



# BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

## NEWS AND VIEWS

[www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk)

New Series

Number 14

May 2006

Birmingham Humanist Group is affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. We are always pleased to welcome as new members those who try to make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values rather than religion or superstition.

### Past Events

Around 15 people, including several new faces, attended the March meeting to listen to recordings and watch video clips of the late BHA President Linda Smith. It seemed an appropriate way to mark her passing.

There were 18 in the April audience to hear Imran Mogra and discuss Islam. We are very grateful to him for 'coming into the lion's den' and are pleased that the evening showed that we can have a civilised discussion even when there is little common ground which we can agree on.

### Future Events

We hope as many of you as possible will be able to attend next Friday's meeting for **Professor Harshad Navsaria**, who is coming from London to explain to us the importance of his work involving tissue engineering and stem cell therapy in a not-too-scientific way. Please spread the word and note that this is **NOT** at our normal venue but is in Selly Oak.

*AN INVITATION FROM BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS*

*TO A MEETING WITH*

### PROFESSOR HARSHAD NAVSARIA

*An expert in Cell and Tissue Engineering at Barts and the London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine who will give a talk on the cultivation of*

### ARTIFICIAL SKIN FOR BURNS

- \* *Leading edge research in tissue engineered skin.*
- \* *Its use and importance in treating burns victims.*
- \* *Recent experience following major fires in Paraguay and the Dominican Republic*
- \* *Potential new treatments using adult stem cells.*

*THE FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE,  
936 BRISTOL ROAD, SELLY OAK, B29,  
FRIDAY, 19th MAY, at 7.45pm.*

**EVERYBODY WELCOME - ADMISSION FREE.**

*For further information please contact Percy Lea,  
telephone number 0121 427 8497.*

The Committee also hope that as many members as possible will make the effort to come along to the **Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> June** as this is now also in part a Social Event. Jane & William Wynne Willson kindly open their conservatory and garden to us from 6.30 pm so we can eat and chat before the official business gets under way. The food is always excellent - because we each bring an item ourselves!! Please contact Jane beforehand on 0121 475 6508 to co-ordinate items of food & drink. If you can't make the AGM but would like to play a part in the running of the group or have ideas for the future programme please contact one of the committee whose details are on the removable "Diary" page at the rear of this issue of News & Views. For those newer members 28 Garland Way, Northfield, is not the easiest address to find - the best way is to approach from Heath Road South or ask for a lift.

We would also appreciate the help from as many members as possible at the **Moseley Festival on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> June** where we are having a stall to publicise the group and Humanism in general. We hope this will be a way of attracting new, maybe younger members. As last year, part of the stall will have second hand books and a 'wheel of fortune' - Humanist style. The event runs from 9.30 am until around 4.00 pm and if you can just spare an hour or two please contact Harry Stopes-Roe.

### Would You Believe It?

I've just come across a Birmingham Humanist Group document from 1992. The Group then had 101 members, of whom 45 were also members of the British Humanist Association. Listed on the Committee were Harry Stopes-Roe, Jane Wynne Willson & Tova Jones! What would the group have done without them in last 14 years? Fit though they are they will not be able to go on for ever (& a Happy 90<sup>th</sup> recently to our Treasurer, Frank Hyam) so please newer members think whether you could serve a spell on the Committee.

## **A REVIEW OF ONE OF THE BOOKS IN OUR GROUP LIBRARY**

**“TRUTH – a guide for the perplexed”** by Simon Blackburn £14.99 (pub. Allen Lane)

The man in the street has little regard for philosophy, seeing it either as a means of entertainment for people who enjoy a good argument or as a device for making the world appear more complicated than it really is. For most everyday purposes the recognition of truth (or the realisation that a quest for it will be futile) present few difficulties and to devote an entire book to the topic looks like extravagance. This, however, is a book written by a philosopher who begins with a warning that we should beware of believing things to be true because we want them to be so. He takes the reader on a tour of many of the schools of philosophy and the various views they have taken of the meaning of truth through the centuries. It is written in philosophers' language but there are enough telling and often witty similes and anecdotes to enable the non-philosopher to stay afloat for most of the time. Even so, I have to say that I was not perplexed before I encountered this book but reading it has changed all that. John Lester

