OBITUARY

Harold Blackham (1903–2009)

Harold Blackham, who died on 23 January 2009 aged 105, was, in his role as Secretary of the Campaign for Moral Education and Chair of the Education Committee of the Social Morality Council (SMC) in the UK, the driving force behind and co-founder of the Journal of Moral Education (JME). He was the first Chair of the Editorial Board of JME, from its initial publication by the Rationalist Press Association in October 1971 until May 1977, when, at the age of 74, he also retired from being Chair of the SMC, leaving London for the Wye Valley, Herefordshire. From there he continued to write more books, enjoying gardening, nature and the panoramic countryside view for another 30 years. He, nevertheless, remained actively connected with both the JME and SMC (which owned the journal) throughout the 1980s, advising on the development of the journal and its publication arrangements, writing and reviewing papers, in 1983 acting as Guest Editor of the first special issue of JME, and in 1994 becoming an Honorary Associate.

Harold Blackham’s connection with JME was only a small part of a much wider national and international web of intellectual and practical connection, a life of thought, writing, action and commitment to many progressive causes, focusing on Humanism. Indeed, he has widely been acknowledged as ‘the father of modern humanism’ (http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/09/obituary-harold-blackman-humanist), ‘architect of the British and international humanist movements’ and ‘founder of the British Humanist Association’ (http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/209). These obituaries testify to the early influences on Harold Blackham—the family background in Congregationalism and bookselling, study of divinity, ethics and literature at Birmingham University, and a period of teaching—before becoming a freelance lecturer and writer, which continued throughout his life. Through working with Stanton Coit, who after social reform in his native USA, had founded a British Union of Ethical Societies, Harold Blackham became chairman of the Union in 1934, and it was this organisation that eventually became the British Humanist Association (BHA), of which he became the first Director, 1963–1968. It was under the auspices of the BHA (today a national charity supporting and representing the non-religious in Britain through its educational and secular civic activities) that JME was first established. Prior to and immediately after the Second World War, Harold was also working with other Freethinkers...
internationally, particularly in the USA, India and the Netherlands, to build the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), now a worldwide union of over 100 organisations in 40 nations, which continues to develop Humanism internationally. The IHEU was a point of connection for Harold and Lisa Kuhmerker—in 1974 the first female JME Editorial Board member from outside the UK, and from 1976 the founder of the Association for Moral Education in USA and founder and Editor of Moral Education Forum. Their communication persisted into the mid-1980s, with Lisa writing a glowing review of Harold’s book, *The fable as literature* (1985, The Athlone Press) in *JME* (15 (3), p. 243–244).

Harold’s intellect and practical wisdom were obvious from being in contact with him, as I was from 1974 for over 20 years, first through his contribution on *The Curriculum in Moral Education* to an edited collection *Progress and problems in moral education* (NFER, 1975), and then as Editor of *JME*. Andrew Copson’s BHA obituary mentions Harold’s ‘life-long love of the written word’ and that fellow Humanist, Barbara Smoker in her anthology *Blackham’s best* (BHA, 1988) describes his writing as ‘driven by a desire to distil and communicate the wisdom of the past’, both evident to me as a young editor visiting his completely book-lined flat in Parsons Green, and in Harold’s correspondence which parenthetically referred to ancient Greek and twentieth century Continental thinkers. Of his many books and multifarious writings published over 70 years, *Six existentialist thinkers* (Routledge, 1952) and *Humanism* (Penguin, 1968), must rank as among the most influential for students of philosophy and the general public.

In the 1970–1980s in the UK, Harold Blackham’s long experience of national and international committees and voluntary organisations was brought to bear on a succession of moral education activities which he led from the SMC and of which *JME* was a part. The SMC was comprised of representatives of recognised religious traditions of that time in the UK (principally Anglicans, Catholics, members of the Free Churches and Jews) and Humanists, educational professionals, and members of the wider community. Harold Blackham set up working parties to promote dialogue on contemporary ethical issues (such as drug dependence, broadcasting, the relationship of moral and religious education and the preparation of teachers for moral education), with a view to arriving at agreed statements used as leverage for funding and to change the climate of opinion with government, ecumenical and local education authorities (e.g. *Moral and religious education in county schools*, Methuen, 1970). The SMC’s first Moral Education Centre was set up at University of London, Goldsmiths’ College, and undertook a survey of moral education in the UK, produced a resource list on moral education (National Book League, 1976) and stimulated conferences and reports (e.g. *Moral education*, ULGC, 1978). At this time the aims and teaching of religious education, the main curriculum vehicle for moral education, were hotly contested by Humanists (e.g. *Objective, fair and balanced*, BHA, 1975; and Blackham’s edited *Moral and religious education in county primary schools*, NFER, 1976). Another dimension of Harold’s concern for moral education was manifest in his advocacy for attention to be given to personal development in school, both through pastoral care (‘though I don’t like the term … a bit’) and
counselling, in line with his co-founding of the British Association for Counselling in 1977 and the publication of his *Education for personal autonomy* (Methuen, 1978).

