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Why I am a secular humanist. (views of members of the International Academy of Humanism)(includes related article on secular humanist Sir Isaiah Berlin) Yelena Bonner; Hermann Bondi; Taslima Nasrin; Richard Dawkins; Richard Taylor; John Passmore; Arthur C. Clarke; Anthony Flew; J.J.C. Smart; Inumati Parikh.

Abstract: Several members of the International Academy of Humanism presented their views on being secular humanists. Some of them believed that their professions, family backgrounds and ideals positively contribute to the values embodied by humanism. They felt that their views correlate well with issues of faith, double standards, and religion. Other members of the academy associated their commitments, ethical conduct and philosophy with various human life issues and concerns.

The members of the International Academy of Humanism reflect on the guiding principles of their lives

The International Academy of Humanism was established in 1985 to recognize distinguished humanists and to disseminate humanistic ideals and beliefs.

YELENA BONNER

A distinguished defender of human rights. Because of her human rights advocacy in the former USSR, she was persecuted by the state, as was her late husband, Andrei Sakharov, the famous Soviet dissident and Nobel Peace Laureate.

I was born in 1923 and grew up in a time when the word humanism and all concepts that accompanied it were scorned and rejected as bourgeois vocabulary. A common phrase stated that "a communist cannot be a humanist." Many years later, in a Soviet encyclopedic dictionary, I read: ". . . Karl Marx called communism 'real humanism.' Humanism received practical realization in the achievements of socialism, that pronounced as its principle "All for the sake of man, for the good of man."

It was both ridiculous and sad to read this in Gorky, where my husband, Andrei Sakharov, was kept in isolation from the entire world by the whim and arbitrariness of the authorities, and where I was sentenced to exile four years later.

My perception of good and evil were shaped and nurtured by my family, friends, and colleagues. I was 14 years old when my parents were arrested. My father was shot, and my mother was taken away from me and my younger brother for eight years of labor camps and another nine years of internal exile, until the time when the so-called violations of socialist legality were condemned in my country and my parents were exonerated, my father posthumously. Such was communist "humanism."

My family's tragedy did not make me bitter, and I have never held it against my country, never felt my country was culpable. Rather, it was perceived as an act of god, especially since the case of my family was not unique. The same fate had befallen many of my peers - friends and schoolmates. All of us were "strange orphans of 1937," to use the expression coined by the writer Ilya Ehrenburg. In

reality "strange orphans" in our society existed since 1917, as well as much later than 1937.

There is no doubt that my family's misfortune left a mark on my psyche, but to all that was evil there was a counterweight in the great Russian literature, and particularly, in poetry, which was fortunately close to my heart from early childhood. Then came World War II with its blood and suffering, with terrible injustice of young lives cruelly cut short - lives of strangers and the most dear ones alike. There was fear. Survival seemed a miracle. A poet's line fully applies to me: "I put the war past me, but it passed through me."

After the war I betrayed my first choice of vocation (I had volunteered to the front after my freshman year of study in Russian language and literature) and entered medical school. I wanted to do good not by word but deed, by everyday work. I have never regretted having become a physician. Even today I relive the sensation of happiness that accompanies the first cry of a newborn in the delivery room; or when entering the ward I would hear two or three dozen babies crying in unison, for feeding time was near. I often found myself smiling as I walked toward their cries. A crying baby is an alive baby.

It was in the family with its misfortunes and joys, in friends and books, in professional life, in the concerns of a woman and a mother that I developed my own perception of the world and of my place in it, my ideals. In essence, they are probably close to the values of humanism.

Translated by Taliana Yakelerich

EDWARD O. WILSON

Emeritus Professor of Entomology at Harvard University and author of numerous widely acclaimed books including *Sociobiology*.

I was raised a Southern Baptist in a religious environment that favored a literal interpretation of the Bible. But it happened that I also became fascinated by natural history at an early age, and, as a biology concentrator at the University of Alabama, discovered evolution. All that I had learned of the living world to that point fell into place in a wholly new and intellectually compelling way. It was apparent to me that life is connected not by supernatural design but by kinship, with species having multiplied out of other species to create, over hundreds of millions of years, the great panoply of biodiversity around us today. If a Divine Creator put it all here several thousand years ago, he also salted Earth from pole to pole with falsified massive, interlocking evidence to make scientists believe life evolved autonomously. I realized that something was terribly wrong in this dissonance. The God depicted in Holy Scripture is variously benevolent, didactic, loving, angry, and vengeful, but never tricky.

