

Institution: University of Kent
Unit of Assessment: 32 - Philosophy
Title of case study: Humanism and Religion in Public Life
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Professor Richard Norman's research has led to an improvement in the public awareness of humanist thought and value, both at national and international level. This impact was generated through articles written for a non-academic audience; public lectures and conference presentations; a report on humanist issues as the centrepiece of parliamentary debate in the House of Lords; and an appearance to discuss humanist perspectives on BBC Radio 4's <i>The Moral Maze</i>.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>A core element of the underpinning research which has generated the impact is Norman's book <i>On Humanism</i> (2004). This book defines humanism as a non-religious worldview, but maintains that there is more to humanism than the simple rejection of religious beliefs. It does this by highlighting the contiguities between humanist and religious perspectives on morality, and on what makes for a good human life. Norman's research therefore departs from the movement sometimes referred to as 'New Atheism'. New Atheism is uncompromisingly hostile to all manifestations of religious belief, and its exponents are often reluctant to identify any common ground between religious and non-religious perspectives. As a result, New Atheism is often considered to be socially divisive. Norman's work should be seen as a conciliatory corrective to the polemical tone of New Atheist literature.</p> <p>Norman's research emphasises the need to pay close attention to the nuances of religious belief. The potential to engage in constructive public debate is ill-served by commentators who fail to acknowledge the complexity of religion as a social phenomenon, and who do not appreciate the heterogeneous nature of religious belief. Norman emphasises the importance of this issue in his article 'Secularism and Shared Values' (2009).</p> <p>In 'What do Religious Believers Believe?' (2011), Norman examines the nature of religious belief. He responds to those philosophers who claim that modern religions exist primarily as social institutions, rather than as metaphysical explanations of the existence of the universe. Norman argues that religions necessarily make putatively factual statements about why the world is as it is. This, he argues, shows that religious belief is a legitimate subject for rational debate, in a way that it would not be if religions were understood solely as social institutions.</p> <p>In <i>Ethics, Killing and War</i> (1995), Norman critically discusses traditional approaches to just war theory. Just war theory was heavily influenced by early Christian thinkers such as Augustine, and Norman argues that this influence is still present in modern, secular attempts to legitimise war. Norman argues that there are serious philosophical deficiencies in traditional approaches to just war theory, and argues for the conclusion that, in more instances than are generally acknowledged, the decision to go to war is not morally justifiable. This position reflects the humanist values which are the subject of Norman's later research, and the book as a whole exemplifies the way in which humanists can engage in constructive moral debate with religious traditions.</p>

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The key insights of Norman's research are:

- The standard of public debate regarding the place of religion in society must be improved by promoting a deeper understanding both of religious belief and of humanist thought.
- Humanism does not merely claim that God does not exist: it also actively engages with many of the ethical questions discussed by religious thinkers. Humanism is a perspective from which both religious and non-religious individuals can engage in secular debate.
- A humanist perspective can make important contributions to political issues such as the justification for going to war. It does this by highlighting the historical influence of religious traditions on such debates, and by suggesting alternative ways of thinking about those issues.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Norman, Richard (1995) *Ethics, Killing and War*. Cambridge University Press. (ISBN 0-521-45553-7)

Norman, Richard (2004) *On Humanism*. Routledge. (ISBN 0-415-30523-3)

Norman, Richard (2009) 'Secularism and Shared Values', in *Philosophers and God*, ed. John Cornwell and Michael McGhee. Continuum. (ISBN 978-0-8470-6548-3)

Norman, Richard (2011) 'What do Religious Believers Believe?', in *Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Anthony O'Hear. Cambridge University Press. (ISBN 9781107615984)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Norman's work has substantially improved public understanding of humanist thought, both in the UK and abroad.

The impact generated by Norman's research began with articles introducing humanist perspectives on religious debate to a wide audience. The first of these, 'Holy Communion', called for closer co-operation between religious and non-religious groups in tackling social ills such as poverty. The second, 'Beyond Belief', examined the nature of religious belief. It questioned claims that religions should be identified solely as social institutions. The reach of this impact is demonstrated by the magazine's sales figures, and by online hits specific to Norman's articles:

- '[Holy Communion](#)', in *New Humanist*, Vol. 122, Issue 6 (2007). Read online 14,365 times up to 31 July 2013 [Source A below].
- '[Beyond Belief](#)', in *New Humanist*, Vol. 124, Issue 6 (2009). Read online 8,500 times up to 31 July 2013. Sales figures for Vol. 124, Issue 6 are approximately 4,500 (3,500 subscriptions; 1,000 news-stand) [Source A].

