

ANOTHER VOLTAIRE LECTURE: WHEN WILL IT END?

Each year Humanists UK sponsors its annual Voltaire lecture.

While widely recognised as a towering figure in terms of philosophy, thought and literature, and as an important opponent and critic of religion, Voltaire was a notorious anti-semitic and racist whose writings and speech, if it did not directly inspire Nazism's mass murder of Jews, certainly helped bolster the vile anti-jewish racism of the Nazi leadership.

A confidante of the German emperor Frederick who made Jewish people wear yellow stars and confined them to ghettos, Voltaire, amongst other statements, wrote about Jewish people: "You have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct and in barbarism. You deserve to be punished for this is your destiny". His racism was undoubtedly worse than Christian anti-Semitism because Voltaire argued that Jewish people were innately evil while Christian anti-semitism allowed Jews to be 'saved' by changing religion. Frederick's actions and Voltaire's rhetoric were precursors and motivators for the vicious murder of men, women and children by the Nazis. And of course Hitler read the anti-semitic writings of Voltaire.

That being said, I am not arguing here that we should reject or ignore the many positive ideas and contributions of Voltaire or his literature (including the renowned *Candide*) but I am arguing that we must also recognise the extreme darkness of his anti-semitism and racism (he invested in slavery) and recognise its importance in understanding this member of the French elite, who expounded many elite values.

As Humanists we need to understand and acknowledge the pain and suffering of Jewish people in their millions and the pains of those who suffered slavery, and we need to communicate that message effectively.

As Humanists, to my mind, we therefore cannot and should not continue to allow the name of Voltaire to accompany an annual lecture prominent in the world of UK Humanism. Such continuance communicates a poor message about modern Humanism, suggesting an insufficient sense of empathy and understanding of our human fellows, for whom we need to clearly show our concern, care and understanding.

There are plenty of other eminent Humanists, and antecedents of Humanism, whose names could replace that of Voltaire. We need to change this situation forthwith

HUMANIST UK CONVENTION REPORT

I was lucky enough to be able to attend the Humanists UK conference in Liverpool this year which was thoroughly enjoyable and blessed with warmth and sunshine.

The Friday night comedy was enlivened by excellent performances by the local comedian Hannah Platt whose jokes about mental health and counselling went down well with the audience ("My counsellor didn't like me so we had something in common") with Robin Ince telling excellent and warm stories about his comedy career and those he'd encountered along the way (the Goodies, Stuart Lee and more). It was lovely to see him and hear him perform.

This was all the better as the first half of the comedy night was to my mind disappointing with the first comedian Lee Peart asking "What are Humanists?" at the start of his performance. Could he not have found out who we were before his performance and made jokes about us? Perhaps with more experience he will be able to tailor his performances, but personally I found his comedy was conventional, unadventurous and not my cup of tea. For me, it felt like he'd been to a comedy course sometime and was repeating some formula.

The second comedian Alison Spittle felt similarly unadventurous and in fact I left after a few minutes and went to read some of the books available on the stall in the foyer. Life is short. Time has to be used well. That being said, my impression was that many of the rest of the audience laughed and enjoyed these two comics, but for me I was grateful for the second half of the show!

On the Saturday, after a parkrun in the morning, I saw the excellent Susie Alegro talking about her book "Freedom to Think - Promoting Human rights in the digital age. A fascinating, engaging talk so I went off to buy the book, which had unfortunately sold out. Others clearly felt the same way about this talk as I did.

Then in the afternoon it was Robin Dunbar on the evolution of religion. I'd been worried about this talk as, having browsed his book at the bookstall, I was unable to find a definition of religion in his introduction or elsewhere which to me would seem to make discussing the evolution of religion rather difficult. But perhaps I needed to read his book in more depth. Anyway, I really enjoyed his talk. It proved fascinating and clear, and felt informative with amusing descriptions of cults and religions, and rightly arguing that for Humanists, we need to be sure we understand religions.

I do enjoy these conventions but my constant feeling is that I am there as rather a passive audience member, learning passively from the experts rather than as being seen as an active and valued agent of Humanism. I do feel there need to be more opportunities for attendees to contribute and participate rather than simply being listeners to the excellent speakers brought to the occasion.

Of course, it would be undemocratic for just those of us who can afford a weekend in Liverpool to be determiners of Humanist UK policy. However I would like to see greater efforts to facilitate interaction between attendees (Andrew Copson said I missed the 9am Saturday morning - talk to someone your left, and on your right - but people often stick with those they know so this activity might not achieve much) and to seek contributions and opinions from those who do attend.

Finally I would add that the whole occasion was organised with consummate efficiency, the talks were really interesting (Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson were excellent too on the Sunday) so thanks to the Humanists UK team for all their efforts and for the successful delivery of an excellent convention.

Living Humanism Daily

A core and central idea set out by the book Living Humanism is that Humanism comprises a life stance which can be applied to our daily lives. Of course, there may be other ethical ideas, thoughts frameworks and philosophies which influence the ways we think and how we behave.

But once we have decided, as Humanists, to place our own humanity and the humanity of all others at the centre of our lives, and once we have also accepted, as also advocated in Living Humanism, that our own well-being and the well-being of all others should also lie at the centre of our thinking and actions, then these ideas provide a basis around which can start to build a rational way of living through our daily lives.

So, what should we be doing in our daily lives? A wide range of things that support our own well-being and the well-being of others is the answer, to some degree based in your own interests, character and preferences but within the framework of aiming to optimise your own well-being and the well-being of others.

So if you like to sit in your garden or go to a park to relax and enjoy the sunshine on a sunny summer's afternoon, then of course you should, in the main and dependent on circumstances ,probably do so (but if, for example, an ill relative needs your company then perhaps you should see them, then enjoy and relax in which way you will be supporting both your own well-being and theirs).

If you want to sit in a café talking to friends, you may be keeping yourself happy, keeping your friends happy. By buying a coffee perhaps this will help keep someone else in work, they then pay taxes and so forth, so we have positive effects for ourselves and others in this case.

Then through our daily paid work (if we have some) we will hopefully be supporting others in our communities in many ways, too numerous to list in a short article like this. Through our spirit of generosity and care for others we may give to charities, support friends, give of our own time to help others as a volunteer, or in other ways.

And hopefully, we will be loving and supporting of our young children, friends and partners as best we can, not only being giving to them through our actions but also benefitting our communities through our actions.

Of course, we should be aiming to optimise the degree to which we support our own well-being of others. I don't have a mathematical formula for this, and maybe doing this is too complex to be manageable.

Yet, through the days we can be aware of the actions we are taking in terms of supporting well-being for ourselves and all others, and do our best to optimise what we do in these respects. In this way we will also benefit community and society .

Your articles and your thoughts

This magazine invites your contributions that deal with Humanism, living a Humanist life and contemporary issues tied to Humanism.

If you wish to send in an article on your thoughts and ideas then please send these to the editor at info@livinghumanism.org.uk marking your email with HCM in the subject line.