

**NOTE ON INTER FAITH WEEK 2009 EVENT  
HELD BY THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**

One of the aims of Inter Faith Week in 2009 was “to increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious belief”.

A ‘by invitation’ event was held by the Inter Faith Network for the UK, arranged jointly with the British Humanist Association on the evening of 17 November. The meeting was held at Barnard’s Inn in Holborn, London. This is the home of Gresham College. Both the Inter Faith Network and the British Humanist Association invited members of their respective constituencies to this event. It was attended by some 45 people. A grant was provided to the Inter Faith Network by the Department for Community and Local Government (CLG) to meet the direct costs of this event and it was attended by a member of CLG’s staff.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when the religious landscape of the UK was less diverse than it is now, there was a good deal of dialogue between Christians and Humanists which focused on the content of the Christian and Humanist traditions. There has been less dialogue of this kind in subsequent decades, partly because of the growth of inter faith dialogue and partly because the Christian/Humanist dialogue was increasingly subsumed in the dialogue and debate on the relationship between science and religion. More recently, issues of the ‘public square’ have come to dominate the relationship between religious faith on the one hand and Humanism on the other, with intense disagreement on a number of issues, such as the state funding of state schools, exceptions for religious organisations under equalities legislation, and the place of bishops in the House of Lords. With, on the one hand, the growth of ‘the New Atheism’, most notably represented by *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, together with other books very dismissive of religious faith and attacking the historical record and current practice of religious institutions, and, on the other hand, anxiety about a perceived rise in religious extremism, the debate between religious and secular perspectives has become increasingly strident.

It was against this background that the Inter Faith Network for the UK initiated this Inter Faith Week event. The joint event with the British Humanist Association was seen by the Inter Faith Network as an important first step in a longer term project which it is taking forward, drawing on experience in inter faith dialogue, with the aim of encouraging somewhat greater mutual understanding and more constructive relations between those with religious beliefs and those with non-religious beliefs. While the primary focus of the work of the Inter Faith Network has been, and remains, on inter faith relations, this wider dialogue is also a very important one in today’s society.

Accordingly, the aim of the Inter Faith Week event, by agreement with the British Humanist Association, was not to debate the place of religion and belief in the ‘public square’, (and issues such as state-funded faith schools, which are addressed in other contexts). Rather, the aim was to provide an opportunity for shared reflection on the extent to which there may be meeting points between religious traditions and the Humanist tradition, in particular in terms of understandings of the universe and of ethical values, exploring what common ground there may be as a basis for working together, within a plural society, for the common good, while respecting the distinctiveness of different faiths and beliefs.

The event was co-facilitated by Mr Brian Pearce, the Inter Faith Network's Adviser on Faith and Public Life (and its former Director) and Ms Hanne Stinson, who had retired the previous week from her post as Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association.

It had been agreed that the discussion should be initiated through two introductory contributions of about fifteen minutes each, from a philosophical standpoint. The first speaker was Professor John Cottingham, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading, speaking from a religious perspective. The main points which he made were as follows:

- All of us have reason to be grateful to science not just for the improvement that it has brought to life, but also, and perhaps just as important, for the way in which it responds to the human yearning to find out more about life, the origin of the stars, the galaxies, the universe itself. But there is a crucial distinction between science and 'scientism'. Science is the use of reason and observation to uncover the secrets of nature. 'Scientism' is an attempt to boil down and reduce all human understanding to what can be described using the methods of the sciences. It is the dogma that there is no reality beyond that which can be described by the sciences and that there is therefore nothing which could count as anything beyond the physical cosmos. In other words, the universe is seen as a "closed system". It may be - but to claim that this is so is not science, but metaphysics. To say that the cosmos is "closed" and natural phenomena exhaust all reality is an article of faith which goes beyond science.
- Most religious people believe the cosmos is not closed in this way. They believe that reality stems from an eternal or transcendent source which is beyond the physical universe. The truth of this cannot be proved philosophically but the falsity of it cannot be proved philosophically or rationally either. Both the "naturalist" view and the "theistic" view are on an equal footing in that each has elements of metaphysics which have to be accepted on faith. Neither can claim exclusively to be the rational position. Both have elements of reason and elements of faith, and this is indeed one aspect of the common ground between them.
- The cosmos we inhabit, the intricate mathematically ordered dance of the largest galaxies and the smallest particles and the vast complex interactive rhythm of the natural order which has unfolded over billions of years and our ability to understand, if only very partially, that world and to find it conforms to mathematical principles is very remarkable. Even the most militant atheist will admit that the world disclosed by science fills them with awe and wonder. This is another area of common ground because this description of the world, far from being a rival to the religious worldview, is strikingly compatible with it. The world we inhabit is a world of order, rhythm and beauty. It is something in which we can rejoice whether we are religious believers or not.
- Many of the traditional religions see God as the source of this order, and see not just reason but love at the heart of the universe. But to think that ultimate reality is loving, compassionate and merciful is a matter of faith and cannot be scientifically or rationally demonstrated. Do we just have to say that there is a head on clash between the view of the cosmos as moral and the neutral or even pessimistic view of it as a grim theatre of survival? The inexorable natural process which has produced the universe is said by many cosmologists to show that the universe is "biophilic" and

“neophilic”, that is to say, it will in due course at some point produce both life and intelligence. That kind of universe is compatible with the view of it that most religion asserts.

