anything correctly: no astrologer in the world could predict clearly and accurately the September 2001 terror attacks on the US, or the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai. None warned us in advance of great natural disasters like the tsunami which devastated vast areas of our planet and killed several hundreds of thousands of people. Nor did they warn us about human-made disasters like the partition of India, which led to half a million deaths, or the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, John F Kennedy etc.

Despite this singular lack of success and complete lack of credibility, astrologers still claim that astrology is a science and sadly, in India, many public personalities, including politicians, patronise them. Such is the power of the ignorance their trade is based on, that these purveyors of superstitions have influenced even universities to introduce astrology as a subject, and have thus obtained institutional backing to their fraud.

Since astrology seems to have a particularly potent effect on both politicians and political parties, IHEU deemed it topical to challenge these beliefs during the biggest show in India, the General Elections.

Here I'll give a small background to astrology's vice-like grip over public affairs in India. A leading Dravidian political party from South India, the AIADMK, made

examining horoscopes of prospective candidates an integral part of the process to select candidates. Almost all candidates for the elections chose auspicious times prescribed by astrologers for filing of nominations. And the leader of this political party even changed her name as per advice given to her by astrologers!

Every political party except the *Lok Satta*, headed by a Humanist, and the Communist Parties, has court astrologers. Everyone today depends on astrology, numerology and *vaastu* to win elections. The politicians appeal more to the Gods and to the planets, than to the people!

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

To prove that astrology is a giant hoax, the Indian members of the IHEU, Manava Vikasa Vedika (Human Development Forum), Indian Radical Humanist Association, Hyderabad, Rationalist Forum and their kindred organisations, the science popularisation group, Jana Vignana Vedika, and the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, under the auspices of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, extended a challenge to astrologers and other purveyors of superstition to use their divine powers or the tools of astrology to accurately predict the election results. Here was a chance for astrologers to prove their oft repeated claim that astrology is a science, and they could also pick up a cash reward of Rupees ten million or USD 200,000 by predicting accurately the results of the elections within the limits of experimental error. The challenge was titled *Kaun Banega Karodpati*, after the very popular Indian version of UK's TV show *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?*

I launched the challenge in the offices of Jana



Babu Gogineni

*Babu Gogineni is International Director of IHEU



Babu Gogineni launching the Challenge

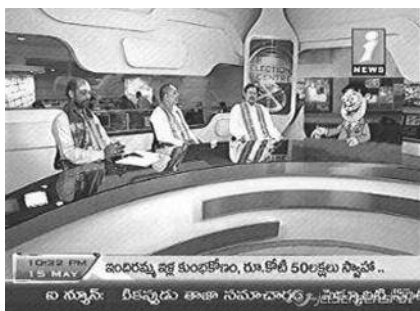
Vignana Vedika at a media conference attended by leaders of our member groups. There were 27 questions posed to the astrologers relating to the results of the election. The astrologers were asked to predict the names of the next Prime Minister of India, the next chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, the exact names of political parties which would form the Central government in New Delhi, and the exact number of seats some specified political parties would get in Parliament. Apart from the astrologer community in general, the questions were specially directed towards the Astrology Department of the Telugu University. Answers had to be given in a sealed cover to be delivered to us before the vote counting began, along with a Rs.10 000 security deposit to avoid frivolous entries. The sealed covers were to be opened in front of the media after the elections.

To win, at least 22 of the 27 questions had to be answered correctly, and the winner with the highest score crossing 22 correct answers would be able to take home ten million rupees and of course, their initial deposit. The office of Jana Vignana Vedika in Chintalbasti was named as the place to deliver the answers.

The aim of the challenge was to once again invite all in society to examine the truth claims of astrology, and to evaluate for themselves if in a modern society there is a place for those who deceive others on the basis of outdated notions about the universe.

Our challenge received the widest publicity ever hoped for by us: TV 9 with the highest TRP ratings carried this news as the breaking news, giving unedited coverage for more than 5 minutes to the challenge at midday; immediately following it up by top news coverage in the one-o'clock afternoon news, placing it ahead of even national political events! The news was

repeated prominently till late night that day, while other channels too picked up the story in a big way, starting with breaking news and going on to give wide coverage. Local TV (C Channel) immediately came



I News Channel lo chetta Jyothishyam cheppina – Srinivasa Murthy, Srinivasa Sarma, Srinivas Gargeya

forward to partner in the challenge and offered its own offices state-wide as places where astrologers could deposit their responses. Local TV shot a special promo with me giving out the challenge and this was broadcast throughout the day several times. Another channel, Studio N, invited me and Jana Vignana Vedika's T.V. Rao to issue the same challenge from their studios as well. Zee News sought out astrologers who were willing to take up the challenge, while TV 9 spoke to two prominent representatives of the astrologer community.

Interestingly, well-known astrologer Srinivasa Gargeya refused to answer the questions of rationalists and claimed that his answering these questions would be an insult to astrology! Another astrologer, Srinivasa Sarma, added the insight that astrology was not enough to predict the future, they would have to examine the *Yogas* (destinies) of the individuals concerned – because without *Maha Yoga* no one could hold the reins of power.

The INews program also called up senior astrologer Madura Krishnamurthy who, looking impressive both due to age and due to his half naked body as he seemed to be doing a penance, predicted after a complex but laughable analysis of planets, their positions and their movement, that there would be no single party rule either at the state level or at the central level. All three seemed to agree that there were no prospects of a stable rule for the next three years. We learnt in this program that factors that influence winning or losing an election were also the time when a political party was established, the time when election nominations were filed, and what the position of the stars on that particular day was.

Meanwhile, in Studio N, 'astro-journalists' 'Prof.' Murthy and Krishna Mohan challenged T.V. Rao and me on live TV, claiming that they were not after the prize money, that they would accept just one rupee as winning prize, and that if their predictions proved correct they would ask rationalists to stop troubling them and retire from public life. They warned that from now on 'they would chase Babu Gogineni wherever he was to expose the claims of rationalists that astrology was false'. They offered to abandon astrology if their predictions proved false.

In fact all their predictions were wrong, both at the Central and State election levels.

"It is foolish to ask us stupid questions. Did you understand my response, sir?" 'Senior Astrologist' Krishna Mohan asks Babu Gogineni. This same person later apologised and admitted failure on TV, once election results were announced.



The Results

Some days after the election results, once their mobile phones were switched on, Studio N tracked these great astrologers again and they apologised to me for what they had said on TV. Studio N, which claims a viewership of half-million people, produced a special program 'Their Astrology is a Joke'. When asked if they would honour their word to abandon astrology, one of

them said calmly that they would stop public predictions but that they would practice astrology privately. When asked if this was not contrary to what they themselves offered, the response we got was “Doctors do not stop their practice just because one operation failed”.

The Final Answer

All the lies and deceptions of the astrologers, a sample of which are recorded above, were exposed at a second press conference organised by us when the sealed covers were opened.

How many covers did we receive from the MGK Foundation or P.V. Reddy or the others who swear by their ‘science’?

ZERO.

Not even one entry was received either at JVV office or at local TV offices. The boastful heroes on TV9 never sent in any entries for the contest! The court astrologers for the political parties were nowhere to be seen!

Crawling out of the Woodwork

The next chance for the astrologers to come back on television was when in June and July the powerful and much feared Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, since deceased Rajasekhar Reddy, declared that the state Government was organising prayers for rain. The full force of the state machinery was deployed to offer prayers to the Hindu god of rain *Varuna*, and even mosques and churches were asked to organise similar prayers. At each of the hundreds of temples where the prayers were organised, thousands of pots of milk were poured into sacrificial fires to appease the rain god to show mercy on a state which was ruled by a Christian Chief Minister who promised ‘God’s Rule’ in the state. Not to be outdone was the Department of Culture, which organised a special musical event to invoke the rain god – after all, did the famous Tansen (court musician of Mughal emperor Akbar) not bring rains in medieval India through his mellifluous music? Why couldn’t that experiment be replicated in modern times?

So when NTV organised its popular show *Second Opinion* on the subject of the magical powers of music, I challenged the two famous musicians present in the show to demonstrate their powers by making it rain in the studio. The musicians accepted, but it was a full 30 days before the delayed monsoon showed any real mercy on the state. In other interviews, TV Rao, Ramesh and I asked government officials who were implementing the government orders whether they were appointed to serve as priests or as administrators.

The Eclipse of Reason

The next and greatest challenge to the scientific point of view was when three eclipses occurred on the Indian sub-continent within a span of 30 days. A total solar eclipse sandwiched between two lunar eclipses is a most negative thing. This celestial event will bring us a tsunami, said one astrologer. A world war, screamed another. ‘The First World War was started because of three eclipses in a row within 30 days, and the same was what caused the Second World War’, declared a representative of *The Art of Living*, the hugely popular organisation which counts amongst its clients some of the top corporates in India, and whose leader, Sri Sri

Ravishankar, has been spotted in Oslo and in Stockholm, lobbying for a Nobel Peace Prize. They even published a book about the eclipse and the disasters that it will bring.

I challenged this claim on the Hindi news channel, Zee News. ‘The Second World War was a result of the First World War, not because of an eclipse. And the First World War started in 1914, whereas the eclipse was in 1919. How can they be linked? And the last time there was a tsunami there were no eclipses. Shouldn’t we file a police complaint against these fraudsters for spreading rumours and deliberately frightening people?’ This same argument was repeated in umpteen channels which were discussing the eclipses. Another myth accompanying the eclipses was: ‘There are special rays that are emitted that science does not know of, which affect pregnant women. They should remain indoors and not harm their foetuses’.

‘You are mistaken in your analysis, Mr. Gogineni. You have to consider that the human body is made of 75% water and water is affected by gravitational pull. Look at the tides in the sea’ said Srinivasa Gargeya who had previously called Rationalists ‘poisonous worms’. Such baseless claims were easily refuted by us.

The debates rationalists participate in are meant more to educate the viewers rather than merely defeat the silly astrologer. The top channels all claim viewership of one million each and it is these viewers that rationalists are educating by participating in TV debates.

In Hyderabad, Jana Vignana Vedika, Manava Vikasa Vedika and Centre for Inquiry Hyderabad organised an eclipse breakfast party on Total Solar Eclipse day on 22 July, as did the Dalits in the 20 Dalit villages where IHEU is supporting Humanist Centres for Social Change. These events received great media publicity because by cooking and eating during the morning eclipse Humanists were breaking and challenging the traditional taboos – just like Gora and Saraswati Gora did 50 years ago. TV Channels came with their OB vans and broadcast the breakfast events and live interviews with Dr. Innaiah, Mr. Sukhadev and others. I was in North India in the holy town of Ujjain, where I was interviewed by half a dozen TV channels.

‘You have to come to the studio right away, sir. An earthquake has been reported in Indonesia and a tsunami is feared. The astrologers are claiming they are right and that science could not predict this’. That morning the TV channel pitted Dr. Prasad, a geologist from the National Geographical Research Institute, and me against Gargeya and Srinivas, two astrologers, in a live TV discussion that lasted nearly 2 hours. ‘But are there not nearly a million earthquakes every year, most of them rather small ones’, I asked. ‘And Indonesia had no eclipse so why did the earthquake happen there? There are some 17 earthquakes of magnitude 7.5 and above every year. So anyone could predict an earthquake and see that happen somewhere on the earth within 90 days. What is so special about astrology?’ This was not what they expected and with authority, Dr. Prasad explained the difference between prediction in science and predictions of the kind the astrologers were claiming.

One Prediction

One prediction that Rationalists and Humanists can safely make is that these debates will continue. India is being bled and weakened by the purveyors of superstition and it is the duty of all Humanists to confront ignorance and to defeat those making a business out of banking on people's gullibility. And with the new energy and the new tactics that Humanists have

demonstrated, it is obvious that in a short while they will be able to build a formidable opposition to the claims being made in the name of astrology. The last few months have seen many victories for the scientific point of view, but we have to prepare already for the next spectacular celestial event – the annular solar eclipse that will cross South India on 15 January 2010.

The Many Faces of Helen Ukpabio – the renegade evangelist, child witch hunter and ruthless businesswoman

Dr Olusegun Fakoya*

The world-wide reaction and publicity that followed the release of the award-winning documentary, 'Saving Africa's Witch Children', has been a source of consternation to those whose activities were exposed by the film. This film demonstrated the scale of the problem caused by the continued labelling of children as witches in South Eastern Nigeria. This practice has brought untold hardship to thousands of children. The burgeoning role of some Pentecostal churches was equally exposed, including their collusion and participation in the lies and untruths which lead children to be stigmatised as witches and later tortured, and which generate huge commercial success. The international outcry following the documentary led to the endorsement of the Child Rights Act by the Akwa Ibom State government. There were also spates of arrests following the release of the documentary, including that of "Bishop" Sunday Ulup-Aya who boasted of having killed 110 child witches single-handedly. However, it was Helen Ukpabio, the self-acclaimed expert witch-hunter within Nigerian Pentecostal Christendom, who escaped the noose but who has led the crusade in child witch stigmatisation. Like Cleopatra, this notorious woman has many faces which are key for understanding how she operates.

The first of Helen Ukpabio's faces is that of the determined fighter whose major focus is that of combating witchcraft.

She sees the branding of witches and wizards as a fundamental part of her Christianity and shows no regret in the social turbulence caused by her religion.

Helen once expressed a grudge with fellow *Pentecostals* saying: "many of our preachers are giving the excuse that not much is said about witchcraft in the Bible." It is perhaps in response to this that both Apostle John Okoriko of Solid Rock Foundation Church in Nigeria and the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos recently denounced pastors who are profiting from the witchcraft industry, condemning the falsehood, exploitation and inherent deception in modern-day Nigerian Pentecostalism which sees the gospel used to deceive the gullible. The vulnerability of

children holds a special allure for Ms Ukpabio which she has found easy to exploit. Helen has produced numerous programmes, home movies and books, all warning parents about the participation of children in witchcraft and the importance of child exorcism.

In her book, *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*, Helen and others, write that

"a child under two years of age that cries at night and deteriorates in health is an agent of Satan".

Helen remains indifferent to the social consequences of her actions, deceiving the masses and lining her pocket. Society is left to bear the scars of her misguided actions.

Another face of Helen Ukpabio is that of an organised businesswoman who discovered a working formula amongst the multitude of Pentecostal preachers. She is astute and ruthless in her determination to ensure her comfort so that even when presented with the outrageous fallouts of her mission she remains unflustered and unrepentant. It is an indication of this that to date, Ms Ukpabio has not apologised for the agonies that she has caused to thousands of children in Nigeria and elsewhere for stigmatising them as witches.

The third face of Helen Ukpabio is brutish and monstrous. In an attempt to clear her name following the film's release, Helen employed the Lagos lawyer Victor Ukutt. Ms Ukpabio identified Gary Foxcroft of Stepping Stones Nigeria and Sam Ikpe-Itauma of Child Rights and Rehabilitation Centre (CRARN) in Eket, as the enemies that must be crushed and thus Mr Ukutt, on behalf of the Trustees of Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministry, wrote a threatening letter to both organisations demanding a public and published apology and one billion US dollars on behalf of his clients. When this wasn't done Helen employed the police to visit CRARN on 3rd July of this year where the aim was to arrest or kidnap Mr Ikpe-Itauma. Failing to achieve this, the



Dr Olusegun Fakoya

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policemen beat several of the children including two who required hospitalisation. Helen has used every means to defend her name, never attempting to ameliorate the plight of stigmatised children. Ms Ukpabio would improve her reputation through re-distributing the wealth amassed through cruelty to children and clearing the social mess caused by her actions.

