

A GAY HUMANIST MANIFESTO

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PROPOSITIONS OF THIS MANIFESTO

Humanism is a rational system of thought in which the primary objectives are human happiness and fulfilment, not adherence to supernatural beliefs. Humanism can be defined as working with others for the common good, or “Being good for goodness sake”.

This booklet is a manifesto - not in the sense of being a political party's pitch for votes - but in the sense of proposing a humanist view of the world specifically relevant to lesbians and gay men. Though written for lesbian and gay humanists, what it says may be of interest to others who are not gay, or who may be religious. Arguments are put forward to support the following propositions:

- human characteristics vary from one individual to another; this variation is natural and desirable - it helps us to adapt and survive in a changing world;
- human sexuality varies a lot; millions are strongly driven by sexual attraction to others of the same gender;
- our sexual desires are deeply rooted in our personalities; with sexual love, as with relationships between human beings generally, variety should be expected to occur;
- we should use observation and reason to develop our understanding of the world around us, testing our ideas out when practicable; we should challenge beliefs based on superstition, supposed messages from a god or gods, or traditions, especially those which conflict with rational understanding;

- we should develop a moral compass to guide our actions; a compass that will help us judge what will be of benefit to ourselves and those around us, and steer us through the difficulties of life;
- living among a heterosexual majority, we are constantly reminded of our own different natures; like other minorities, we may face questions about how we fit in;
- being an identifiable minority, we are vulnerable to discrimination; we need to stand up for ourselves;
- we should promote an outlook of tolerance and respect for individuality and difference in society generally;
- whilst opposing those who condemn us because of our sexuality, we should give credit where credit is due; we should not undervalue kind and helpful actions performed by those with beliefs different from our own.

The following sections of this booklet further explain each of these propositions.

Human characteristics vary from one individual to another. This variation is natural and desirable. It helps us to adapt and survive in a changing world.

Darwinian evolution is the scientific theory which explains how different species of living things all developed from earlier forms through genetic variation and natural selection. Variations that help any form of life to thrive are part of the process that brings about new species. Because of the vast timescale and the many thousands of different species on the planet, the way evolution works as a whole cannot be tested and demonstrated in a laboratory. Nevertheless a huge body of evidence does exist; it comes from recorded observations of nature, from the selective breeding by humans of plants and animals, and through links to biology, the fossil record, geology, astronomy, cosmology, physics, chemistry and many other scientific disciplines.

Simple observations and experiments can be carried out by breeding species of plants or small animals to demonstrate that variations occur and are passed on from generation to generation. Some rules to predict how certain traits are inherited were identified by Gregor Mendel in the 1850s. He studied the characteristics of pea plants, and one of the milestones in his research was the discovery of pairs of dominant and recessive genes. Cross-pollination of plants that produced yellow seeds with plants that produced green seeds would result in some later generations having 100% of plants with yellow seeds, and some with 75% yellow and 25% green. No later cross-bred generations contained fewer yellow than green, and Mendel found it was possible to predict the percentages that would occur. He deduced that the traits of seeds being yellow or of being green occurred as a pair, and that the yellow trait was dominant. A plant inheriting one gene of each type, i.e. having the yellow from one parent and the green from the other, would bear only yellow seeds; only when both parents had the green trait would plants bearing green seeds result.

We know now that genetic traits are determined by particular

molecular sequences in the genes of the living cells that make up our bodies. Our species, homo sapiens, shares most of these sequences with other animal species. We have developed in the same way as other living things, through the processes of individual variation and natural selection. Some human traits, such as eye colour, follow the dominant/recessive gene pattern of inheritance. Recent estimates of the numbers of lesbians and gay men in human populations, 5% or so, are much lower than the 25% found when a variation is due to a single dominant and recessive gene pair. Though estimating characteristics in human populations is more complex than counting the seeds of cross-bred pea plants, this suggests that sexual orientation is not determined by anything as simple as a single pair of dominant/recessive genes.

When species spread into new areas, or when the environment changes, some traits become more, or less, useful than they were before. New traits may appear at any time through genetic mutation. The outcome is a slow and continuing process of adaptation, and this has resulted in the huge range of species that has come into existence over the millions of years life has existed on earth. Many species have become extinct, some through dramatic environmental change, others because new species appeared that were better able to survive and breed.

Our brains being so much larger than that of other species, we are uniquely able to alter our environment intentionally. From forest clearances to fresh water reservoirs, we are increasingly working the levers of environmental change.

Human sexuality varies a lot. Millions are strongly driven by sexual attraction to others of the same gender.

Differences in physical characteristics abound among our species; our personalities, too, vary in countless different ways. Whether we think of intelligence, feeding, fighting, bodily strength, ability to use tools, entertainment, whatever aspect of human personality we

might choose, individuals vary. These variations are essential to civilisation, enabling people to develop particular abilities and specialise in a range of occupations and activities. They can also be the cause of conflict. Since individuals differ in so many ways, inevitably something one person enjoys may not be liked another, or may even be thought loathsome.

