

# PLANETARY HUMANIST VALUES

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*ABSTRACT: Humanists fare differently in varying places today: barely tolerated in the United States, welcomed in much of Northern Europe, suppressed in many other places. World humanist gatherings remind us of these disparities and help us devise better survival and growth strategies. Oxford 2014 was such an occasion.*

KEY WORDS: FREEDOM—THOUGHT, BELIEF, EXPRESSION;  
SECULAR VALUES



The World Humanist Congress<sup>1</sup> in Oxford, England August 8–11, 2014, was sandwiched between various meetings of organs of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).<sup>2</sup> Both were ably hosted by the British Humanist Association.<sup>3</sup> The Congress meets every three years, and its next meeting will be in São Paulo, Brazil.

The Congress and a couple of other humanist conferences I recently attended kept me thinking about humanism’s relationship to traditional religions and the development of what many in the United States have called “religious humanism.”

## Reflections on Humanism and Religion

I think readers of this journal could all agree that: (1) our humanism is based on values and not beliefs and (2) those values emerged from human experience and knowledge, not from any alleged gods. In fact, our values have been, and still are, opposed by most major religions. I would put, for example, free thought and speech, same-sex marriage, gender equality, and universal human rights in this category. Promoting and expanding upon such values has been the task of modern humanism since it flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment with the emergence of science, public education,

and democracy.

In the US, most people focus on local and national matters. Humanists have added categories such as global, international, and planetary. Oppression of people is unacceptable—whether in our households or anywhere else in the world.

I think the IHEU has the best tradition of a broad and deep involvement. Their “Minimum Statement” is the basis for many other world organizations’ mission statements:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.

In the United States, Humanistic Judaism and Ethical Culture describe themselves as religious humanists, as do many Unitarian Universalists and some Quakers. They promote humanist values, adapt religious features transgenerationally, make those values more evident and attractive with the arts, sustain communities of like-minded people who share those values, encourage other organizations to share those values, and work with those organizations that already share them. Most of these groups provide training for leaders and celebrants.

Humanist values can be described as democratic, progressive, and liberal. We must be honest about the ways religions and their gods did—and still do—negate those values. But we must never make that our central focus. We must promote, not defend! Another necessary service is helping those who are recovering from traditional religions that oppose those values. Some scars are slow to heal, but building our ranks is the goal.

Values are created by humans, and Darwin reminded us that the cosmos cares not. To build on history, we must know it. We must also know those humanist pioneers who are our adopted forebears. The better we know them, the more we can extend their work.

Humanists also need to become comfortable with words like “secular.” At the Oxford conferences, I saw little presence of Unitarians, Quakers, or those from other liberal religions. In the US, perhaps because there is no state religion, some religious subgroups have modernized enough to embrace and help in the expansion of democratic values. Humanists need to encourage this, but at the same time stress that universal values are secular. Thus, we must likewise point out that discussing theological “foundations” or supernatural “preferences” is provocative and can become divisive.

## The Meetings

Organizational sessions of the IHEU meetings were extremely well-planned. Those who were not delegates at the World Congress were designated as “Extras.” The Extras could attend special sessions, while delegates were attending other smaller sessions. In contrast, the six plenary sessions of the World Humanist Congress included everyone. A striking feature was that each plenary session began with an esthetic experience: a Norwegian choir with a secular wedding song; a choir with a secular funeral song; a magician’s clever hands; a string quartet also singing (and dancing) opera. There were also many occasions for socializing with snacks and drinks.

The Congress’ theme was *Freedom of Thought and Expression: Forging a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Enlightenment*. A draft statement was discussed and adopted.<sup>4</sup>

Building upon the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),<sup>5</sup> the Congress’ statement amplified many issues still contested around the world. Freedom of thought and belief “should be a single right indivisible, protecting the dignity and freedom of all people by protecting their right to those personal beliefs whatever those beliefs, religious or non-religious.” More specifically, the Congress added that “no one anywhere should ever be forced into or out of a belief.” It also asserted that the “right of freedom of expression is global in its scope.”

