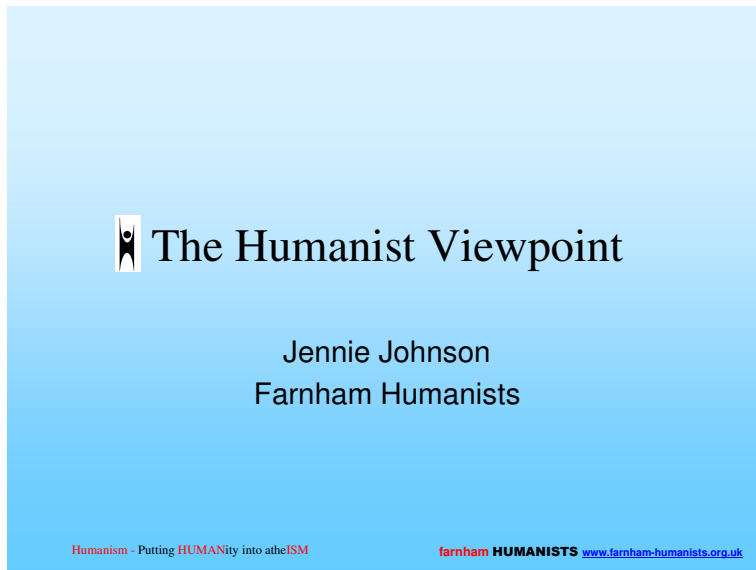


The Humanist Viewpoint



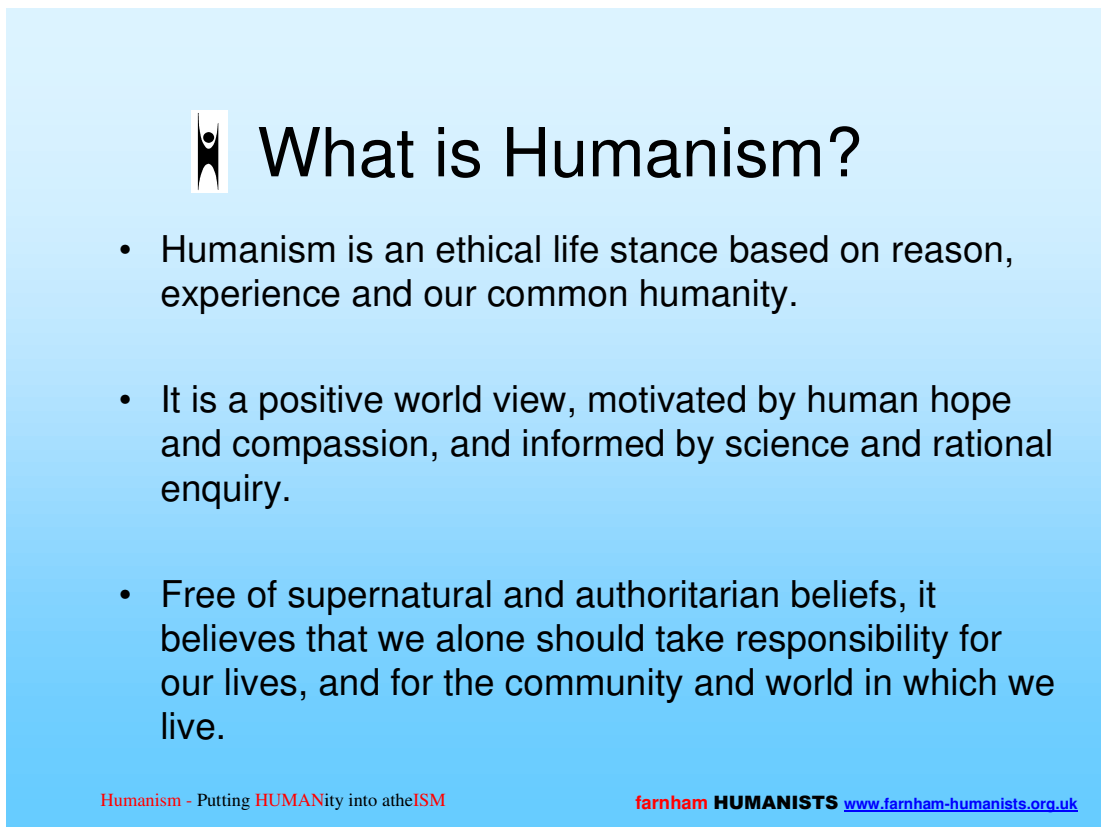
The Humanist Viewpoint

Jennie Johnson
Farnham Humanists

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I'm going to start off by giving you a short description and then go into our core beliefs in a bit more detail. I will then give you a short History of Humanism and talk about how Humanists engage with society. Ivor has asked me to include a mention of our institutions and any connections with any religious ones. Then at the end I'll give a short summary.

What is Humanism?



What is Humanism?

- Humanism is an ethical life stance based on reason, experience and our common humanity.
- It is a positive world view, motivated by human hope and compassion, and informed by science and rational enquiry.
- Free of supernatural and authoritarian beliefs, it believes that we alone should take responsibility for our lives, and for the community and world in which we live.

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What Humanists believe –

What do Humanists believe?

- **Only the natural world exists - not the supernatural**
- **We have only one life - it's up to us to make the most of it**
- **Importance of moral values**
- **Democracy, Human Rights and mutual respect**
- **Importance of science and the scientific method of inquiry**
- **Importance of nurturing the human spirit**
- **Unending questioning of assumptions/convictions**

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Only the natural world exists - not the supernatural

Most Humanists are atheists or agnostics. We don't believe in the existence of a god or gods, or that life has an underlying supernatural purpose.

What we do believe is, that as human beings we have the resources ourselves to give our lives purpose and meaning e.g. through our families and communities, through helping other people, through worthwhile projects and activities.

We recognise that for some people the thought that they could be on their own in the universe could be very frightening.

Whilst others, like me, find it very difficult to believe in any sort of god, but especially an all powerful and all loving god who could allow anyone to suffer in the short term let alone in an eternal hell.

For many humanists, myself included, believing only in the natural world, not the supernatural, gives a huge sense of freedom and relief.