- In terms of the multiplicity of different religious faiths, it is difficult to argue that the God of supreme mercy, compassion and goodness could just favour someone by virtue of their creed or allegiance. This applies regardless of which faith or denomination one follows and indeed regardless of whether one is a theist or an atheist. The issue is how we behave in practice.
- A human being needs a vehicle – in religious terms a structure of doctrine and practice – to provide a ‘way’ or a rule of living. That way of life involves commitment. But it is important to note that religious people have no monopoly of virtue and religious faith is clearly neither necessary nor sufficient for a morally decent life. It is not required; nor is it enough. You can remain whole hearted in your commitment while remaining fully open to the virtues of those who do not share your allegiance.

The second introductory speaker was Professor Richard Norman, Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Kent, who is a member of the Humanist Philosophers Group. His main points were as follows:

- People often talk of the importance of respect for people of different views and beliefs. This involves recognising that, however much we may disagree with others, others have their reasons for the beliefs and faiths they have; and that it is incumbent on all of us to take those reasons seriously and to try to understand them.
- The existence of many different versions of the ‘golden rule’ - to treat other people in the way you would want to be treated yourself - points to important common ground. The ‘golden rule’, as the basis of our values, is rooted in what it is to be human.
- There are two crucial features here of what it is to be human. The first is our capacity for empathy - our capacity for imaginative identification with one another, to feel what other people feel, to be moved by other people’s joys and other people’s sufferings. The other crucial dimension is our possession of language, which enables us to formulate rules and principles, to arrive at an articulation of values and to reflect on what we share. The possession of language enables us not just to act intuitively on the basis of our capacity for empathy but also to formulate it into the concept of ‘ought’ – of what we ought to be doing.
- The ‘golden rule’ does not constitute the whole of morality. It is not the sole value but it is the shared basis for more specific values. We have a multiplicity of moral values but these are all underpinned by the golden rule. Because it requires us to treat others in the way in which we would want to be treated and since there are very different ways in which we can treat one another well and treat one another badly, there are various separate values corresponding to those separate ways in which we can do so. For example, we can directly harm one another or directly benefit one another, acting for one another’s good. So we recognise the values of care and compassion. We can act badly to one another. We can harm one another specifically by cheating one another, by exploiting or making use of, another. That is why we recognise the shared values of fairness and justice. On a similar basis, we recognise the shared value of

honesty and the value of loyalty. We can wrong one another by trying to control other people's lives, by trying to coerce and dominate others. That is why we recognise values such as freedom, respect and tolerance.

- This plurality of shared values, grounded in the 'golden rule' are all rooted in what it is to be human. There are various ways in which we might wish to locate the idea of a shared humanity grounded in our shared values, but the idea itself is a socially important piece of common ground between us.
- If we do have shared values in this way, why is it that people disagree about moral questions, often deeply and strongly? Moral disagreement is a constant feature of our interaction with one another. Disagreement can arise because of different interpretation of the same shared value. People may agree about the sanctity of life and yet disagree deeply about the morality of war. There are different interpretations of the value of respect for life in terms of both abortion and voluntary euthanasia. The debates on these issues also point to the possibility of disagreement because there can be conflicts between different values, which might pull us in different directions: the value of respect for life, the value of compassion for those who are suffering, the value for respect for people's autonomy, respect for people's informed choices. People come to different conclusions about how the tensions between those different values should play out.
- People sharing the same values may disagree because they disagree about the facts and in particular about the likely consequences of our actions. For example, some people will argue that legalising assisted suicide would create intolerable pressures on the old and the vulnerable who feel themselves to be a burden. Other people would deny that. So starting from the same shared value we may come to different conclusions.
- Disagreements of this kind do not necessarily reflect differences between different faith traditions or between the religious and the non-religious, although sometimes they do.
- A religious tradition may perhaps exercise a weight of inertia, which makes it difficult for it to apply shared values to new conditions and new circumstances.
- Returning to the theme of common ground and shared values, it may be helpful to identify the kind of common action and practicalities which reflect in practical terms those shared values. A crucially important point is to recognise the extent to which, building on shared values, there are important kinds of shared activities in which we can engage. A common opposition to racism should unite us all and be a particularly important practical focus for joint activity, as should issues of poverty and injustice, both nationally and globally, and issues of climate change.

