

VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

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CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Does respect for others and support for diversity involve acceptance of traditional practices and laws of other cultures? Can autonomous social groups and belief systems demand to be free from criticism and external interference?

Consider these examples.

- A magistrate in the Northern Territory some years ago ruled that an Aboriginal offender should undergo tribal punishment. The culprit was repeatedly speared, then taken to hospital by a waiting ambulance, where his wounds were attended to.
- In Saudi Arabia amputations of the right hand are carried out, mostly in public, as punishment for theft. (In 1990 *Lancet*, the leading medical journal, reminded doctors involved in punitive amputations that they are in breach of international medical code of ethics, even when advising on treating the wound.)
- Female genital mutilation practised in several countries often causes long-term morbidity or death from blood loss or infection.
- *Sharia* law dictates that women be stoned to death for adultery, young men hanged for being gay, and allows the marriage of girls as young as nine years of age.

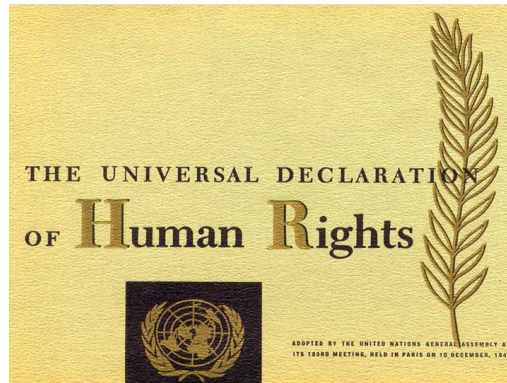
Should we refrain from criticising and taking action against such practices, out of respect for the traditions of other cultures? I think not. In the past there were activists who did not see slavery or the burning at the stake of witches and heretics as quaint traditional practices of our culture. They did not consider such practices had to be respected. These activists fought long battles to have such practices abolished. I am grateful for their actions. Humankind's trek from the barbaric to the civilised state relies on convictions and activism of this type.

Respect for the 'other' is important. Yet of greater importance, in my view, is the freedom of groups and individuals to protest and campaign against such harmful practices.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed 62 years ago. At that time it was adopted by the vast majority of member States of the United Nations, Saudi Arabia being the only exception among the Islamic States. A Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) was established to defend the principles of the UDHR.

The Declaration became a key document for Humanist and kindred societies worldwide and for many non-government organisations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International, Councils for Civil Liberties, International League Against Racism and many other human-rights groups. It was generally accepted that religious adherents had the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their belief, but religion itself could not be free from criticism.

However, in the last decade there has been a shift in power in the UNCHR (reformed in 2006 as the Human Rights Council), leading to such actions as the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam being adopted as an alternative to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Continued on page 5



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HSV
Public Lecture

THURSDAY
24 March

7.30 for 8.00 pm

Professor Timothy
McCormack
(University of
Melbourne),
on

*'International
criminal justice
and the
prevention of
atrocities'*

Balwyn Library Meeting
Room
336 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)

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Parents' meeting

The advertised meeting at Hays Paddock on 27 February was adjourned to KFC, Kew, because of wet weather. Fourteen parents gathered, at Dan Kerr's invitation, to discuss special religious instruction in State schools and to hear our solicitors' update on the legal case of complaint against the Education Department. Stephen Stuart, John Russell and Harry Gardner also spoke for HSV.

Tasmanian members

One Tasmanian member has expressed an interest in sounding out whether other Tasmanian Humanists are interested in getting together. HSV will facilitate this by asking all Tasmanian members whether they are happy to have their contact details given to this person.

Is Humanism only for old people?

You'd think so from much of our literature.

In-house discussion, 11 am, Sunday 13 March, William Tresise Centre, 37 Bowler St., Hawthorn East.

In preparation please read 'Secular schooling in Victoria: the humanist perspective' by Stephen Stuart, *Australian Humanist* No. 99, pp 6-8 (2010), and 'Children's ethics course' by Harry Gardner, *AH*, No. 101, pp 7-9 (2011).