The 1983 *JME* Special Issue, Moral Education, Religious Education and Ethical Theory, of which Harold was Guest Editor, was motivated by ongoing confusion and uncertainty in curriculum theory and UK pedagogical practice. Harold was persuaded to become involved because of his deep intellectual interest in these themes. As he wrote to me, ‘Not that I intend anything controversial, rather I would hope to satisfy all reasonable minds. What a hope!’ The Special Issue was followed up with a series of meetings in conjunction with local education authority advisers and teachers to establish new baselines for development in moral education, which resulted in *A Statement—Relations of ME with RE: the Need for Understanding and Cooperation* (*JME* 14(1), 4–8 January 1985). In the mid-1980s Harold and the SMC were the driving forces behind obtaining some government funding for the establishment of a Moral Education Centre focusing on teacher education, at Leicester University under the direction of Derek Wright, with David Ingram. There was also enhanced co-operation with the Moral Education Research and Information Centre at the then St Martin’s College, Lancaster, under the direction of Brian Gates, with Mike Cross, and other significant regional work was supported by the Chief Education Officers in Devon and Cornwall and in Dudley, West Midlands.

Even this glimpse of Harold Blackham’s moral education endeavours demonstrates that he enabled a Humanist voice to be heard at a time of domination of a Christian religious perspective, but this was together with the hearing of other religious and educational voices. Harold had intellectual force and showed leadership, but he also worked with others, commanding respect and commitment to the process of engagement. He managed to be patient and reasonably optimistic about moving matters forward, willing to pay attention to detail, always concerned with practical arrangements, yet never losing sight of the wider political and educational picture. It was he who encouraged and supported both an international perspective in the journal and the thematic series of now customary Special Issues. To a beginning editor, almost 50 years his junior, as Chair of the Editorial Board he was an inspiration and guide: informed and informative, balanced but not without opinion, calm and prompt, with a passionate urgency to make progress. He was self-directed and industrious: after his move to Hereford he wrote ‘with all there was to do … I overdid it … and have had to let up, which I find almost impossible. I resolve every day, and break it, like an addict, which I suppose I am’, and years later he observed, ‘an inability to relax is my greatest difficulty’. His courteous communications always had a personal touch—comments about his current concerns and endeavours and an evaluation of their progress—and empathic support for one’s own. His long life must be seen as one of considerable influence and lasting achievement, primarily in his explanation and promotion of Humanism and in securing its recognition and acknowledgement as a human-centred ethic in a naturalistic world, and in his contribution to several related professional spheres including moral education.
The passing of Harold Blackham, together with that of James Hemming (in 2008), John Wilson (in 2003) and Derek Wright (in 2006), marks the end of the initial era of British leadership in moral education. Their learning, thinking and experiences led them from their backgrounds and interests in religious sources of morality to seek and promote other secular, rational (including the emotions) and logical approaches to morality and moral education, which linked theory firmly with practice, individual and social needs and the contexts for learning, with recognition of increasing social pluralism. Their visions, drive and endeavours found common expression in founding and sustaining the early years of the \textit{JME} and their ongoing, active commitment to it during at least its first 25 years. With the growth in the field of moral development and education and the interrelated international and academic role of the Journal, scholars around the world who have published in and who read the \textit{JME} have reason to be grateful for their foresight and legacy, and Harold’s intellectual, strategic and inclusive leadership.

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\textbf{Founders of} \textit{JME}: Harold Blackham (on the left) celebrating his 100\textsuperscript{th} birthday with James Hemming in 2004