## **Would You Believe It ? Number 2**

“The Heritage Lottery Fund has invested more than £340 million in places of worship of all denominations,” proudly claims Carole Souter of the HLF in ‘The Times’. Now religious groups are at it again, pleading for more money to repair church buildings. Even TV presenter Jeremy Paxman has joined in and urged villagers to save a distinctive local church spire. However, the latest annual report of the Church of England Commissioners shows that it now has over £5bn in the bank after its investments and property sales added £800m last year. The Church's financial tentacles stretch far and wide; it even retains interests in shopping malls across Britain, including the Metro Centre in Gateshead. Many would argue that, due to the tax privileges the Church enjoys (of which it takes full advantage) it already fails to pay its proper share of taxes so why should it expect the rest of us to fork out yet again?

You can view some of the interesting architecture that is ‘under threat’ on John Lester's July ramble on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup>, since it passes close to the church of St Lawrence in Meriden and the church of St John Baptist at Berkswell – the latter described as “easily the most interesting Norman village church in Warwickshire” by Pevsner – as well as the secular building, Berkswell Hall.

## **GOVERNMENT MINISTER STANDS UP TO ISLAMIST MANIPULATORS (AT LAST)**

Foreign Office minister Kim Howells told an Islamic audience in London last week that blaming the West for the problems in the Muslim world was “an act of self-denial”. Mr Howells told a meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) that although he accepted that Muslims and some non-Muslims were offended by the recent publication of the Mohammed cartoons, the press in some Islamic countries had to take some blame for the ensuing bloodshed. He criticised some Islamic media for their handling of the issue, saying “the existence of anti-Western and anti-Jewish media and material in the Muslim world, some of it in state owned press, undermined as hypocritical the moral indignation that was expressed.”

Mr Howells said that it was right that the issue of Islamophobia was addressed but that Islamic governments and organisations should also address problems that give Islam a negative image. He cited support for Taliban-type legal and social systems, “recent statements coming out of Tehran,” practices that segregate and subjugate women, and conspiracy theories about 9/11 being a CIA plot and polio vaccines being contaminated with viruses. He said “Reports of raped women being punished and stoned, restrictions on other religions, including death sentences pronounced on Christian converts, poor human rights records and authoritarian, undemocratic environments all have a negative impact which we cannot ignore.” He said the Islamic world had the right to criticise policies pursued by Britain, the U.S. or the European Union, “but continuing to blame the West for all the ills of the Muslim world is an act of self-denial.”

## **Quotes of the Month**

“There are ten types of filth and impurities: urine, faeces, semen, carrion, blood of carrion, dogs, pigs, disbelievers” (*Text being taught at The Hawza Ilmiyya Islamic School, Willesden, London according to The Times*)

“It is, after all, a truism that religion makes you a more moral person. Like many truisms, it's wrong. As I have argued here before, religion has a magnificent record of inspiring art, architecture, music, literature and even scientific inquiry. It has completely failed to improve human behaviour. Rather, it tends to persuade people that, provided they are believers, they can get away with anything.” (*Peter Wilby, Times Ed. Supplement*)

## **Video Clip of the Month**

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8602483019158148765> How do they fake these things?

## A Humanist Song For your I-Pod?

### **Look to Yourself**

(Paul Turner, Roger Turner and Bob Smith)

Foolish man - Release your eyes  
From their bondage - To the skies  
Start afresh - Turn a new leaf  
Escape forever - From this grief  
Wave goodbye - To life's old chains  
Go and reap - Your hard earned gains  
Loose the rope - Around your neck  
New life's simple - Not complex  
Gods are gone - We need new scope  
Look to yourself - Your only hope

Look to yourself - Your only hope  
Take a look - At what's in store  
When you've got up - Off the floor  
Smile again - Now you can see  
The world awaits you - Your mind is free  
Gods are gone - We need new scope  
Look to yourself - Your only hope  
Look to yourself - Your only hope  
Look to yourself - Your only hope  
Look to yourself - Your only hope.