Submission Report

1. On 'bullying in Australia' we made the following main points.

- That legislation be enacted to deal with bullying, with a range of age-related penalties.
- That the proposed religious exemptions to the anti-discrimination law would effectively grant protection to a type of bullying.
- That the proposed Commissioner for Children and Young People be empowered to initiate legal means to protect young people from all forms of bullying.
- That schools be mandated to revise their policies against homophobic and cyber bullying and have compulsory counselling for both bullies and victims, such as restorative practice and mediation.
- Victims of bullying should be regarded as 'children at risk' and reported as such under the mandatory reporting scheme obliging all teachers.
- Anti-bullying programs should be mandatory within school curricula at all levels. Respect for diversity and compassion and tolerance for others should be key issues in life-skills education within the Australian National Curriculum.
- Schools should instruct on appropriate responses to bullying and engage in public education campaign to raise public awareness of consequences and solutions to bullying
- We mention the response of some world leaders to the issue of bullying and resulting suicide.

Copies to the PM, Peter Garrett, Chris Evans, Jenny Macklin and Sarah Hanson-Young.

Geoff Allshorn

2. On 'chaplains in State schools' we made the following main points.

- Humanists regard formal education as an essential human right and an important determinant of quality of life. We strongly support the proposal to fund non-religious 'pastoral care workers' in place of Christian chaplains in state schools.
- We respect private beliefs and activities but oppose the promoting and funding of chaplains in public schools. It is discriminatory and violates Australian Constitution (Section 116).
- Council for Christian Education in Schools (ACCESS ministries) train chaplains and instruct them to reach students with 'the transforming love of God and his son Jesus Christ' and connect students with local Christian churches etc. This clear proselytising is an 'essential' part of the job.
- Teachers are directed not to promote their own beliefs, opinions or practices and we regard this as an important aspect of education.
- Humanists advocate the teaching of comparative belief systems to engender tolerance and understanding of others and to foster social cohesion.
- Effective counsellors require years of training in psychology, crisis management and available support services. They are required to upgrade their skills periodically. Chaplains are not required to do so and there are no provisions for evaluating their performance.
- We believe some State schools accept chaplains to relieve financial constraints; we urge that properly trained secular welfare officers be installed in State schools.

Geoff Allshorn & Halina Strnad

Submission feedback

1. In anticipation of a conscience vote in the parliament re euthanasia (via *The Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* of the Northern Territory), we wrote to 12 Victorian Senators (see report in Dec *VH*). We urged them to support the legislation of VE. The debate was deferred till later in 2011. So far four of the Senators responded, Jacinta Collins, David Feeney, Scott Ryan and Michael Ronaldson. All opposed VE in short statements or lengthy explanations.

2. In a letter to the Prime Minister we recommended Mr Julian Burnside (AHOY 2009) for membership of the expert panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians. The response came from the office of the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Hon. Jenny Macklin MP. We were thanked for our interest and support of this issue, assured of the Government's commitment to hold a referendum in this term of office or at the next election. The expert panel has already been selected from many nominations and comprises Indigenous leaders, legal experts, federal MPs and community leaders. HSV is invited to join in the national debate and contribute further.

Halina Strnad

Pernicious identities

(Reprinted from *Humanist Perspectives* Issue 165, Summer 2008, Ottawa.)

By Gary Bauslaugh

People are constantly identified and differentiated by others, and by themselves, in terms of superficial differences. This has been a source of enormous human suffering, and of untold injustices. It continues to be so, and even in educated circles continues to influence perceptions in a harmful manner. Black and aboriginal students are sometimes taught that western literature and philosophy is not 'of them', when in fact as members of the human race they are as entitled to claim as much credit for these accomplishments as anyone else. Shakespeare is a treasure, equally, for all of humanity, and the denial of access to his work because it is now the intellectual fashion in some circles to do so is only one small example of how misapprehensions about identity impoverish the world.

Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen,* in a recent book entitled *Violence & Identity*, writes that 'our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification.' Our shared humanity is forgotten when a senior general, responding to the reports of torture at Abu Ghraib, said that the abused detainees were 'only Iraqis' (Seymour Hersh, *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007).

But we are of the same family – we are all African, as Chris di Carlo wrote in our issue on Africa (Spring 2006). Individuals and groups will vary in the nearly infinite ways that the human genome allows – that is part of the richness of human experience. But in essence we are all the same. With individual variations, we all experience the same range of human feelings, the sorrows and joys, the same destructive predilections for anger, jealousy and revenge, the same capacities for love, kindness and forgiveness.