We have only one life and it's up to us to make the most of it

Humanists do not believe in life after death or indeed in life before we are conceived. We

believe our mind is a function of the brain and there is no conscious survival after death. When we die we return to nature. Our molecules recombine as part of the universe.

We do believe people live on in other people's memories, in the people they have touched and in the projects they have left behind. We believe in the importance of rites of passage and, as I expect many of you are aware, we hold non-religious funerals which celebrate the life of the person who has died.

We can understand that many people might find it very tough that we don't believe in a life after death. That we won't see again the people we have loved who have died. For humanists there is simply insufficient convincing evidence of an afterlife and for many it is something they have come to accept.

I personally had to confront explaining what happens when we die when my 4 and 6 year olds asked me where their daddy was now, following his death after an operation. I had brought them up from the beginning with the view that it is entirely up to them whether they believe in a god or gods and whether they want to follow a religion or not. So I said the truth, that I didn't know. I said that different people think different things. Their Granny and my closest friend who is a Methodist minister thought he would be in heaven whereas I thought you don't go anywhere when you die but that I believed that he would be there for us in our thoughts. That we would always know he loved us and hadn't wanted to leave us.

Some people wonder what motivates humanists – I have been asked why do I get up in the mornings?

Believing we only have one life can mean that even more we want to make the most of what we have and we want to feel good about it.

We know that decent people do generally earn the affection and respect of others. They don't live in fear of disapproval or punishment, and so are generally happier. Those who actively care about other people and act on it usually have better relationships and more rewarding lives.

Of course the world is full of injustice too - bad people do sometimes prosper and good people suffer. Nevertheless, it isn't naïve or stupid to be good, but actually a sensible and rational response.

We believe having a meaningful life and being happy depends to a large extent on helping to make other people happy.