(©Roger Turner Productions)

You can listen to it at [www.soundclick.com/todge](http://www.soundclick.com/todge)

A WARM  
WELCOME  
TO NEW  
(AND SOME RETURNING)  
MEMBERS:-  
SUE BROOMES  
JUNE FLETCHER,  
ROY GREEN,  
BILL GREEN,  
JOHN CRACKNELL  
&  
HARRY SCHARF,

Existing members please note that Birmingham Humanists membership year runs from 1<sup>st</sup> April and you may find a renewal invitation in with this "News & Views". If you do, rest assured that we place a high value your continued membership of this small but important group. We hope that you feel it worthy of your support and that you will renew your subscription.

## Would You Believe It ? Number 3

There are around 7,000 state-funded schools operated by religious groups in England and Wales; that is 6,400 primary schools and 600 secondary. Of these, 6,955 are Church of England, Roman Catholic or Methodist. The rest consist of 36 Jewish schools, 6 Muslim, 2 Sikh, 1 Greek Orthodox and 1 Seventh Day Adventist. Now Conservative Education spokesman Tim Collins says a commitment to a major expansion of religious schools "is absolutely at the heart of the Conservative vision". He says Christian, Jewish and Islamic schools have higher standards and a stronger ethos than secular schools. "We must have more of them - not a handful here and there, but hundreds, ultimately perhaps thousands, more," he says. (To be politically neutral the editor should point out that Labour is "committed to allowing faith schools where residents want them" & the Lib Dems have denied the "myth" that they want to halt their development.)



(For the uninitiated Freeman Moxy is Dubya-speak for Freedom & Democracy)

It is hoped to produce the next issue in around 3 months time. Please send any articles, letters, news or suggestions to the editor, John Edwards, at 157 Welford Road, Shirley, Solihull B90 3HT or via e mail to [jaeied@hotmail.com](mailto:jaeied@hotmail.com)

## **A statement by the Royal Society on evolution, creationism and intelligent design**

The Royal Society was founded in 1660 by a group of scholars whose desire was to promote an understanding of ourselves and the universe through experiment and observation. This approach to the acquisition of knowledge forms the basis of the scientific method, which involves the testing of theories against observational evidence. It has led to major advances of understanding over more than 300 years. Although there is still much left to be discovered, we now have a broad knowledge of how the universe developed after the 'Big Bang' and of how humans and other species appeared on Earth.

One of the most important advances in our knowledge has been the development of the theory of evolution by natural selection. Since being proposed by Charles Darwin nearly 150 years ago, the theory of evolution has been supported by a mounting body of scientific evidence. Today it is recognised as the best explanation for the development of life on Earth from its beginnings and for the diversity of species. Evolution is rightly taught as an essential part of biology and science courses in schools, colleges and universities across the world.

The process of evolution can be seen in action today, for example in the development of resistance to antibiotics in disease-causing bacteria, of resistance to pesticides by insect pests, and the rapid evolution of viruses that are responsible for influenza and AIDS. Darwin's theory of evolution helps us to understand these problems and to find solutions to them.

Many other explanations, some of them based on religious belief, have been offered for the development of life on Earth, and the existence of a 'creator' is fundamental to many religions. Many people both believe in a creator and accept the scientific evidence for how the universe, and life on Earth, developed. Creationism is a belief that may be taught as part of religious education in schools, colleges and universities. Creationism may also be taught in some science classes to demonstrate the difference between theories, such as evolution, that are based on scientific evidence, and beliefs, such as creationism, that are based on faith. However, some versions of creationism are incompatible with the scientific evidence. For instance, a belief that all species on Earth have always existed in their present form is not consistent with the wealth of evidence for evolution, such as the fossil record. Similarly, a belief that the Earth was formed in 4004 BC is not consistent with the evidence from geology, astronomy and physics that the solar system, including Earth, formed about 4600 million years ago.

Some proponents of an alternative explanation for the diversity of life on Earth now claim that their theories are based on scientific evidence. One such view is presented as the theory of intelligent design. This proposes that some species are too complex to have evolved through natural selection and that therefore life on Earth must be the product of a 'designer'. Its supporters make only selective reference to the overwhelming scientific evidence that supports evolution, and treat gaps in current knowledge which, as in all areas of science, certainly exist - as if they were evidence for a 'designer'. In this respect, intelligent design has far more in common with a religious belief in creationism than it has with science, which is based on evidence acquired through experiment and observation. The theory of evolution is supported by the weight of scientific evidence; the theory of intelligent design is not.