The faces of Helen Ukpabio are many. She is the evangelist; the tormentor of children; the astute businesswoman; the formidable fighter and the conscienceless brute. Helen Ukpabio is an egregious evangelist who readily boasts of her influence in Nigeria and sees any foreign interference as a threat. This is who Nigeria must contend with. As men and women of Nigeria, we owe it to our children, our nation and generations unborn to speak out in the face of the ignoble antics of this renegade evangelist. In a more civilised environ, her types are usually contained behind prison walls. However, our struggle for justice requires input from all.

The Child Rights Act asserts that children can only reach their full potential when there is an environment that helps to meet their basic needs and also recognises and protects their rights. It is thus an offence against humanity for anyone, whether an organisation or

individual, to destroy the rights of children. It is irresponsible of any government to throw up its hands while such tyranny is being perpetrated. Helen Ukpabio has shown total disregard for the welfare of children by stigmatising them as witches. She is guilty of violating the Child Rights Act through the unfettered social, emotional and psychological torture of children as well as profiteering from the misfortunes of innocent children which she induced by her proclamations and actions. She has caused untold social hardship, marriage destruction and psychological disharmony in the nation. As a result it is necessary to:

1. Demand a full and thorough investigation into the activities of Helen Ukpabio by the Federal Government or the government of Akwa Ibom state.
2. Bring Helen Ukpabio to justice through the legal system.
3. Seize the assets and illegal wealth of Helen Ukpabio.
4. Educate the public on the evil of labelling children as witches and the criminality inherent in such practices.

The battle for the emancipation of the rights of children in Nigeria will not be made easier by the freedom of people like Helen Ukpabio, an enemy of child rights. The time has come for Nigeria to say no to her satanic verses.

Witchcraft at the United Nations

The worldwide problem of belief in witchcraft and the appalling human rights abuses to which it leads received a boost in September at the 12th session of the UN Human Rights Council held in Geneva, Switzerland.

IHEU presented a written statement on this issue, since published by the UN,¹ highlighting the problem in Africa, and especially Nigeria, where IHEU's representative Leo Igwe has been battling heroically against both the practice of witchcraft and against those who falsely, and profitably, accuse others – especially young children – of being witches. We followed up our written statement with an oral statement at the plenary of the Council on 22 September – see below.

It was encouraging to see that the plight of those falsely accused of witchcraft – after years of silence in the Human Rights Council – is beginning to receive the recognition that it deserves. Accusations of witchcraft, targeting mainly the old, the weak and the most disadvantaged in society is a world-wide scourge. And horrific though the actual practice of witchcraft may be, with children being killed for their body parts for use in spells, the number of these victims is exceeded many-fold by the number of children tortured and killed after having been falsely accused of being witches.

The problem is indeed worldwide. We heard at a seminar organized by the High Commission for Human Rights of abuse of those accused of witchcraft from Nepal to Tanzania. And from Papua/New Guinea to the United Kingdom. The UN High Commission for Refugees has published a report highlighting the scale of the problem in refugee camps. That the seminar was organized by the High Commission itself rather than by one or two concerned NGOs was an important sign that this scourge

may now be moving centre stage at the UN.

The seminar featured eight experts who exposed both the world-wide nature of the problem: its span across cultures and continents, and how deeply held are these beliefs which are all too frequently related to religion: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and traditional beliefs.

The seminar audience of some 60 delegates and NGO representatives was notable for the high proportion of western faces – with only three Africans present – and for the realization that beliefs and practices that had been comprehensively laid to rest in the West two hundred years ago were still ubiquitous in the rest of the world.

Some organisations working in the field have actually abandoned attempts to combat these beliefs, focusing instead on working to rehabilitate victims of witchcraft accusations, even going so far as to persuade local priests to “exorcise” and cleanse the victim of the evil spirits that have supposedly taken over their bodies. The absence of Africans from the seminar does not speak well of recognition of the problem among governments on that continent. Indeed, we were shocked at reports from the Gambia recently of witch hunts carried out under the orders of the president, a matter we referred to in our statements.

What can be done?

One speaker at the seminar noted that criminalizing the practice of witchcraft had led to negative consequences in many countries, where new laws have tended to encourage local people to take the law into their own hands and to lynch those accused of witchcraft. What is needed are laws which criminalise the practice of making accusations of witchcraft. The experience of the way that the United States eliminated the widespread practice of

mob lynching in the 19th century was offered as a model. There, the communities where victims had been lynched were collectively held to account, were fined and forced to compensate the families of the victims. This approach might offer promise in India, for example, where we have seen police intervention after the murder of those accused of witchcraft – where it happens at all – directed towards persuasion but with little chance of finding or indicting those directly responsible, and without the possibility of holding the entire community to account.

Longer term, the answer must lie in education – education in the reality that evil spirits and supernatural powers do not exist. But sadly, human nature may be

working against us. We have evolved to seek cause and effect and to make decisions on insufficient evidence. This may have served our ancestors well as a survival mechanism, but we have no instinct to seek proof: that needs to be learned.

Gary Foxcroft of Stepping Stones Nigeria introduced two important initiatives. The first was for a conference to be held in London in April 2010 to bring together organizations working on this problem to come together and exchange views and ideas. The second was an announcement of a network to coordinate the highly fragmented work of both international institutions and NGOs on the issue. IHEU should strongly support both of these initiatives.

Witchcraft in Africa

Joint statement by IHEU and the Association for World Education,
UN Human Rights Council 12th session, 22 September 2009

Mr President,

Witchcraft is still widely practiced in many countries in Africa by witchdoctors who often use human body parts in their spells. Some witchdoctors employ gangs of young men to attack and kill victims, often young children, for their body parts, which are frequently removed while the victim is still alive.² An estimated 300 people are killed each year in South Africa alone as a result of this practice.³

But horrific though this practice is, it is only part of the problem. In Nigeria, in both the Muslim North and the Christian South, witch hunts are not uncommon and this has led to a second form of abuse. Some unscrupulous pastors, many linked to Pentecostal churches, have a lucrative trade in making unfounded accusations of witchcraft against young children. [The pastors then agree to “cure” the witches for a substantial fee. Many children are being ostracized and abandoned by their parents as a result of these accusations.]

Victims accused of witchcraft often suffer appalling abuse, reminiscent of the European witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many being burned alive.⁴

Recent reports of witch hunting and kidnappings by militias in the Gambia under the orders of the President have highlighted the problem of witch hunts.⁵

In Tanzania, Albinos are targeted for their body parts which are believed to bring good luck.⁶

[Similar situations exist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.^{7 8 9}

It has been a tradition in Ghana, Zambia and Kenya to accuse childless old women of witchcraft.]

In Nigeria one unscrupulous pastor who has made a fortune from unfounded accusations of witchcraft is Helen Ukpabio, the leader of Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries.

[In her book ‘Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft’ she states that a child under the age of two that cries at night and has poor health is ‘an agent of Satan’. This ridiculous claim has ensured Ms Ukpabio a steady stream of parents paying to have their children ‘cured’.]

[IHEU and the UK charity Stepping Stones Nigeria have been campaigning against witchcraft and false accusations of witchcraft in Nigeria. At an anti-witchcraft conference in Calabar, Cross River State last month, one of our international representatives, Leo Igwe, was assaulted and robbed by about 100 supporters of Helen Ukpabio.]

Mr President, we are calling on this Council, the African Union and the African Commission for Human and Peoples’ Rights, to urge governments to do more – through improved education and better policing – to eliminate the twin scourges of those practicing witchcraft and those claiming to find and “cure” witches.

Thank you sir.

Note: The words in [square brackets] could not be read in the two minutes available.

¹ <http://www.iheu.org/un-publishes-iheu-statement-witchcraft-africa>

² http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Witchcraft-Killers-Want-Body-Parts/Article/20061131240912?lpos=Home_Article_Related_Content_Region_5&lid=ARTICLE_1240912_Witchcraft_Killers_Want_Body_Parts

³ <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/news/article-10033336-details/Exposed:+witch-doctors/article.do>

⁴ <http://www.stolenchildhood.net/entry/eternity-suffering-of-small-nigerian-souls-as-a-result-of-religious-hypocrisy/>

⁵ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article6797697.ece>

⁶ <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Africa-Young-Albino-Girl-Killed-And-Mutilated-To-Give-Body-Parts-To-Witch-Doctors-In-Tanzania/Article/200810315125431>

⁷ <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2253b,46545ce12,496323c31e,0.html>

⁸ <http://www.africanewssearch.com/olink.php?ARG1=http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/14/663393&ARG2=302188>

⁹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20080904+ITEM-012-03+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

Speaking Freely About Religion: Religious Freedom, Defamation and Blasphemy

Matt Cherry*

Since 1999 several resolutions entitled “Combating Defamation of Religions” have been adopted by various United Nations bodies, including the UN Commission on Human Rights, the new UN Human Rights Council and, in 2007 and 2008, by the UN General Assembly itself. A similar resolution is likely to come up before the General Assembly at the end of 2009. The resolutions’ proponents argue that they will enhance freedom of religion and prevent human rights violations, while critics have compared the resolutions to “blasphemy laws” that violate freedom of belief by criminalizing criticism of religion.

The authority of the UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly are necessarily constrained by their charters and international law. This article therefore examines the concept of defamation of religion to see if it is consistent with international human rights law.

Many analyses of the resolutions “combating defamation of religion” have been framed in terms of “competing rights”: with the claim made that freedom of expression must be limited to protect religious rights. However, since criticism, even denunciation, of specific religions and beliefs is a common practice of many believers, we surely need to examine whether “freedom of religion or belief” protects or prohibits the criticism of beliefs. So, without neglecting the right to freedom of expression, I will focus on freedom of religion or belief, and examine whether this right supports restrictions on the “defamation of religions.”

I. The resolutions on “Defamation of Religions”

In 1999 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) received a draft resolution titled ‘Defamation of Islam’. After some amendments this text was adopted by the UNCHR under the title ‘Defamation of Religions’. In 2002, the UNCHR adopted a resolution, drafted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) representing the 56 Islamic States, entitled “Combating Defamation of Religions.” The Resolution expressed alarm at “the serious instances of intolerance, xenophobia, discrimination and acts of violence based on religion or belief in the aftermath of the September 11” attacks on the United States.

The Resolution, in a variety of versions, was adopted by the Commission for Human Rights in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 and by the Human Rights Council in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Similar resolutions were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2007 and December 2008.

Within the resolution, definitions of the term “defamation of religions” include: “negative projection of Islam in the media,” “negative stereotyping of religions or belief,” and “the frequent and incorrect association of

Islam with human rights violations and terrorism”.

Why Do these Resolutions Matter?

None of the resolutions against “defamation of religion” have yet been given the force of international law. But UN resolutions create precedents that shape the creation of future laws. Indeed the OIC has stated that, ultimately, it seeks a “new instrument or convention” on the issue of religious defamation. The General Assembly was even asked to include this language in the founding charter of the Human Rights Council. Furthermore, UN resolutions tend to influence national laws and jurisprudence. Even non-binding UN resolutions may be cited as international sanction for new or existing national laws. In fact, the OIC lobbied national delegations to adopt the General Assembly Resolution, which stated that “defamation of religions and prophets is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression.”

Before universally binding language restricting established rights in the name of combating defamation of religions is placed in international instruments, it is imperative that the international community analyze this novel restriction on freedom of expression in the light of currently existing international law.

II. The Right to Freedom of Belief and Expression

Freedom of belief and freedom of speech were first declared by the global community in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. They were given the force of international law by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), agreed in 1966. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is guaranteed by Article 18 of the ICCPR. Freedom of expression is protected by Article 19 of the ICCPR.

The UN resolutions have stated that “[d]efamation of religions is a serious affront to human dignity leading to a restriction on the freedom of their adherents”. The resolutions’ proponents have therefore argued that restrictions on freedom of expressions are necessary to ensure respect for religions; or that, in the words of Pakistan, proposing the 2009 resolution to the HRC, a “delicate balance” has to be struck between freedom of expression and respect for religions. So let’s take a closer look at both these rights: first to see if “defamation of religion” must be outlawed to protect freedom of religion or belief, and then to explore whether “defamation of religion” is protected or forbidden by freedom of expression.



Matt Cherry

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Freedom of Religion or Belief

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Analogous guarantees of the right to freedom of conscience can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the *UDHR*), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the *African Charter*), the American Convention on Human Rights (the *American Convention*), and the European Convention on Human Rights (the *European Convention*). In 1981, the United Nations agreed a more detailed statement on the right to freedom of conscience, the "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief."

The UN Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment on Article 18, states that this right is:

far-reaching and profound; it encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others. ... The fundamental character of these freedoms is also reflected in the fact that this provision cannot be derogated from, even in time of public emergency, as stated in article 4.2 of the Covenant.

The UN Human Rights Committee is very clear that freedom of religion or belief applies equally to all beliefs, including atheist and non-religious beliefs:

Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms "belief" and "religion" are to be broadly construed.

Furthermore, the right to freedom of religion or belief is grounded in the right of an individual to choose their own religion or beliefs. Emphasizing the importance of choice in the exercise of freedom of religion, the Human Rights Committee states that:

the freedom to "have or to adopt" a religion or belief necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views, as well as the right to retain one's religion or belief.

Exercising one's right to choose, or replace, a religion or belief, as guaranteed by Article 18 of the ICCPR, must include the right to full and free discourse as to the truth, benefits and disadvantages of any religion or belief. The right to discuss and criticize any or all religions or beliefs is a necessary component of the freedom of religion.

Finally, it must be noted that freedom of religion or belief applies only to individuals and does not give rights to religions or beliefs per se. This right does not protect the content of religious

beliefs from criticism, nor protect the feelings of believers who may take offense at criticism of their beliefs.

Freedom of Expression

Article 19, ICCPR, states that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

Analogous guarantees of the right to freedom of conscience can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the *UDHR*), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the *African Charter*), the American Convention on Human Rights (the *American Convention*), and the European Convention on Human Rights (the *European Convention*). All of these instruments recognize a broad right to freedom of expression, applying, in the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights:

not only to "information" or "ideas" that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Such are the demands of that pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no "democratic society".

Again, it must be noted that Articles 18 and 19 particularly protect expression of thought, conscience, and religion, but do not shield the content of any religion or belief from debate or criticism. So our initial survey shows that outlawing defamation of religion is not required by the right to freedom of religion. In fact, laws against defamation of religion seem to infringe freedom of religion as well as freedom of expression.

III. The Limits to Freedom of Belief and Expression

International law does allow some limitations to freedom of expression, including expressions of religion or beliefs. I will therefore examine these to see whether "defamation of religion" is one of the legitimate grounds for restricting freedom of religion and free speech.

Limits to Freedom of Religion or Belief

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights permits **no** limitation whatsoever to the freedom of thought, as distinct from the right to manifest religion or belief. The United Nations Human Rights Committee in its General Comment, notes that:

Article 18 distinguishes the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief from the freedom to manifest religion or belief. It does not permit any limitations whatsoever on the freedom of thought and conscience or on the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of one's choice. These freedoms are protected unconditionally, as is the right of everyone to hold opinions without interference in article 19.1.