Importance of moral values

Stalin was an atheist but he was not a humanist. Humanists believe in the importance of ethical human values - of a need for morality.

Humanists use reason and experience, and empathy and respect for others when thinking about moral issues. We do not believe that morality comes from one leader, one book or one set of absolute rules. For instance, in general, we would all agree that killing is wrong but would it be wrong to kill a terrorist who is about to blow up a building full of

people. And if your children are starving is it wrong to steal food from someone who has plenty?

Thus, Humanists prefer to look at general principles which have to be worked out for the particular situation. One such general principle is known as the Golden Rule which is based on reason, empathy and experience and goes back to the ancient Greeks. Confucius in 500 BC worded it as *Do not do to others what you would not like yourself*. The more positive way round is to treat other people as you would like to be treated – for example with tolerance, consideration and compassion.

The next slide gives the golden rule as expressed by some of the different World religions and beliefs – I ran out of room to fit in others such as Buddhism, Jainism, Zoastrainism, etc

Universality of the Golden Rule

Christianity	<i>In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets Matthew 7:12 You shall love your neighbour as yourself Matthew 22:39</i>
Confucianism	<i>Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state. Analects 12:2</i>
Bah'ai	<i>And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choosest for thyself. Writing of Baha'u'llah [Bahai]</i>
Hinduism	<i>This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you. Mahabharata 5,1517</i>
Humanism	<i>"Do not do to others that which would anger you if others did it to you." 5th Century BC, Socrates "Treat other people as you'd want to be treated in their situation; don't do things you wouldn't want to have done to you." BHA 1999</i>
Islam	<i>No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself. Sunnah</i>
Judaism	<i>What is hateful to you, do not do unto others. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. Talmud, Shabbat 31d</i>

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The fact that all main religions and beliefs share this ethical principle of reciprocity is a great illustration of just how much we have in common.

Having said this of course the golden rule is not perfect- you wouldn't want it to be put into general practice by a sado-masochist for example – this is why Humanists prefer to have guidelines rather than absolute rules and to take into account past evidence as well the likely consequences of our actions.

Humanists believe our moral sense comes from our development as social animals. It is a natural instinct which has evolved over the millennia, from our need to live in groups to survive. Recent anthropological studies and the work of evolutionary biologists and psychologists have brought home to us how much of our behaviour is universal, including our basic needs and values.

Some of what we think of as human values, such as mutual help and altruism can also be seen in other animals. For example, vervet monkeys give alarm calls to warn fellow monkeys of predators even though they are increasing the likelihood of themselves being attacked. Human swimmers have been protected from sharks by dolphins swimming tightly round them

Naturally any society will have some people who do not develop a sense of morality. There needs therefore to be some rules or laws laid down by society with treatment in prison or by psychiatrists to help such people and for the good of the community.

Importance of democracy, Human Rights and mutual respect.

Humanists believe in Human Rights, democracy and free speech and in the importance of tolerance and mutual respect. We support equality and oppose discrimination. We believe in the importance of an 'open society' in which people of fundamentally different views can co-operate in shared and neutral institutions for the common good.

For example Humanists actively supported the addition of the three new equality strands of religion or belief, sexual orientation and age. These combine with gender, race and disability to make six protected equality areas in law.

We believe all religious and non-religious ethical beliefs should be able to be freely practised, with no one religion or belief being given any priority over any of the others. This would maximise freedom, equality and inclusivity for **all** citizens.

We are against any groups having exemptions from the religion and belief or sexual orientation equality strands. For example, we don't believe it is right for (say) a geography teacher in a state school to be barred from recruitment or promotion because he or she is gay or has the wrong religion.

Being a humanist does not mean agreeing with other humanists about everything. Humanists often hold conflicting views about ethical and political questions. The main point is that we believe we should engage in discussion in a spirit of free inquiry and try to use reason and evidence in support of our arguments.

Importance of science and the scientific method of enquiry

Humanists believe science has produced much of benefit – antibiotics, aeroplanes, mobile phones, but of course scientific discoveries can be used in damaging ways too.