Human sexual desire is as varied as other attributes of our personalities. Same sex attraction has been recorded in different cultures in all periods of history, and in all parts of the world. Other species too exhibit same sex attraction. Sheep farmers, when deciding how many rams are needed to impregnate a flock of ewes, allow for about 10% of males being sexually attracted not to the ewes but to other rams. Horse breeders tell of stallions that are 'gay'. Pairs of water birds of the same sex have been seen making nests, some taking a fertile egg from the nest of a mixed sex pair. In communities of bonobo (a species of chimpanzee), promiscuous sexual acts between individuals of the same and opposite sexes occur frequently and appear to reinforce cohesion within the group. These are a few examples. Many, many more have been observed in the animal kingdom.

Historically, in humans many kinds of sexual relationships have occurred and been condoned in human societies, for example child marriage, forced marriage, slaves bought to satisfy the lust of their owners, and harems. What is accepted in one country may be illegal in another. In societies that value human rights and individual freedom, a rule of thumb applicable to sexual relationships is that the informed consent of the participants must be freely given. Many relationships approved of in other cultures, past and present, contravene this rule, but it leaves us free to do what we want with our own bodies, as long as we do not deprive others of the right to decide what to do – or not do – with theirs, providing we do not harm others, especially the vulnerable, and especially children.

Whether in liberal or autocratic societies, the sexual urge is a frequent cause of problems. Those who can be happy without a great investment of time and effort in the bump and grind of physical sex may look with bemusement at those who are

relentlessly driven by desire. They may well be pleased to escape the strife and misery that strong sexual urges sometimes cause. They may though, experience less of the joy that intense sexual love can bring. What they have no right to do is to assume their lower sex drive gives them the moral authority to condemn others who are more strongly driven. One of the most appalling instances of such bogus moralising was the suicide of the father of the modern computer, Alan Turing, who was driven to take his own life through persecution by the British authorities because he had consensual sex with another man, a crime under the laws of the time.

Our sexual desires are deeply rooted in our personalities. As with relationships between human beings generally, a variety of types of sexual love should be expected to occur.

Evolutionary arguments can be used to explain some prohibitions against sexual relationships. Inbreeding will, over time, limit the mix of different genes passed on to later generations, and increase the likelihood of offspring having genetic defects. With few exceptions, people who seek sexual partners instinctively look beyond their brothers and sisters and other close relatives.

To these instinctive prohibitions, laws, traditions and religions have added their own concepts of what is acceptable. Many earlier views of what should be forbidden have been contradicted, or called into question, by more recent scientific knowledge of human reproduction, evolution, and psychology. In societies which value human rights and individual freedom, those in power should not use the law to prohibit people from engaging in an activity unless it causes harm.

If sex is important in making us happy or sad, we have the right to decide for ourselves what suits us best, subject always to the rights of others being given due weight. Sex will play a major role in determining who (if anybody) we live with, and we will often make friends with those who share our interests and outlook. We

become aware of physical differences at a very young age, and during adolescence find ourselves being interested sexually in others, some of us in the opposite sex, some of us in our own sex, and some are attracted to both. Some of us discover that our initial desires were mistaken and change tack. We need to discover what is right for us, so as not to spend the rest of our lives fearing we are miserably doing what parents and others wanted, but not what might have brought us happiness. Attraction to the same or the opposite sex is only one factor in our sexual natures. Some arguments for and against promiscuity, and similarly for and against monogamy, are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Arguments in favour of promiscuity

Sex is a simple physical pleasure which should be enjoyed freely by consenting adults whenever there is mutual attraction, as long as no harm is done. Engaging with many lovers will enrich our lives. Learning from them will improve our own ability to make love, and make us better able to bring pleasure to others as well as to ourselves. Being promiscuous means that we engage with a greater number of people in a mutually beneficial way, and shows our willingness to cross boundaries and reach out to strangers. It can make us feel we belong to a huge informal club of like-minded people.

An individual's sexual desires can change over time. Promiscuity makes it easy to move on to new experiences.

Whilst promiscuity may not bring everyone all they want, the prospect of a larger number finding at least some satisfaction is greater in a promiscuous world. This reduces sexual frustration, which causes psychological and social problems.

Against Promiscuity

Any highly promiscuous man or woman is rather like someone who answers the question “Do you have any close friends?” by saying “Oh yes, I have thousands!” Their love is fleeting and hedonistic; relationships do not deepen and mature over time. All that matters about a complex human being is whether their appearance arouses sexual desire, and their actions give sensual pleasure. This is a cold way to love, a refusal to see sexual partners as sensitive beings who have hopes and dreams, problems and disappointments.

Between strangers, the understanding of each other's physical likes and dislikes is limited. There is no repertoire of shared sexual pleasures that can be drawn on to enhance love-making.

Promiscuity can lead to a constant hunt for new sexual partners. This predatory activity comes to dominate some people's lives; thousands of new conquests are sought to satisfy what is seen as a purely physical need, when satisfaction can only be found through a broader appreciation, a physical, emotional, and intellectual meeting of mind and body.