Article 18 of the ICCPR states that that "[f]reedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of

others.” This is explained in more detail by the United Nations Human Rights Committee General Comment: “paragraph 3 of article 18 is to be strictly interpreted: restrictions are not allowed on grounds not specified there, even if they would be allowed as restrictions to other rights protected in the Covenant, such as national security.”

It must be noted that “defamation of religions” is not one of the grounds specified.

Proposed limitations on “negative projection of Islam” or “the association of Islam with terrorism and human rights violations” are also outside the grounds allowed for restricting the right to manifest one’s religion or belief.

And therefore, under existing human rights law, they are not permitted as justifications for limiting the manifestation of religion or belief.

The UN Human Rights Committee General Comment goes on to comment specifically on the possibility of limiting the expression or practise of religion or belief on the grounds of “morals”:

The Committee observes that the concept of morals derives from many social, philosophical and religious traditions; consequently, limitations on the freedom to manifest a religion or belief for the purpose of protecting morals must be based on principles not deriving exclusively from a single tradition.

As we shall see later, this would seem to rule out laws prohibiting “blasphemy” or other criticisms of religion defined as immoral by a single religious tradition.

Limits to Freedom of Expression

Article 19 (3) specifies when States may place limits on freedom of expression:

19 (3). The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

- (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;*
- (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.*

The Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment on Article 19, makes it clear that “it is only subject to these conditions that restrictions may be imposed.” Just as with Article 18, Article 19 prohibits restrictions on grounds not specified within the article. And “defamation of religions” is not among the specified grounds allowing restrictions on the freedom of speech.

Thus, States may place restrictions on expression, but only when they are provided by law and are necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others. The key concept here is “necessity”. Louis Henkin of the Columbia University School of International Law notes:

A State has overstepped its authority in limiting freedom of expression under Art 19, if such a limitation is not necessary to maintain public order in a democratic society. Because many States are prone to abuse the ‘necessity’ requirement, the threshold of ‘necessity’ must be set high.

Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence

The high threshold for restrictions on freedom of

expression is demonstrated by Article 20 of the ICCPR, which explains when States must limit freedom of expression:

20.1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.

20.2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, has noted:

Article 20 was drafted against the historical background of the horrors committed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. The threshold of the acts that are referred to in Article 20 is relatively high.

She has gone on to recommend against lowering this threshold for limiting free expression, noting that it would weaken freedom of religion as well as free speech:

At the global level, any attempt to lower the threshold of Article 20 of the Covenant would not only shrink the frontiers of free expression, but also limit freedom of religion or belief itself. Such an attempt could be counterproductive and may promote an atmosphere of religious intolerance.

The Special Rapporteur has therefore told the UN that in monitoring this right:

The threshold of the acts that are referred to in Article 20 is relatively high because they have to constitute advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred. Accordingly, the Special Rapporteur is of the opinion that expressions should only be prohibited under Article 20 if they constitute incitement to imminent acts of violence or discrimination against a specific individual or group.

The Genocide Convention and Group Defamation

The Genocide Convention provides another possible ground for prohibiting group defamation, since it requires states to prohibit any act committed “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.”

The International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda relied in part on the Genocide Convention to prosecute Hutu-run media. They noted that Hutu media described the Tutsis as “hypocrites, thieves, and killers,” “marked by malice and dishonesty,” and “inherently evil.” Many Tutsis singled out by the media were immediately killed. In applying the Genocide Convention, the Rwanda Tribunal described this type of expression as a “discriminatory form of aggression that destroy[ed] the dignity of those in the group under attack . . . and treat[ed] them as less than human.”

To prevent such incitement to genocidal violence, states may pass group defamation laws without violating international law. Indeed such laws may be necessary to fulfil the obligations contained in Article 20 of the ICCPR. But group defamation laws are very different from defamation of religion laws, because group defamation laws protect the reputation of people, not ideas.

It is clear that defamation of a group must be restricted if and only if it amounts to incitement to hatred or violence as specified in Article 20 of the

ICCPR. The activities of the Hutu media in the Rwanda genocide provide an example of such defamation.

“Defamation of Religion” Fails to Meet Threshold

“Defamation of religion”, however understood, includes expressions which are well below the threshold for constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Furthermore, the UN resolutions “combating defamation of religions” have used a variety of other terms which also fall short of that standard, such as “negative” or “deliberate” stereotyping and the “frequent and wrongful association of Islam with human rights violations and terrorism”.

After examining all of the legitimate criteria for restricting free expression and freedom of belief, it seems clear that “defamation of religion” fails to meet the carefully prescribed standards for restricting these fundamental freedoms.

IV. Arguments against Religious Defamation Laws

As we have seen, Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR particularly protect expression of thought, conscience, and religion; they do not shield the content of any religion or belief from discussion or criticism. Indeed, as the European Court of Human Rights stated, freedom of expression protects speech, ideas and information that may “offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population”.

It seems clear that prohibiting “defamation of religions” would violate the right to freedom of expression. However, proponents of the measures have suggested there is an intrinsic tension between freedom of expression and freedom of religion, and that the resolutions strike a “delicate balance” between these ‘competing’ rights. I think that a study of international law and precedent suggests the opposite:

free expression does not conflict with freedom of belief, but is a fundamental component of it.

Defamation Laws Would Violate Religious Freedom

Indeed, since the right to freedom of religion or belief is grounded in the right of an individual to choose their own religion or beliefs, free inquiry about religion is guaranteed. Thus criticism of other religions or beliefs is protected by Article 18 as well as by Article 19 of the ICCPR. Furthermore, religions, and other worldviews, often include views about the truth and morality of other religions and beliefs. They may even include fundamental doctrines that flatly condemn the doctrines of other religions, and injunctions to adherents to “bear witness” to those beliefs in public. If the beliefs of one religion are seen as “defamatory” by the followers of another, laws against “defamation” could produce a vicious spiral of increasing limits to freedom of expression.

Defamation laws are likely to be inconsistent with such a full and free discourse and, therefore, are unlikely to fall within the narrow exception set forth in Article 18(3). This point was well expressed by the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, in her report (A/62/280) on 26 October 2007 to the Third Committee of the Sixty-second General

Assembly Session. Referring to the report on incitement to religious hatred that she had prepared for the Human Rights Council with Doudou Diene, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, she said,

If it was defamation to say that one religion was better than another, the result would be the religious prosecution of those who embarked on intellectual analysis of religions or those who were within their rights to say that their religion was superior.

Defamation Laws Cannot Apply to Religions

International law allows States to enact defamation laws to protect the reputation of others under the necessity requirement of Article 19 of the ICCPR. But under existing law, the term “defamation” has no meaning with regard to objects, ideas or beliefs. Nor is “defamation” concerned with “hurt feelings”.

Defamation laws exist to protect the reputation of persons from being harmed by false statements. The person seeking vindication of their reputation must be identified, must have suffered measurable damage, and must prove the “defamatory” statements are false.

Religions – like other opinions and ideologies – do not have such a personal reputation and are not protected by international human rights law. Attempting to apply the concept of “defamation” to religions would be extremely problematic. For example, proving the truth of a statement is always an absolute defence to a defamation charge. Yet, judicial standards of truth are notoriously difficult to apply to questions of faith. Opinions on religion, or artistic interpretations or even satire of religion, are often not susceptible to being proven true or false. Thus, the “truth defence” would not be readily available to anyone accused of defamation of religion.

The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief has pointed out that:

[t]he right to freedom of religion or belief protects primarily the individual and, to some extent, the collective rights of the community concerned but it does not protect religions or beliefs per se.

She concludes that the “defamation of religion” concept does not exist in international law, because human rights law protects the rights of people and not religions. Furthermore, it is wrong to think of any religion as a homogenous collection of believers, because even adherents of the majority religion should be free to deviate from or reinterpret that religion.

V. Defamation as Blasphemy

As we have just seen, defamation laws protect people, not religions or beliefs. Yet we know many religions have received legal protection from perceived insults and criticism. If these laws are not part of the traditional concept of “anti-defamation” laws, then what are they? The answer is, “Blasphemy Laws.”

Blasphemy laws, under a variety of names, have been traditional in many countries in Europe, the Muslim World, and across many parts of the former British

Empire. Indeed, Britain only repealed its blasphemy law in 2008, and Ireland introduced a new blasphemy law in 2009. Blasphemy laws protect religion, almost always the one state-endorsed religion, from criticism and insult. In some cases, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, punishments for blasphemy still include the death penalty.

Pakistan's so-called "blasphemy laws" seem especially relevant because they outlaw "derogatory remarks" against Islam, the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed. These laws, which carry the death penalty, have been used to prosecute hundreds of Pakistanis over the last decade, and are often used against minority religions, freethinkers, or simply as a means of settling scores against personal enemies. Since Pakistan has taken the lead in promoting the UN resolutions "Combating Defamation of Religions", it seems only prudent to note the remarkable similarities between the concept of "derogatory remarks" against a religion and the concept of "defamation of religion."

Many observers have equated the UN resolutions "Combating Defamation of Religions" with blasphemy laws.

In the Sixty Second Session of the United Nations general assembly, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief herself made the connection between laws against "defamation of religion" and "blasphemy laws" that existed in some states, saying that,

she and her predecessor had looked at several blasphemy laws that had been used initially against vulnerable religious minorities and those who had been dispassionate about religion. It would be counterproductive if defamation at any level became a human rights violation, unless it led to violence.

Violating Freedom of Belief

The concept of "defamation of religion" shares many characteristics with the concept of "blasphemy" found in anti-blasphemy laws: both concepts favour the ideas and institutions of religion over the conscience and expressions of the individual; both favour politically powerful forms of religion over dissenting and minority forms of religions; and both favour religious beliefs over non-religious beliefs. As a result, both prohibit critical evaluation and debate about religions and religious institutions in a position of power. And both restrict free inquiry and freedom to compare and choose between beliefs.

The parallels between "defamation of religion" and "blasphemy" also highlight the reasons why outlawing "defamation of religion" would violate freedom of religion or belief. For example, Article 18 protects non-religious and atheistic beliefs equally with religious and theistic beliefs. Yet the UN statements on Defamation protect only religious and theistic beliefs, with special mention given to one religion, Islam, over all other religions or groups of believers. Yet it does not seem possible to extend concepts of blasphemy or defamation to cover all religions or belief equally. Many religions include doctrines that contradict other religions: to give

one basic example, the fundamental Christian claim that Jesus is the "son of God" may be blasphemous to Muslims, while the Muslim claim that Jesus was a prophet but not the son of God may be blasphemous to Christians.

Nor is it licit to claim that the dominant religion in a state can limit the expression of critical beliefs, as with blasphemy laws, on the grounds of public "morals." As earlier noted, the UN Human Rights Committee made it clear that "limitations on the freedom to manifest a religion or belief for the purpose of protecting morals must be based on principles not deriving exclusively from a single tradition."

Legal privileges for one religion over another – or even the legal privileging of all religions over the rejection of religion – goes against existing international human rights law. It violates freedom of religion or belief by introducing a form of discrimination against religious minorities, religious dissenters, and those who reject religion. As the United Nations Human Rights Committee noted in its General Comment 22 on Article 18 of the ICCPR, "Restrictions [on freedom of religion or belief] may not be imposed for discriminatory purposes or applied in a discriminatory manner."

The Danger of Religious Abuse

There is a clear danger that states may use the UN resolutions against defamation to justify existing or new domestic blasphemy laws. Blasphemy laws continue to be used to protect politically dominant religions from dissent, to prosecute objections to human rights abuses in the name of religion, and to exempt powerful religious institutions from scrutiny and criticism.

Some states are already using the concept of the defamation of religions to silence dissenting voices. This trend has recently been condemned by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in the case of the Egyptian writer, Kareem Amer. Amer was convicted of insulting the religious Al Azhar Institute and the Head of State. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated:

[d]efamation of religions may offend people and hurt their feelings but it does not directly result in a violation of their rights to freedom of religion. International law does not permit restrictions on the expression of opinions or beliefs which diverge from the religious beliefs of the majority of the population or from the State prescribed one.

The Working Group declared Amer's detention for exercising his freedom of expression arbitrary and in contravention of Article 19 of the ICCPR, among other rights.

In addition to national abuse of blasphemy laws, the danger of internationalising concepts of defamation or blasphemy was highlighted by a 2008 case in Jordan. A Jordanian court issued a summons, on charges of "blasphemy", to eleven Danes for drawing and reprinting cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. According to Danish reports, Jordanian lawyers are hoping the case "will help establish an international law against slandering religion."

Conclusion

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) supports initiatives to combat discrimination, hostility and violence based on religions or belief. An essential step towards the goals agreed by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Declaration on The Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief must be the universal implementation of the standards outlined in those historic agreements.

The UN Resolutions on “Combating Religious Defamation” also state their concern at recent instances of “intolerance, xenophobia, discrimination and acts of violence based on religion or belief.” I share those concerns but believe that these problems are already adequately covered by international law in the form of articles 18, 19 and 20 of the ICCPR. What is needed is a more uniform application of those fundamental rights.

It therefore seems clear that the new proposal to combat “defamation of religions” is unnecessary. Furthermore, as the above analysis has shown, outlawing “defamation of religion” would contradict numerous

existing principles of international law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In summary:

- The concept of “defamation of religion” and the resolutions have no validity in international law;

Outlawing “defamation of religion” would contradict numerous existing principles of international law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Laws combating “defamation of religion” are analogous to laws against blasphemy, with the potential for similar human rights abuses;
- The concerns the resolutions seek to address are more effectively addressed by existing human rights agreements; and
- We need a more uniform application of existing standards to combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

For these reasons, the IHEU and its allies must continue to campaign for the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council to reject future resolutions “Combating Defamation of Religions.”

Speaking out at the UN about Child Abuse and the Holy See

It was in 2007, at a meeting of the Council of Europe in San Marino, that I first had the opportunity to say to an audience that it might be able to do something about the fact that organised religion was a major threat to human rights.

I was taking a risk in a chamber packed with men in various weird and wonderful hats and frocks that indicated their elevated religious rankings. It was therefore something of a pleasant surprise to find myself being warmly applauded by other NGOs and the senior diplomats who were present.

The representative of the Holy See (the Vatican’s *alter ego* in diplomatic circles), however, apparently complained about my remarks. I expected nothing less.

Since then, I have been preparing a detailed study cataloguing the many ways that religion threatens – and often actively abuses – human rights. And what a long depressing list it is. I have brought the fat dossier to the attention of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, on whose advisory panel I sit, with a view to tackling some of the issues.

The study revealed the Catholic Church to be by far the biggest offender. Even in the tiny country of Ireland, well over a billion Euros has been paid out – by Irish taxpayers – to compensate victims of child abuse carried out in Catholic institutions, and with the Church bearing less than ten percent of the cost.

The abuse continued for so long and on such a scale

throughout the world because Church leaders condoned it, covered it up and shielded abusers from the law. In light of this, it becomes difficult to escape the conclusion that this problem goes to the very top of the Church.

And of course it was the Vatican itself that negotiated the Holy See’s accession to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Cynically, it specifically “reserved” (excluded) Vatican City from the Convention. This is both the Holy See’s entire geographic territory and the very place we believe all accusations of child abuse are supposed to be sent and dealt with in secret. And, shamefully, the Holy See had been allowed to get away with this exclusion.

