



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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Humanism, an Enlightenment tradition

Modern Humanism developed out of the 18th-century Enlightenment; which in turn was influenced by earlier thinkers, from the Renaissance, Roman times and ancient Greece. This tradition embraces the use of reason, scepticism, seeking the evidence and holds that humans can lead a good life through human effort here on Earth.

What is meant by 'enlightenment?' When asked in 1784, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.' By 'immaturity', he said it was an inability to think for one's self without guidance of authority.

Although the tradition of using human rather than supernatural means to get through each day stretches back 2,500 years, it attracted few adherents until the 1650–1700~, Enlightenment or Age of Reason period. At this time many people, especially in the American colonies and Western Europe, began openly to question powerful authorities of the church and state. Men like Diderot, Hume, Voltaire and Paine emphasized reason and common sense as key ways to understand the world. They questioned given ideas and agitated for people to have a say in how they were governed and how they led their lives.

Three ground-breaking products of the Enlightenment were the American Declaration of Independence, the United States Bill of Rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. Advanced as these were, all three documents are now seen as flawed – no mention of women or slaves. However, what was inspirational about the Enlightenment was that it made possible for individuals to aspire to making their own decisions; to reject being bossed around by those in authority.

Among the problems facing today's world are conflicts between those who have embraced enlightened thinking and those who adhere to long-established authoritarian ways. In places where war and social conflict is greatest, e.g. Iran, Iraq, Middle East and Afghanistan, the values of the Enlightenment have had little or no influence. In contrast to western scientific thinking, Islamic countries have not experienced an enlightenment period. Something called for by people both inside and outside these countries.

Making this call is the former member of the Dutch Parliament, world-renowned author and critic of Islam, Ayaan Hirsi Ali. This brave and articulate woman, who now lives in the USA, spoke via Skype to Think Inc in Melbourne on 18 September. In her speech challenging Islamic ideas and authorities, she declared herself to be a Humanist.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is just one of the millions of thoughtful people around the world who identify themselves as a Humanist. As inheritors of Enlightenment values like tolerance, secularism, reason, autonomy and universal rights, our world-view underpins liberal democracy. The Humanist view is worth proclaiming and promoting – so we hope you'll renew your HSV membership and introduce others to Humanist ideas.

Rosslyn Ives, editor

HSV Monthly Public Lecture

THURSDAY 27 October

7.30 for 8.00 pm

Meeting Room
Balwyn Library

336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)

T. B. A.

Please check HSV website
nearing to 27 October, or
phone a committee
member.

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Representations to public bodies

1. To a panel considering **Constitutional Recognition of Australia's Indigenous Peoples** we submitted as follows to a series of questions for invited responses.

- Victorian Humanists congratulate the Prime Minister on initiating the project. We convey best wishes to the panel on this important task.
- Constitutional recognition of the First Australians is long overdue and should be stated in the body of this document and also mentioned in the preamble.
- We strongly support,
 1. acknowledgement of prior ownership and custodianship of land, distinct culture and heritage;
 2. the addition of statement of values such as racial and gender equality, personal freedoms, the rule of law, respect for diversity, equal opportunities and democratic governance – being of particular importance in the absence of a national bill of rights;
 3. the removal of Sections 25 and 51(xxvi) to clear our Constitution of these racist statements;
 4. the creation in the Constitution of a guarantee of racial equality in Australia.
- The Federal Government should have powers to redress historical disadvantage. It should enact protection for the culture and heritage of the First Australians. We believe positive discrimination towards the disadvantaged is a mark of a civilised society.
- Having signed the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous People, we should include a summary of these rights in our Constitution.
- We would like to see a formal treaty with Australia's Indigenous people, such as exists in NZ, US and Canada and other countries.

Halina Strnad

2. Following our letter in February to the Prime Minister on **bullying in Australia** (*VH* March), we received an encouraging response, dated 4 May as follows, from the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, Hon. Peter Garrett. He thanked the Society for writing on this important matter.