More controversially, “there is no right not to be offended, or not to hear contrary opinions.” More specifically, mired in cultural baggage, “the best response to the expression of a view we disagree with is to reply to it. Violence and censorship are never legitimate responses. All laws that criminalize language on grounds of ‘blasphemy’ or of offense to beliefs and values impede human freedom and should be abolished.”

Humanists are often involved in discussions regarding the differences between verbal expression and actions. The statement's phrasing is "freedom of belief is absolute but the freedom to act on the belief is not." The UDHR notes that "these balances can be hard to strike but with a focus on freedom and human dignity, we believe legislators and judiciaries can strike them in a progressive manner."

The Congress' statement also emphasizes that "States must not restrict thought and freedom of expression merely to protect the government from criticism."

A quotable summary paragraph of the statement states: "We assert the principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and secularism as providing the firmest foundation for the development of open societies where freedom of thought and expression will be protected and promoted."

### The Speakers

Congress plenary sessions included well-known speakers such as A.C. Grayling, Philip Pullman, Taslima Nasreen, and Richard Dawkins, along with others not yet as well known.<sup>6</sup>

Several persons from troubled countries, however, carried the day in expounding upon freedom. Foremost, Wole Soyinka's acceptance speech of his International Humanist Award from the Congress was to have been at a plenary but illness prevented his presence. Watching his videotaped picture on the large screen, the audience heard him reading the speech.<sup>7</sup>

Soyinka began by asking what is it that religions really want? "Not what they worship—that is beyond rational comprehension for many—but what do they really seek? After all, all society is built on the practical, unavoidable principle of co-existence." He then proceeded to discuss the many ways that religions seek jurisdiction, domination against freedom—and what this does to all who fall outside of their circles. After reviewing some recent events, he said "we must take on the duty of telling the enemy openly: it is not spiritual fulfillment that you seek but power. Control. Power in its crudest form." He reminded humanists how serious this repression of freedom is in the whole world and how humanists must act. He used a Yoruba expression, *F'itiju k'arun*, that means "contracting a disease through politeness." He

translated this further into “the language of social mobility that mistakes sophistry for sophistication, it reads simply: *Political Correctness*.”

The conflict between humanists and religionists has “always been one between the torch of enlightenment and the chains of enslavement.” Soyinka here was speaking about local Boko Haram and Nigeria, but also insisting that the militant form of religion has great spreading power. “In numerous parts of the world today, the Scroll of Faith is indistinguishable from the Roll-call of Death.”

We have “reached a pass square, paradoxically, tolerance is far more pernicious than intolerance. Far worse than both however is avoidance!” What is called for? “Transformative aggression.” He argued that “We must bring religion to the table, along with other national and global concerns, such as poverty, social welfare, corruption, shelter, soil erosion, hunger, disease, environmental degradation and all others societal mandates.”

To religious leaders who say that violent religionists are “extremists,” humanists must ask “did you, either by direct pronouncement or eloquent silence, fan those embers?” For Soyinka, the violent kind of religion is not only found in Africa. “The menace is borderless, aggressive, and unconscionable.” In “ever expanding parts of the world, human existence has turned brutish—at best, precarious and nightmarish, punctuated by horrors that appear to presage the very end of humanity and those values that attempt to define it.”

He ended with a powerful call to action: “Collectively, we must eradicate the enclaves of religious atavism with humane alternatives, new vistas of the world, new insights into history, new propositions of human relationships—of gender, race, beliefs, classes and identities.”

Many other speakers at the Congress, from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, echoed these descriptions of political and physical terror and the need to develop a shared and effective response.