Humanists attach much importance to evidence and the scientific method as a means of understanding the world. The scientific method involves formulating a hypothesis and then experimentally testing it to see if the results predicted actually occur. The philosopher Karl Popper highlighted that it is never possible to prove the validity of a theory with absolute certainty, but it may be possible to disprove it. This is why, despite

overwhelmingly strong evidence and acceptance by the vast majority of the world's scientists, Darwin's Evolution by Natural Selection is still described by Scientists as The Theory of Evolution.

Humanists also recognize the limitations of science. Science cannot, for example, provide decisions on whether one object is more beautiful than another or whether one type of behaviour is more morally correct than another.

Importance of nurturing the human spirit

Whilst not relating it to anything supernatural, most Humanists would agree on the importance of nurturing the human spirit, of having a dimension to living which is beyond the everyday and of developing our inner resources to have the ability to rise above the mundane. For example this would include experiencing feelings of awe and wonder at the natural world, of being inspired by artistic creativity, of being moved by love, kindness and compassion and of having a sense of unity with other human beings.

Unending questioning of basic assumptions and convictions, including Humanism

Lastly Humanism believes in unending questioning of basic assumptions and convictions, and, of course, this includes Humanism itself.

History of Humanism



 **History of Humanism**

- Humanist ideas date back to the ancient world
 - e.g. Greek thinkers: Aesop, Democritus, Epicurus, Protagoras
- Developed over time - no one person or group
 - Question & Answer method of Socrates
 - Renaissance & Age of Enlightenment e.g. Hume, Voltaire, Diderot
 - Social reform movement of 18th & 19th centuries e.g. John Stuart Mill,
 - 20th century e.g. E M Forster, Bertrand Russell,
- British Humanist Association (BHA) originated 1896
 - International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) 1952

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Humanism is not new. You can find humanist ideas dating back to ancient India and China and in the thoughts of Greek thinkers such as Democritus and Epicurus.

Humanism wasn't founded by one person, or by a group of people. It has developed over time.

Humanists identify with the question and answer process of Socrates as a way of arriving at the truth. Ideas were developed further during the renaissance and the age of enlightenment, for example through the writings of David Hume, Voltaire and Diderot. Humanism then became part of mainstream thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Because Humanists believe this life is the only one we have and that human problems can only be solved by humans, humanists have often been active social reformers. For example in the 19th century Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill used their moral philosophy to argue for democracy, better welfare and education, and legal and prison reforms.

In the 20th century for example, humanists helped to start up the United Nations and were the first directors of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation, and UNESCO.

The British Humanist Association is the national charity supporting Humanists today in the UK. It originated in 1896 from the ethical social reform movement of the 18th and 19th centuries.

On the world stage, the International Humanist and Ethical Union was founded in Amsterdam in 1952 and is the world union of more than 100 Humanist groups and similar ethical organisations in over 40 countries. It has consultative status at the UN, UNICEF, the Council of Europe and UNESCO.



Today many ordinary people are Humanists and many others, whilst not calling themselves Humanists, have sympathy with our beliefs. Among better known Humanists are: Terry Pratchett, Jonathan Miller, Professor Steve Jones, Stephen Fry, Professor Brian Cox, Glenys Kinnock, Jenni Murray. Claire Raynor who sadly died this month was President of the BHA for 5 years before becoming Vice-President for the past 6 years.

Humanism and Society

Humanism and Society

- Humanist Ceremonies
 - Baby namings, civil partnerships, weddings, funerals
- Local humanist groups
- Volunteering and charitable giving
 - Humanist Chaplain Volunteers
 - Humanist Speaker Volunteers
 - Humanist Local development Volunteers
 - Humanist SACRE Volunteers

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Humanism is a positive philosophy with much emphasis on actively taking part in society and culture for a better world for everyone. I'm just going to talk about some of the ways Humanists get involved in the local community.

Humanist Ceremonies

When I married 23 years ago the only options were getting married in a registry office or a church. I chose the registry office much to my Uncle's chagrin who couldn't see why I couldn't conveniently forget my beliefs and go for the country church and whole white wedding. Similarly of course I couldn't christen my children but that didn't stop me having a welcoming gathering of friends and family with a speech and cutting a cake.