As time passed, I learned that scientific materialism explains vastly more of the tangible world, physical and biological, in precise and useful detail, than the Iron-Age theology and mysticism bequeathed us by the modern great religions ever dreamed. It offers an epic view of the origin and meaning of humanity far greater, and I believe more noble, than conceived by all the prophets of old combined. Its discoveries suggest that, like it or not, we are alone. We must measure and judge ourselves, and we will decide our own destiny.

Why then, am I a humanist? Let me give the answer in terms of Blaise Pascal's Wager. The seventeenth-century French philosopher said, in effect, live well but accept religious faith. "If I lost," he wrote. "I would have lost little: If I won I would have gained eternal life." Given what we now know of the real world, I would turn the Wager around as follows: if fear and hope and reason dictate that you must accept the faith, do so, but treat this world as if there is none other.

SIR HERMANN BONDI

Fellow of the Royal Society and past Master of Churchill College, Cambridge University.

I grew up in Vienna in a nonbelieving Jewish family. But whereas my father liked the forms of the Jewish religion as a social cement (and indeed we kept the household such that we could entertain our numerous Orthodox relatives), I acquired from my mother an intense dislike of the narrowness and exclusivity of the religion. Ethical principles were very strong at home. I soon became clear to me that a moral outlook was at least as strong among nonbelievers. I similarly acquired a strong dislike of the alternative religion, the Catholic Church (in Austria dominant and very reactionary). So I was set early on the path of nonbelief, with strong ethical principles, and soon was ready to declare my attitude. But it was only later that I joined others with a similar outlook in humanist organizations.

My opinion now is that arguments about the existence or nonexistence of an undefined "God" are quite pointless. What divides us from those who believe in one of the faiths claiming universal validity (such as Christianity or Islam) is their firm trust in an alleged revelation. It is this absolute reliance on a sacred text that is the basis of the terrible crimes committed in the name of religion (and of other absolutist faiths such as Nazism or doctrinaire communism). It is also worth pointing out the appalling arrogance of viewing one's own religion as "right" and all others as "wrong." The multiplicity of mutually contradictory faiths needs pointing out again and again.

Thus I regard humanism not as yet another exclusive faith, but as a determination to stress those issues on which we are all more or less agreed and to relegate to the backburner faiths that divide us. Thus I am a firm secularist, favoring a society and educational system in which those of any religion and of none can feel comfortable as long as they are not aggressive or separatist.

TASLIMA NASRIN

A physician-turned-human-rights-activist and author of the dissident novel *Shame*. She is exiled from her native Bangladesh.

I was born in a Muslim family. I was forced by mother to read the Koran every morning, to pray namaz, and to fast during Ramadan.

While I was growing up, I was taken by my mother to a pit, a religious cult leader respected by Muslims. He had his own group, who believed in a genie and superstitions. The pit declared that women who laughed in front of men and went out of the house had been taken over by the genie and they were brutally beaten by the pit so that the genie would leave. He gave a scary description of hell. Whoever visited him gave money.

The pir was surrounded by young women who massaged his body and served him whatever he needed. One day, in my presence, he declared that keyamout, the destruction day of the Earth, was coming soon, and that there was no need for women to marry. They should sacrifice their lives for Allah.

I was' horrified to see all the torture he did to get rid of the genie and to listen to the description of hell and waiting for keyamout. But it did not come.

The pir used to treat sick people by uttering sura and beating them. Water was declared holy and said to cure sick people. The sick became sicker after drinking the water. I was also treated by a pit, but I was not cured until my physician father treated me with scientific medicine.

I was encouraged by my father to get a secular education. I learned about the big bang, evolution, and the solar system and became suspicious about Allah's six-day adventure to make the whole universe, the Adam and Eve story, and stories of suns moving around the Earth and mountains like nails to balance the Earth so that the Earth would not fall down. My mother asked me not to ask any questions about Allah and to have blind faith in Allah. I could not be blind.