It was such injustices that hardened my resolve to ask IHEU’s Roy Brown to help me take on the Holy See at the UN. The UN’s Human Rights Council (HRC) published our statement detailing our hard-hitting charges against the Holy See and the action we called for. Then, on 22 September 2009, came my opportunity to intervene at a plenary session in Geneva to hammer home our points before diplomats from around the globe.

*Keith Porteous Wood**



Keith Porteous Wood

*Keith Porteous Wood is Executive Director of the (UK) National Secular Society

It was a privilege to do this. I believe it is the first intervention at the UN ever to take the Holy See to task on anything. And we did not pull our punches, especially in the statement which we made available to diplomats along with the text of my speech.

We criticised the Holy See for breaking five Articles of the UNCRC, including one which required them to produce regular reports – yet reports covering *fifteen years* have still not been filed.

We emphasised that it was not the abuse itself, but the Church's reaction to it that we were focussing on. We observed that the culture of institutional secrecy had directly enabled more abuse to take place by shielding abusers from justice.

When abusers were found out, the hierarchy obligingly moved them to other dioceses, allowing them to continue abusing.

We noted the Church had compounded victims' agony by telling them in some instances that they were liars, and conniving to minimise the compensation paid them, if they paid any at all. Generally, compensation came with a gagging clause, so that the full horror of what had gone on remained secret – just the way the Vatican likes it.

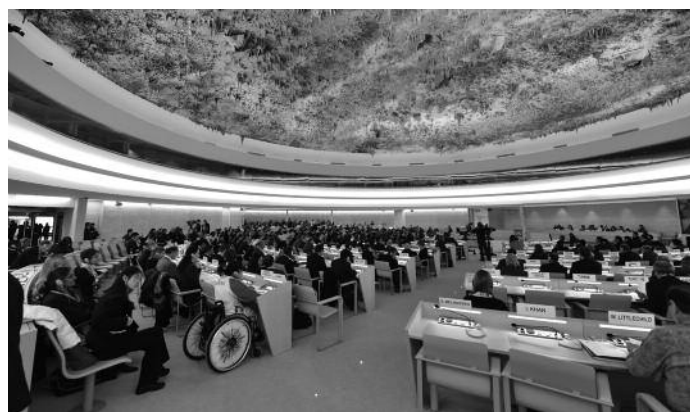
I told delegates of the case of Bernard Law. Until 2002 he was Archbishop of Boston (the largest US diocese) and the centre of a massive cover-up operation. Despite Law getting into hot water in the courts, resulting in a crescendo of calls for him to resign, Pope John Paul II intervened – presumably on a day he mislaid his infallibility – and refused to let him do so. But the people of Boston had had enough.

Against such a clamour for Law's resignation even Popes are now powerless and John Paul II brought the disgraced Law to Rome where he lives in luxury, still a Cardinal and on the Pontifical Council of the Family. Far from being damaged by his disgrace, Law's stature has actually grown. He still enjoys the patronage of the current Pope who – let us not forget – was the chief enforcer of discipline in the Church from 1981 until his promotion.

No bishop or more senior official has ever been disbarred from the Church for involvement in child abuse. This fact, taken with the Vatican's lauding of Law, demonstrates that the Church is not contrite, continues to make light of the matter and cares not a hoot about the public perception of their antics. The Vatican seems oblivious to the massive blows to its reputation and status around the globe.

And this may go some way to explain the evasive and complacent Right of Reply the Church made in the Chamber a few hours after my attack. The author of the rebuttal was H.E. Archbishop Tomasi, Apostolic Nuncio.

Tomasi's opening shot was to deem it sufficient to include *just one paragraph* on child abuse by clergy in their grossly overdue report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. He made a point of saying the report was now finalised. So, the very first mention of any publication of their report only came after our challenge. Other states are pressurised to bring late



UNHRC in session

reporting up to date and their undertakings are formally recorded, but the Holy See seems to be let off its responsibilities here as in so many other places.

The Archbishop's reply went from bad to worse as he tried to deflect our criticism by quibbling at some length about the use of the word p[a]edophilia – a word that we hadn't even used.

The diversion looks to be part of an attempt to shift the blame onto homosexuals. Under Benedict's papacy, priests with a homosexual orientation are now *persona non-grata* even if they are entirely sexually inactive.

His Excellency's last major point was to imply through misleadingly presented statistics that child abuse was worse in the Protestant churches in America than in Catholic ones. As you can imagine, this has not won him many friends and the Jewish community whom he also dragged into this is up in arms.

The nearest he got to a *mea culpa*, the only response that would have been appropriate, was a reference that "the Catholic church has been busy cleaning its own house". Its purpose was to serve as the prelude to a gloating rebuke: "it would be good if other institutions and authorities, where the major part of abuses are reported, could do the same".

The clean-up has started in some places, but certainly not at the top – where it matters most of all. When is the Vatican going to open all its files on child abuse, or make it mandatory in Canon Law to report suspected child abusers to local law enforcement agencies and not shift them around or cover up their activities?

Examples of the Vatican admitting it made a major blunder are extremely rare, but becoming less so under the current, accident-prone, pontiff. I have evidence, though, that the Holy See's press office admitted to the Vatican correspondent of one newswire that they had decided not to post Tomasi's response to my "very hard and unjust attack" because they did not want to "add gasoline to the fire" on an already volatile topic.

Despite this, Archbishop Tomasi's limp and ill-advised excuses were reported in fifteen countries around the world and in over fifty newspapers or major blogs. The arrogant tone of Tomasi's rebuttal even infuriated loyal Catholics who could not make up their mind whether to be ashamed or angered by it.

The London *Guardian* repeated my admonishment "The many thousands of victims of abuse deserve the

international community to hold the Vatican to account, something it has been unwilling to do, so far. Both states and children's organisations must unite to pressurise the Vatican to open its files, change its procedures worldwide, and report suspected abusers to civil authorities." Alongside this it printed a box with a huge "5%" – "Maximum percentage of Catholic clergy involved in child sex abuse, according to research quoted by the Vatican".

One blogger picked this percentage up and estimated it "would put the number of clergy linked to abuse at roughly 27,500".

And of course the 27,500 is just current clergy. Let's hope they weren't all as active as the head of Austria's Catholic Church, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer, who died in 2003, disgraced but of course never stripped of his Cardinal's berretta. According to *Das Buch Groer* he had abused more than 2,000 young men over forty years. When we read this dreadful statistic we need also reflect on the sad fact that abusers often exploit the same person repeatedly. Groer certainly adds new meaning to the term "cardinal sin".

It is somewhat sobering to discover that despite the stunning scale of this abuse, it was only exposed as a result of Groer remarking that "child molesters would not enter the kingdom of God". This was the last straw for one of his myriad victims who proceeded to spill the beans. The effect on the Church in Austria has been devastating, as it has also been in Ireland and the United States.

Some of the responses to these articles and blogs have been revealing and heart-rending, for example:

"My first junior seminary – 11 priests on the staff over two and a half year period. 4 sexual abusers. 1 eventually imprisoned on 23 charges. He pleaded guilty after plea bargaining the charges

down the way. Other three died before charges could be brought. Second junior seminary (different order) – three priests on the staff, two sexual abusers. Both dead before charges could be brought. At least five priests charged in my diocese. One admitted to over 120 cases of abuse. Only six of his victims came forward. A history of these guys being moved from parish to parish when complaints were made. ... Had I not come forward (naively thinking that the church would back me since I was after all, a priest), none of this would have come to light."

Such examples suggest a massive scale of sexual abuse, which all too often has ruined the victims' whole lives. And so much of this has gone unreported and unpunished. Nor should we forget the endemic, indeed legendary, physical and mental cruelty of the Christian Brothers and some orders of nuns. Just type "Magdalene Laundries" into Google.

Sadly, it is clear that the billions of dollars paid out in the US and billions of Euros in diminutive Ireland represent just the tip of the iceberg. So this is why I concluded my speech by pleading with the international community to hold the Vatican to account.

I would like to put on record my gratitude to Roy Brown, IHEU Main Representative at the UN in Geneva, without whom I could not have achieved the above.

Statement which the UN published [http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unhrc-iheudoconholyssee-\(2\).pdf](http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unhrc-iheudoconholyssee-(2).pdf)

This link <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unhrc-holy-see-pack.pdf> gives Keith's intervention, followed by how the Holy See responded, and some reactions.

*Keith Porteous Wood is Executive Director of the (UK) National Secular Society, which conducted six months of research which led to this exchange.

Solferino and Jean Henri Dunant

Diana Brown*

One of my favourite films is the 1994 version of Balzac's story *Le Colonel Chabert*. It begins with a haunting scene: we see a Napoleonic battlefield, after the battle. It is cold and misty and in all directions lie the bodies of the dead and wounded, while in the background we hear the eerie music from Beethoven's Ghost Trio. Scavengers wander among the bodies, seeking anything valuable that can be stripped from them, whether dead or still barely alive, and the naked bodies are gathered up for careless burial in a mass grave.

Such a scene could have been set in any war over the centuries of human history.

In June 1859, at Solferino in Italy, another such scene ensued. The forces of the French Emperor, Napoleon III, met those of the Austrian Emperor, Franz Josef,

resulting in casualties approaching 40 000. Many of the wounded were shot or bayoneted after the battle. A witness to the battle was a Swiss businessman, Jean Henri Dunant, who was horrified by the terrible suffering he saw. He organised local civilians to help the wounded. He also organised the purchase of supplies and shelter for the wounded and negotiated the release of doctors who were held prisoner. Help was given to the wounded of



Diana Brown

*Diana Brown is former editor, *IHN*

both sides and the helpers adopted a slogan of “All men are brothers”.

When Dunant returned to Geneva, he wrote and published a book about Solferino, in which he set out his ideas for a non-partisan organisation to give care to the wounded. He sent the book to many political leaders and also travelled widely in Europe promoting his ideas.

In 1863 a committee was set up in Geneva to further these ideas. This was the beginning of what eventually became the International Committee of the Red Cross. The same year, the Swiss Parliament organised a meeting attended by representatives of a number of states which resulted in the first Geneva Convention “for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field”. This bound the signatories to respect and protect hospitals and their staff, to allow treatment of wounded from both sides and to recognise the Red Cross symbol as an identifier of hospitals and personnel covered by the convention. Further Geneva Conventions were eventually to follow, extending protection to prisoners of war and civilian populations.

The Red Cross was adopted as a symbol in honour of Switzerland. The Swiss flag bears a white cross on a red ground, so the colours were reversed for the humanitarian organisation.

Dunant’s energetic humanitarian activities led him to neglect his business and he suffered a humiliating bankruptcy. He also fell out with some of his associates.



Jean Henri Dunant

For many years he was a poverty-stricken semi-outcast, but eventually he became a recipient of the first ever Nobel Peace Prize. Having been a Christian for much of his life, he died in 1910, having finally rejected religion. His birthday, 8 May, is celebrated every year as World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day.

In June this year, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Solferino, volunteers and staff from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies from 186 countries came together in Solferino to remember the past, but also to look to the future. Young volunteers were

given training so that they could go back and train comrades in their home countries. A torchlight procession followed in the footsteps of volunteers who carried the wounded from the battlefield of Solferino to the nearby town of Castiglione delle Stiviere. Finally, following the example of Jean Henri Dunant, hundreds of youth volunteers travelled from Solferino to Geneva to present a declaration addressing solutions to today’s humanitarian challenges to international leaders.

I know that many Humanists often feel helpless in the face of the huge problems that face us. We are only individuals, and what can a mere individual do? Dunant’s example should give us courage and hope. He may not have been able to stop wars, but at least he was able to set in motion a great movement that did much for the victims of wars. From a tiny seed, a great tree can grow.

On The Wearing of Religious Clothes in Private Life

On the occasion of its National Congress, held in Savoie on August 24 – 26, 2009, the National Federation of Libre Pensee reiterated its principled position regarding institutional secularism and the respect for basic democratic liberties that safeguard the citizen’s private life in this country.

An important media campaign began at the end of June, starting with the initiative of a Communist Party Member of Parliament, and then with a majority of right-wing MPs, to stigmatize the wearing of burqa and niqab inside state schools, offices of public administration and other public services. This move was echoed and amplified by the President of the Republic in a speech before the Congress – an exceptional meeting of both Houses of Parliament – at Versailles.

It was surprising to see Nicolas Sarkozy wearing the mantle of secularism. In fact, for years he has been insisting on the “necessary position” of religions in society and public life.

A Parliamentary fact finding mission is to publish a report on this issue.

What is secularism?

Secularism is neither a philosophy nor a life-stance; it is a



Burqa-clad students in France – Courtesy Internet

mode of political organization of public institutions. Through the separation of religions and the state (1905 Law), its purpose is to separate institutionally the domain of administration and public services from the citizen’s private domain.

As a principle of political organization, secularism is applied to institutions and not to individuals. This clear distinction, implemented through the Law of July 1, 1901, on the freedom of association and the Law of December 9, 1905, safeguards the absence of interference of metaphysical concepts in the public domain in order to better guarantee the freedom of opinion and behaviour in the private domain.

In this sense, it is logically republican and secularist to ban all signs of religious membership in state schools and public services. That was the purpose of the 1886 Goblet Law, the 1905 Law and the 1936 and 1937 circulars signed by Jean Zay. On the other hand, the law cannot dictate specific attire in the private domain, or any other behaviour, so long as they are not dangerous to other people's lives.

We cannot fight one form of totalitarianism by replacing it with another form of totalitarianism.

Undoubtedly, the wearing of the burqa or the niqab is a symbol of oppression, to the extent that it is imposed. And yet, how is the wearing of the burqa by a few Muslim women more oppressive than a Roman Catholic priest wearing a cassock or a monk in a frock or a nun with a cornet, some Jews with a schtreimel, a spodik or in a caftan?

We must remember that dictators have always been willing to impose a life stance and the wearing of specific garments. In 1872, in Poland then occupied by Russia, Tsar Alexander II banned Jews from wearing sidelocks and long mantles (their traditional clothing). Napoleon's Civil Code banned women from wearing trousers/pants. From 1967 to 1974, in Greece, the "Colonels" banned short haircuts and miniskirts. History is full of these totalitarian attempts to run everybody's life.

"When fanaticism is in the service of an ignoble cause, we can regret, we must fight, although we can understand – intellectually – because this is a coherent system where causes and effects, aims and means correspond like a perfectly adjusted jigsaw puzzle. But when fanaticism is in the service of a cause, however noble, it degrades and disqualifies ipso facto this cause which it pretends to serve and promote. Why? Because Man is a complex being, capable of slaughtering his fellow citizens in the name of love, putting them in chains in the name of liberty, driving them into madness in the name of reason, and in a nutshell, maintaining the reign of terror in the name of virtue" (Alain Graesel, past Grand Master of Grande Loge de France).



Participants at the Congress listening closely



Burqa, cassock, caftan, all those are imposed articles of clothing to standardize the lives of the people who wear them and *"every uniform is a livery"* (Ferdinand Buisson). Why then make a distinction between clothing oppressions? Why ban one article of clothing and allow the others?

In defence of democratic liberties

"Freedom is always in defence of the freedom of those who think differently" (Rosa Luxembourg).

First, there is the ban on one article of clothing, but what will come next? There was a time when it was forbidden to kiss in the street. Are we to be taught the goose step?