People are constantly identified and differentiated by others, and by themselves, in terms of superficial differences. This has been a source of enormous human suffering, and of untold injustices.

It is a common human fault to make too much of superficial differences, to mistrust or even hate those who have superficial physical differences, to assume that a different idea about how to live one's life is nasty and pernicious. We ought not to fall into the trap of relativism – some ideas are nasty and pernicious – but neither ought we to despise mere difference, as school children are prone to do.

Humanism embraces freedom of thought, and that obliges us to exemplify tolerance and good will toward those with different ideas, so long as those ideas do not impinge upon the freedom of others. It is what a person does that is important, not what he or she happens to think about the cosmos. Too often humanists identify themselves as people who must try to rid the world of wrong-thinking people, whether or not those people lead good and generous lives. That is the opposite of

encouraging freedom of thought, and that is giving humanism a one-dimensional identity, misrepresenting what the humanist movement is really all about.

Humanism is essentially about making the world a better place for humans to live out the one life they will ever have, and an understanding of our 'shared humanity' is surely central to that goal. The pernicious identity sometimes taken on by humanists is that of the militant, strident, unforgiving and intolerant enemy of religion. The mature identity we ought to seek characterizes the European humanist movement: a rational, tolerant voice of reason, seeking a better life for all humans, supporting a secular approach to public life.

Gary Bauslaugh edits *Humanist Perspectives*.

* Indian economist, Amartya Sen, was awarded a Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences in 1998 and has been honoured with an international Humanist award by IHEU. – Editor

Cultural relativism and human rights

(Continued from page 1)

It states that all rights derive from God, i.e. Allah. This move 'to combat defamation of religion' was in fact aimed at silencing criticism of human-rights abuses. It reversed the principle of universality of human rights and made these rights dependent on matters such as culture, tradition and beliefs. Thus the UN Human Rights Council lost its basic function.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) – the world umbrella organisation for Humanist, Rationalist, atheist, secularist and freethought groups – is an NGO with Special Consultative Status with the UN, UNICEF and UNESCO. Mr Roy Brown, former president of IHEU, has been our spokesperson in these forums for several years. He argues strongly that the criticism of religion is not blasphemy and that no State should be permitted to hide behind tradition, culture or religion in order to justify human rights abuse. He especially condemns abuses of women, such as 'honour' killings, facial maiming with acid and child marriages.

On 28 March 2008 the Islamic States, supported by China, Russia and Cuba, forced an amendment to a resolution on freedom of expression that prevents criticism of religious laws and traditions. Roy Brown reported this as 'the death of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' and added, 'the NGO community now needs to think carefully what purpose can any longer be served by our continuing our engagement with the Human Rights Council, and by fighting for values that are no longer accepted within the UN system.'

He further suggested that the NGOs and those States that are genuinely concerned with human rights should withdraw from the UNHRC and set up their own organisation, committed to the universal protection and promotion of human rights. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan calls this 'the organisation of the willing'.

It is worth recalling that it was broad, concerted action such as sanctions against South Africa that brought an end to its apartheid policy in 1992.

Halina Strnad

VH in colourful PDF—Consider receiving future VHs by E-mail. Please advise Dan Kerr victorianhumanist@gmail.com

NSW

These three motions may be discussed at the members' meeting on 13 March. If not they will be considered on 10 April. Please bring a copy with you.

1. 'That CAHS forward the following recommendation to the IHEU and the Federal Government:

- that the international community be strongly urged
- to implement policies which would reduce population growth;
 - to reverse decline in arable lands;
 - to adopt environmentally friendly energy and resource use policies.'

Rationale

The underlying notion supporting these policy points is that humanity is part and parcel of the natural environment and not separate from it. The attitude that human beings and human society can exploit the products and resources of the natural world as an infinite well has never been sustainable, but now the impact of humanity on the natural world by way of its massive and still growing population, pressure on land-use and resource depletion, magnified by achievements in science and technology, has the potential to overwhelm the natural world with unpredictable and dire consequences.