Then I studied the Koran instead of reading it without knowing the meaning. I found it total bull-shit. The Koran, believed by millions, supported slavery and inequalities among people - in other countries the equality of women had been established as a human right and the moon had already been won by men. Men had the right to marry four times, divorce, have sex with female slaves, and beat their wives. Women were to hide their bodies because the female body is simply a sexual object. Women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, enjoy inheritance, or have their testimony in court considered as seriously as men's. I found that Allah prescribed Muslims to hate non-Muslims and kill apostates.

With my own conscience I found religion ridiculous because it stops freethought, reason, and rationality. My father told me to believe nothing without reason. I did that. I could not believe religion and I became an atheist. I started writing against religion and all the religious superstitions. I was attacked, verbally, physically. The outrage of the religious people was so big that I had to leave my country.

I lived in one of the poorest countries in the world. I saw how poverty was glorified by religion and how the poor are exploited. It is said the poor are sent to the Earth to prove their strong faith for Allah in their miserable life. I have not seen any religious teaching that calls for a cure for poverty. Instead the rich are supposed to make Allah happy by giving some help (Mother Teresa's type of help). The poor should remain poor in society, and opportunists can use them to buy a ticket for heaven.

So I don't accept Allah, His cruel unholiness. I have my own conscience, which inspired me to support a society based on equality and rationality. Religion is the cause of fanaticism, bloodshed, hatred, racism, conflict. Humanism can only make people humane and make the world livable.

RICHARD DAWKINS

Charles Simionyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science, Oxford University, and author of *The Blind Watchmaker*, *The Selfish Gene*, and *Climbing Mount Improbable*.

It is said that, while science can answer many of our questions, it cannot answer all of them. True. But false is the hidden implication that if science can't answer a question it follows that some other discipline can.

Certainly science cannot prove what is right or wrong, but nor can theology. Secular, rationalistic, moral philosophy comes closest by exposing our inconsistencies and double standards.

But science can answer deep questions popularly regarded as outside its remit, as well as those that are universally ceded to it. "Why is there anything rather than nothing?" is often cited as beyond the reach of science, but physics may one day answer it and if physics doesn't, nothing will.

"What is the purpose of life?" already has a straightforward Darwinian answer and is quite different from "What would be a worthwhile purpose for me to adopt in my own life?" Indeed, my own philosophy of life begins with an explicit rejection of Darwinism as a normative principle for living, even while I extol it as the explanatory principle for life.

This brings me to the aspect of humanism that resonates most harmoniously for me. We are on our own in the universe. Humanity can expect no help from outside, so our help, such as it is, must come from our own resources. As individuals we should make the most of the short time we have, for it is a privilege to be here. We should seize the opportunity presented by our good fortune and fill our brief minds, before we die, with understanding of why, and where, we exist.

I'd worry about the humanist label if it implied something uniquely special about being human. Evolution is a gradual process. Humanness is not an all-or-none quality that you either have or don't have. It is a complicated mixture of qualities that evolved gradually, which means that some

people have higher doses than others, and some nonhumans have non-negligible doses as well. Absolutist moral judgments founded on the "rights" of all humans, as opposed to nonhumans, therefore seem to me less justifiable than more pragmatic judgments based, for example, on quantitative assessment of the ability to suffer.

The atheist label also worries me because it shouldn't be necessary. Those who don't believe in fairies have no need of a label: the onus of proof is on those who do. I would with positive conviction call myself a scientific rationalist, with a humane concern that is directed toward a target that is both wider and narrower than humanity. Wider because it includes other species and potentially other planets. Narrower because it admits that not all humans are equal.

RICHARD TAYLOR

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Rochester, and author of *Metaphysics*.

I am interested in humanism, not as a creed or set of beliefs, but simply as social policy and a way of treating people. Essentially, it is a way of making the conditions of life less burdensome, the relationships between people more fulfilling, and promoting harmony rather than friction. People fare best when they look not to moral rules and principles, not to priests and churches, and not to creeds, but to the actual results of what they do.

Three things have guided me to this approach to life. The first is the wisdom of Socrates, especially as it was developed by the Stoic philosophers of Antiquity and then by such modern Stoics as Henry David Thoreau. They all taught us that we should look first to our own nobility as rational human beings and pay little attention to such things as wealth or power. The second was the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who located all ethical conduct in our capacity for compassion, not only for other human beings, but for all things that feel pain. And the third was the extraordinary achievements of Joseph Fletcher, whom it was one of my great blessings to know as a friend.