We are living in a society where Orwell's Big Brother regime of 1984 is almost a nursery tale. We are put on files, watched over, controlled, inspected and searched on a daily basis. Through computer systems, those who own the network and the political power are able to know everything about us. Undoubtedly, listening to the BBC in 1942 was less risky than surfing the internet today, as far as the privacy of one's opinions is concerned.

And are we to be told which article of clothing is banned and which is not? Insidiously, with this media campaign, a moral order which does not tell its name is being built. This means single thought, we are told what is politically correct. Society is being formatted.

After racial profiling¹ or *"driving while black"*, shall we see the offence of *"driving while in the wrong article of clothing"*?

This is a neo totalitarian concept. This type of debate took place as early as 1905. What was needed: A law of separation of religions and the state or a law on destruction of religions? Clearly, the political question was raised: a secular state or an Atheist state? The Libre Pensée found itself in favour of separation with Jaurès and with Aristide Briand's proposal: *"Fortunately, law has never been able to reduce to submission neither individuals nor groups of individuals, even less their thought. Any law which would have such a goal would be nothing but a law of persecution and tyranny"*.

In conformity with this democratic tradition, the National Federation of Libre Pensée will examine the findings of the parliamentary probe and, using the above-mentioned principles, will publicly draw its own conclusions.

Adopted unanimously by the 200 delegates from the 81 federated groups represented in the national Congress

¹ The real U.S. crime is "driving while intoxicated". "Driving while Black", or DWB, implies that a motorist may be pulled over by a police officer simply because he or she is black, and then questioned, searched, and/or charged with a trivial offense. The term refers to "racial profiling", which is used by police and other law enforcement officials. Racial profiling is the inclusion of racial or ethnic characteristics in determining whether a person is considered likely to commit a particular type of crime or an illegal act or to behave in a "predictable" manner

The American Humanist Association: Building on Momentum

Maggie Ardiente*

On January 20, 2009, newly elected President Barack Obama in his inaugural speech stated, “For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and non-believers.” For the first time in history, millions of Humanists, atheists, and other freethinkers in the United States were acknowledged as Americans. The American Humanist Association (AHA), the oldest and largest Humanist organization in the United States, is taking advantage of this momentum to grow our movement.

Organized Humanism can be traced back to the formation of the Humanist Fellowship at the University of Chicago, which began publishing the *New Humanist* (the precursor to the AHA’s *Humanist* magazine) in 1928. The successor organization to the Humanist Fellowship was the Humanist Press Association in 1935, the first organized national association of Humanism in the United States. This group would later be recognized as the American Humanist Association and be incorporated in 1941.

Humanism is defined as a progressive philosophy of life that – without theism or other supernatural beliefs – affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. Author Kurt Vonnegut, who served for many years as the AHA’s honorary president, said it best when he said, “I’m a Humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after I am dead.”

The American Humanist Association strives to bring about a progressive society where being “good without god” is an accepted way to live life. We accomplish this through our defense of civil liberties and secular government, by our outreach to the growing number of people without religious belief or preference, and through a continued refinement and advancement of the Humanist worldview. The AHA has over 15,000 members and supporters, over 120 Humanist chapters and affiliates in the United States, and offices in Washington DC and New York.

Over the years, many women and men who embrace Humanism have worked closely with the American Humanist Association. The AHA’s “Humanist of the Year” award has been given to some of our most prominent thinkers and leaders, including Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Joyce Carol Oates, U.S. Representative Pete Stark, Isaac Asimov, Betty Friedan, and Kurt Vonnegut. The AHA’s current honorary president is the prolific author and essayist Gore Vidal.

The AHA is also the publisher of the *Humanist* magazine, which has had a number of writers over the years, including Salman Rushdie, Noam Chomsky, Joyce Carol Oates, Michelle Goldberg, Philip Pullman, and

E.O. Wilson. The *Humanist* remains committed to its core: critical inquiry and social concern from a Humanist perspective, presenting moral dilemmas, exposing various rights abuses, and grappling with the challenges of life in the 21st century, with an eye toward solutions. The *Humanist* appears in thousands of libraries and on national newsstands, with individual readers numbering over 20,000.



Maggie Ardiente

Today, our biggest challenge is: how do we reach out to the 43 million Americans who consider themselves nonreligious? This question launched the American Humanist Association’s advertising campaign in 2005 to promote Humanism and reach out to other Humanists. The AHA first began with full-page advertisements in progressive magazines like *The Nation* and *American Prospect*, then later published ads in major newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

The AHA’s first Humanist billboard in 2008, which appeared near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, garnered significant press and controversy for its bold statement, “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone.” The AHA later established billboards and sponsored bus advertisements in other cities across the country, with our most recent one declaring “Millions are Good Without God” in Moscow, Idaho.

Our most successful campaign was in December 2008 when the AHA placed an ad on over 200 buses in Washington DC. The ad stated, “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake.” The campaign led to televised appearances on CNN Headline News, Fox News, *The O’Reilly Factor*, and numerous national radio shows and local television stations. The AHA plans to repeat our campaign this November with a new slogan that’s sure to generate thought and controversy.

Protecting the Jeffersonian wall separating church and state is the AHA’s biggest focus. As a member of the Secular Coalition for America and with a lobbyist on staff, the AHA is actively lobbying leaders on Capitol Hill for a place at the table. We recently joined over fifty other civil liberties organizations calling for the withdrawal of a 2007 Office of Legal Counsel memo that inaccurately interprets the Religious Freedom Restoration Act as allowing religious organizations to discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring.

While church-state separation is our biggest focus, several adjuncts fly under the banner of the AHA to not only serve Humanists but protect the rights of Humanists and other secular minorities.

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The Appignani Humanist Legal Center is our official legal arm, providing assistance to defend the constitutional rights of secularists by directly challenging clear violations of the law where it relates to the Establishment Clause. Most recently, the American Humanist Association has filed an amicus brief in a Supreme Court case in support of the removal of a Christian cross on Sunrise Rock in the Mojave National Preserve in California and challenged unconstitutional religious content and remove “so help me God” in the presidential inauguration ceremonies. The AHLC also drafted a complaint challenging Section 107 of the IRS code, commonly known as the Parsonage Allowance, which allows churches to provide a tax-free housing allowance to pastors, a benefit that unconstitutionally favors religion.

Recognizing the need for education rooted in reason and science, the Kochhar Humanist Education Center is developing Humanist curriculum for local chapters interested in establishing children’s educational programs, with critical thinking at its core. With pilot programs in Portland, Oregon and Albuquerque, New Mexico, the KHEC is introducing courses for children on science, critical thinking, and Humanist values. The AHA recently petitioned the Texas School Board to halt any changes to the social studies curriculum that would portray the United States as a “Christian nation.” The petition is currently at over 2,000 signatories.

The Appignani Bioethics Center, with offices in New York, works with the United Nations and other government and community leaders to bring a more scientific and Humanist perspective to bioethical issues like stem cell research, reproductive rights, and the alleviation of world hunger. The Center’s director, Dr. Ana Lita, is also a visiting scholar at the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine. The Center’s senior advisor, Dr. Jonathan Moreno, was selected to be the head of the transition team for President Barack Obama’s Presidential Council on Bioethics.

Other adjuncts that serve Humanists in the United States include:

- The Feminist Caucus, a group of both women and men working toward the advancement of women’s rights and equality, keeping us involved in women’s rights issues;
- Our newly formed LGBT Humanist Council, a forum for LGBT Humanists from across the country to exchange ideas on local organizing, find support in coming out as LGBT (and a Humanist), and to speak out with one voice on issues of concern to the LGBT Humanist community;
- Humanist Charities, which specializes in aid and action, particularly in response to major natural disasters abroad and at home. It’s an opportunity for members to support direct charitable work that does not involve religious proselytizing;
- The Humanist Society, which certifies Humanist celebrants, who can conduct nonreligious weddings,

memorials, baby-naming, and other life cycle ceremonies, and provides resources for individuals seeking nonreligious ceremonies.

- The International Darwin Day Foundation, which promotes public education about science and the defense of evolution in public school science classes, in addition to hosting the largest database of Darwin Day events online.

For too long, Humanists were likened to an elite club of intellectuals that talked more than acted. In today’s world, we are seeing a change with many Humanists, atheists and other nontheists standing up and doing their best to improve society.

Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, states, “In past decades we’ve seen some in our movement sometimes in the closet, willing to ‘pass’ as something we’re not in order not to offend, and to gain a sense of acceptance – a false sense of acceptance in my opinion. It’s time to come out of the closet.”

One of the major challenges of the freethought movement was the lack of cooperation between the dozens of disparate secular, freethought, atheist, skeptic and Humanist organizations. Today these groups have formed into a movement that aims to raise the positive profile of all of us, and seek a place at the table so that we can advocate for our views. The annual Heads Meeting, a gathering of the leaders of national nontheist organizations, brings together groups like the American Ethical Union and the Society for Humanistic Judaism with Atheist Alliance International and the Secular Coalition for America. All involved are benefiting by closer collaboration despite differences in our philosophical approaches.

By working together, and helping to unite the freethought movement, we can mobilize for change through public outreach, activism, advocacy, and through efforts to change hearts and minds one person at a time.



A proud moment!

The Council for Secular Humanism

Tom Flynn*

The Council for Secular Humanism is a transnational organization based in the United States. It exists parallel to and independent of national Humanist organizations in various countries and is a specialist member of the IHEU. The Council was founded in 1980 (as the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, or CODESH) and has continually published *Free Inquiry*, the largest-circulation Humanist magazine published in the English language.

At the time of the Council's founding, secular Humanism was being condemned by leaders of America's religious right as "public enemy number one." Philosopher Paul Kurtz, the author of *Humanist Manifesto II*, felt the time was ripe for an organization that would stand up for a specifically secular Humanist agenda anywhere in the world. The Council's first act in 1980 was to publish "A Secular Humanist Declaration," a statement signed by 58 prominent thinkers (later signed by hundreds) which attracted broad media attention. Publication of *Free Inquiry* began immediately thereafter.

Driven by an entrepreneurial method and governed by a compact, self-perpetuating board, the Council hoped to pursue specific objectives more nimbly than groups whose agendas might face annual adjustment by voting memberships. Over the years CODESH gave rise to a broad range of programs, many of which were subsequently taken over by a supporting organization, the Center for Inquiry. In its early years CODESH successfully sued to end tax-funded publication of an annual prayer anthology compiled by the chaplain of the U.S. Senate. It sponsored an undercover investigation of U. S. faith healers' practices, revealing that evangelist Peter Popoff received clandestine radio transmissions from his wife backstage which formed the basis of his startling, seemingly prophetic healing declarations. (This disclosure sidelined Popoff's ministry for several years and inspired a major motion picture, *Leap of Faith* starring Steve Martin.) Also during this period, Council principals offered courtroom testimony and a legal brief that helped to prevent the U. S. court system from categorizing secular Humanism as a religion.

A 1985 conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the University of Michigan refocused scholarly attention on the long-dormant issue of whether Jesus was a historical figure. The conference, which attracted a "who's who" of secular religious scholars, has been cited as a possible catalyst for the formation of the well-known Jesus Seminar by scholars Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan.

Other early initiatives included purchasing and restoring the birthplace of 19th century agnostic orator Robert Green Ingersoll, which has operated since 1993 as America's only freethought museum; catalyzing the founding (by one of its local groups) of the first U. S. summer camp for nonreligious children, now the independently-operated Camp Quest; creating the

International Academy of Humanism, an elective body of 80 world-famed Humanist thinkers and activists; and forming Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS), the world's largest wholly non-religious self-help recovery movement for alcoholics and other addicts.



Tom Flynn

Throughout this period, the Council conducted its own independent Humanist development program, helping to spark the formation of numerous Humanist groups, especially in eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa, many of which became members of the IHEU.

In 1996, under executive director Matt Cherry, the Council shortened its name to its present form. The original name, Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, had sought to differentiate the organization from persons and organizations on the global left with Marxist commitments; following the fall of Communism in Europe this agenda was less urgent and consequently the shorter name "Council for Secular Humanism" was adopted.

Also in 1996, the Council launched a nationwide movement for atheist and Humanist college students, the Campus Freethought Alliance, which grew to include student groups on hundreds of campuses. (This program now operates as Center for Inquiry / *On Campus*). These student groups complemented the Council's long-established network of independent local secular Humanist groups, from time to time numbering as many as 150 across the United States.

By this time the Council was housed in a 20,000 square foot headquarters campus, the Center for Inquiry / *Transnational*, which hosted frequent public lectures, a variety of adult education programs, a television studio, and the world's largest atheist and Humanist library. Many of the projects housed at this location were originally conceived and launched by the Council, though most are now operated under the auspices of the Center for Inquiry. (In 2005 the headquarters campus was expanded again, now comprising nearly 40,000 square feet.)

In 1999 the Council released *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, a successor to *Humanist Manifesto II* and *A Secular Humanist Declaration* authored by Paul Kurtz. This manifesto ultimately attracted the signatures of hundreds of leading thinkers and activists.

In 2006, the Council responded to the global controversy over a Danish newspaper's late-2005 publication of twelve satirical cartoons purporting to show the Muslim prophet Muhammad. *Free Inquiry* became the first nationwide U.S.-based magazine to publish a selection of the cartoons, launching a notable controversy. Borders, one of the two largest U. S. bookstore chains, withdrew the issue featuring the

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cartoons from its shelves, attracting widespread criticism for perceived censorship. Perhaps more humorously, the largest Canadian bookstore chain censored the issue following the issue containing the cartoons, attracting criticism and ridicule from Canadian media. When the squabbling was over, *Free Inquiry* had gained additional newsstand circulation and its offices remained un-bombed. Shortly thereafter, the influential *Harper's Magazine* (members of whose staff had been in touch with *Free Inquiry* staff during the censorship controversy) published a cover story in which all 12 of the "Muhammad" cartoons were reprinted and insightfully analyzed by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Jewish-American graphic novelist Art Spiegelman.

The Council also has a proud history of legal activism. In the middle 90s it created a small national network of volunteer church-state attorneys, the First Amendment Task Force. Now connected to the Center for Inquiry, the First Amendment Task Force has contributed *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) briefs in most of the most important church-state cases considered by American courts over the past several years. For its part, the Council for Secular Humanism is now involved as a litigant in an ongoing legal challenge to a program under which the U. S. state of Florida channels public funds to Christian organizations that deliver openly sectarian social services.

In 2009 and 2010, the Council will observe its thirtieth anniversary. Volume 30, Issue #1 of *Free Inquiry* will be published in November 2009, featuring the magazine's first overall redesign since 1997. On October 7-10, 2010, the Council will hold its thirtieth anniversary conference at one of the grandest hotels in Los Angeles, the art deco Millennium Biltmore Hotel.

Since its founding, the Council's executive directors have included Jean Millholland (well known to IHEU old-timers), Tim Madigan, Matt Cherry, Ed Buckner, David Koepsell, and (in 2009) Tom Flynn. Ms. Millholland is now retired; Dr. Madigan now teaches philosophy at a college in Rochester, New York; Mr. Cherry is now International Representative of the IHEU; Mr. Buckner is now president of another U.S. organization, American Atheists; and Dr. Koepsell now teaches at a university in the Netherlands. *Free Inquiry's*



Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum



The CSH team

editors over the same period have included Paul Kurtz, Tim Madigan, Lewis Vaughn, and (since 2000) Tom Flynn.