The content of these articles was also disseminated via a series of public lectures, which discussed similar themes. The lectures also stressed the need for a better understanding of humanist beliefs in order to help promote dialogue between humanist and non-humanist groups:

- 17 November 2009: A talk at a joint meeting of the British Humanist Association and the Inter-Faith Network for the UK. This took place as part of Inter-Faith Week, one of the aims of which was to foster a better understanding 'between people of religious and non-religious belief'. An Inter-Faith Network report notes that '[a]t the end of the meeting there was

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general agreement that it had been a very useful and constructive occasion, which had led to some increase in understanding between the religious and humanist perspectives' [Source E].

- 21 July 2010: A public lecture titled 'On Humanism – Thinking in Action'.
- 18 January 2012: A public lecture titled 'Humanism for a Better World'.

A recording of '[On Humanism – Thinking in Action](#)' is available on YouTube [Source F]. It has been viewed over 600 times.

These activities led to the publication of *The Case for Secularism* (2007), in association with the British Humanist Association (BHA). Norman edited and authored the text for this publication, which was based on the results of extensive group debate between members of the BHA. On 18 March 2010, *The Case for Secularism* was the focus of [Parliamentary debate in the House of Lords](#). One of the central themes of Norman's research, namely the desirability of creating a society underpinned by shared liberal values, featured prominently in this debate. In her contribution to the debate, Baroness Massey of Darwen noted that '*The Case for Secularism* maintains that the state should be "neutral between [...] differing values and should not impose a conception of the good life". If only all states could do this, we might be spared some of the conflicts evident in our world today.' Lord McKenzie of Luton observed that *The Case for Secularism* 'challenge[s] the misconception that humanists and other non-religious people are anti-religious' and recommended its 'accessible and thoughtful contributions to public debate' [Source G].

On 3 November 2011, Norman spoke as a member of a panel at a meeting hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. This meeting was held to launch [Right to Object: Conscientious Objection and Religious Conviction](#), a BHA publication co-authored by Norman. He addressed the same topic on 26 January 2011 for BBC Radio 4's [The Moral Maze](#) [Source I]. Debates on *The Moral Maze* consistently have about a million listeners on air and about 10,000 listeners online [Source J].

The impact which Norman's work has generated in the UK has also begun to generate further impact on an international level. On 12 August 2011, Norman gave a keynote address at the World Humanist Congress, held in Oslo, which had [over 500 attendees from 50 countries](#) [Source D]. This address drew on issues raised in *Ethics, Killing and War*, discussing the need for humanists to take account of and build on the Christian tradition of ethical thinking about war. A [video recording](#) of this address has been uploaded to YouTube [Source H]. Norman spoke on a similar theme in 2013, addressing the [UK Armed Forces Humanist Association](#) with a lecture entitled 'The Ethics of Killing'.

The BHA describes Norman's research as making 'an enormous impact in a number of public policy areas', and as having 'contributed significantly to the public understanding of humanist thought' [Source B]. Philosopher Julian Baggini describes Norman's research as having 'provided a valuable contribution to the public understanding of secular humanism which counters the more scientific, strident, simplistic norm'. Due to Norman's public activities, he writes, 'thousands of people have had this direct contact with a serious humanist thinker and will have had important ideas explained to and discussed with them at a much higher level of sophistication than they would otherwise' [Source C].

In sum, Norman has made use of a variety of channels to change the way the public thinks about humanism: magazine articles, videos, talks, radio discussion, humanist publications and political

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debate. By promulgating his views, his work has been an important contributing factor in the recent resurgence of humanism (the [BHA](#) now has over 28,000 members and the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#) has 117 member organisations from 38 countries). That humanist thought is becoming increasingly relevant is witnessed by the growth of the religiously unaffiliated in census data: the proportion of people who identify themselves as having no religion is up from 14.8% in 2001 to 25.1% in 2011 in [England and Wales](#); the proportion of religiously unaffiliated is up from 15.3% in 2007 to 19.6% in 2012 in the [US](#); about 16% of the [global](#) population, i.e., 1.1 billion people, do not identify with any particular religion.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- (A) *New Humanist* sales figures and online hits: caspar.melville@rationalist.org.uk
- (B) Impact Testimonial provided by BHA (available on request).
- (C) Impact Testimonial provided by Julian Baggini (available on request).
- (D) Number of attendees at the World Humanist Congress 2011: <http://iheu.org/article-categories/world-humanist-congress-2011>
- (E) A report on the meeting between the Inter-Faith Network and the British Humanist Association: <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/IFW2009event171109.pdf>
- (F) A video of the 'On Humanism – Thinking in Action' talk given to the Central London Humanist Group: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&v=mBWcisMRFiE>
- (G) The Hansard record of the House of Lords debate on *The Case for Secularism*: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldhansrd/text/100318-0003.htm#10031838000669>
- (H) A video of Norman's keynote address to the World Humanist Congress 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qDhma0Ntis>
- (I) Norman's appearance on BBC Radio 4's *The Moral Maze*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00xw1t9>
- (J) Testimonial provided by Phil Pegum, producer of *The Moral Maze* (available on request).