JOHN PASSMORE

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Australian National University and President of the Australian Academy of Science. His book *Memoirs of a Semidetached Australian* details his evolution from Roman Catholicism.

I rebelled as a young boy against the view that the whole of humanity suffers because a single person was disobedient. This I saw as tyranny of the first order. If there was no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church, I also argued, how could an omnipotent God allow our aborigines to remain unsaved for thousands of years, when they knew nothing of the Church? Later, under the influence of my university philosophy teacher I developed metaphysical arguments against religion.

Critics of humanism sometimes suggest that we make a god of man. But I am willing to admit that there is no deed so dreadful that we can safely say "no human being could do that" and no belief so absurd that we can safely say "no human being could believe that." But on the other side I point to the marvelous achievements of human beings in science and art and acts of courage, love, and self-sacrifice.

I call myself a pessimistic humanist because I do not regard human beings or their societies as being perfectible but a humanist I nonetheless am. And I reflect on the fact that the worst terrorists of the dreadful century I have lived through have felt justified by their belief that they are acting in the interests of some superhuman entity, whether it be God, or History, or the State.

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Well-known science-fiction writer, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and respected futurist.

The greatest tragedy in mankind's entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion. However valuable - even necessary - that may have been in enforcing good behavior on primitive peoples, their association is now counterproductive. Yet at the very moment when they should be decoupled, sanctimonious nitwits are calling for a return to morals based on superstition. Virtually all civilized societies would give a passing grade of at least 60% to the Ten Commandments (modern translation: "suggested guidelines"). They have nothing to do with any specific faith.

ANTONY FLEW

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Reading University in the United Kingdom. His books include *The Logic of Mortality* and *Atheistic Humanism*.

My father, like his father before him, was a Methodist minister. At the age of 13, I was sent to the excellent boarding school founded by John Wesley for the education of the sons of his itinerant preachers. I originally rejected the Christian faith - a rejection that occasioned distress to all concerned - during my middle teens. I rejected it then simply and solely because I had come to believe that it could not be true: the belief that the universe is created and sustained by a being both omnipotent and benevolent seemed to me, as it still seems, manifestly incompatible with innumerable, all-too familiar facts. Now - 60 years on - I am more inclined to argue on Humean lines that there is no good evidencing reason for making positive assertions about the putative Cause of the Universe.

J. J. C. SMART

Professor of Philosophy at Australian National University. He recently defended atheism in a debate with J. J. Haldane in the book *Atheism and Theism*.

My parents were Scots, but I was born and grew up in Cambridge. We were Presbyterians, and I went to a Methodist school. However, on moving to Glasgow, where my father became Regius Professor of Astronomy, my mother, who in Cambridge had some hankering for the Anglican church, became a Scottish Episcopalian and in this was followed by my brothers and then by my father. Last of all I became an Anglican at Oxford.

Nevertheless, I felt uneasy in my churchgoing because I increasingly found it hard to reconcile it with my scientific and philosophical beliefs. I comforted myself with Wittgensteinian double-talk, of which I now feel thoroughly ashamed. For emotional reasons, connected with my affection for my parents, I was a reluctant atheist, but giving up religion brought peace of mind because intellectual conflict was resolved.

INDUMATI PARIKH

Physician and President of the Indian Radical Humanist Association.

In our society woman is on the lowest rung of the social ladder. She does not have freedom to assert herself in fact, she hardly knows what freedom is. So it is the case with most of our poor ignorant men. I thought helping women to be free was more important and would have a lasting effect on the community. In a society fragmented by religion and castes, I thought humanism was the only ideology that would cut across boundaries and help men and women to understand their basic humanness. Being more of an activist than a philosopher, I put my energy to helping women, children, and men at the lowest end of society. I might be one of the few who have worked at developing humanism through work at grassroots level.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, Secular Humanist

When Isaiah Berlin died at 88 on November 5, 1997, the International Academy of Humanism lost one of its most distinguished members - and the world was deprived of a great mind both humane

and fecund. The least of his achievements was that he had received 23 honorary doctorates, numerous academic awards, the Order of Merit, and knighthood. The greatest was that he was a philosopher and historian of ideas who spent his life promoting and refining humanist ideals: liberty, social pluralism, critical thought, and the dignity of human beings. Along the way, he attained a passionate life filled with the delights of the intellect, of music, of good conversation, and of friends.