

The Humanist Imperative

By John W. de Gruchy (editor)

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If you have ever wondered what Humanism is about, then this collection of essays might be just what you were looking for. *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* is the culmination of a research project that took place over two years and was based at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS).

This two-year project involved thirty-nine academics and public figures, drawn from many different backgrounds and disciplines. In their discussions, their shared common concern was: “How can our fledgling democracy not only survive but flourish?”

African humanism is markedly different from that of Europe. Its history is complex – a blend of liberal, socialist, secular and religious tradition. Both strains, however, encourage the same affirmation of human freedom, dignity, rights, responsibilities and economic justice.

At the launch of this book on 11 August 2011, Archbishop Desmond Tutu made a statement in which he called upon government leaders to spend less money on official luxury cars. He also mentioned a “wealth tax” which, predictably, was reported in detail by the media. Most of his speech, however, dealt with the need for human solidarity in the struggle for justice that, according to him, forms the centre of genuine humanism. He feels that our young, constitutional democracy is being threatened by our inability to achieve economic justice.

Traditionally, Humanism is described as a belief in human-based morality, a system of thought that is based on human values, characteristics, and behavior. Nothing new there, you might say. But these essays on New Humanism, edited by theologian and social scientist John de Gruchy, are fascinating in that they describe a whole new language of humanism that is much more uncertain and searches for new moral rules and obligations. Words that re-occur are “provisional,” “complexity” and “irony,” reflecting the abstractions of certain contemporary French philosophers like Derrida, but fortunately rooting some of them in post-apartheid South Africa.

A good place to start is the essay by Russell Botman, SU rector, in which he argues for a new morality that focuses on the wellness of humanity as a whole. This obviously applies to South Africa, as his criteria of transparency, inclusivity, diversity and humaneness apply to the sort of transformation and upliftment that hopefully will ensure a better future for us all.

Other writers like Njabulo Ndebele, Antjie Krog, Deborah Posel and Achille Mbembe question the values of technology, science, materialism, and the political certainties that were the corner stones of the old humanism. Their language consists of concepts like *ubuntu*, community, identity and accountability, and is particularly related to smaller and local social issues.

Local neuro-psychoanalyst Mark Solms provides an intriguing account of the biological foundations of being human, examining the ways that instincts have turned into values over times.

This is a valuable book, to dip into whenever thoughts like “what does it mean to be human in South Africa today?” strike you.