Since its founding the Council has always been closely identified with the views and policies of its founder, philosopher Paul Kurtz. It is thus worth noting that between June 2008 and June 2009, the boards of directors of the quintet of organizations including the Council for Secular Humanism and its supporting organization, the Center for Inquiry, have established a new governance model designed to prepare the organizations for a lengthy future. Paul Kurtz has been named Chair Emeritus; while he continues to serve on the board of directors, he is no longer the final arbiter of policy. The new Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism is Ronald A. Lindsay, a philosopher and attorney who has been active with the Council since its early legal campaigns during the 1980s.

Many of the programs launched under the Council's auspices over the last twenty-nine years are now operated by the Center for Inquiry, including the libraries, adult education project, student outreach project, television studio, and others. But the Council maintains a significant portfolio of activities under its own auspices. It continues to publish *Free Inquiry* and an associate membership newsletter, *Secular Humanist Bulletin*. It operates the International Academy of Humanism, SOS, African Americans for Humanism, and a small charitable outreach that seeks to aid victims of natural disasters ("acts of God"). It continues to operate the Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum and has become a leading interpreter of radical reform history in the area surrounding the Museum site (see www.freethought-trail.org). After a brief fallow period, it has reactivated its local groups program across the United States. And its Web site, www.secularhumanism.org, will undergo a complete update and redesign in late 2009 or early 2010.

Humanism in New Zealand

Bill Cooke*

The February 2009 issue of *IHN* ran an article by Iain Middleton which, under the title 'Humanism in New Zealand', was in fact only an account of the Humanist Society's activities from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. I outlined some of the problems with the article in a letter published in the May 2009 issue, and here would like to offer a broader account of Humanism in New Zealand.

New Zealand is one of the most Humanistic societies on earth, with the unfortunate by-product of it not being much concerned with Humanism. The nationwide census of 2006 revealed a post-Christian society in the making. In answering the question on religious affiliation, 1,297,104, or 31.5 percent of respondents, described themselves as having no religion and a further 295,059 people exercised their right to object to the question. And the vast majority of those who acknowledged some religious affiliation did so in a purely nominal way. At the end of the twentieth century regular churchgoers accounted for little more than about 15% of the population and those who attend monthly or more are fewer still.

Most mainline denominations are experiencing consistent decline in membership. Regular churchgoers are usually in the older age cohorts with those in their twenties being only half as likely to attend church as those over sixty. The Church of England, once the heavyweight of the New Zealand religious scene, has shrunk the most noticeably. In 1926 575,731, or 40 percent of the census respondents claimed adherence to the Church of England, but in 2001, despite a fourfold increase in the country's population, Anglican numbers were just 584,793, or about 21 percent.

While 67 percent of New Zealanders believe in some sort of god, only 47 percent believed in a soul and 43 percent in life after death. Sin, hell and the devil all registered much lower levels of adherence. And of those who made some profession of belief in god, a significant proportion attended church never or very rarely. Religious expression, like most other commitments, is expressed in Humanistic terms of bettering life in the here-and-now.

The secular nature of New Zealand society is also apparent in the country's politics. Few cabinet ministers swear their oath of allegiance on the Bible. At the time of writing, neither the current prime minister, nor the leader of any other party in parliament is demonstrably religious. The prime minister's agnosticism, and that of his predecessor Helen Clark, is public knowledge and has not been a relevant issue for the vast majority of electors.

Since the late 1980s there has been an attempt to construct an American-style Religious Right in New Zealand politics, but it has failed to make any sort of breakthrough. In 1996 two right-wing Christian parties

formed a coalition to exploit the new proportional representation system New Zealand had adopted, but failed to get the required five percent threshold to be represented in parliament. That coalition soon broke up acrimoniously into its respective parts. The Christian Heritage party was the more uncompromising of the two and rarely rose above two percent approval ratings. In 2005 Graham Capill, its leader from 1989 until 2003, was found guilty of the sexual exploitation of underage girls.

By contrast the United Future Party has been at pains to describe itself as a secular party of the political centre. On this platform it did well in the 2002 election, securing 6.9 percent of the vote and ensuring a place in parliament. But the party soon squandered its election night vote with a series of muddles and scandals, and its voter rating dropped down to levels experienced by the Christian Heritage Party. In July 2003 a still more radical fundamentalist party called Destiny New Zealand was formed. It seized attention with a march through Wellington in October 2004 in which its male marchers wore black shirts. In 2008 the party, having learned from American stealth techniques renamed itself the Family Party. It and another attempt, called the Kiwi Party, polled pitifully.

New Zealand has no Established Church, and among the intellectually oriented of the mostly English and Scottish immigrants who created the modern state in the nineteenth century, the three most influential thinkers were Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, each of whom was a staunch agnostic. The influence of these thinkers, and the ascendancy at the time of agnosticism and secularism were well timed to have a formative influence on the developing New Zealand psyche, which can reasonably be said to be Humanistic. Some of the most eminent of the early prime ministers of New Zealand were freethinkers of one kind or another. Perhaps the earliest premier whose views were unorthodox was Alfred Domett (1811-1877), who had a formative role in developing the secular education system at provincial level and which was later used as a model for the creation of a national secular education system in 1877. Domett served as premier between 1862 and 1863. Later in the century were John Ballance (1839-1893) and Sir Robert Stout (1844-1930). Ballance was influential, even after his death, in the long-lived Liberal government of 1890 to 1912, which did a lot to shape the growing sense of New Zealand identity. Another prominent Liberal prime minister of



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the time, Richard Seddon (1845-1906) actually described himself as a Humanist in 1906, by which he probably meant a generalised reformist humanitarianism. Into the twentieth century, two of the country's most significant prime ministers, Michael Joseph Savage and Peter Fraser were rationalists. Savage (1872-1940) led the Labour Party to a landslide victory in 1935 and enacted a series of sweeping economic and social reforms which helped drag the country out of the Depression and build a comprehensive welfare state. Savage was followed by Peter Fraser (1884-1950), another rationalist, who solidified Savage's reforms and led the country through the Second World War. Fraser also helped found the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

The longest-lasting issue that divides religious from secular-minded New Zealanders is the role of religion in schools.

The notion of free, secular and compulsory education is as old as government in New Zealand. The formula was introduced into the province of Nelson in the 1840s and developed by Alfred Domett into a model the rest of the country used when it developed a national education policy in 1877, after the demise of the provincial form of government. The 1877 Education Act was passed by a coalition of viewpoints. As well as the small groups of agnostics and Jews there were a large number of nominally religious people who were anxious to create conditions whereby no one religion would exercise unchallenged control in the nation's schools. The safest solution, they reasoned, was that no religions should enter the schools.

Church groups have remained unreconciled to this legislation ever since it was enacted. In 1897 they managed to insert a half-hour slot of religious instruction, during which time the school was deemed to be closed. The questionable legality of this stratagem was in dispute until it was finally legitimised in the 1964 Education Act. Religious instruction has to avoid any form of indoctrination and disparagement of other religions. But in practice both of these go on. Bible in Schools, as this programme is commonly known, only

happens in primary schools, which teach children up to ten years of age, and only at schools that want it – it is not compulsory for all New Zealand schools. Parents have the opportunity to withdraw their children from the programme, and many do. Other issues which Humanists have played a part in include the debate over voluntary euthanasia, capital punishment, blasphemy laws and religious pluralism.

The secular nature of New Zealand has posed a tricky set of problems for the country's Humanist movement. In a society as Humanistically-inclined as New Zealand, very few people feel the need to belong to an organisation which caters for them as non-religious people. Most people are as unmoved by sharp distinctions between secular and religious as they are by sectarian divisions. The movement has responded in various ways. The five principal freethought organisations are divided by their respective attitudes toward religion, in particular the degree to which it should be subjected to criticism.

The Skeptics organisation is based in Christchurch and focuses on pseudoscience in medicine, the media and politics. It generally says little about religion. The Skeptics have the best media presence of all the freethought groups in the country. Criticism of religion, promoting the Humanist alternative, and defending the secular state has become the main preserve of the Auckland-based NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists. This is the oldest and most active of the secular Humanist organisations. A smaller Humanist Society, restricted to the Wellington region, deals with similar issues. The main organisation catering for religious Humanism is the Sea of Faith. This movement was founded by the heterodox English churchman Don Cupitt in 1984 on the strength of a book by that title. It was transplanted into New Zealand shortly afterwards by Lloyd Geering (1918 -), the country's best known theologian, a radical religious Humanist. There are also small Unitarian communities which cater to a similar constituency. There is a significant cross-over of members between these organisations but, as yet, little real co-operation.

The Radical Humanist Movement in India

Vinod Jain*

The Origin

The history of Indian Radical Humanist Association can be traced back to 1920 when M N Roy, the founder of the new Humanist Movement in India started his long and arduous efforts from Moscow to give a social content to the Nationalist Movement for India's freedom from British rule. The movement gathered momentum after Roy's arrival in India at the end of 1930, but much more so after his release from jail in 1936. Thereafter, groups of intellectuals agreeing with the thoughts of M N Roy, in several cities in India, came together and formed the League of Radical Congressmen in 1939.

Inaugurating the Conference in Pune, in western India near Bombay, Roy stated: "The welfare of the



Vinod Jain

nation as a whole is conditional upon certain revolutionary changes in its social structure, and those changes cannot be brought about until political power has been captured by the masses.” Stating the goal he said “We stand for revolution inside the Congress, a revolution in the outlook, a revolution in methods, a revolution in its structure – so that it can become the leader of the revolution which must take place in the country to establish freedom needed for the progress and prosperity of the Nation.”

Development

India’s Radical Humanists regard freedom as the birthright of every human being. In Hitler’s onslaught on Europe the Radicals saw the danger not only to the freedom of Europe, but to that of the whole world including India. For the Radicals the Second World War was an anti-Fascist war right from the beginning.

Considering Fascism as the greatest menace to human civilization, the Radicals were helping the British in their war effort. This despite the fact, that the Radicals wanted the British to leave India as any other Indian. That is to say the menace of Fascism was not a thing to be ignored, despite the bad name it brought to the Radicals who had to suffer the taunts of lay Indians who could not understand and appreciate the menace of Fascism in far away Europe.

At the same time the Radicals were continuously engaged in ideological and philosophical explorations. These explorations eventually crystallized themselves in the form of the philosophy of New Humanism. This was endorsed at a conference in Bombay in 1946.

The idea, that society has to be reorganized, and that it has to pass through a comprehensive and an all-embracing revolution was already accepted by Radicals as Marxists. Having seen the extreme form of nationalism transforming itself into Fascism, the Radicals realized that Nationalism was based on a collective ego which could lead to the sacrifice and slavery of the individual.

The Thought

The necessity to understand life in a comprehensive sense was realised. Man should use his power of reason, his rationality, which is inherent in him / her. Scientists like Charles Darwin have enabled man to understand himself and to know that he is a part of this cosmic universe. He has evolved in the natural process spread over millions of years. Man is essentially rational. The innate rationality of man is the only guarantee of a harmonious social order, which will also be a moral order, because morality is a rational function. Only man’s innate rationality can make man moral, spontaneously and voluntarily. Reason is the only sanction of morality. Morality is an appeal to conscience. Conscience is no longer mystical or mysterious.

The axiology (the theory of value judgments) of New Humanism deduces all values from the supreme value of freedom. Freedom for us is the progressive removal of all impediments to the integrated growth of every human being. New Humanism holds that, for creating a new world for liberty and social justice, revolution must



IRHA meets college students

go beyond an economic reorganisation of society. The urge for freedom being the basic incentive of life, the purpose of all rational human endeavour must be to strive for the removal of social conditions which restrain the unfolding of potentialities of man. New/Radical Humanism will lead to cosmopolitan commonwealth of spiritually free individuals, and will not be limited to the borders of national states – Capitalist, Fascist, Socialist, Communist, or of any other kind – which will gradually disappear under the impact of a New Renaissance.

The whole world is witness to the fast developments in the fields of science and technology. On account of these developments the old structures based on nationalism and established religions are shaking and dwindling. These would be obsolete sooner or later. The only philosophy and way of life, which may keep humanity alive and together, is the philosophy of Radical or Cosmopolitan Humanism and organised democracy with freedom of individuals as its foundation.

The Radicals and their Movement

Eminent intellectuals and public figures adopted the credo of New Humanism. These people made their mark in their respective fields as thinkers, leaders, writers, educationists, scholars, social workers, trade unionists, journalists, advocates, medical practitioners, judges, economists, freedom fighters, film producers etc.

Some ten magazines on Humanism, in different Indian languages, are published regularly. *The Radical Humanist*, in English, is one of them. It is being published uninterruptedly for the last 73 years.

When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency in June 1975 and suspended civil liberties, the Radical Humanists stood up as one man to form the organisation ‘Citizens For Democracy’ (CFD) in cooperation with other democratically inclined individuals and groups. The CFD fought, in whatever little way it could, the onslaught on India’s democracy.

Subsequently, the Humanist Movement in India gradually ran out of steam. The Radicals could not adjust themselves to changed circumstances. They had started as part of the freedom movement. After freedom was attained and M N Roy was no more, the Radicals could not take up new challenges. The Radicals failed dismally to attract and induct people of the younger generation to carry on the torch of the Humanist



A young Humanist recruit

Movement in the new environment of a free India. And as earlier Humanists were fading away with time, and newer ones were not to be seen, very few were left to attend to activities.

It was in these circumstances, that in the July 2009 conference, a new board of the Indian Radical Humanist Association (IRHA) was constituted. This board at the

suggestion of its new president (Vinod Jain) agreed to launch a youth programme. The programme has been launched in September 2009 in a college in the pink city of Jaipur in the northern state of Rajasthan. There is a lot of enthusiasm about it already. Hopefully, it will grow reasonably well as the programme progresses from college to college, from state to state.

The youth programme picks up issues which are fundamental to our society, culture, civilization and history. These issues are discussed by the youth, questioned by them and answered by them publicly. Even though senior people are around, they do not lecture at all.

The new youth programme, however, is facing a problem. When the new board of IRHA took over, it did not have anything in its coffers.

India's Humanist movement has the potential to become the largest Humanist movement in the world if it is not held up for lack of funds.

The idea is to encourage the youth to start thinking about the fundamental socio-cultural issues of the Indian society. If that gets going, the movement gets going.

A Visit to Alva Academy in Scotland

*Iba Brayne**

In August 2008, the Humanist Academy's (HA) course on Humanism was officially available to all secondary schools throughout Scotland as part of the curriculum for Religious and Moral-Philosophical Studies. Since then, the Academy's practitioners have been invited to various schools across the country to give voice to the course material, to enliven the written word with personal experience and to further explain Humanism, specifically its naturalistic approach to some thorny moral subjects the pupils will tackle in their end-of-year exams.

In mid September 2009 two of us went to Alva Academy, a secondary school housed in a contemporary and spacious building nestling at the foot of the majestic and ancient Ochil hills of Clackmannanshire in central Scotland, where the quality of the air is a treat for any city dweller's lungs.

