

A humanist discussion of... WORLD POVERTY

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use **reason**, **experience** and **respect for others** when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it's the only one we have. They do not believe in a god who gives humans moral values, or in a life after death that will compensate for earthly suffering and reward the good and punish the bad. Humanists consider that the "**golden rule**", **Treat others as you would like to be treated**" is a useful ethical principle, because it is based on the shared human need to be treated well and our aspiration to live harmoniously with others.

For these reasons, humanists oppose the vast inequalities and injustices which cause so much poverty and misery. They know that **if we are to improve matters it is up to us**, and that we must use our knowledge and skills to help others in the way we would want to be helped. **We should care about poverty**, however remote from us it is, not because our god or a holy text tells us to, but because we are all members of the same species, co-existing on our small planet, and **treating others fairly is the right thing to do**. Besides, it is in everyone's interest to work towards a more just world - injustice and scarcity cause wars and mass displacements of population which only increase suffering and can affect us all.

What is poverty?

There are two kinds of poverty, **absolute** and **relative**. Absolute poverty exists where people do not have adequate food, shelter or opportunities to improve their conditions. Relative poverty exists where there are inequalities of wealth in a society so that those with the lowest incomes have a standard of living far below most of their fellow citizens, and this kind of poverty can be found even in the richest nations. In the poorest parts of the world people have too little food, water, shelter, education, land, sanitation, and health-care. They are poor in absolute terms, and also poor relative to the wealthier members of their own societies, and to almost everyone in the more affluent parts of the world, which would include Europe and the USA. Some of us in Britain may be poor relative to others, but few of us are starving or could not get medical care if we needed it.

Why does so much poverty exist?

When thinking about moral issues, it is often useful to explore the **causes** of a problem before deciding on the answer. Poverty has many causes, and people differ about which are the most important. Humanists would discount causes such as fate or a displeased deity, but, depending on their experience and political views, might choose one or more of the following causes, and campaign or give money to combat it:

Lack of education is a barrier to prosperity. Education can provide doctors, teachers, nurses, engineers, agriculturalists, vets - all of whom can help to create a better future. As the saying puts it, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for life."

Lack of opportunities for girls and women hinders development: educating girls boosts the economy through their career contributions and leads to smaller healthier families.

Exploitation of the poor by the rich - This seems to be an unfortunate aspect of human nature, linked with the desire for power and status, and goes on everywhere. It is worse when authoritarian governments deny the poor a political voice, or when rich nations use their bargaining power to drive down the prices they pay for products from developing countries. Some people think that the massive debts that poor countries have been allowed to accumulate are a form of exploitation. Colonialism often led to the draining of a country's natural resources towards the wealthier colonial powers. Investment in poor countries by businesses and industries from richer nations can help to create jobs and wealth - but if the benefits go disproportionately to the investors, this too can result in wealth flowing from the poor nations to the rich, and this is sometimes called "neo-colonialism" ("neo" meaning new).

Lack of resources - some countries lack good farmland, plentiful fresh water, minerals or sources of energy. New technologies can help, provided they are affordable and realistic for the context. Competition for increasingly scarce natural resources may well cause future wars.

Natural disasters - drought, floods, volcanoes, earthquakes. Some of the world's poorest people have little choice but to live in areas subject to regular natural disasters. In emergencies they need aid, fast.

Environmental degradation - It is not surprising that poor people clear forests, overgraze grasslands, and are unwilling to spend money on preventing pollution, all of which increase their problems in the long term. If rich people care about these things, they must be prepared to pay for them - in aid, in fair prices for goods, in eco-tourism and other ways of paying for the preservation of wilderness.

War - conflict disrupts food production and distribution and wastes limited resources, as well as causing death, injury, and destruction of a country's infrastructure. War and armaments are luxuries that few poor countries can afford, though they may be necessary for self-defence.

Traditions (including religious traditions) can stand in the way of progress. For example, it is important that people use birth control to avoid having more children than they can look after, and that girls are educated too if a country is to make the best use of its human potential. Some cultures oppose these developments.

Corruption and inefficiency - some countries are poorer than they need be because a minority creams off the resources and aid that should be more widely distributed, or because funds (sometimes borrowed at high interest) are badly used. Everyone has to be honest and efficient if huge problems are to be solved.