In the ensuing discussion, in which the introductory speakers participated<sup>1</sup>, a range of points were made, set out here in sequence:

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<sup>1</sup> Points made by them being marked JC and RN respectively.

- Religious people customarily draw from their beliefs about the nature of the universe their beliefs about the way they should behave. Humanist morality derives from perceptions about the way the universe is.
- Beliefs need to be of a cogent and profound nature if they are to command respect.
- The Social Morality Council, which was founded in the 1970s, brought together religious and non-religious people to look for agreed solutions to social and moral problems and worked successfully for seven years. The present encounter is of real value.
- We need a great deal of humility about our ability to understand what the consequences of our actions will be.
- We need to try to do our best to give to all human beings throughout the world the possibility of a rich and meaningful life, which means allowing people to develop to the best of their potential.
- Education about morality or goodness has to be transmitted and faith based communities have an infrastructure for doing this. It is not clear whether Humanists have a similar kind of institutional infrastructure. But how we act is what counts at the end of the day and there is more that unites us than divides us on ethical grounds.
- There may be better ways to express the common ground than the ‘golden rule’, which is based on what the observer would want done. This may not be a very good guide to what the other person themselves wants done. A good guideline, and a definition of love, is ‘the accurate estimation and then the meeting of another’s need’ - a formulation which starts with the other person rather than oneself.
- Among religious traditions there are both theistic and non-theistic expressions of faith. So the presence or not of a theistic framework does not seem crucial to the identification of a religious tradition as being a faith.
- All the faiths not only recognise what is of value but also want to offer ways of moving towards it from our present inadequate position. It is all very well to have common values but we are all failing miserably to put them into practice adequately.
- People mean many different things by ‘spirituality’. There is a sense in which Humanists would want to say that there is a Humanist spirituality, and a sense in which they would not. The sense in which they would not is that they would be cautious about the kind of metaphysics that might seem to go with it. But as a phrase to identify certain crucial dimensions of human life, it can be said that there is Humanist spirituality. The Humanist moral tradition is built on reason but pure reason by itself will not generate values and moral principles. It has to be grounded in an intuitive, emotional response to other human beings and recognition of our common humanity, in other words, by empathy. We share an attitude of awe and wonder in the face of the universe. This should induce a proper humility and is an important dimension of Humanist spirituality. *[RN]*
- In our experience as human beings – and this might be in a context which is religious or might not – we experience a sense of ‘ought’ and not just ‘is-ness’. In terms of

religious traditions, the sense of 'ought' is often linked to a sense of 'the beyond', a sense of transcendence, something that is beyond humanity. There are questions here about how far religious and non-religious people, in this context, understand the universe in different ways or use different language for similar perspectives.

- The emphasis that has come out very sharply in this discussion is that the ultimate test is what is our practice – is it good or not?
- An Inter Faith Week event in South London was called a 'faith' event, but from a Humanist perspective it should have been called 'faith and belief' event.
- There can be a solidarity between women, whether religious or not, who have had to cope with the consequences of male ways of thinking.
- There is common ground in that we all share a respect for certain values and, indeed, the obligations to which they give rise, regardless of what our religious or non-religious background might be. We do not invent values or create them; they are there. Whether one interprets this as linked to a transcendent divine being or not is another matter.
- It is not entirely clear who accepts responsibility, in terms of teaching in schools, for developing conscience and a sense of 'oughtness' in pupils, or for defining where that 'oughtness' can come from and how it can be cultivated.
- The words 'religion', 'spirituality', 'belief' and 'faith' are central to our discussion, but each has its difficulties. There has been a reaction to 'religion' as being too hard-edged for many people, which is why the term 'spiritual' has grasped the imagination of many as an alternative; but it has a degree of fuzziness. Would there be an acceptance on the part of Humanists of the rationality of religious belief and the rationality of faith in terms of personal commitment?
- The word 'spirituality' draws our attention to practice rather than theory – practices like meditation, fasting, prayer, reflection, confession, repentance and change of life. But the point of these activities is that they serve as a way of focusing the self towards certain values which might otherwise seem rather abstract and theoretical. We are not purely rational, disembodied creatures who just perceive the good and act on it. We are embodied beings who have emotions as well as reason. [JC]
- 'Spirituality' is an ambiguous term and it can be very frustrating being caught in the ambiguity of it in terms of self understanding. Certainly, Humanists recognise that rich human emotions and rich human experiences are what give a point to human life. Humanists have fought shy of using the term 'faith' because it has other connotations, but would accept an understanding of 'faith' as being grounded in commitment. All these terms have their uses and there are senses in which Humanists can use them. Humanists may recognise the rationality of a religious belief without finding that basis decisive or persuasive. It is wrong to shift too quickly from thinking that the reasons for particular beliefs are not good enough to saying that they are irrational. That is a *non sequitur*. [RN]