There were around 70 pupils gathered from the relevant classes, the youngest were about 13/14 and the oldest about 17/18. Their teachers had invited us there to address any questions or concerns the pupils might still have about the aspects of Humanism they had been studying, so we encouraged them to ask as many questions as they wanted and to feel free to disagree with any of the views we expressed. We explained what Humanism was, (not a religion, but a worldview), and went into some detail about what is meant by a naturalistic outlook, specifically, how Humanists, Atheists and Brights favour natural explanations about the world and reject any supernatural notions. We were careful to define each position as clearly as possible because it would be the first time that many of these young people would have heard

someone speak so frankly from a naturalistic or atheist perspective. The teacher explained that the pupils would be examined soon on particular subjects (Medical Ethics, Euthanasia, Abortion, Stem Cell Research, Gender and Science) and had asked that we give the 'Humanist stance' on these. We had to repeatedly point out that since Humanism doesn't come with prescriptive rules, there isn't such a stance. So, we explained that Humanists take a particular approach to all moral, social and political issues, one based on knowledge, evidence and compassion for our fellow humans. We emphasised the role of evidence in all matters, especially in issues where there might be objections that could stall advances in technology or medicine that might help improve the lives for millions of people presently suffering.



Iba Brayne

During the discussion on Pregnancy Termination, we had a slight difference of opinion but the teacher was pleased that the pupils were able to witness firsthand that Humanists don't always agree on all issues. The talk on abortion led to another teacher starting an interesting discussion about how we could draw an arbitrary line between a potential human with no rights, and a human baby with rights. There followed a lot of exchanges on the matter of potentiality, (potential doctor, potential millionaire, etc) and we pointed out that for practical

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reasons societies had to deal with actualities rather than potentialities.

At times, the questions could be tricky, including: Should we show compassion towards embryos? Why don't infertile couples adopt poor, uncared for children rather than having expensive IVF treatment? We answered all of them as best we could. After giving our views on Euthanasia, we asked for a show of hands from those who agreed with the Humanist view and most hands went up. However, one girl wanted to explain why she disagreed and stoutly defended her own view that we should not interfere with life, instead let it run its natural course – we left it at that.

We didn't have time to cover all the subjects in any detail and the issue of God or religion was hardly mentioned. All the young people at Alva were well-behaved and attentive. They asked intelligent and pertinent questions. They didn't challenge us strongly, perhaps because they agreed with our viewpoints or because they were too polite, but they still had plenty to

say, and their questions made for some stimulating discussion. We were glad to be invited to the school, and I think the teachers and students appreciated us coming as they promised to have us back soon. We were delighted to notice that as part of the pupils' studies on Humanism they had made a collage of their thoughts on Humanist values on the wall outside the classroom.

So we thought it important to let people in other parts of the world know that the concept of Humanism is not only making headway in Scotland, it is actively thriving. Humanist principles and values are being discussed in schools up and down the country, and its philosophy is now an academic subject that pupils can make part of their formal education.

Our next visit is to an equally delightful school in Perthshire, this time to a group of younger children in a primary school. For that visit we have chosen the subjects of morality and responsibility and we are preparing a light and enjoyable (yet thought-provoking) presentation.

Nigerian Humanist Movement

The Nigerian Humanist Movement was founded in 1996 to promote Humanism, defend secularism and provide a sense of community to all non religious and freethinking Nigerians – atheists, skeptics, rationalists, agnostics and freethinkers. Nigeria is a deeply religious society. And in most cases people relate, interact and marry along religious lines. Religious affiliation becomes a decisive factor when one is seeking employment, doing a business or wants to be admitted into a school or university. Those who do not profess any religion are treated as second class citizens. So in Nigeria most non religious people are in the closet. They lack any association or community they can call their own. The rights of non religious people are not recognised. The voice and interests are not represented at public debates and discourse. So NHM was formed to fulfil this important need – to defend the rights and interests of Humanists and the general public and to realise a Humanistic society.

In 1998 NHM started organising informal meetings at the University of Ibadan. The meeting served as a forum to present Humanism, publicise the Humanist outlook and recruit new members. In 2001 NHM with the support of an American Humanist group, the Council for Secular Humanism, organised the first International Humanist conference in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2001 NHM has organised other successful conferences in Ikenne in 2004 and in Benin in 2006.

In 2007 and 2008 NHM's conferences were held in Port Harcourt and Owerri respectively. These conferences have been used to bring Humanist perspectives to national issues and to nurture and establish local chapters and campus groups.

Since its inception NHM has taken part in several campaigns against anti personnel landmines, child labour, female genital mutilation, ritual killing, witchcraft, caste discrimination, *shari'a* law and homophobia. Since 2002 NHM has organised the World Humanist Day lecture. The World Humanist Day is celebrated on June 21. But NHM celebrates it at any time of the year with a lecture. Each year NHM invites a scholar to discuss the ideas of a Humanist. Or it invites a Humanist to discuss and share his or her thoughts and experiences. In 2002 the World Humanist Day Lecture was delivered by Prof Michael Afoloyan who discussed the life and times of Tai Solarin. The lecture was delivered in 2003 by Prof Agwonorobo Eruvbetine, in 2004 by Dr Enyeribe Onuoha, in 2005 by Prof Eskor Toyo, in 2006 by Prof Nkeonye Otakepor, in 2007 by Patrick Naagbantton, in 2008 by Dr Jide Akeredolu. Mr Ikechukwu Okechukwu has been confirmed to deliver the lecture this year.

In recognition of its achievements and efforts in the promotion Humanism, human rights and freethought, NHM has won three awards: the International Freidenker award(2005), Rainbow Humanist Award(2007) and Community Cooperation Award(2008). In a country plagued by poverty, ignorance, religious fanaticism and superstition, NHM will continue to work and campaign for intellectual awakening, social reform, cultural rebirth and renewal.

Leo Igwe*



Leo Igwe

*Leo Igwe is IHEU International Representative, Africa

How to behave towards believers

Harold Hillman*

Changes in the last 50 years

When I was a boy, few people questioned the established religion. It was not respectable to do so. It could get you into trouble at school, and could even damage your career prospects. Nowadays, in most advanced countries, the shoe is on the other foot. Religious people feel that what they call secularism has taken over, and are often reluctant to admit their affiliation. I heard recently that teachers on the Alpha course were encouraged not to mention God and Jesus too frequently. However, it is simply not true that secularism has taken over. Would that it had.

Disillusionment

To us, secularism is a positive belief in a society whose morals do not depend upon supernatural theology.

Unfortunately, most people in advanced countries do not believe in secularism – they have lost belief in gods and religion. They do not feel that religion is relevant to modern living, and are not interested. Very often, they have become disillusioned with political parties, ideologies, politics, politicians, religion, abstract ideas and even atheism. Their main pursuits are consumerism and hedonism, which in no way can be defined as secularism or atheism.

Atheists have two attitudes to religion

I do not wish to define the terms atheism, rationalism, secularism, humanism, freethinking, brightness, or indeed, not so brightness. Broadly speaking, their adherents have two main attitudes to religions and their followers. One attitude is that religion in the past has done so much damage to people and societies, and is liable to continue to do so, that it is the duty of every man and woman of good will to fight and try to destroy it. The other attitude is that its theology and morals are so flawed that, irrespective of its continuing power in the world, we should ignore it. Instead, we should use all our efforts to develop our own ethics and morality, and allow religion to wither on the vine. We should permit it to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. I believe that these two attitudes, or variations of them, account for most of the beliefs of modern atheists.

What religious people believe in

We all know decent people such as, nurses, clergy, bus drivers, train drivers, postmen, lawyers, gas men, rich men, poor men and beggars, – both atheists and believers, – who rarely transgress the laws. They want to live normal lives in reasonable comfort in peaceful societies. Most Christians are liable to believe some of the following:

- (i) a god exists and is all good;
- (ii) he created us and the world;
- (iii) he gave us free will to pursue good, or evil aims;
- (iv) he knows and cares about what we do;
- (v) he expects worship and prayer;

- (vi) he had a son without sexual intercourse;
- (vii) he was god before he was born;
- (viii) god designed us and controls us, yet his son was martyred for doing what he had made us do, and knew what we were going to do beforehand.



Harold Hillman

Moslems

Adherents of Islam believe that:

- (i) Mohammed, though illiterate, dictated the Koran;
- (ii) all women are inferior to men and should obey them;
- (iii) homosexuals should be punished;
- (iv) people of other and no religions are inferior to Moslems, and may be discriminated against;
- (v) Moslems have a duty to convert people of all other religions to Islam, by force, if necessary.

Hindus

Devout Hindus believe that:

- (i) when they die, they will be reincarnated to another animal, depending on their behaviour during life;
- (ii) some animals such as monkeys, elephants and cows are gods, and even their excrement is holy;
- (iii) bathing in the polluted River Ganges will bring them salvation throughout their lives;
- (iv) prayer and pilgrimage work.

Jews

Orthodox Jews believe that:

- (i) god chose them above all other people;
- (ii) he concluded an agreement with them by cutting off the foreskins of all newly born males;
- (iii) the world is less than 6,000 years old;
- (iv) adult men and women should cover their heads all day long;
- (v) all animals then alive were saved from a flood by embarking in pairs on one boat;
- (vi) every word and letter of the five books of Moses and the Prophets is literally true.

Some beliefs are harmless

I have given a few examples of probably sincerely held beliefs of four religions, which adherents of other religions, and atheists find ludicrous. Most of these beliefs are harmless, if they do not impinge on other people. Obviously, atheists believe that any human being has a right to believe in anything they want, whether it is logical, or illogical. We also hold that we have a right to disagree with the consensus view about anything.

How should atheists behave?

This brings us to the important question, 'How should an atheist behave to a sincere believer?' We respect all human beings, because they are human, however irrational, nonsensical, or incredible their views appear to us to be. Many religious people allege that because we

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disagree profoundly with the tenet of their religion, that means that we wish to destroy them. This is absolutely untrue, and is a slander on all atheists.

Do we have a duty to spread our beliefs?

Is it our duty to try to correct mistaken views? Is it a duty to be missionaries for our causes? I believe that it is. If you are an Atheist, Christian, Trotskyist, Conservative, Fascist or Seventh Day Adventist, you must believe that, if everyone in the world adopted your view, it would make the world a better place. Why should you embrace a particular view if you did not believe that? Thus, it is the duty of anyone who identifies with a particular view to try to convert other people to it. Of course, that does not justify force or coercion to persuade them.

Religious people sometimes need their beliefs

On the other hand, if a grieving person wants to believe that a dying friend will eventually go to an after-world, if a severely ill patient believes in the power of prayer, if a

lonely man thinks that God is caring for him, I believe that it would be thoroughly unkind to try to persuade them otherwise.

Discussions with theologians

If one were having a discussion with a cardinal or an ayatollah, who spends all his life formulating and justifying his religion, one has a duty to debate his theology and ethics uncompromisingly. In my view, our language should not be ridiculous or impolite about their views. Such behaviour gives them a good reason to break off dialogue, and is socially divisive. However, it is wrong to be mealy-mouthed about our differences with theologians, as it would be patronising to think that they should not be able to face up to the misdemeanours and contradictions of their own beliefs.

Summary

In summary, be kind to vulnerable religious people, but argue politely but forcefully with clerics.

Star-Struck

What is the standing of astrology in today's world? There is a tendency on the part of ordinary Humanists to downplay astrology and similar sorts of mysticism, especially in the West. Organized religion is frequently seen as the key threat, and New Age cures, drum circles, star charts and horoscopes can come and go as they please. In India the situation may be a bit different, thanks to the efforts of Abraham Koveer and others to dispel superstition, but I expect the belief that astrology is a fairly harmless quirk continues to hold sway. It is this belief which allowed Ronald Reagan to casually remark in his memoirs that his wife had often visited an astrologer, and for any number of ostensibly secular Indian politicians to publically ensure that their inaugurations fall on "auspicious days."

In this essay, I will attempt to show that while astrology may not be the worst belief in history, it is nonetheless a fundamentally dangerous and absurd belief which puts human rights at risk. Not only is astrology a superstition and an untruth, it is an evil doctrine.

Of course, there are some (31% of Americans, according to the 2003 Harris poll quoted above, and an even greater number of Indians) who would disagree even that astrology is a superstition and a myth. Our first task is to explode this belief.

Scientifically, astrology cannot be defended. We know of no scientific mechanism which would allow the stars and planets to exert any control over our lives or destinies. Even the force of their gravity is too weak to cause any but the most inconceivably tiny wobbles in our orbit. Even if I felt a slight jolt from such wobbles, and I would have to applaud myself for my infinite sensitivity if I did, I don't think this would change the happiness of my future marriage or alter my personal destiny.

Even if we grant the stars a mysterious power of

influence of which we are not aware, this does not change the fact that astrology, as it was classically formulated, cannot make sense alongside our modern understanding of the world.

But those who believe in astrology do not defend it on the grounds of science. To do so would be nearly impossible. Instead, they tend to fall back on four key arguments, all of which I have heard used in discussions. I should mention here that I am not speaking about bearded quacks selling snake-oil, but reasonable, intelligent individuals, who still retain a belief in astrology. These people tend to claim [1] that one oughtn't to dismiss astrology until it has been properly studied, [2] that scientific rationality, while it may be a useful tool for certain disciplines, cannot take full account of the universe, [3] that within a religious framework, anything is possible, and [4] that even if astrology doesn't "work" scientifically, it "works for" people, meaning it is helpful and gives them comfort in life. I will attempt to deal with all four arguments.

Astrology as scientific hypothesis

There are still a courageous few who assert that astrology, even if it hasn't been proven, ought to be discussed and tested and investigated by science. To dismiss the discipline, they argue, is an unscientific thing to do. Every hypothesis must be researched, after all, before it can be scrapped. Astrology, therefore, ought to be seen as a legitimate theory, an alternative explanation for the world, and be tested accordingly.

I believe I've explained above why astrology is

*J.F. Leach**



J.F. Leach

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fundamentally nonsensical within our modern universe. It is based on a conception of the world which is grossly outmoded, and was developed by people with a limited understanding of what the sky and the celestial objects actually were. If there are not really constellations in the universe, if the celestial objects are inconceivably distant, if some of the signs of the zodiac do not even deal with real objects, and so on, astrology cannot be tested. To say that it ought to be is as absurd as saying that modern physicists ought to stop probing the mysteries of quantum mechanics and space-time and focus instead on the alternative theory of gravity which posits that instead of Newton's apple falling to Earth, the apple remained stationary and the Earth rushed up to meet it.

These alternative theories, which cannot be reconciled with our understanding of the world have, in a sense, been tested. Our conception of the universe and its structure, as we commonly accept it, is based on centuries of observing and testing natural phenomena. If astrology does not fit with that conception, then it has already been disproved by science. This does not mean that our current understanding is perfect, by any stretch of the imagination. But to reject it, one must demonstrate why a certain aspect of it does not hold up under rigorous scrutiny, and why one's proposed hypothesis makes for a better explanation. The proponents of astrology have not been able to find flaws in the rational understanding of the universe which can only be explained by their belief. And even when astrologers have been "tested," as in Abraham Kovoov, the well-known Indian rationalist's, famous fraud-proof experiments, they have consistently failed to predict events and answers to questions. Kovoov even reported that the astrologers he tested performed less well, on average, than the laymen and random guessers who formed their competition.

Astrology as impervious to reason

Once the mystics lose the scientific battleground, as they inevitably do, they retreat to one of the oldest and most nonsensical arguments in the book. This is the famous "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio," sort of argument. Its proponents state that scientific rationality, while it may take us quite a ways when dealing with certain phenomena, is just not equipped to deal with the universe as a whole. There are things which reason cannot explain. Our brains are too limited and our reason too puny to comprehend God, the divine forces, the astrological omens, etc. We cannot explain them with science, but we can feel them and grasp them intuitively. So if a large number of people believe in astrology and can "feel" the worth of its doctrines, as many apparently do, it may have some legitimacy.