Now I know that I could go to the British Humanist Association for support with Humanist ceremonies for baby namings, weddings and civil partnerships as well as for funerals.

Local Humanist groups

Some Humanists join local groups. I belong to Farnham Humanists. Otherwise locally there are groups in Reading, Guildford, Richmond and Southampton. We come together to exchange ideas, hear talks, plan events socialise and of course friendships and mutual support follow from this. For example our group has raised over £2000 for charity by holding annual public debates. This November we have Lord Norton and Dr Ken Ritchie as our main speakers for a public debate on Electoral Reform ahead of the

referendum next May.

However a lot of Humanists find that they don't need to join a group.

Volunteering and charitable giving

Humanists, like religious and other non-religious people, are active in the community and give money to charities. For example, people in our Farnham group are involved with Citizens Advice Bureau, School Governors, Disability Changers, Oxfam, Amnesty International, Cruse to name just some. A government survey in 2001 showed that the same percentage of people are volunteers independent of whether or not they are religious.

Humanist Chaplain volunteers

We support the provision of Humanist chaplains. We believe that when in difficulty and away from everyday life, for example in hospital or in prison, people may like to have contact with those who share their outlook on life and to know they are not alone. Thus a Humanist patient may like to have the option of seeing a Humanist Chaplain in the same way that a Christian patient appreciates the presence of a Christian chaplain. Locally for example a member of Farnham Humanists is now a volunteer chaplain to Surrey police alongside 19 others mostly Christian with a Jew, Bahai, Sikh, Muslim and a Buddhist. The role is to provide a service to police staff and an advice link for public attitudes.

Humanist Speaker Volunteers

Some of our members give up their free time to go into schools and sixth forms to give talks about Humanism or participate in assemblies.

Humanist Local Development Volunteers

We have volunteers who work with local authorities providing advice on diversity and equality, and projects concerned with social cohesion. Farnham Humanist volunteers for example have joined the South East England Faith Forum, Waverley Borough Council Faith Forum and Surrey County Council External Equality Advisory Group.

Humanist SACRE volunteers

Religious Education is the only subject that does not have a national curriculum. Each Local Education Authority has a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) which is responsible for providing the RE syllabus for all non-faith schools and some faith schools. Other faith schools are allowed to produce their own RE syllabus which could, of course, mean only teaching their own religion.

We believe it is important to teach children about non-religious ethical beliefs as well as different religious beliefs. We are pleased that non-statutory national guidance for local RE syllabuses now advises that all state school pupils should examine both religious and non-religious perspectives. Although Humanists are no longer explicitly barred from contributing to SACREs, some SACREs still do not allow Humanists to be involved and barely include any reference to non-religious ethical views in their syllabuses. However I have been fortunate to be able to represent Humanism on the Surrey SACRE for the

past 4 years.

Humanist institutions and how they relate to those of religions



British Humanist Association

- Supports ceremonies, local Humanist groups and activities
- Works with Government, & religious groups where possible
 - Involved in events with Interfaith Network for the UK
 - Poverty e.g. End Child Poverty, Make Poverty History coalition
 - Equality and Human Rights e.g.
 - BBC's Standing Conference on Religion and Belief,
 - Cutting Edge Consortium for equality at work regardless of sexuality.
 - ROCK coalition - Rights of the Child UK, London Equality Network
 - HEAR for equality in voluntary&community sector
 - Education e.g.
 - Provides extensive Humanist material e.g. for teachers, pupils, parents
 - RE Council, National Association of RE teachers, NASACRE

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Ivor has particularly asked me to talk about Humanist institutions and how they relate to those of other beliefs. I've already mentioned that the BHA is the main national charity representing Humanism.

It supports all the grass roots activities such as ceremonies, local groups, chaplaincy, SACREs etc.

A lot of the BHA's work is with government particularly in the area of Human Rights and equalities.

