Workshop Summary

Personal notes by Callum Brown

In Britain there must be in the order of 30,000 people belonging to humanist and secular ethical organisations. In Scotland, it is in the region of 8,000 people. What do they want from the organisations they join?

Dr. Matthew Engelke, of the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics, sought to answer this question at first Humanist Research Workshop at the University of Glasgow on 7th March, sponsored by the Royal Society of Edinburgh through its research workshop grant programme. His answer was: humanists want contradictory things, and sometimes mutually exclusive things. From his ESRC-funded research project in to the British Humanist Association (BHA) in the London region, he concluded that some people just wanted to meet and talk. Some wanted to feel the aesthetic inspiration of fine buildings (rather like the Unitarians and Quakers). But some felt that such aesthetics invoked the irrational, and for this reason they opposed 'nice' buildings. Some joiners were not really humanists or atheists but, as Matthew put it, 'they just didn't want the vicar'. Matthew reported that British Humanist Association celebrants were usually happy to provide weddings or funerals for non-humanists. It was 'the infrastructure of community' members sought, and this was a strong pull of the BHA which celebrants felt happy to oblige.

Is Scotland different from this experience? For one thing, as Workshop participants pointed out, the BHA is a large organisation that employs 12 people, whilst the Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS) relies mostly on those who are volunteers. There was an ambivalence towards organisation, a concern for 'group think' and a perceived need to avoid this.

Of course, as Douglas McLellan, HSS CEO pointed out, the HSS is composed of active members and passive members. Around 30 per cent of the membership he reported was waiting to be married by a HSS celebrant. However, there was change here. The proportions of temporary members were decreasing, and a rising proportion of family membership was apparent. This means that there was a growing desire for fellowship, for 'religion-lite', for a 'secular vicar'.

Three of the most active humanist celebrants in Scotland were present – Ivan Middleton (who may hold the record for numbers of Humanist weddings in Scotland, if not in Britain), Mary Wallace (former trainer of celebrants, and celebrant at my own marriage) and Mandy Evans-Ewing (humanist chaplain at the universities of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Strathclyde and West of Scotland). Mary reported the importance of the reflection and contemplation time that she as a humanist celebrant fostered in her events, and Mary noted that often at her weddings one or other of the parties were 'spiritual' or religious. Mary emphasised that that irrespective of the personal religious position of participants, clients were look for non-religious events, professionally conducted, and personal treatment to make the event seem special and memorable.

It struck me that what was being suggested by the Workshop was that Humanist organisations in their wedding and funerals were attractive to the atheist, humanist and religious person alike in some key ways. Humanists provided a quality of service often hard to locate amongst hard-pressed Church of Scotland ministers and Anglican vicars and priests as they try to provide weddings and funeral for all in their parishes; they bustled from event to event with little or no research into the marrying couple, the bereaved or the deceased. They provided an event free from religious doctrine and liturgy with which the bulk of people – even the 'religious' – are now unfamiliar and with which they are ill-at-ease. Theology and church ritual are now alien to the bulk of those who still tick the 'Christian' box on the census. This was not the case 70 years ago. In the slide from faith, there may not be an attraction to a 'vicarless religion', but there is to a secular vicar. Maybe that is what a humanist celebrant is.