While such an argument may make sense in the world of Hamlet, where there are ghosts aplenty, in our world, where there is no fraud-proof, experimental evidence for astrology whatsoever, it simply does not. It is always true, of course, that there is more out there than we can understand. Scientists are constantly discovering new aspects of our world which were previously undreamt of. Who would have thought that the majority of the matter in our universe would turn out to be invisible "dark matter?" Who would have believed that matter is being

created and destroyed every second before our eyes by the instantaneous appearance of particles and their anti-particles. All of this boggles the mind and suggests that our reason is limited. To be sure, we do not know everything about the universe.

No scientist in the entire world would claim to know everything, or claim that complete, perfect knowledge is within our grasp. To make the sort of argument outlined above is a grossly unfair characterization of scientific rationalism. It portrays such rationalism as pompous and arrogant, inflated with its own significance. Meanwhile, the mystics come across as humble and wise, perfectly willing to admit the powerlessness of their reason before the divine chaos. None of this, however, is accurate. In fact, rationalists do not claim to be able to take into account the entire world. However, they do claim that reason is our only tool to attempt to do so. We can, of course, balk at the very attempt, as the mystics would prefer. But if we want to make any progress, however stumbling and slight, toward understanding the world, and how we can make it better, we must use reason. It is all we have "to render less/the sum of human wretchedness," as Byron put it. If we abandon our reason, imperfect as it is, then we leave the door open to any untruth. Should we believe in gravity or in stationary apples? A vast universe governed by laws or a bunch of constellations which control our fate? People may "feel" one way or the other about these questions at any given moment. The only way we can decide which is closer to the truth and which is patently false is by using our reason.

Astrology as religion

The next argument is related to the above, but is slightly different. Here, the mystics may concede both of the above points, but they may still seek asylum in the arms of an organized religion. They argue that they have chosen to have faith in a certain tradition, and that while reason may be our best guide to understanding the physical universe which has been set up by God or Brahma or the divine forces, those same cosmic forces may intervene at times to contradict those laws. In the famous Scopes Monkey Trial, Clarence Darrow asked William Jennings Bryan whether or not he believed that Joshua "stopped the sun." Of course, the sun doesn't orbit the Earth, so the whole thing is absurd. But even beyond this point, any halt in the Earth's orbit would necessarily cause an inconceivable global holocaust, which, as far as I know, doesn't happen in the Bible story. Bryan conceded that this was the case when it came to our natural world and its laws, but that God, as creator, could suspend these laws as He saw fit. This constituted a miracle.

The reason that this does not hold water is essentially the same as that given above. We do not form opinions about the natural world and human life willy-nilly. We must use our minds, even if they are imperfect guides, otherwise we might as well "have faith" in anything. If we want to be content and idle in ignorance, then we may have faith without having reasons for our faith, we may have belief without a sound basis for belief. But if we want to solve the world's problems, we need to think logically and coherently, and to use what tools we have, including reason.

Astrology as social worker

This final argument is probably the most persuasive and the most rational, but it is also the most dangerous. It goes something like this: "Even though astrology is false and inaccurate, it gives people hope and comfort. It 'works for' them by giving them a way to understand and cope with their fate, while holding out the possibility of a better tomorrow."

The belief that astrology is essentially harmless may seem persuasive, but in fact, astrology is a highly dangerous doctrine and a social evil. For one thing, there is a great deal of evidence that any untruth is harmful. When people know the truth, they are better able to understand the world around them, as well as their own plight. When people do not know the truth, they are unable to grasp the real conditions of their lives and the problems which beset them. A solution, then, is impossible. So no matter how unpleasant the truth may appear, it is ultimately empowering.

However, astrology is not even a pleasant untruth which we might be tempted to hold on to. Astrology

assures people that they are pawns in a cosmic game. It encourages the belief that humanity has no control over its own fate, and is entirely in the hands of ruthless destiny. It encourages people to accept their doom and to calmly wait, when things are going badly, for a more "auspicious day." It is not an attitude suited to democratic citizens, and it stands in the way of the realization of human rights in this world by denying people the hope of subverting fate, throwing off the shackles of destiny, and seizing hold of dignity and justice for themselves.

Astrology is suited to oppression. Like lotteries and gambling, it encourages the belief that one might rise above one's fellow-sufferers through pure chance. One therefore ignores the plight of those fellow-sufferers, as well as one's own plight, by throwing everything away on a cosmic crap shoot. The alignment of the stars will not solve our problems, and I cannot guarantee that human reason will either, but it is the best we have. Those who discredit its use, astrologers especially, stand in the way of progress the world over.

Hope Nuertey Tawiah: A little piece of rational thinking is dead

Nii Noi Vanderpuye

We honour a man today who was always able to question superstition and strip it bare; make scary religious stories look ordinary; challenge traditional and conservative thinking, and make rational thinking remind us of the greatness in us all.

Hope Nuertey Tawiah lived the last 40 odd years of his life debating and challenging religious oddities that define the life of the conservative African society which shaped his formative years. After several years of intensely studying various literatures on evolution in search of what makes us human, Hope established the Rational Center in Accra to serve as a foundation for the education of a society steeped in religious superstition.

Hope was born 74 years ago into a highly religious family. His father was Presbyterian and mother was Methodist. Both backgrounds kept strong and rigid allegiance to traditional animist beliefs as well. Either way, Hope, like any other African, was virtually imprisoned in deep-seated superstition from the cradle to the grave. Religion and superstition is always embedded in the DNA of an African at birth. This is the society that Hope fancifully wanted to change. Practically impossible, one may dare say. But he defied the odds and took up the challenge.

Hope struggled to elevate Humanism beyond academic exercise. He desperately tried to persuade his compatriots to appreciate the fact that life is what humanity makes of it and enjoyed here on earth. For a society that literally believes that its survival depended on superstition, any attempt to reason otherwise is considered blasphemy.

He, however, spent many years working and frequently had interaction with many like-minded Humanists to find ways of distilling reason and rational thinking. By the mid-1980s, Hope could no longer

contain the burning desire to transform his thoughts into an organised institution. The Rational Center was the starting point. Ironically, the first "disciple" that found wisdom in the philosophy being espoused by Hope was Nii Oto Kwame (now deceased), a traditional chief whose very status depended on rigid superstitious rituals and practices. Together, the two "drafted" Nortey Kwesi Orgle (also deceased), who was Hope's cousin. These three were, arguably, the pioneers of organised Humanism and rational thinking in Ghana. Together, they spent long hours studying, analysing and debating literature received from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). The residence of Hope was virtually turned into a library where books and pamphlets donated by IHEU and the African-Americans for Humanism (AAH) were displayed for public study.

As a student of journalism during the same period, I became a target and a conduit through which the three free-thinkers used to reach fellow students in college.

Even those of us who were not heavyweight thinkers at the time always wished to pillow our craniums a bit more carefully at night after listening to Hope. He made us realise that the gray mass between our ears is quite a treasure!

Hope was passionate about free-thinking. He was restless in propagating the ideas he read about and constantly organised lectures, even if the attendance was not encouraging. The first and biggest breakthrough came sometime in 1989 when Norm Allen Jnr. of the AAH visited the Rational Center and addressed a series of lectures on free-thinking. Subsequently, he persuaded the AAH to sponsor two students from college in Ghana to attend the 1990 IHEU Congress in Brussels. This, he believed, would serve as a learning forum for the students who were being "nurtured" by the Rational

Center to take over the “crusade” of disseminating Humanists’ philosophy. I’m glad to say I was one of the beneficiaries of this scholarship.

Hope had a cherished dream of building a library to house literature on free-thinking which would serve as a center to attract fellow Humanists. Unfortunately, the late Nii Oto Kwame could not fulfill his promise of donating land for this purpose.

The departure of Hope on September 27, 2009, marks the end of the trinity that defied traditional pressures and defined organised free-thinking in Africa. The death of Nortey Kwesi Orgle in 1997 and Nii Oto

Kwame in 2005 respectively, literally derailed the momentum towards building a strong and viable alternative to religion in Ghana.

Hopefully, the death of Hope Tawiah will not mark the end of giving hope to hundreds (probably, thousands) of other free-thinkers spread across Ghana and Africa who are looking for an opportunity to free themselves from religious slavery.

Hope Tawiah lit the flame for Humanist work in Ghana. He always wore glasses of optimism, hoping that the future would see more enlightenment than the past. Others will now have to take up the mantle after his death.

B Premanand: The Ascetic Rationalist

*Babu Gogineni**

Learning that he had terminal cancer of the stomach, and knowing that Basava Premanand, the 79 year old doyen of Indian rationalism, did not have much time left to live, I went to visit him in Coimbatore in South India earlier this year. When I landed, I learnt that Premanand’s younger brother and neighbour, the famous Dayanand, President of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, had died a few hours earlier that day. Saying “Death is a part of life, and we must take it as it comes”, and holding my hand for support, Premanand walked me to Dayanand’s home where his body was lying in state. Standing next to Dayanand’s body, and talking with pride about the half-a-dozen Ph.Ds that his brother had acquired after an education in Santi Niketan, a university set up by Rabindranath Tagore in West Bengal, and of his extraordinary interest in learning new things all the time, Premanand looked at me in the eye and said “He was greater than me, Babu”. It was a single, intimate, unguarded moment in the two decades that I had known him when Premanand revealed that he was aware of his own greatness.

Premanand was not only great, he was also unique. When you first met him, you were struck by what you saw: a short man with a face framed with abundant flowing hair, and usually a cigarette and a glass of South Indian coffee in hand. He looked almost like the Hindu gurus whose miracles he fought fearlessly for nearly four decades.

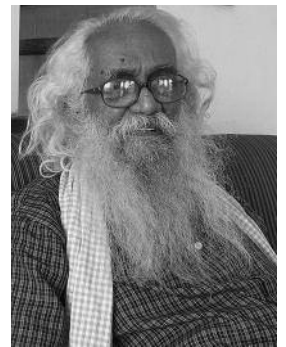
“I am a man in search of miracles,” he would say, and he had been looking for them ever since he and his brother were expelled from school in his 9th standard because of their nationalist views during British colonial rule. He left home at an early age, not wanting to be dependent on his rich Theosophical parents, and wanting to earn his own livelihood. It was an attitude he carried with him throughout his life time, never asking for donations from anyone, though a few benefactors like the industrialist G.D. Naidu always supported his work. As a young man, he joined several religious *ashrams* and stayed with many gurus, hoping to find a ‘true miracle’ – he even joined Satya Sai Baba’s group, India’s most infamous god man and trickster, who heads a religious empire reputedly worth USD 6 Billion.

Premanand never found even one ‘true miracle’, having investigated some 1500 miracle claims, all of which he exposed as fraudulent. But to do this he learnt magic and prestidigitation; he understood how to handle

snakes and scorpions without getting bitten; he learnt how to pierce his body with tridents and hooks; how to pierce his cheek with a rod without it hurting; and how to hold burning camphor in his hand. He practised how to swallow and regurgitate religious symbols, and he taught activists to hang from hooks pierced in their back, and to even pull cars. He learnt, taught and demonstrated the secrets behind the fraudulent miracle claims of god men and gullible believers. He did this so that the general public could understand the scientific principles behind these extraordinary feats, which they attributed to mystic, magical or religious power. Using the money he earned through his businesses, he travelled many times from one end of India to another, to share with others what he had learnt. He stopped by the roadside, he performed on the street, he went into villages, he slept in his jeep – and he took the message of science and its spirit into rural India in a way that few could have done.

Premanand was the obvious spiritual and intellectual successor of the legendary Dr. Abraham Koor who whose campaigns for rationalism shook up the Indian sub-continent, and he took Koor’s work to its logical conclusion and into rural India: Premanand’s tireless travels led to the founding of innumerable local rationalist organisations that sprouted after his visits, now federated under the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations to whom he bequeathed the copyright of his works and his books. To keep the activists continuously educated and informed, he published the *Indian Skeptic*, to produce and to distribute which he laboured at the printing press and carried heavy loads to the post office himself. His singular and single handed efforts took the message of skepticism and rationalism to hundreds of schools, colleges and universities.

If the all-powerful Satya Sai Baba, who had kings, queens, presidents and prime ministers falling at his feet, had one person to fear, it was Premanand. Premanand led a media and judicial battle against Satya Sai Baba,



Basava Premanand

but he never received support from the police even when six murders were committed in Sai Baba's own bedroom – a sordid saga on which Premanand brought out a 1000 page tome. The Skeptics Book Club, which he ran, produced and reproduced some gems which are valuable reference works for fellow activists aiming to fight bad science and superstition.

I was baffled by his frequent statement that he had no money – a man who ran a successful business manufacturing French Polish, one who had travelled to 49 countries with his own money, a man who has been featured in innumerable television documentaries by the BBC, by Discovery Channel and National Geographic as also in the non English world. How could such a man have no money? I learnt the answer when I visited him: the money he earned, he had already donated for the care and education of many physically and mentally challenged children. He had no money because he had given it away!

In the twilight years of his life he lost both his sons, and he had the regret that his personal life was never a happy one. But he died happy that his idea of a Method of Science Museum, based on the work of his close friend, India's top and internationally acclaimed scientist, the molecular biologist, Prof. P. M. Bhargava, was built in his home town, Podanur. He supervised its construction even through his illness and got it inaugurated not by a celebrity but by a girl in a local municipal school, 'because it is meant for the children', he said.. "No, my dream is not fulfilled. I want such a Museum of Science in every village in India, if not in every school" he said to me and to his successor Prof. Narendra Nayak, the biochemist who resigned from his teaching job to continue Premanand's work, and who is now President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations with some 70 member organisations.

Premanand died as he lived: selflessly and thinking of others; fearlessly, and being true to himself, despite the several murderous attacks on him by those aggrieved by his attacks on superstitions. He gave away all of himself not just in life, but also in death. His main worry towards the end was whether his body would be donated to the local medical college after his death, because his daughter-in-law was religious. He made her promise to him that this would happen. At Abirami hospital in his last days, despite the heavy medication he had received, he woke up with angry surprise when it was whispered to him that there were rumours about his deathbed conversion to religion. He issued through Prof. Nayak a final statement that he was dying as a rationalist. He also instructed Prof. Nayak not to cancel any anti-superstition show to get a glimpse of his dead body.

As a great man passes into history and legend, the family of rationalists grieves the loss of not only a living inspiration, but a dear and affectionate senior friend, who was, above all, a great human being.

Letters

I would like to congratulate Mr. Comelab on his interesting column in the August 2009 issue. My only comment is that in giving reasons to fight the UN resolution against defamation of religion he misses to mention examples of other religions (e.g.Vatican) that, on occasion, united with OIC in approving this resolution.

Elio Peneasy

It is very kind of Prof Jayanti Patel, the prominent Radical Humanist of Gujarat who gave me the valuable gift of *IHN*. Being an ex-untouchable dalit poet the issue of August 2009 reporting on *World Conference on Untouchability* brought me a lot of new information about my co-sufferers in Africa, Bangladesh, Japan and many other countries.

Kindly do publish my appreciation for these writers – Matt Cherry, Lord Avebury, Jamil Iqbal, Leo Igwe, Sam Ayache and V B Rawat for their poignant contribution and effort to raise global awareness regarding this heinous human rights violation.

Neerav Patel, India

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