Can anyone engaging in an alcohol or drug fuelled orgy truly say that informed consent has been freely given by all the parties? An attitude of “What the hell, anything goes” is likely to predominate, with little regard to the wishes and well-being of others.

Promiscuity brings greater health risks. “Safe sex” will reduce these, but will not eliminate them. There are, too, people on the prowl who are nasty and dangerous.

High levels of promiscuity among gay men, far from being a form of sexual freedom, may be a hangover from oppressive times when gay sex was punishable by imprisonment, and exposure ruined careers and caused social ostracism. Then, brief anonymous encounters were the best way to avoid blackmail or prosecution. Patterns of behaviour that developed during those awful times of persecution have been foisted by older generations onto new.

In favour of monogamy

Many people find that sex is best when it is part of a long-term loving relationship. To established couples, what they share with each other is special. The desire for an intense relationship with one individual is strong in many of us; without it our lives are not complete.

In well matched couples, the sense of belonging to one another, and of being able to trust and inspire one another, is reinforced by the act of making love. The relationship boosts the couple's confidence in themselves. Together they can achieve more in life than would be possible had they remained single.

The everyday burdens of life are more easily carried by two than by one.

A stable relationship provides a good basis for home life, especially for lesbians or gay men who want to raise children.

Against monogamy

The monogamous do not cease to fancy other attractive people they see and encounter, in photographs or in the flesh. They stray, at least in their thoughts. Perhaps the reasons they do not act on their desires are little to do with virtue, and much more to do with the fear of being found out, or perhaps breaking their complaisant routine is too much bother.

Living as a couple means each partner giving up many of the things they want in favour of what the other partner wants. Even if this sacrifice is fully reciprocated, they each have to spend a lot of time on things they would not have chosen for themselves. Dissatisfaction over the balance of give and take in relationships is common. Some couples stick together because they have nowhere else to go, but come to hate each other. One partner may become dominant, and the other a resentful lackey, or they engage in an endless battle of wills through constant point scoring or other mutually damaging behaviour. One party may inflict physical or mental cruelty on the other. The world is full of unhappy people limping along in committed relationships. Not only have they made

their own lives miserable, but their gloom affects those around them.

We all age. We are all vulnerable to illness, emotional distress, problems over money, or rows with family and friends. One partner can become a burden on the other, who may come to feel the relationship has turned into a trap. Even with heterosexuals, divorce numbers rocketed when law reform eased the restrictions. In many long-term relationships, to borrow from the playwright Marivaux, “Duty becomes a monster that crushes you.”

There seem to be more arguments “against” than “for”, both for promiscuity and monogamy. Other possibilities, for instance serial monogamy, have not been mentioned. Coverage of all relationship possibilities would fill several large books, but there is no intention here to promote a “one size fits all” notion of how gay men or lesbians ought to live. As gay humanists we will want to think for ourselves and find our own way forward. The over-arching question is what is best for us as individuals, and for those close to us. Unencumbered by guesses about the nature of things in ancient texts that have long since been proved wrong, or by superstitious beliefs, we should stand a better chance than most.

We should use observation and reason to develop our understanding of the world around us, testing our ideas out when practicable. We should question beliefs based on superstition, supposed messages from a god or gods, or traditions, especially those which conflict with rational understanding.

The vast extent of scientific knowledge, and the mathematics frequently entailed, may seem daunting. A single individual does not have the mental capacity to fully understand the whole of known science. Yet a familiarity with the basics of the scientific

method – an enquiring mind, intelligent observation, deduction and testing ideas out – will be of value to everyone.

Some people nevertheless find science too challenging, and seek refuge in a simpler world of straightforward absolute certainties. Religious people who regard a holy text or the word of a prophet to be literally and absolutely true claim there is no need to think further. Indeed they usually regard questioning their accepted dogma as sinful. Very few, though, turn away from the benefits that have come about through scientific thought. Much of the modern world, including all of our electrical devices, many home comforts, modern medicine, and the ability to travel quickly over long distances, is a result of scientific advances. They are very seldom spurned as contrary to religious beliefs, even though they were not mentioned in the religious texts. There is great inconsistency among the “absolute truths” put forward in different religions. Those who adhere rigidly to religious dogma shut the door on honest enquiry and understanding.

Innumerable myths and legends have been devised by different peoples at different times to explain how we and the world we live in came about. Many of these were genuine attempts to answer fundamental questions about ourselves and the universe, but may have been hijacked and embellished by forceful, domineering individuals to grab or wield power over communities, nations and empires. Scientific knowledge stands apart from myths, legends and tradition because it is subject to argument, to proof, disproof, and modification when new facts come to light.

This is not to say humanists must shun legends, myths, or tradition altogether. They can be appreciated as imaginative stories powerfully expressed in evocative language. We should think of them as part of human history and appreciate them for their cultural significance. What we should not do is give them the same factual status as careful observations of the world and theories that have been properly developed in the scientific manner.