Lack of human rights - some of the above problems would be less likely in democratic systems where people can get rid of bad governments, and in countries which respect human rights, which include the right to criticise the current situation and work for change.

The humanist record

Individual humanists contribute to a range of humanitarian organisations dedicated to improving the conditions of the world's poorest people. Many of these organisations are not religious. Humanists were very active in setting up United Nations agencies after the 1939-45 war. Some were awarded honours for public service. Some examples of humanists who worked for a better world follow:

PETER RITCHIE CALDER, later **BARON RITCHIE-CALDER** (1906-82), was a humanist, journalist, and British delegate to UNESCO. He wanted people to see that science, if used properly, could help the world rather than destroy it. He was an adviser to Oxfam.

BROCK CHISHOLM (1898-1967) was a Canadian psychiatrist who dedicated much of his life to awakening the world to a sense of responsibility for the present and future welfare of humankind. He felt that we were all citizens of the world. He was Director General of the WHO from 1948 to 1953, and was one of the first people to insist that the problem of over-population must be tackled.

PANDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU (1889-1964) was the first Prime Minister of India. He worked with Mahatma Gandhi to achieve independence from British rule peacefully. Nehru saw the effects of superstition on the lives of his people and wrote of religion that "...it shuts its eyes to reality." He thought that religion was at the root of the stagnation and lack of progress in his country: "No country or people who are slaves to dogma and dogmatic mentality can progress, and unhappily our country and people have become extraordinarily dogmatic and little-minded." He wanted mass education to release Indian society from the limitations that ignorance and religious traditions imposed. He knew that industrialisation was needed to feed the growing population, and that illiteracy denied people the skills required.

OLIVE SCHREINER (1855-1920) grew up in South Africa. She was an agnostic who became a passionate pacifist and opponent of racism.

M N ROY (1887-1954) was an Indian humanist, nationalist and revolutionary. His life and political activism were based on his humanist values. His life-long passion, and a constant element in his long and varied career, was the desire for liberty.

FENNER BROCKWAY (1888-1988) was a humanist politician who devoted his life to world peace and racial equality. He was imprisoned for his opposition to the 1914-18 war, and helped to found the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the World Disarmament Campaign. He played a leading role in bringing about the change from the old imperialist British Empire to the present situation where independent nations belong to the Commonwealth. He knew most of the leaders of the colonies seeking independence from Britain, including Gandhi and Nehru, the Indian leaders.

LORD JOHN BOYD ORR (1880-1971) was the first Director of both the WHO and of the FAO. He had been a Professor of Agriculture, and, as a scientist and a humanist, he believed that we should use our knowledge to ensure that everyone in the world has enough to eat.

SIR JULIAN HUXLEY (1887-1975) was a professor at King's College, London, and a pioneer in the study of animal behaviour (ethology) and conservation. Huxley was the first Director-General of UNESCO, where he was able to promote world-wide education, population control and conservation of nature.

Humanists today continue to seek **rational** and **scientific solutions for problems of poverty and ignorance around the world**. For example, they vigorously oppose the Roman Catholic Church's position on contraception and a former Honorary President of the BHA, Sir Hermann Bondi, was also President of Population Concern. In 2005 the BHA joined the [MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY](#) coalition.

Task (individual or group)

Your organisation or school has raised £5000 to alleviate world poverty, and you are on the committee deciding which charity you will donate it to. Find out about some charities (e.g. Oxfam, Intermediate Technology, Action Aid, or ones campaigning for peace, disarmament, cancellation of third world debt, or human rights). Present the arguments for donating the money to the charity of your choice.

Further reading

Humanist Perspectives 2 (BHA) contains a more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers. Available to buy at www.humanism.org.uk

Also available from the BHA's website –

- Other BHA briefings: ***Thinking about ethics ; Human Rights, Discrimination and Prejudice, Immigration and Asylum***, etc.
- Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), ***What is Humanism?*** (BHA)

Lloyd Russow, Village of 1,000 in 2000 - for a version of the Global Village article ("If the world was a village of 1000 people...") <http://faculty.philau.edu/russow/villageof1000.html> Who are you in the "global village"?

The magazine [New Internationalist](#) deals with many relevant issues and published an article by the BHA education officer in [issue 370](#), August '04,