The imminent crunch of these factors is leading to global food crises. Political social policies desperately need to improve in order to limit the influence of reactionary religion, which populations turn to as answers to harsh political economic policies, perpetrated mainly by the West. These religious forces inhibit the education of women. Inhibiting the education of women works against the need to reduce birthrates.

The world has already seen a global food crisis in 2008 which led to food riots in many parts of the world. The world is going into increased risk of situations of multiple whammies of concurrent unfortunate weather events, widespread serious outbreak of agricultural diseases and pests, limits to growth of the key fertiliser ingredients of potash and phosphorous, widespread serious soil degradation, energy supply crunch causing more diversion of food production to transport liquid fuel energy and biofuels

2. 'That CAHS write to Senator Nick Xenophon, Hon. Bill Shorten MP (assistant treasurer) and the Senate Economics Legislation Cttee supporting the Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010.'

Rationale

This bill seeks to amend the tax laws to require that religious and charitable institutions meet a public benefit test to justify their exemption from taxation. This is a step towards ensuring that religions pay their fair share of tax.

(If another State Society introduces a more wide-ranging motion on this issue, e.g. based on Max Wallace's information, we are prepared to accept replacement).

3. 'hat we urge CAHS to continue to lobby government at all appropriate levels for government recognition of same-sex marriage.'

Rationale

A step towards ending all forms of discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

Victoria

The intent of 1–3 motions, were agreed to at the HSV discussion meeting on Sunday 13 February.

1. 'That CAHS respond positively to IHEU's appeal of May 2010 to adopt a Dalit village, and determine how the requisite funds may be raised.'

Rationale

1. Dalits, the untouchables of India, are deprived of the most basic human rights and live in dire poverty.
2. Our help would be a practical act of altruism, which Humanists espouse. It would foster education and hence a better ability to fight for human rights and against the inequity imposed by the caste system.
3. Action by CAHS would establish Australian Humanists as active members of IHEU. In the absence of ready funds, CAHS should appeal to its members for donations.

2. 'That CAHS apply to the Federal Attorney General to be recognized as espousing a world-view equivalent to a religion, for the purpose of solemnizing marriages under the *Marriage Act 1961*, and, in pursuance, be prepared to establish a special agency for appointing officiants to perform marriages, using a Humanist form of service, anywhere in Australia.'

Rationale

1. Humanism, being a positive approach to life which aims to maximize human fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living, is eminently suited to celebrating marriage.
2. The Australian *Marriage Act 1961*, as amended, establishes civil marriage in three streams, licensed by 'ministers of religion', by government officers or by individual civil celebrants. The last stream was introduced by jurist Lionel Murphy, AHOY 1983. A number of individual Humanists are now registered as marriage celebrants under the Act. Humanist organizations in a number of other jurisdictions, including New Zealand, Scotland, Norway, Ontario and some 36 states of the USA, are officially recognized for solemnization of marriages, and their officiants are deemed to be clergy of a non-theistic religion.
3. A demographically sensible government would appreciate that what people swear by is wider than any number of gods. Proclamation of Humanism on a par with conventional religion for marriage purposes would be a significant breach in the wall of church privilege, which is outdated in our multicultural society. It would strengthen the cause of Humanists to challenge the church's reactionary stranglehold on moral guidance in government schools.

3. '(a) That Humanists, both organizationally and individually, urge other Australians, who have no religious commitment, to mark 'no religion' on the Census's optional question on religion, and
(b) that Societies and individuals share their ideas and actions on this matter with others for maximum effectiveness.'

Rationale

Early in August Australians will be asked to complete a 2011 Census form.

The questions asked will be the same as in 2006.

Therefore the optional, question on religion will ask, 'What is the person's religion? The response section will include named boxes for religions with larger numbers, a write-in 'other' box for minority religions and right at the bottom a 'no religion' box.

As the data from this question is widely used by governments, politicians, researchers, journalists, etc. as the most accurate data on belief in Australia, even though it is at odds other social indicators that show the level of religious commitment in Australia is low – under 20% do anything religious on a regular basis.

To bring the census religion/non-religion data closer in line with other social survey data, we need to urge people to boost the 'no religion' numbers.