Nor should we ascribe to scientific knowledge and our rational systems of thought the infallibility claimed for religious dogma. The peer review process in science is very effective in maintaining quality, but errors of data and misunderstandings do happen.

Sometimes charlatans deceive us with false claims, in order to make money or further their careers. When fraud occurs, the legal processes to obtain redress are so lengthy that the trickster often makes a fortune and the real discoverer goes bust before the case is determined. Sharp operators often buy their way out of trouble with out of court settlements.

Scientists should be open and honest about how they have made their discovery, obtained their data, and developed their theory. They should not behave like nodding donkeys. Enquiring minds are essential to scientific advance, and they generate conflicting arguments. We should be suspicious of anything presented as fact solely on the grounds that scientists all over the world believe it to be so.

We should develop a moral compass to guide our actions; a compass that will help us judge what will be of benefit to ourselves and those around us, and steer us through the difficulties of life.

For all our modern scientific understanding of our world, the horrors of war, of starvation, of disease, and of threats to the environment persist. Life is short and brutish for billions of people because of industrial pollution, massively powerful weapons, populations burgeoning where food is scarce, epidemic diseases, and a host of other reasons. Slaves, untouchables and deprived poor underclasses remain common features of human societies. Tyrants torture and kill, racial and religious minorities are driven from their homes, and even in “advanced” countries that boast of freedom, millions of convicts languish in prison. Our modern, rational understanding of the world has eliminated some horrors, for example smallpox, but at times human misery seems to increase as quickly as the world population.

The challenge facing modern humanists is to turn scientific knowledge and modern technology towards the common good and

that of our planet, and to prevent them being used to cause harm. Perhaps a final evolutionary test lies before homo sapiens. Can we use our knowledge to secure a better future for our species, in harmony with our ever changing environment, or will greed and aggression lead us back to more primitive, self-destructive ways? Grit and courage will be needed even to stay where we are, let alone meet the challenge of further progress.

Man's positive capabilities, fairness, respect for the rights of others, altruism, forgiveness, charity, integrity, and cooperation with others for the common good, struggle against self-interest, greed, vengeance, dishonesty, oppression, callousness and the lust for power. To citizens in stable societies going about their everyday lives, this struggle may seem remote until some extraordinary event disturbs established routines. Yet everyday actions too are part of the struggle between good and bad. Most of us know people whose only concern is to get whatever they can in life, and we know others who are exceptionally kind and considerate. The humanist view of what being a good person means is much broader than acting only out of self-interest. We want to play a part in protecting what is of value in the world, and to make things better for everyone.

Living among the heterosexual majority, we are constantly reminded of our own different natures; like other minorities, we may face questions about how we fit in.

In tolerant countries we may be tempted to think we are no longer part of a dubious minority. This may be a nice idea, but do we, when we are out in public with a partner or lover, feel free to hold hands, put our arms round each other, and kiss? In places where we know others of our own kind are present, or where we think the straights are open minded, we may be confident enough to show affection, but when we see very conventional looking people all around us, we may simply decide to quietly do whatever we are

there to do without being conspicuous. Straight couples often do not touch each other in public, so this self-restraint may not seem much of a sacrifice. In reality we know displays of affection by us may not be accepted quite so readily as physical contact between heterosexual couples, and that we may even provoke hostility. Much of the time we simply want to get on with our lives.

Advertising images are everywhere. Mixed gender couples are often shown happily being together, but same sex couples only rarely. The arithmetic is against us: adverts will usually be seen by a lot more straights than gays, and the mixed sex couple will appeal to most. That's the way marketing works.

Ever been asked by someone you've recently met about your wife or husband, and had to explain that you have a partner of the same sex? Or been asked by a comparative stranger if you fancy so and so, on the assumption that the opposite sex attracts you? Or been with a group of straights of your own gender who talk about their own hetero experiences in a way that makes you feel left out?

One run of the mill event of this kind may not amount to much, and we get used to dealing with the awkwardness, but the relief that comes from being able to talk and act freely and naturally again in the company of other lesbians and gay men can be enormous. Nor are the difficulties confined to small everyday matters: when we announced our same sex preference to our parents, even if they were supportive and reassuring, were they not likely to have hidden a disappointment that grandchildren were unlikely? We know we are not the same as the straight majority, and must accept that our being different is not always welcome.

Three questions about evolution and how we fit in as a minority are often asked:

- does same sex attraction depend on inherited characteristics, or is it due to environment or culture?
- if there is an inherited element, since same sex love making does not produce children, how has the trait been passed on, and why is it so common?

- how can we fit in with the straight majority?

Some thoughts about these issues are briefly outlined below. The first question, whether nature or nurture plays the major role, is asked about a lot of personality traits. Arguments have raged about whether nature or nurture is primary. Whole books have been written about whether criminal and other antisocial actions arise through intrinsic wickedness, or are caused by deprivation or mistreatment during early childhood, or just social conditioning, e.g. being brought up in a criminal family. If we fall in love, straight or gay we experience an emotional tsunami. Logic and reason struggle to control intense desire, joy, jealousy and despair. Whether this state of mind is ascribed to nature or nurture, the overpowering feelings spring from deep within us. They can not, like a hairstyle, be easily changed.