The Australian Government fully realized that students need safe, supportive and respectful environments. The National Professional Standards for Teachers, released on 9 February, required teachers to 'create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments' (www.aitsl.edu.au/ta/go). The minister launched a revised National Safe Schools Framework on 18 March, which includes a response to cyber bullying, declaring a National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence (www.safeschools.deewr.gov.au). The Government had worked with State education authorities to produce online resources to help bullied students and bystanders of bullying (www.bullyingnoway.com.au; www.takeastandtogether.gov.au). The national curriculum which was being developed included 'general capabilities' that specifically relate to student wellbeing; public comment and consultation were welcomed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority (www.acara.edu.au). The National School Chaplaincy Program was intended to help 'provide greater pastoral care,

personal advice and support to all students and staff, and positively contribute to their wellbeing'.

The Government had invested \$276.9 million over four years to address the tragedy of suicide (Department of Health & Ageing), including \$65.9 million to promote resilience in young people and prevent suicide. In addition \$175.8 million was announced in the 2010 Budget to focus on youth friendly services such as the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre model. The Commonwealth Department of Education contributed to a recent government round-table on youth suicide prevention.

There was a strong legislative framework protecting all people in Australia from unlawful discrimination and harassment, both at Commonwealth level – *Age Discrimination Act 2004, Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Racial Discrimination Act 1975, Sex Discrimination Act 1984, Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* – and at State and Territory level. There was a bill before the Senate to amend the Sex Discrimination Act by extending the prohibition on sexual harassment of students. The Government was committed to introducing protection from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. It was committed to appointing an Age Discrimination Commissioner who would advocate on behalf of young people, and was considering a potential Children's Commissioner as part of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Dept. of Families etc.).

Stephen Stuart

VH Corrigendum

VH September, page 6, column 2.

For **Z?** read **Man – a peaceful animal?**

Worth quoting

School welfare offers better balance.

An editorial, *The Age*, Friday 9 September, 2011, in support of secular welfare officers in chaplaincy program, included the following.

'Our society is predominately secular, especially today's students and their parents. Two out of three marriages involve civil ceremonies. Only 7 per cent of people attend church weekly. A 2006 study by Monash and catholic universities and the Christian research association found 52 per cent of people born between 1976 and 1990 have no belief in god. Australian youth were the least religious of all countries in a 2008 *Christian Science Monitor* survey.'

Error in *The Age*

On same page as above quote, the Readers' Poll on 'Should schools be allowed to use secular counsellors instead of chaplains?' YES 19% NO 81%
Total 7910

These results were at odds with quote. As a follower of *The Age* polls I had noted progressive results were the reverse of above. Shortly later, courtesy of Nigel Sinnott, I read that the polling for *previous day*, on a different question, was *exactly* as above. Turns out the night staff had not up-dated the figures from the previous day.

Actual poll result on 'Should schools be allowed to use secular counsellors instead of chaplains?' was
YES 88% NO 12%
Total 1793

Rosslyn Ives

Witch-hunters, superstition and injustice in Africa

Public Lecture, under the auspices of Victorian Skeptics Association and HSV, by **Leo Igwe**, Nigerian Humanist activist, at Trades Hall, 27 August 2011.

Report by **Jennie Stuart**

Leo explained that he has been in Australia lecturing in connection with Science Week, adding that no such promotion of science occurs in Nigeria. In his country, by contrast, there are lengthy celebrations with prayers, often lasting several days, related to superstitious practices.

He has spent several decades campaigning in Nigeria and other parts of Africa about the risks of superstition and witchcraft. However his attempts to argue for the merits of science and reason are often dismissed as 'just thinking like a white man'. Worse still, he has been arrested and beaten up by the police on several occasions. In addition his family has suffered. After one assault his father lost the sight of an eye.