The BHA is very keen to promote understanding between religious and non-religious people and to work together on issues of common concern wherever possible.

For example, it gets involved with the government sponsored Interfaith week run by the Interfaith Network for the UK.

When it can, it joins coalitions with religious organisations such as Make Poverty History and End Child Poverty.

On the equality front, alongside religious organisations it is now part of the standing conference used by the BBC for consultation on its religious broadcasting. It has combined with Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, the Christian think tank Ekklesia, the Muslim Women's Network and Liberal Judaism to form the Cutting edge Consortium for equal rights at work regardless of sexuality. Other example groups where the BHA is involved is ROCK to make the UN Convention on Rights of the Child part of UK law and HEAR for equality in London's voluntary & community sector.

In the area of education, the BHA provides a huge amount of material about Humanism in a readily useable form for teachers, pupils, parents and anybody else who might be interested. It is also involved with a number of RE bodies alongside religious representatives such as the RE Council, National Association of RE teachers, NASACRE.

My last example is the Accord coalition where the BHA works alongside religious groups on an ongoing basis in favour of inclusive and non-discriminatory schools.



- Accord - in favour of inclusive & non-discriminatory state schools
- Chaired by Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain
- Other members to British Humanist Association are:
 - Association of Teachers and Lecturers
 - British Muslims for Secular Democracy,
 - Christian think tank Ekklesia,
 - Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement
 - Hindu Academy
 - General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches now joining

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The coalition is chaired by Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain.

Other members are the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, Christian think tank Ekklesia, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and the Hindu Academy. And a month ago the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches announced that it was joining Accord.

I'd like to read out what President of the Unitarians, Neville Kenyon, said when making

the announcement to join.

'We believe that state schools should be open to children of every background, while jobs in schools should be open to all teachers who are qualified to do them. Schools should also teach pupils about the wide range of different religions and beliefs, helping to better prepare them for life in our increasingly diverse society. We are delighted to have become members of The Accord Coalition which successfully addresses issues of religious liberty and is entirely in tune with the Unitarian ethos'.


It is often said that faith schools achieve better results and this is due to their religious ethos. Accord has put together a dossier of research from many independent sources which they have made easy for anyone to download off the internet.

For example Accord quotes 2009 House of Commons research on primary schools showing that performance differences are explained by selection methods, prior attainment and background whereas analysis of GCSE results shows that non-faith schools perform better in some categories and faith schools do better in others.

Other independent evidence showed that a community school is likely to have about 50% more free school meal children than a voluntary-aided religious school located in the same neighbourhood with exactly the same levels of deprivation.

Conclusion

And now to conclude

 **Conclusion**

- British Social Attitudes Survey reported in 2010
 - 43% non-religious (was 31% 25 years earlier)
- Humanism provides **an option** of
 - an alternative **ethical** life stance for atheists and agnostics
 - with possibilities of fellowship and support if desired

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There are many non-religious people in our society today. For example the latest British Social Attitudes Survey issued earlier this year shows that the number of people who describe themselves as non-religious has risen from 31% to 43% over the past 25 years.

Not all of these will be agnostics and atheists, but many will be.

Humanism provides the option of an alternative ethical life stance for these people and the possibility of fellowship and support from like minded individuals if they should want it. This could be the option of non-religious ceremonies at significant moments in their lives such as funerals or weddings or it might be access to a Humanist Chaplain or membership of a local group.

Humanists recognise that a lot of agnostics and atheists are probably living with beliefs which are similar to humanism but are quite happy not being labelled as Humanists. Humanists do not wish to convert people but would just like people to know the option is there.

[The following was not included in the talk due to lack of time...] I would like now to end with a definition of Humanism which is used by many Humanist groups in the US:

Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximisation of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of an open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognises human beings to be part of nature and holds that all values – be they religious, ethical, social, or political -- have their source in human nature, experience and culture.

Note: Jennie Johnson would like to thank Jim Herrick for his support in putting this talk together and she also used material taken from Alan Montgomery's February 2010 talk to Treloar College.