

Humanists working for a better world

Because of their belief that this world is the only one we have and that human problems can only be solved by humans, humanists have often been very active social reformers. Compassion and a sense of justice are not unique to religious people. Most humanists believe in democracy, open government and human rights, and support action on world poverty and the environment. Some were and are pacifists, and many are active in charities and politics. Early humanists campaigned for wider access to contraception and for the legal acceptance of non-religious oaths. Before the state took over much social and charitable work from the churches, humanists helped non-religious people who needed these services by setting up: housing and education projects for young workers (1890s); an adoption agency (1950s), a housing association (1960s), a humanist counselling service (1960s); directly funded overseas aid projects (1960s).

In the nineteenth century

Social reformer and industrialist **Robert Owen** (1771-1858) pioneered good working and living conditions for his workers and their families in his mill and workers' village at New Lanark, Scotland.

Utilitarian philosophers **Jeremy Bentham** (1748 – 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) used their moral philosophy to argue for democracy, better welfare and education, and legal and prison reforms.

Scottish philanthropist **George Baillie** (1784-1873) endowed Baillies' Institute in Glasgow, which opened in 1887 for the education of workers.

Early humanist and founder of the National Secular Society **Charles Bradlaugh** (1833-91) was sentenced to six months in prison in 1877 for publishing a pamphlet about family planning. Bradlaugh, who became an MP, also campaigned for the legal recognition of non-religious affirmations.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919), Scottish-born American industrialist, decided at 33 to spend his wealth on "benevolent purposes", establishing one of the world's largest philanthropic grant-making funds, founding thousands of libraries and giving money to cultural, educational and peace institutions.

In the twentieth century

Between the wars humanists were active in the League of Nations. After World War 2, humanists helped to start up the United Nations, to help to

keep the peace between people of all nations, religions and cultures. The UN recognises the interdependence of humankind. It works to resolve conflicts between nations peacefully, and to bring about social and economic progress through improvements in agriculture, health care and education. As one of its first tasks, it formulated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on 10 December 1948 (now Human Rights Day) and which sets a standard of entitlement to rights and freedoms for everyone. In 1989 the UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by over 190 countries. Humanists were the first directors of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Health Organisation (WHO), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Peter Ritchie Calder, later Lord Ritchie-Calder (1906-82), was a humanist, journalist, British delegate to UNESCO and UN Famine Conference, and adviser to Oxfam. He wrote a number of books, including *Common Sense About a Starving World*, and made a documentary film, *Enough to Eat?* He wrote about the application of science, and wanted people to see that science, if used properly, could help the world rather than destroy it. He believed that understanding evolution could help us to understand our own nature and behaviour. He devoted much of his life to the peaceful uses of atomic energy, and helped to start the United Nations Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, as well as being active in the British Peace Council and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Brock Chisholm (1898-1967) was a Canadian psychiatrist and humanist, who dedicated much of his life to awakening the world to a sense of responsibility for the present and future welfare of humankind. His major contribution to this was as Director General of the World Health Organisation from 1948 to 1953. Dr Chisholm managed this complex task with a gentle dedication and a genius for getting diverse people to co-operate in a common cause, challenging and encouraging those working with him. Brock Chisholm was one of the first to insist that the problem of over-population must be tackled if the world was not to be degraded and stripped bare by the increasing number of human beings on it.

Sir Julian Huxley (1887-1975) was the grandson of T H Huxley (staunch supporter of Charles Darwin and originator of the term "agnostic"). He was a professor at King's College, London, and a pioneer in the study of animal behaviour (ethology) and conservation. In 1935 he became director of London Zoo. In the 30s he was also a member of the African Survey, assessing the needs of the people who lived in sub-Saharan Africa. In the early sixties, he wrote articles about hunted and endangered species in Africa, which contributed to the founding of the World Wildlife Fund. Huxley was appointed the first Director-General of UNESCO, the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Here he was able to promote world-wide education, population control and

conservation of nature. Huxley was dedicated to finding the way to a better life and wider access to such a life.

Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru (1898-1994) worked peacefully to establish independence, democracy and social reforms in India, and became the first Prime Minister of the newly independent India after World War 2. He wrote: "...Nor am I greatly interested in life after death. I find the problems of this life sufficiently absorbing to fill my mind."

John Boyd Orr, later Lord Boyd Orr (1880-1971) was the first Director of the World Health Organisation and of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). He was an adviser to the BHA, and put his humanist ideals into practice. He had been a Professor of Agriculture, and, as a scientist and a humanist, believed that we should use our knowledge to ensure that everyone in the world had enough to eat. The titles of his books, *Food and the People*, *Health and Income*, and *Famine and Feast*, showed the main concerns of his life. His efforts to eradicate hunger in the world won him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1949, and he was made a Companion of Honour by The Queen.

Shri Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (aka Gora) (1902-1975) was an Indian social reformer. Born into a high caste Orthodox Hindu family and marrying Saraswathi in 1922 when she was only 10 (their religion dictated at that time that girls must marry pre-puberty), Gora was exposed to the inadequacies of societal practices in India. His campaigns - underpinned by atheism throughout - strove to abolish both the caste system with its 'untouchables', and the idea of 'karma' or divine fate.

Today

Present day humanists give money and/or time generously and regularly to an average of 6 charities each. Humanists tend to plan their giving rationally and selectively, but most also respond generously to emergency appeals and street collections. The most popular causes were those connected with social welfare (27%) and international development / aid (21%). Only 2 out of 676 responses did not support charitable giving. (BHA survey of members in *Humanity*, 2000)

For comparison: according to a Mori survey for Nestlé Family Monitor in 2000, just under ½ the British public undertook voluntary work that year, and 92% had given money to at least one charity. 1 in 5 gave regularly, and 1 in 5 was a member of a charity, though the most popular forms of giving were to street collections (55%) and to door-to-door collections (50%). Only 36% of the general public contributed to 5 or more charities. Children's charities and medical research charities were the most popular.

Some humanists also contribute to society through their work as officiants, helping the non-religious to mark important occasions in their



lives in humanist ceremonies for baby namings, weddings, affirmations and funerals.