Science has proved enormously successful in advancing our understanding of the world, and young people are entitled to learn about scientific knowledge, including evolution. They also have a right to learn how science advances, and that there are, of course, many things that science cannot yet explain. Some may wish to explore the compatibility, or otherwise, of science with various religious beliefs, and they should be encouraged to do so. However, young people are poorly served by deliberate attempts to withhold, distort or misrepresent scientific knowledge and understanding in order to promote particular religious beliefs.

(April 2006)

## **Statements by the Archbishop of Canterbury & the Pope on Creationism .**

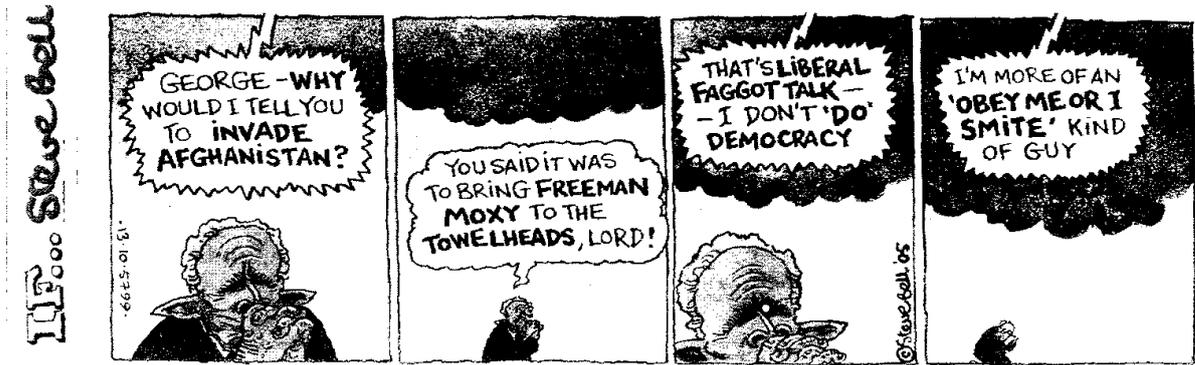
On 12<sup>th</sup> Feb (the 197<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin) the 78-year-old Pontiff Benedict XVI told the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican "The Church joyfully accepts the real conquests of human knowledge." The Pope said an understanding of science should help believers understand "the mysteries of life on Earth", while helping them to see "the logic of faith in God". Now both Pope John Paul II and the current Pontiff have spoken out in favour of evolution being incorporated into religious people's view of the world, saying that evolution and science are compatible in the Christian faith.

In an interview in March Dr Rowan Williams condemned the teaching of creationism in schools. The head of the Church of England said the Biblical creation stories do not belong in the same category as evolutionary theory. He said: "I think creationism is...a kind of category mistake, as if the Bible were a theory like other theories. If creationism is presented as a stark alternative theory alongside other theories I think there's just been a jarring of categories." He went on to explain (?) "My worry is creationism can end up reducing the doctrine of creation rather than enhancing it."

## **Statements by our world leaders on evolution, creationism and intelligent design.**

President Bush (August 2005) "Both sides ought to be properly taught...so people can understand what the debate is about." Tony Blair (at P.M Questions when asked if he was happy for ID to be taught in evangelist Peter Vardy's new city academies, he said: "I am very happy...If you look at the school's results, I think you will find that they are very good." Perhaps a lesson in the principle of papal infallibility is required!

## Letters To The Editor



(For the uninitiated Freeman Moxy is Dubya-speak for Freedom & Democracy)

### **N.B.**

**The Freethinker** is a British secular humanist journal, founded by G.W. Foote in 1881. It is the world's oldest surviving freethought publication.

It has always taken a militant atheist, anti-religious stance. In Issue 1 (May, 1881), Foote set out *The Freethinker's* purpose:

*The Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against superstition in general, and against Christian superstition in particular. It will do its best to employ the resources of Science, Scholarship, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as a Divine Revelation; and it will not scruple to employ for the same purpose any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that may be borrowed from the armoury of Common Sense.

Although closely linked with the National Secular Society for most of its history (NSS Presidents and General Secretaries have at various times also served as *Freethinker* editor), *The Freethinker* is strictly autonomous and is not, and never has been, published by the NSS.

Barry Duke is the current editor.



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