Though most of us realise early on in our lives that we are gay, and we stay that way to the end, some people find their orientation shifts over time. How and why this happens is little understood, but that orientation occasionally changes does not mean the attraction to a particular individual at any given time is not overwhelming. Many people are, at least to some extent, bisexual. Perhaps we feel strongly attracted to a particular person, and that sways our sexual preference. An unhappy experience may have the opposite effect. Perhaps we know we are capable of making love to the opposite gender, and we meet someone with whom we want to have children, but nevertheless remain very strongly attracted to our own sex. Changes in orientation happen in both directions, straight to gay and gay to straight; the change may be a slight shift in preference, or it may be complete. The causes are complex, a mix of emotion and instinct, and are not determined by logic or reason. Deliberate attempts by others to manipulate our personalities risk causing misery, perhaps clinical depression. Meddling with the human mind in this way can give rise to aberrant behaviour and cause harm, to ourselves or others affected by us.

It may be worth thinking about this issue in relation to a trait other than sexuality, one which has been studied widely:

intelligence. Nature and nurture – inheritance and environment – seem to play a part in it. Success in particular types of intelligence test will improve with practice, but an improvement through learning will occur whether an individual scored high or low to start with. We cannot simply will ourselves to be more clever. There are no grounds for thinking sexual orientation can be altered at will either. However much effort we put in, we cannot turn ourselves into something we are not.

To the next question, of how same sex attraction is passed on through generations when same sex love-making cannot produce offspring, again no simple answer can be given. Many genes and influences during upbringing may play a part. We might guess that where populations have been devastated by disease, drought or starvation, a high proportion of people engaging in heterosexual intercourse will help build up numbers. On the other hand, where numbers outgrow the available natural resources, same-sex attraction could help to slow the increase and reduce the strain on supplies of food and water.

Whilst many factors, such as rainfall and efficiency of food production, come into play and make it impossible to calculate the maximum number of people the planet as a whole can sustain, the potential cannot be infinite. Nor is it clear what the optimum number of people might be. In areas of high population density particularly, a growing proportion of gay men and lesbians could be a path to slower rates of population increase.

Sexual relations which do not result in pregnancies may also help to create greater social cohesion. Competition between males and females for the most desirable mates may be advantageous to the species as part of natural selection, but same-sex attraction may benefit communities by reducing aggression between adults of the same sex. Some recent research suggests the probability of a mother giving birth to a gay son increases with second and subsequent sons. This too could help dampen reproductive competition between males.

In human societies, the great majority of genes passed on to the next generation will be shared between straight and gay individuals, so those who do not have children themselves, but who

help the community to thrive, are assisting in the continuance of the pool of shared genes. This form of specialisation, in which only some individuals engage in reproductive sex but the rest add to the common good in other ways occurs in many species, for example in packs of hyenas and colonies of bees.

Arguments like these risk falling into the trap of justifying the existence of lesbians and gay men when no justification is necessary. Survival of the fittest may be essential to the evolutionary process, but genetic mutations occur in a random manner. All sorts of traits develop which cannot be explained in terms of obvious benefit to the species as a whole. The peacock's tail is an example. The male's extravaganza of plumage plays a part in attracting peahens, but other bird species like pigeons and finches reproduce very well without being similarly equipped. We might expect that the peacock's investment of bodily resources in growing its huge encumbrance of tail feathers would be a disadvantage, yet the species thrive in their Asian habitat. Another example of a trait of dubious value is the poison produced by some species of fungus. There is little evidence that it protects from predators, and most fungi are not poisonous. Rather than the toxins being there to help poisonous fungi survive, the explanation may simply be that they are useless by-products of the biochemical processes that take place during growth.

Genetic variations occur, sometimes they help a species to survive, sometimes they have the opposite effect, and sometimes they just happen without being of much benefit or much hindrance. Changes in the environment make some traits that are of no present value useful in the future. Variation is an essential part of the evolutionary process. Human personality is wonderfully varied. Multiple occupations and interests are a feature of advanced societies. It is therefore wrong to condemn lesbians and gay men simply because of their sexual preference. We can, and do, make a valuable contribution to communities in which we are made welcome.

Being an identifiable minority, we are vulnerable to discrimination and persecution; we need to stand up for ourselves.

Some people are not open about their sexuality because they fear rejection, being ostracised, or being denied access to other things they want. As the emotions of sexual desire and love fluctuate, and cannot easily be understood or directed using reason and logic, we may find talking to others about them difficult. Should not those with whom we share no sexual interests not mind their own business? Yet unless we constantly and successfully hide it, people who get to know us are likely to realise that we are attracted to our own sex. If we are not in a country where we risk harsh penalties, why deceive? If our experience of life has taught us that we are predominantly lesbian or gay, better surely to accept that some people may dislike us for what we are than to pretend to the world that we want sex with the opposite gender. If the “us” that everyone has come to know is a pretence, how can we have any true friends?