4. 'That CAHS and state Australian Humanist Societies co-ordinate their lobbying activities through exchanging material relating to Humanist involvement.'

Rationale

1. To strengthen the Humanist voice in Australia.
2. To avoid contradictions which would damage our credibility.

5. 'That CAHS strongly object to the continued incarceration of asylum seekers, particularly of over one thousand children, many of these being unaccompanied minors. (Minister of Immigration to receive letter, CC to PM)'

Rationale

1. Mandatory detention violates basic human rights.
2. Recent criticism of Australia re this matter has come from UNICEF, Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Council.

Member in print

(*Melbourne's Child*, Feb 2011.)

I'M WRITING to express my concern regarding the sanctioned isolation and discrimination occurring in our primary schools. Most know our public schools run a class about religion, but many parents seem totally unaware of what the details are.

Most schools don't fully inform parents that two courses are possible. GRE on comparative religion; and SRI on a particular religion only (e.g. protestant, jewish, islam), taught by unknown volunteers with two days' training. GRE is neglected because it would cost the Dept money. So we get SRI – or CRE as it is known, because Christian volunteers get majority access to our primary level children.

And children can receive vastly different lessons depending on the whims of the volunteer. Some children, the Humanist Society of Victoria has found, are returning home with conceptions of hell and torture weighing on

them. Concepts their developing minds cannot possibly understand. I bought the syllabus myself to read and have yet to find evidence of any practical lessons on right from wrong.

Right now parents concerned about Sunday-school-style preaching have to Opt Out of these classes. But there is absolutely no alternative offered and at this age kids simply don't understand why they are singled out. Instead they are taken away and isolated to corridors, libraries or empty rooms. One parent was told by a principal she would have to come and look after her child herself if she chose to Opt Out. Or worse, some kids are just shifted to the back of their classroom and watch their friends eating candy and reading colourful books. Does that sound like a secular unbiased multicultural school in Melbourne?

A logical solution would be for schools to stop SRI entirely and offer GRE (comparative religion) as an ordinary, uncontentious, elective subject. A less drastic change would be to offer the SRI lessons after school hours. But both major political parties are scared of rocking the boat. But let's not forget the important point; its children who suffer while adults quibble over terminology. A lawsuit is under way for some of the worst cases, and you can learn more about those at vic.humanist.org.au. That this is even required is a scandal. I can only reiterate that parents should find out what their kids are actually learning (or not learning) and go from there. Hopefully reason will prevail and all children can feel safe and important in their own school.

Dan Kerr, Mitcham

Expel God from class

Journalist Susie O'Brien argued strongly against the National School Chaplaincy Program, in an article with the above title, *Herald Sun*, 15 Feb. Humanist policy agrees with her. Chaplains have been defended on two fronts, as fine exemplars of traditional religion and as pastors to the distressed. There are correspondingly two sensible alternatives. First, professional teachers may deliver general religious education, which would give students a wider and more objective view of religious culture. Second, professional psychologists could help troubled young people more effectively without a missionary agenda. However, and perhaps predictably, all letters subsequently printed on the subject in the *Herald Sun* were genuflections to the good chaps.

Stephen Stuart

Member E-mail list request

We are asking all members to send their E-mail details in order to provide you with more up to date goings on, changes to event details and to advise on any mid-month activities that were not in the VH. Please send your E-mail and Name details to victorianhumanist@gmail.com with Subject of 'Member email list'.

To join HSV

Contact the Membership Secretary, Marie Hodgens, E-mail hmhodge@netspace.net.au,

Tel. (03) 9833 4732 or write to HSV, GPO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001.
Annual fees: Individual \$30 [conc. \$20], Couple \$35 [conc. \$25], Ass member [publications only \$20]

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The case for the humanistic outlook is overwhelming; and therefore the starting point in these pages is the premise that human individuals, as intelligent agents capable of making choices and deciding for themselves what to aim for, are responsible for making the best life possible for themselves in the heres and nows of their time in the world. And their time in the world is brief enough to add urgency to the question, 'How shall we live for the best?' for an average lifespan is than a thousand months long.

A. C. Grayling, *The Choice of Hercules: Pleasure, Duty and the Good Life in the 21st Century*, Phoenix, 2007.