

Editorial

# The Positive Message of Humanism

Bill Cooke

It's one of the longest-standing problems of the freethought movement. How should we balance our message between the criticism of religion and the voicing of a positive alternative? Opinions have differed over the years on where the proper balance lies.

It seems to me that we need to look once again at this old problem and to shift the balance back to accentuating the positive. It often seems that we know what we are against, but are less clear what we are for. This problem is not surprising in a way, because it is not really the job of humanism to provide alternative lists of commandments. After all, humanism is about thinking freely. This means that many attempts to outline the positive message of humanism, in seeking to avoid a commandment-like feel, end up being a bit vague. The more detailed any outline is, the more prescriptive and limiting it is as well. However, with these caveats in place, the message of humanism, for me at least, can be boiled down to these points.

***Humanism is about cosmic modesty.*** Humanists reject the presumption of thinking ourselves to be the only special species in the universe, and understand that humans have no unique claim to the bounty of the universe. This cosmic modesty is an essential prerequisite to any meaningful change in outlook about preserving and sharing the planet.

***Humanism is about the passionate love of life.*** It is an important component of cosmic modesty that we reject the transcendental temptation. We are not so intrinsically marvellous as to deserve a corner of the universe for our eternal repose. Like all living beings, we have but one life to lead and we have not just the right but the duty to live it to the full.

***Humanism is about living well and helping others live well.*** Living life to the full does not mean living selfishly, because living life to the full means helping those we love also to live life to the full. Helping others live well is an integral part of our own pursuit of happiness.

***Humanism is about the integration of our personality.*** Humanism seeks a harmonious balance between our reasoning and our non-rational faculties. Our rational faculties help us avoid the pitfalls of credulity and fanaticism and our nonrational faculties help develop our capacity for compassion and exuberance.

***Humanism is about toleration.*** Because we have rejected supernaturalist absolutes, it is beholden on humanists to exercise toleration toward those we disagree with. After all, we could be wrong, and there is always something we can learn from people who believe differently. Like every other system of belief, humanism has no monopoly on the truth. Humanism is about how we behave as much as what we believe. One of the happy consequences of taking toleration seriously is that we can see good in people who believe different things to ourselves. Humanism shares this great insight with the Asian traditions.

***Humanism places a high value on learning.*** Having rejected the absolutes and commandments of supernaturalism, we are free to learn how the world actually works. And this does not confine us to

book-learning. The universe is so fascinatingly complex that there is no limit to what we can learn or to how we can learn it.

***Humanism is about righting wrongs.*** There is so much injustice in the world that there is no shortage of causes to work for. Because we have only one life to live, we have some obligation to alleviate the condition of people whose life is beset with suffering. We can't just shrug our shoulders and say it'll all be sorted out on Judgment Day, or that it's all karma. We have to make life less unjust in the here and now.

***Humanism understands the tragic dimension of life.*** So much of what happens to people is unfair, and not some cosmic aberration to be explained away. No matter how much we achieve, there will always be more injustice and vileness to overcome. Awareness of this helps us deepen our love of life and our desire to alleviate the suffering of others. But it also helps us learn our limitations.

***Humanism is about laughter and joy.*** In the face of the absurdity of existence and the cruelty and stupidity of so much that goes on, humanists are committed to finding the humour in each situation and seeking an excuse to laugh as often as possible. This is best done with one's friends.

The history of humanism is replete with larger than life people who exemplify one or more of these elements. Lucretius and Bertrand Russell have both written beautifully about cosmic modesty. Paul Kurtz and Iris Murdoch have written about living life to the full. Voltaire taught us about the value of toleration and Confucius is a wonderful guide on the value of learning. The Indian social pioneer Gora is an inspiration for living well while helping others to live well, in his case the poor of India. The Greek tragedians, William Shakespeare and Albert Camus can help us understand the tragic dimension of life and Democritus, the ancient Greek who was known as the laughing philosopher, is a role model for finding any excuse for a good laugh, preferably with a glass of something in one's hand.

I call this humanism. Other people can call it other things. In the end it matters little what we call it.

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