Rethinking Our Objectives and Strategies

by Vir Narain

When the International Humanist Movement came into being in 1952 with the founding of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), its declared mission was to provide an alternative to *"traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other."* The IHEU is now more than sixty-five years old. The Indian Humanist Union was founded more than fifty-seven years ago. We need to ask ourselves how far we have succeeded in achieving this objective. Is the world less afflicted today by religious intolerance and sectarian conflict than it was in the middle of the last century? Have totalitarian systems given way to democratic governments? And – most importantly for Humanists – if any progress has been made in these areas, what has been the contribution of the Humanist Movement as such? What strategies, if any, have we adopted for achieving our objectives and how effective have they been?

Before we try to find an answer to these questions, perhaps we should take a closer look at our objectives. Apparently the founder-members of the IHEU perceived, in their times, two major ills in the world which had to be dealt with: first, traditional religions which claimed to be based on revelation, and secondly, totalitarian systems, taking note perhaps of the situation behind the Iron Curtain. The remedies for these two ills were secularism for the first and democracy for the second. The identification of these twin objectives was natural, and conceptually convenient, in the prevailing situation. However, the real adversary of Humanism, which underlies both of the evils identified in the founding Amsterdam Declaration, is authoritarianism. I think we can safely claim that our Founder, Narsingh Narain, was the first to explicitly formulate this.

In a communication to the IHEU Board in 1966, he wrote:

> It seems to us that the most objectionable feature common to all religions is not supernaturalism but authoritarianism, that is, attachment of finality and infallibility to their teachings....This authoritarianism is the more harmful and dangerous as it has not been confined to the religions; its influence has been much more pervasive ... authoritarianism and its offshoots, dogmatism and fanaticism, are to be found everywhere in the world today, and we feel that **the primary function of Humanism is to help in the transition from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian society in all spheres of life.** (emphasis added)

This formulation covers both the objectives – or tasks – set out in the Amsterdam Declaration of 1952. But it does involve a certain reorientation of the stated Humanist position, which focuses mainly on its opposition to supernaturalism and promotion of atheism. This has crucially affected the Humanist Movement's perception of its goals and its response to religion, although thinkers as influential as Hermann Bondi have cautioned against it. Bondi says:

> I think in this country we are too impressed by the concept of God. Many religions, like Buddhism and

Confucianism, don't have a God at all. On the other hand, Communism in its heyday had a 'sacred text' which were the writings of Marx and Lenin, and you justified an argument by referring to these writings. So it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God – indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined? No, what makes a religion is a "revelation." And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems – that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything.

Humanist Response to Religion

The Founding Declaration as well as Julian Huxley's Presidential Address at the first International Congress were clear about the role and self-image of the Humanist Movement. Huxley said:

> As I see it, the world is undoubtedly in need of a new religion, and that religion must be founded on Humanist principles if it is to meet the new situation adequately. Humanists have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas. When I say religion I do not mean merely a theology involving belief in a supernatural god or gods; nor do I mean merely a system of ethics, however exalted; nor only scientific knowledge, however extensive; nor just a political social morality however admirable and efficient. I mean an organised system of ideas and emotion which relate man to his destiny, beyond and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing system of laws and social structure. Such systems of ideas and emotions about human destiny have always existed and will always continue to exist; they certainly include the theistic religions; and I believe we have nothing to lose by using the word religion in the broadest possible sense to include non-theistic formulations and systems as well. Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions.

"In rejecting religion altogether, humanism may be throwing out the ethical baby with the supernatural bathwater."

It is more than sixty years since this eloquent plea was made. During this time, the Humanist Movement has steadily moved away from Huxley's vision of a new religion *"founded on Humanist principles."* The very idea of Humanism being a religion – or being called a religion, or even being equated with religion – has been rejected. The question: "Is Humanism a religion?" conveys a deceptive impression of addressing a question of fact. In reality it is a matter of choice: it depends on how we choose to define religion. If we define religion in terms of its doctrines, such as belief in the supernatural, God and an afterlife, Humanism is clearly not a religion. If we define religion in terms of its function – the human needs it addresses – there is no reason why Humanism should not be called a religion. In declaring itself as an alternative to religion, Humanism clearly seeks to perform some of the functions that religion has served. As Narsingh Narain said: "If we define religion (as I think we should) in terms of the function it has tried to serve, that is, of helping individuals to feel at home in an apparently hostile universe, and not in terms of beliefs and doctrines, such as supernaturalism, then we are perfectly justified in speaking of a humanist religion."

The practical – and strategically important – question is: "Given that Humanism aims to provide an alternative to traditional religions, which approach is likely to be more effective in helping those belonging to traditional religions to adopt a humanist worldview? Is the outright rejection of any resemblance between religion and Humanism likely to be more persuasive than an acknowledgement of the commonality between them of certain valuable human purposes and functions?" As quoted above,

Huxley felt that we had nothing to lose by using the word religion. "Otherwise", he said, "we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward..." H.J. Eysenck held that "In rejecting religion altogether, humanism may be throwing out the ethical baby with the supernatural bathwater." For Einstein the true purpose of religion could be taken to be the emancipation of mankind from "the shackles of personal hopes and desires, and thereby [the attaining of] that humble attitude of mind toward the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence, which, in its profoundest depth, is inaccessible to man."

But, in 1989, the IHEU Board decided that the words 'religion' and 'religious' caused contention and confusion and, some years later, a 'Minimum Statement' was officially adopted:

> Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.