People are often more comfortable with the familiar and suspicious of anything different or unusual. Even in tolerant societies, the majority is likely to have mixed feelings towards us. Our sexual preference is a significant difference, and any identifiable minority is liable to find itself resented, misunderstood or made scapegoats of by disgruntled individuals, or those who seek some benefit for themselves through attacking us.

Imagine a minority who could see extremely well in the ultra-violet part of the spectrum, but had very poor vision in the red, whilst the majority were the opposite. Sometimes vision in the ultraviolet might be useful, but the disadvantages would be likely to outweigh the benefits, for example traffic lights will be the colour that best suits the majority. The ultra-violet seeing minority would be wise to join with others like themselves to influence society to cater for their different eyesight. Minorities learn better how to cope with being different by sharing experiences. We lesbians and gay men live alongside the majority, and are like them in most

respects, but we are not the same as them.

Historically, numerous societies have persecuted us. Authoritarian regimes and official state religions have been among the most severe in condemning us, victimising us with severe punishments and mental torture. When those with power declare our sexual urges to be sinful, claim that we corrupt the purity of the race or social structures, they do so to make us wage war against our own natures. Threatened and harassed, we may be left no alternative but to lead a double life, to make a public show of heterosexual love, whilst secretly having or longing for sex with our own gender. We are induced to inflict mental torment on ourselves.

Some religious believers are taught that obedience to dogma will bring an afterlife of everlasting happiness, presumably whilst gloating over the sinners – lesbians and gays included – who in their millions must suffer horrible everlasting torture. Some of the devout cannot wait to see their vision of eternity come into being, and as punishment for adult consensual sex subject we “sinners” to flogging, burning at the stake, or stoning to death.

The poet Edward Fitzgerald wrote of persecution by the religious:

What! out of senseless Nothing to provoke
A conscious Something to resent the yoke
Of unpermitted Pleasure, under pain
Of everlasting penalties, if broke!

What! From his helpless Creature be repaid
Pure Gold, for what he lent him dross-allay'd -
Sue for a Debt he never did contract,
And cannot answer - Oh the sorry trade!

Zealots are seldom susceptible to reasoned argument, and if we try to engage with them they may delight in cursing us with hell-fire and damnation. They may try to turn the tables on us by claiming that they are the ones who are under threat from our devilish practices. Being drawn into slanging matches will rarely further our cause; mostly we can only hope that, as the philosopher

Nietzsche put it, someone will “redeem them from their redeemer”. Some quotes to illustrate what those who take the Bible and the Koran as literal truth must believe are given in the appendix at the end of this booklet.

Dogma, political or religious, is at odds with a humanist outlook because it does not allow denial or dispute. For humanists the truth, rather than being set down by some absolute authority, is for us to discover using our own faculties to observe the world around us, and develop knowledge and understanding by thinking for ourselves and discussing and learning from others. We are not all-seeing and all-knowing. We are not outraged by different ways of looking at things, and accept that changes in the world and our knowledge of it may require us to change our views.

Not all religious people are dogmatic. Some regard zealots as followers of a false interpretation of their system of belief. The balance between zealots and moderates is hard to ascertain, and lesbians and gay men should be cautious when dealing with anyone of a religious persuasion until they make it clear they mean us no harm.

Even in tolerant societies, people who would like to make us suffer have not disappeared. They wait and watch for an opportunity to shift public perceptions. We must be on the look out for them, and do what we can to counter them. They may act secretly, being careful to obey the letter of the law whilst marking us down at job interviews; they may look askance at the slightest public display of same sex affection. They may insult us, then claim their words were intended to be humorous, not to cause offence. They will exclude us whenever they can and by any means. We may be busy getting on with our lives, but we should not forget that our freedoms were hard won, and if we do not resist prejudice they could be taken away.

We should promote an outlook of tolerance and respect for individuality and difference in society generally.

When somebody pressures us to conform to a norm of behaviour which goes against our natures, an understandable instinctive reaction is to push back, and perhaps even to try to impose our own preferred ways on them. The difficulty with this defensive behaviour is that it may not be consistent with wanting to improve the overall level of human happiness, as we are trying to force others into actions they would rather avoid. Tolerance should be our watchword, with the requirement that those we tolerate reciprocate by being tolerant of us. Some religious people welcome gay men and lesbians into their community. Most believers who talk of Christian values do not mean they want to burn heretics at the stake or that they relish the thought of billions suffering eternal torture in hell. Instead they may see the relationship of each individual to their god as being in essence a personal one guided by an “inner light”, and the views they hold on human rights, tolerance, respect for others, and desire for the common good may be very close to humanist principles.