### **The IHEU Consolidated Statement**

In contrast, the opening and final sessions of the IHEU included discussion of a “Consolidated Statement of Policy.” The Statement was available

only with password protection. This 10-page document reflects a review of policy by the IHEU Executive Committee. It was open at the Oxford IHEU meetings for revision and expansion, as it will be at subsequent annual IHEU meetings. It expands upon the Minimum Statement quoted above in very fruitful ways. While the Consolidated Statement is still a draft,<sup>8</sup> its principles are worth discussing, examples of which follow:

- Human dignity in normal circumstances requires individual autonomy. Every individual's life is his or her own to shape as she or he wills.
- Certain human rights, such as the following, are especially important for humanists:
  - The right to freedom of opinion and expression.
  - The right to freedom of religion or belief.
  - The inalienable dignity and worth of every individual person, which entails the need for all to be treated as autonomous equals.
- Humanists note that there exists, historically, discrimination against the following particular groups that needs to be addressed globally: women, children, racial and ethnic minorities, persons defined by religion or belief, persons with nonheterosexual orientation, and persons with nontraditional gender identities.
- The humanist defense of autonomy and worth involves issues concerning the human body and the end-of-life. Accordingly, IHEU supports globalization of the "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights" defined at the 1994 Cairo conference on Population and Development.
- "Dying is a part of life and individual choice and freedom of action should be respected." The Statement acknowledges that legal reforms are necessary in most of the world where the status quo imposes religious values on everyone.
- IHEU policy covers governance and spells out its understanding of

democracy: decision-making based on collaborative discussion and mutual respect; solidarity with and care for weaker groups; equality before the law; honesty and integrity in international institutions; and holding people in office to account and removable by peaceful means. These requirements for democracy depend on secularism and the rule of law. These principles imply separation of powers, fair administration, the right of redress, and the right to a fair trial.

- Recognizing the complications ethically arising in international conflict, IHEU supports “the application of non-violent equitable solutions, their resolution by negotiation, using the UN, the International Court of Justice, and other international bodies.” It also supports the transfer of more resources to and development of trade with developing countries, “subject to need and sufficient internal good governance.”
- Central to humanism has been the right of all individuals to flourish and achieve their potential. This involves, of course, education and familiarity with what the sciences have discovered about our actual world. On the one hand, each individual must be educated to “develop respect for the child’s parents, cultural identity, language and values, and for civilizations different from his or her own,” thus inculcating “a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship among all peoples.” Needless to say, many more traditional cultures oppose exposure to other cultures. The IHEU response is quite specific: “it is particularly important that, although parents have the right to impart their own values and religious beliefs to their children, States have no obligation to support them in doing so but do have a responsibility to provide information and education to children about all widely or locally held religions and beliefs, their histories, values, similarities and differences.”

The Consolidated Statement concludes with several quite specific values. They concern our individual rights to self, food, water, shelter, education, employment, and healthcare. It accepts that the effects of the grossly unequal distribution of wealth and resources makes universal realization of these values difficult and produces “damaging results for all concerned, including the rich.” Emphasizing humans’ total dependence on the natural world for life and well-being, the Consolidated Statement underscores our common responsibilities to the ecology of the planet and to the impacts of our overpopulation. The core issue, of course, is the long-term survivability

of human life on earth.

Will these concerns for the universality of humanist values—and the intensity of resistance or attacks to those values—mobilize present humanist organizations around the world? Studying and distributing the Consolidated Statement would certainly be a good first step. The Oxford Declaration and, eventually, the Consolidated Statement will make clear humanists' roles as sustainers and pioneers of advanced values.



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## References

<sup>1</sup> <http://whc2014.org.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://whc2014.org.uk>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://iheu.org/oxford-declaration-on-freedom-of-thought-and-expression/>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/pages/introduction.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://whc2014.org.uk/speakers/>  
<http://lanyrd.com/2014/whc2014/>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://iheu.org/wole-soyinkas-international-humanist-award-acceptance-speech-full-text/>.

<sup>8</sup> The draft statement remains offline, and my summary here should not be reproduced.