All member organisations are required, under IHEU bylaw 5.1, to accept the IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism. The leading figures of the movement chose to coin the word 'lifestance' to describe Humanism. This coinage, the equivalent of life-posture, has failed to gain currency – or much enthusiasm – even among humanists themselves. One is reminded of Paul Kurtz's advice: "Any proposed definition that we wish to introduce must be based, at least initially, upon common usage... The battles for men's moral allegiances are often won by affixing a label." The term 'Lifestance Humanism' seems to confirm Huxley's apprehension: "Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions."

While distancing itself from religion, the Humanist Movement does not necessarily have to reject religion as an unmitigated evil. Such an approach would be neither factually correct nor practically helpful in achieving the Humanist objective of weaning the great masses of people from their dependence on religious beliefs. As Narsingh Narain said: "...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name 'religion,' so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups."

Over the last few years, two things have become increasingly clear: the objective of providing an alternative to traditional religions has lost its salience for the Humanist Movement; and, to the extent to which it does engage with traditional religions, it has mainly adopted an attitude of rejection and ridicule. A follower of a traditional religion whose faith is wavering is likely to be put off, rather than persuaded, by the smug and sneering attitude of some humanists.

Strategic Options for the Humanist Movement

The Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 states: *"Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to."* This rightly assumes that, once the basic Humanist values – freedom of thought, the autonomous nature of morality, acceptance of uncertainty – are absorbed, parochial attitudes and reliance on religious revelation and dogma would automatically be shed. Clearly this is a gigantic educational task for which even the single-minded application of all the human and material resources available to the Humanist movement may not be adequate. The simultaneous pursuit of other, even closely related, projects such as Social Welfare or Human Rights may not be affordable; although it can be argued that these also serve to promote Humanism. The counter-argument here can be that there already are a number of organisations devoted to these objectives. The IHEU's statement that "Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote humanist values world-wide," is to be seen in this light.

It seems that, at present, all the intellectual and material resources of the international Humanist Movement have to be focused on its primary mission

of providing an alternative to dogmatic religions based on revelation. As mentioned earlier, this might involve a reorientation of the Humanist attitude towards supernaturalism and theism. It certainly would involve a clearer understanding of the emotional and psychological sources of the power that traditional religions have exercised over the minds and hearts of people. Without this understanding, it is highly unlikely that we shall make any headway. "Humanists," Huxley said, "have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas." There are indications that, in rejecting religion altogether, we are also denying that there are any 'religious implications of our ideas.' "There are six billion people in the world," says Francisco J. Ayala, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Irvine, and a former Roman Catholic priest. "If we think that we are going to persuade them to live a rational life based on scientific knowledge, we are not only dreaming — it is like believing in the fairy godmother." He adds: "People need to find meaning and purpose in life, I don't think we want to take that away from them."

A Humanist Movement which ignores the emotional and psychosocial needs of ordinary people cannot succeed in providing an alternative to traditional religions. Some Humanists, with "an irrational passion for dispassionate rationality," tend to dismiss many religious ideas, such as the idea of the sacred, as irrational. But we must pay attention to Durkheim's insistence that even the most apparently irrational religious ideas correspond to real needs of the social order. Also, following Durkheim, the idea of *membership* has to be taken seriously by humanists. "It would not be absurd to suggest," says Roger Scruton, "that the tie of *membership* is a function of religion in those communities fortunate enough to exist outside modernity." It can be argued that even those whose faith has been eroded by what Walter Lippmann calls the 'acids of modernity' need the tie of membership if the dissolution of the moral community into a state of universal breakdown and anomie is to be avoided.

Of the religions based on revelation, the basic challenge to the Humanist world-view comes from the monotheistic 'religions of the book' of Abrahamic origin. With Zionism acting as a catalyst, there has been escalating hostility between evangelical Christianity and political Islam in recent times, inevitably leading to a hardening of religious orthodoxy, and bigotry, on both sides. The Humanist Movement is confined mostly to the West, but it would be difficult to claim that it has made any difference to the religious attitudes of the general populace. To be sure, there has been a decline in orthodox religiosity in the West; but it has to be attributed mainly to the advance of modernity. Walter Lippmann has described the process very effectively:

> The modern man's daily experience of modernity makes instinctively incredible to him these unconscious ideas which are at the core of the great traditional and popular religions. He does not wantonly reject belief, as so many churchmen assert. His predicament is much more serious. With the best will in the world, he finds himself not quite believing.

Lippmann goes on to say:

> When men can no longer be theists, they must, if they are civilized, become humanists.

Whether the Humanist Movement, as such, has been effective in gathering in its fold those whose faith has waned is difficult to say.

In dealing with the other monotheistic religion based uncompromisingly on a single book of revelation – Islam – the Humanist Movement faces seemingly impossible odds. It has next to no presence in the Islamic world. Belief in revelation is mandatory in Islam. For a Muslim, to deny it is to be guilty of apostasy, punishable by death. The aggressive policies of the West and its blind support for Israel's policies of revenge and retaliation have made matters worse. The sudden rise of the so-called Islamic State, with its objective of establishing a World Caliphate using the most brutal methods, is the direct result of such policies.

The best that the Humanist Movement can do in this situation is to strengthen its position in the West. For this it has to assume the role of a successor, not an enemy, of traditional religion.

Vir Narain *is a retired air marshal of the Indian Air Force, chairman of the Indian Humanist Union, and the editor of the quarterly Humanist Outlook.*