As gay humanists we should welcome potential friends and form alliances with those who defend personal freedoms and support just causes. Our aim should be to promote humanism and improve life for ourselves and others, not to be hostile to everybody who does not share our system of beliefs in full. With those who are somewhere between dogmatism and tolerance, we should discourage them from the former and encourage them towards the latter. Reasoned argument will be good for us both. Those fundamentals of humanist belief, happiness, fulfilment and the common good, cannot always be defined precisely or with certainty. Whatever neurologists may discover about the biochemistry of happiness, levels of it fluctuate in ways that are hard to pin down. Spells of happiness and sadness can occur without us knowing for certain why, and any group of people contains individuals whose nature seems to be happier – or sadder – than most.

Fulfilment too is a matter of individual perception. At a family gathering, one great grandparent may look with satisfaction at the assembled four generations, grandparent to great grandchild, whilst the other may feel that the responsibilities and duties of raising a less than inspiring brood have been poorly rewarded.

Those of us lucky enough to enjoy success in our ambitions may find that any sense of fulfilment is short-lived, and before long feel compelled to embark on another project. When we got “there” (in the sense of the end of a project) there was no “there” (in the sense of lasting fulfilment) there. Happiness came perhaps from making step by step progress along the way, rather than after putting the last piece in place.

Humanists experience happiness and fulfilment in similar ways to others who are not humanist, and we should not become so sure of ourselves that we will not listen to people who think differently from us. If we indulge in the folly of believing we are always absolutely right, we will be unable to tolerate those with ideas that differ from our own, and if we continue far enough down this path we may become as inhumane and intolerant as the burners at the stake and stoners to death.

In politics too no one system or party has established itself as having a monopoly over happiness or fulfilment. A simplistic way to think of democratic politics is as a competition between a Robin Hood party, and a Robin Hood in reverse party. As humanists we might be drawn to support Robin Hood to reduce poverty, but history shows that a fair redistribution of wealth is very hard to achieve, and new elites tend to emerge through the transfer of wealth and power. What we can say is that a political system which encourages individualism and variety, works towards the common good, and offers opportunities to all is in keeping with humanism, whilst a conformist, authoritarian, inflexible and uncaring one is not.

Whilst opposing those who condemn us because of our sexuality, we should give credit where credit is due. We should not undervalue kind and helpful actions performed by those with beliefs different from our own.

For some of us, having rejected religious belief, understanding the world through science seems to be all that is necessary for a full and happy life. When success follows success that may be so, but when illness or other misfortune hits, we may feel the need for more comfort and consolation than marvelling at the world through the lens of scientific understanding.

At times we all need support and sympathy, and the more unfortunate of us may have to cope with prolonged misery or pain. The company of family or friends, and being with others experiencing similar difficulties can be of great benefit. Religions often make charitable and other supportive acts part of their purpose, and whatever might be said against their doctrines, the good they do should be recognised. If religious people feed the hungry and help the homeless – without coercing them into singing hymns and saying prayers – we should applaud their charitable actions, even though we believe doing good to be part of human nature, not a result of divine inspiration, nor a means of securing a premium place in heaven.

Some non-religious people like to launch attacks on those who believe in a god or gods, along the lines of “I am an atheist. I believe in science, not superstition, no doubts, no uncertainties, you've got it wrong”. In some circumstances heated arguments about beliefs may clear the air, but we must try not to be dogmatic, or appear blinkered and intolerant. Hostile words are unlikely to win new hearts and minds over to the humanist view. What grounds do we have for ordering others to adopt our way of looking at the world? Have we come to think the working of our brain cells is infallible?

Religions, with their myths, legend, history, rituals, architecture, works of art, music and literature have played such a part in the development of civilisation that they cannot be easily dismissed or

written out of human history. Religions change as new rulers and priests vie to inflict their personal stamp on the masses; sometimes they spread their beliefs through military conquest. Many people see their religious background as part of their culture and identity. They may be happy to think of the legends and ideas as metaphors or as being of historical importance, whilst at the same time using a scientific and rational view of modern society as the basis for how they live.

We may wish humanity to be otherwise, but religions are likely to continue to be successful in attracting followers. For humanists to stand tall among the many religious believers in the world today, we will need to show that our outlook is generous and inclusive to all those who work truly and sincerely towards the same ideals.

SO WHAT NOW?

A traditional way to end would be to provide a list of further reading. The wide range of subjects touched on, secular humanism, ethics, science, evolution etc. means that a good library or a search of the internet will yield plenty of material. Readers who want to read more should have little difficulty in finding material for themselves.

Joining humanist associations and similar groups, or simply discussion with open-minded friends, is a mutually enjoyable way to develop and sustain our humanist outlook. At any gathering of lesbians and gay men there will probably be some like-minded people, or the internet may enable us to find others, or to join on-line groups. Gay humanists also take part in a whole range of voluntary and charitable activities.

A quote from Machiavelli may seem surprising here, but he understood that standing up for oneself is essential: "The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous." The words *to act virtuously in every way* are key in this quote. In our search for love, we will at times find ourselves in conflict with others who wish us harm. The strategies we need to deal with them must be different from the kind and helpful behaviour we should adopt towards those who act in a kindly way towards us.

