

# *The Future of the Humanist Movement in Malta*

by Christian Colombo



## **Context**

Following several years of doubts, I still remember the early days when I had decided to move away from religion in 2007. The change was slow and deep-seated elements of religious faith such as the belief that ‘everything happens for a reason’ took much longer than I realised to shake off. This shift was like an earthquake for me, which left me feeling lost and isolated for a number of years: from someone who publicly dedicated his life completely to religion, to someone who had to make sense of life afresh in a world which seemed alien.

In 2010, it was a relief to learn that in Malta a new group, calling themselves Humanists, was forming. Their position seemed to make sense, they based their decisions on logic, reason, and compassion. Coming from the area of computing (where I taught computer logic amongst other mathematical subjects), it felt like a perfectly sensible life stance which I could adopt for myself. I followed the developments with interest through social media. In a few months, hundreds of Maltese non-believers had joined the newly formed Facebook group. At the time, there was not much of a distinction between atheists and humanists but lots of important exchanges were taking place through long discussions spanning hundreds of comments.

This short run-through of my experience would not be complete without also mentioning that initially I did not feel comfortable within the Humanist community. It felt like you needed to be careful what to say on the social media community group as the feedback you would get could be quite ‘harsh’. Perhaps I am a little too soft but in time I came to know several others who were driven away by the group atmosphere. To be fair, most comments would definitely fall within the bounds of discussion or fair criticism but it required some getting used to. Moreover, there was a strong anticlerical sentiment which manifested itself in frequent posts making fun of religion. The context is that this was the first time non-religious people could meet each other in Malta on a large scale and vent off years of frustration and mistreatment by the mostly religiously influenced society. Yet, this was another reason that ‘moderates’ like me did not feel quite at home in the community that was forming.

What got me to take the plunge and join the Humanist community more closely were the celebrations. These acknowledge the human need for ritual and meaning making, something which was sorely missing for the local non-religious community. So, in 2015 I became one of the first group of celebrants of the then Malta Humanist Association.

By now, almost 10 years later, we have had hundreds of happy clients while proving to be a highly enriching experience for us as celebrants.

When in 2017, the association lost its co-founder and president, Ramon Casha, I decided to join the committee which at that point was desperate to fill the great gaps that had formed. A year later I was appearing on radio and TV shows to talk about Humanism. However, I soon realised that my knowledge of Humanism, its history and its underlying convictions was quite thin; I could talk about reason, science, and compassion, I could talk about our position on particular issues, but if you kept asking me “why?”, I soon realised that I could not answer properly.

Questions about the origin of Humanism led me to delve deeply into philosophy - something which I had never done before: First I got really hooked onto existentialism, then poststructuralism, postmodernism and posthumanism! It was (and still is) quite a lot to take in! I felt earthquakes similar to the early days of questioning religion under my feet, each time losing more and more any hope of finding some solid foundation. However, through this journey I was finally encountering several others with similar values - including believers - with whom I felt comfortable exploring important existential questions. This is when several projects to facilitate dialogue were born, using tools such as theatre and experiential sharing to explore multifaceted topics (like resilience, AI, faith, values, terminal illness) amongst various target audiences, from 14-years-olds at school to audiences which could only be reached through radio.

This has been a truly exciting journey and I feel it is a good time to take stock and understand what can be learned for the future. In what follows, I will try to reflect on my experience and where it leaves the local Humanist movement.

### **Conviction is not exclusively the domain of religions**

As much as I would have loved to find some kind of scientific and purely logical, self-evident, universal and eternal ethics, this just does not seem to be plausible. While the Enlightenment era did well to emphasise the importance of reason to drive away superstition, deifying reason comes with its own problems. If we look closely enough, we realise that we do not agree on the definitions and the axioms, if anything because of language and cultural differences. Therefore, while reason is crucial for any sound deduction, the conclusions cannot prove things universally one way or another.

Many other movements have tried to claim reasonableness, as happens through political ideologies which seem sensible to its adherents. Sadly, we all know how many lives have been rendered miserable or lost altogether because of the conclusions people reach.

As Humanists we cannot escape this either; as much as we would like to present our principles as the most ‘natural’, self-evident ones, philosophical tradition has shown that there is simply no basis for this. Of course, it is positive to try to spread an ethic based on tolerance and compassion, but this is more of a conviction rather than something that every reasonable person should automatically agree to (unless they are stupid).

### **Losing your ‘faith’ is not a one-time event**

Being open to new ideas which challenge our own, is a life-long process. The more we can be aware that culture and religion are ultimately both ways of dealing with our mortality, the more we can see through our “illusions”<sup>1</sup>. Of course, not all illusions are made equal; illusions which cause people to hinder others’ flourishing are dangerous.

While we may be tempted to opt for simple and elegant definitions and explanations, reality has repeatedly refused to be so. Even in areas such as mathematics and computing, we constantly hit paradoxes and limitations in our quest for understanding. While trying to expand our knowledge is certainly commendable, this needs to be done in a humble spirit, open for the next revolution<sup>2</sup>.