- Humanists do not wish to be accused of being base materialists and having no other value than matter. Humanists value love and compassion and all those things that make life worth living. That is what they share, and share with religious people too.
- Religion is not about theories. What is “doing the work” is the luminous moral insights of the various faiths and such insights can also clearly be had by people of no religious belief. Many would stress the primacy of *praxis*. [JC]
- Where there have been encounters between religious people and Humanists or Secularists in a non-confrontational setting, these have proved to be valuable.
- Islam encourages its followers to engage in interaction and dialogue with all human beings. In the Qur’an, God at times addresses people who have faith in the sense of being followers of Islam; at times people ‘of the book’ and of other faiths; and it also speaks of God’s relationship with all human beings. So Islam has a conceptual framework within which all can live together as the human family.
- Buddhism encourages its followers to develop their spirituality in order to overcome their suffering. Buddhism is not a kind of revelatory teaching. Rather the Buddha’s teaching is based on human experience and helps us to understand things as they really are and that everything is impermanent. The Buddha taught that there are natural laws which govern the entire universe. In order to overcome suffering, we have to practice morality, concentration and personal meditation.
- Tibetan Buddhism talks about compassion and wisdom being like two wings of a bird. If you have one without the other, you simply fly around in circles. There is also a very strong emphasis on the rational. What is described as ‘Buddha nature’ means that deep down inside every human being is an inexhaustible source of compassion and wisdom which can be developed throughout one’s life. There is an important issue about the extent to which religions encourage intrinsic rather than extrinsic authority. Tibetan Buddhism recognises the need to adapt its teachings to reflect the findings of contemporary science.
- It is unfortunate that some local inter faith forums focus only on local issues in the ‘public square’ and do not address the broader kind of issue of different world views being addressed in this event.
- A discussion of this kind demonstrates that there is a good deal of common ground between those who are religious and those who are not. Sadly, the media seek to divide us. It is in this dialogue where so many important initiatives of the future need to lie.
- We need to seek common ground but leave genuine room for disagreement. There is a need to recapture some of the skills for dialogue and engagement and generating goodwill. Too often conversations are confrontational, with people not listening properly to one another. People can feel excluded or misunderstood if they are not allowed to self-define. The social context for the exploration of values is very important.
- There is a good deal of shared ground in terms of values and in the emotional responses we have to the universe in terms of awe and wonder. Peter Ustinov, who

was a great Humanist, said that ‘certainties are what divide people and it is our doubts which unite us’. Is there not common ground among human beings in terms of our scepticism and doubt, always searching and enquiring together?

- A sense of awe and wonder is part of our response to the natural world, but this does not require any commitment to the existence of any world other than the natural world. At the same time, we can agree on rejecting ‘Scientism’ if by that we mean the view that science, and in particular the natural sciences, have answers to all our questions. They do not, because a lot of our questions are not scientific questions. They are questions about how we make sense of our experiences, how we make sense of our lives, and what is important to us. Unlike people firmly rooted in a faith tradition, it is not easy for Humanists to draw on the shared resources of a ‘community’. Therefore it is crucially important to recognise how all these traditions, the traditions of the faith communities and the Humanist tradition, can flow into a shared tradition on which we can all draw, as human beings, as shared human insights. *[RN]*
- It is wrong to think that religious people are concerned above all to propose some explanatory hypothesis about the universe or its nature. It is more a matter of striving to live a certain way. What is primary in the sense of driving the enterprise is not the doctrines but the importance of right practice. In any enterprise in life one must give one’s loyalty and commitment. The question is how to combine that with tolerance, with openness, and with recognition of the value of other traditions. This is one of the real challenges of our global society. *[JC]*
- There are very few contexts which bring together in a structured way people of religious faith and people with non-religious beliefs to discuss these together. It is to be hoped that this event will lead to much more dialogue and discourse between religious and non-religious people of all different beliefs and backgrounds.
- Jonathan Heidt, an atheist studying evolutionary psychology at the University of Virginia, has written that “every long standing ideology and way of life [including religions] contains some wisdom, some insights into ways of suppressing selfishness, enhancing co-operation and ultimately enhancing human flourishing.” When we can share those insights, then we all gain from that and that sharing forms part of our own experience, which helps us to better understand our universe, our place in it, and how we should behave.

At the end of the meeting there was general agreement that it had been a very useful and constructive occasion, which had led to some increase in understanding between the religious and Humanist perspectives, and that it would be desirable to find ways in which to build on this initiative.