The future will bring fresh challenges for gay humanists. Medical science may open new avenues to parenthood for lesbians and gay men. The environmental consequences of the burgeoning world population may make a different view of how we humans might live in harmony with our planet essential. Where lesbians and gays are free from persecution and oppression, where we have the opportunity to play our part, and to be ourselves, our self-confidence and happiness will grow, and we will be better able to contribute to the future of our species. To be lesbian or gay is, in itself, neither good nor evil. Our actions as individuals are what determine that. We must expect to experience our share of sadness and disappointment. In some places, in some situations, we may

find ourselves being treated as a despised minority, but we gay humanists know what is in our hearts and our minds.

After death, the world will carry on without us. It lasted for a long time before we were born. The thought of that earlier period does not distress us; why should the thought of the world continuing without us in the future? Others will be born, some of them very much like us, and we hope they will be happy, after we have ceased to exist. Lesbians and gay men yet to be born will search for happiness and fulfilment as we did. Humanists should be brave, be careful, and be good. We should seek our own happiness and fulfilment, and where we can help others to find theirs. Perhaps we can even hope to leave behind some history, or understanding, or something of worth that will benefit those who come after us.

Appendix

The quotes below, from the King James version of the Bible, and the Koran (one of the less threateningly worded English translations), are a small selection of the many passages urging believers in these religions to cruelty, to accept slavery, making threats of dire consequences for stepping out of line, or imposing bizarre or oppressive beliefs or rules. They are intended as ammunition to refute the condemnation of lesbian and gay love by those who interpret the texts literally. They should not be used to offend people who mean us no harm.

Bible:

Leviticus 1 For every one that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death: he hath cursed his father or his mother; his blood shall be upon him.

19 Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee. And whosoever lieth carnally with a woman, that is a bondmaid, betrothed to an husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; she shall be scourged; they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the LORD, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, even a ram for a trespass offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering before the LORD for his sin which he hath done: and the sin which he hath done shall be forgiven him.

25 Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.

Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession.

Psalms 2 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Be wise now therefore, O

ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

Proverbs 13 He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.

22 Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.

23 Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

29 The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

Jonah 1.15 So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.

17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2.1 Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,

10 And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

2 Kings 2 And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the LORD, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake. And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them. And he went from thence to mount Carmel, and from thence he returned to Samaria.

Matthew 10 Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not

worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

1.Timothy 2 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

Koran:

2.178 O ye who believe! the law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude, this is a concession and a Mercy from your Lord. After this whoever exceeds the limits shall be in grave penalty.

2.221 Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe: A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures you. Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: A man slave who believes is better than an unbeliever, even though he allures you. Unbelievers do (but) beckon you to the Fire. But God beckons by His Grace to the Garden (of bliss) and forgiveness, and makes His Signs clear to mankind: That they may celebrate His praise.

3.63 As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the Hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help.

64 Verily God has cursed the Unbelievers and prepared for them a Blazing Fire,

65 To dwell therein for ever: no protector will they find, nor helper.

4.34 Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly);

4.35 but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For God is Most High, great (above you all).

4.56 Those who reject our Signs, We shall soon cast into the Fire: as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins, that they may taste the penalty: for God is Exalted in Power, Wise.

4.92 Never should a believer kill a believer; but (If it so happens) by mistake, (Compensation is due): If one (so) kills a believer, it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's family, unless they remit it freely. If the deceased belonged to a people at war with you, and he was a believer, the freeing of a believing slave (Is enough).

5.33 The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: that is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter;

9.5 But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleague them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.

23.12 Man We did create from a quintessence (of clay);

13 Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed;

14 Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then we made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then we developed out of it another creature. So blessed be God, the best to create!

15 After that, at length ye will die.

47.15 A parable of the garden which those guarding (against evil) are promised: Therein are rivers of water that does not alter, and rivers of milk the taste whereof does not change, and rivers of drink delicious to those who drink, and rivers of honey clarified and for them therein are all fruits and protection from their Lord. (Are these) like those who abide in the fire and who are made to drink boiling water so it rends their bowels asunder.

Alan Keslian was a Gay Liberation Front activist in London in the 1970s, among other things setting up West London GLF and organising gay dances attended by hundreds in Fulham Town Hall.

He has experienced and benefited from the huge change in attitudes towards Gay men and Lesbians in England and elsewhere during recent decades. During his teenage years, in the UK any sex between men was a crime, whereas now civil partnership offers a legal status on a par with marriage, and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is increasingly outlawed. This transformation has huge implications for gay relationships, and his motive in writing is to explore the impact of this new freedom and portray its effects. His first novel, *Goodmans Hotel*, was published in 2003. His second, a more humorous book, *Closer Than Breathing - A Light Gay Odyssey* - came out in 2009. He believes his readers' time is valuable, and tries hard not to waste it.

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This booklet and other publications by Alan Keslian are available from good booksellers, and in ebook formats from www.smashwords.com

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