The support and solidarity of Australian friends has been a great help. He said that in 2010 the Australian High Commission contacted the Nigerian authorities to enquire about the circumstances of his arrest and his conditions. He was being held in a prison cell with about 50 other men. Had he been able to bribe the police he could have been released. The police system is very corrupt despite the claims of rich and powerful members of the community that 'all is well.'

Witchcraft enables many Africans to fill the void that is created by fear and ignorance. It is also a way of understanding natural phenomena. Witches within the community are believed to cause conditions such as hunchback or albinism; they are responsible for hallucinations, sleepwalking and even longevity. For example, it is believed that a witch can take over the soul of an older person. When he was a child Leo said his mother carefully killed the insects which flew into their house at night, because she believed that 'it could be *them*'.

Witchcraft is a social poison. Those under suspicion of being witches are often forced to retreat to bush camps, and their children end up foraging on the streets, at risk of sexual abuse and other crimes. Although there have been many studies describing witchcraft practices very few examine the veracity of the claims. The focus of a UNICEF report, for example, was on the diversity and complexity of the beliefs, while Leo, by contrast, strives to challenge his school and community audiences, 'Is it a myth or reality that accidents are caused by bewitched children flying around at night? Can you prove it?' But he

treads carefully, as many of the powerful elite also subscribe to these beliefs.

Leo described two broad strategies to help combat the problem. Firstly, he believes that it is important to lobby the Nigerian government, because although there are laws against witchcraft in Nigeria, they are not being implemented. The situation is even worse in Malawi, however, where there have been mass burials of 'witches' condoned by the legal system.

The Australian government could also take a more prominent position on the issue, using its membership of the UN and Commonwealth to support reform in this area. Likewise, Australians in general have a role to play in urging their Government to take measures and add its voice where it can.

Secondly, community education is essential. In partnership with a UK program, 'Stepping Stones', Leo and others visit schools and distribute educational material, using dance and music to offer a different viewpoint. School principals don't always support them, however, and Leo explained that the standard of education in Nigeria is often poor, schools lack equipment such as books, and the whole process is more a 'meal ticket' than an opportunity for intellectual development or enlightenment.

For more information about Leo's work with the Stepping Stones project, and PACT (Prevent Abuse of Children Today), or to make a donation, see <http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org>. For a more detailed interview with Leo Igwe and Ben Finney of the Victorian Skeptics at 3RRR on 26th August 2011, see <http://www.archive.org/details/LeoIgweInterview>.

Receive your *VH* by E-mail

If you wish to receive your *VH* (except in months when mailed with *AH*) by E-mail, please advise Rosslyn Ives rosslyn@netspace.net.au.

The members' E-mail list that is being compiled will also be used to advise members of coming HSV and related activities.

World Matters

The 7th Annual World Matters series of talks and book launches organised by ELTHAM Bookshop, Oxfam and Shire of Nillumbik takes place on October 14, 15, 16 at Montsalvat, Hillcrest Avenue, Eltham.

Social justice, international politics, philosophy, environment, world literature and music are the canvas for this unmissable festival. The featured speakers include Miles Franklin winner indigenous writer Kim Scott, anthropologist John Mulvaney, philosopher Raimond Gaita, humanist awards winner Arnold Zable, former Tamil Tigress Niromi de Soya and novelist Eliot Perlman. The chair of the festival is Morag Fraser.

For festival details and booking information call 94398700 or [email elthambookshop@bigpond.com](mailto:email_elthambookshop@bigpond.com).

Website link

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dvoxfam/WorldMatters2011/>

The foundation of morals, laws and ethics

Talk delivered by **Jean Brown** to in-house discussion of HSV, Sunday 14 August 2011, Tresise Centre, Hawthorn East. (Edited version.)

All animals, and that includes humans, that live in societies have rule-like behavioural patterns. These enable individuals to know their place, co-operate and co-ordinate effort. Being a member of a social group offers advantages over living alone in terms of survival, safety and reproductive success. In human societies much social living is consciously organised by rules of behaviour.