### **Humanism needs to adapt**

Since the early days of 2010, several battles have been won for Malta from a rights perspective, including divorce and same-sex marriages. Still, a number of rights still seem somewhat far away, particularly those related to bodily autonomy: assisted dying and abortion. Therefore, activism remains an important aspect of what we do. Yet it feels hard to find volunteers interested in joining and contributing to an association with such an open-ended mission. Most activists seem to prefer to join an NGO which focuses on their favourite topic, be it environment, abortion, etc. The idea of fighting ‘against religion’ which had brought most of the community together feels almost alien to the upcoming generation - religion is mostly a non-issue for them. Topics which used to garner lots of interest and input in the early days of social media, have by now been exhausted and our page posts now barely make it through to its intended

<sup>1</sup> Becker, E. (1975). *The denial of death* (p. 188). New York, NY: Free Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

audience as they drown in the recommendation algorithm's priorities. Still, there are several aspects of religion in Malta which put into question its secular credentials; perhaps the most notable ones being our constitution and from a more practical perspective, sex education in schools.

In view of all the above, the role of Humanism as a bastion of reason against the superstitions of religion is not appealing to the upcoming generations who mostly do not care about religion anyway. The 'death of God' is no longer news and most people of good will have realised that the real divide is not between the religious and irreligious but the ethical and unethical. Along the same lines, we need to put into practice the realisation that humanity is not the centre of the universe.

The following are some of the questions that we could consider going forward:

- Can we present a less abstract Humanism which could be easier for a wider audience to digest?
- Could we base our convictions on more solid ground beyond simply an appeal to 'reason'?
- In what ways do we need to rephrase our positions to:
  - Acknowledge that the human being is far from simply an autonomous rational individual but rather also a product of their culture, experience, perception of reality, i.e., there are many issues on which reasonable minds may reasonably disagree (abortion, euthanasia, even multiculturalism).
  - Be non-human-centric and stop seeing the distinction between the human and 'the environment'.
  - Handle more complexity as new and smarter technologies are developed.
- Could we do more to foster a sense of commitment such that enough energy is invested into the Humanist movement to remain alive?
- Under what banner could we clearly bring together all that we do?
- Is the Humanist view about our innate morality over-optimistic? How far can we rely on this to ensure other living beings and the environment are cared for responsibly?



Without growth and adaptation, Humanism could end up mostly relevant in countries where religion is still strong and slowly dying out elsewhere, perhaps remaining only for servicing life celebrations.

### Some ideas for the future

The question that comes to mind at this point is: “Is it worth building on Humanism as a philosophy, or should we just scrap it and start all over?” By the measure of most contemporary philosophers, Humanism is outdated following a wave of antihumanism and a more recent posthumanism. Yet, with all the structures in place under the banner of Humanism, I do not see why these cannot adapt and grow to learn from all the lessons learned. After all, the definition of Humanism is very wide, and others have already explained how Humanism can indeed include its own criticism within it<sup>3</sup> and can be seen as a contextual intervention to improve the human condition in a particular moment in time<sup>4</sup>. The wide variety of ways (e.g., focus on education, ceremonies, advocacy; related to whether their main concern is religion, other ideologies, or meaning making) in which members of Humanist International operate in their home countries is a testament to this.

Repeatedly, I have found it hard to explain what the Humanist movement stands for to those who have no idea what it is. Traditionally, Humanism seems to have been understood as an ‘alternative to religion’ with the consequence that if religion means nothing, humanism suffers the same fate. Worse still, it can be thought of as something to cling onto and/or comfort oneself with. Humanism needs to be presented as an open-ended challenge along the lines of:

“There are many ways in which human flourishing can be hindered, including religious or political ideologies (which by the way could be atheist), the way we organise ourselves socially and economically, the way we organise our digital world, the way we think about reality through our various blind spots. In an increasingly complex world, we need to continually ask ourselves: What does it mean to flourish as human beings? In what ways are we limiting ourselves? In what ways can we help ourselves thrive?”

Importantly, our flourishing is interlinked. We cannot think of human beings as some autonomous units within society. If individuals or segments of society are struggling, the rest are losing out on a richer and healthier environment conducive to maturity and

growth. Without any God or universally agreed set of values to guide us, we need each other to create a fairer society through openness and exchange of ideas.”

From this angle - borrowing the banner of “Humanising Humanity” from Rorty’s ideas<sup>5</sup> - all our efforts, which could seem disparate, fall into place: our activism, our celebrations, our projects. This alignment could bring Humanism more in line with contemporary philosophy by acknowledging more complexity within the situatedness of human reality and its interaction with the rest of the natural as well as the human-created world. By going in this direction, we will also be moving away from the focus on secularism, making it more accessible to atheists with no history of religion.

The implications of adopting this focus may seem cosmetic at first glance but one thing we saw changing for us in Malta is that religion does not remain ‘the enemy’. In fact, our experience has shown that open-minded religious individuals and communities have welcomed our efforts and collaborated with us in a number of projects e.g., exploring existential questions within a Church school. When the aim is that of humanising humanity, questions like the existence of God become less central and instead the focus shifts to other dehumanising elements in contemporary culture such as unfair capitalism, extreme materialism, harmful use of technology, and so on.

### Conclusion

If Humanism is to survive and thrive beyond religion, it has to define itself without any reference to religion and without the presumption of having some privileged set of universal values. By continually asking the important question of what it means to be human in particular contexts in time, Humanists can provide much needed space for dialogue, be a nuanced voice of reason, and strive through activism and provision of services to protect and cater for humanity’s humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> Said, E. W. (2004). *Humanism and democratic criticism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Higgins, C. (2014). *The humanist moment*. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 15(1), 29-36.

<sup>5</sup> Višňovský, E. (2020). Rorty’s humanism. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*.