For everyone to know everyone and the relationships between them, the optimal size of a human society is around 120–150 persons. Within groups, there is kinship and hierarchy and each determine the nature of the rules and their enforcement. Not every individual, be they animal or human, obeys behavioural rules consistently or without testing the boundaries. It is not only humans that will sneak off and mate with someone else's partner. Among primates it is only in bonobo societies that females have superior status to males, with mating being a free-for-all, used for fun and to reduce tension. Human females are a long way from being other than property or having equal status in most, if not all, human societies. Different rules typically exist for females.

Humans, apes, cetaceans and elephants are so far known to have mirror neurons and spindle cells which permit imitation, empathy and altruism, all essential ingredients of a healthy, complex society. Other



examples are sure to emerge such as in the canine family. I recommend Meerkat Manor, a Channel 2 TV program on the social life of these animals, to see these qualities and strict rule-like behaviour in action.

Since I am discussing only mammals, the strongest social bond is between mother and infant. Male mammals are generally not bonded with their offspring nor do they care for them. Humans are among the exceptions but even here, the bond is much looser and, often, non-existent. In some mammals, the mother/offspring bond lasts only as long as lactation. Where greater survival skills need to be learnt the bond will last much longer.

The female relationship to young is of nurturing, teaching and defence, although the young learn rules from others within the society, particularly as they get older. Males provide sperm, some protection and in case of carnivores the rather irregular provision of larger prey, which they don't necessarily share with their family.

Females are restricted by their need to care for their offspring and almost as often, their male partner.

Mostly, different rules apply to them, which is true even in our own society, let alone, for example, a Moslem one.

For any society to be healthy and survive there must be co-operation, altruism, empathy and enforcement. Altruistic societies are healthy ones and survive better than those with a high level of selfishness. An ideal society exists to benefit all the members of the society as a whole and the individuals within it. Co-operation and enforcement alone, without regard to minorities or the rights of all individuals can result in excrescences such as Nazism.

In many non-human societies, such as wild canines and meerkats, only the alpha male and female breed. The rest of the group generally co-operates toward the success of those few offspring. The groups are held together by affection, hierarchy and enforcement.

Evolutionary success is determined by one's surviving offspring living to breed. In these terms, humans are very successful as their population burgeons. In the longer run, they may breed beyond the resources to sustain them, as can happen in all animal societies.

So, rules are based on co-operation, empathy, altruism and force. In human societies we call these, morals, ethics. In our complex mega-societies, these have resulted in laws which may have little relationship to the other two as the protection of property seems to be a primary purpose and, in early human societies, and animal ones, it did not exist. Also, the law is mostly about winning, not justice nor 'right'.

Religion controls the mind and emotions, mostly the emotions, but all 'good' and 'evil' is controlled by these too. A purely rational decision can be completely inappropriate and inhumane, just as emotion can lead to base behaviour such as xenophobia, murder and hate crimes. Emotion can also lead to all that is 'good' in the world but be silly and, ultimately, destructive to a society. There must be a balance.

Morality is regarded by the religious hierarchies as their domain but, historically, societies have needed the shaman, witchdoctor or priest as much as the latter has needed the support of society; so the two have progressed through history, hand in hand.

While religion controlled the mind and emotion, once developed the larger society or state made laws to regulate the smooth functioning of society. However, throughout history, religion has had a profound affect on the formation of laws in less complex societies and even our own Judeo-Christian one, e.g. The Ten Commandments.

But morals deal in absolutes and often derive from cultural practice, rather than the fundamentals relating to the society's and individual's wellbeing. Absolutes, in real life, don't exist. Situational morals are called ethics and depend on exercising one's intelligence, conscience, empathy and the 'Golden Rule', which is about as close to dogma as they get. Ethics are not imposed by a priesthood, the law or another person but are the self-directed exercise of being profoundly and honestly human with reference to the rest of humanity.