



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

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New Series

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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

A convivial meeting was held at John Lester's house in August at which a range of topics were discussed and astronomical devices demonstrated. The "Day Conference" in September was also a success and I am indebted to John for providing a full report on this event, which I regretfully had to miss (but I thought of you all from advanced base camp below the north face of Everest!) An audience of over 30 attended at the Friends Meeting House in October to hear Jim Herrick's interesting talk on how Humanism can be a help in times of sorrow. Although it was agreed that the churches generally have the advantage over us in that they provide more help and mutual support, it was also recognised that it can be comforting to know that one's illness or misfortune is completely random and that failure is not a sin. Jim raised the question as to whether there was such a thing as 'Secular Mysticism'? He felt there was and Tony Howe agreed with him, commenting that "it is the only sort – it's just misinterpreted by religious people!" One thing that is certain is that if we could guarantee getting such large audiences at our meetings, securing 'big name' speakers would be much less problematic.

Birmingham Humanists' Website

William Wynne Willson has spent a considerable amount of time working on the group's Website which now has the added attraction of a whole series of "Famous Humanists" to try and identify from their potted biographies. The identity and a photograph of each luminary is available at the click of a button. Danny Collman has also devoted much of his time to regularly update our 'Events' page and enlarge on the 'What is Humanism' section for those people who click on the site, wondering if they are in fact Humanists. Our grateful thanks to both these members for their hard work as the Internet is becoming an increasingly important source of new members and enquirers. If you haven't looked at the site recently it's worth logging on to have another look.



What Is Our Group For ??

As well as organising a programme of events, the committee have recently been discussing possible group reorganisation, target-setting and action plans. Is the Group delivering what people want? At the moment the group probably has a mainly social and educational function, with the monthly meetings giving members a chance to meet fellow Humanists and listen to topics of general and philosophical interest. Should it take on a more Political role, opposing or attacking religion or campaigning against faith schools and religious privilege? Should it be developing a more charitable or caring role? If it is to do the latter then members must feel able to contact a member of the committee, or a neighbouring Humanist, if they are having problems through illness or whatever reason and request help (eg with transport, shopping or odd bit's of DIY) or a private social visit for a chat or company. If any Birmingham Humanist member does feel in need of this sort of thing, the committee will do their best to help if they are kept informed. Please feel free to write in and tell us if you feel the group should or could be doing more.

REPORT ON BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS DAY CONFERENCE (23/9/2006) by John Lester
RELIGION – A THREAT TO PERSONAL FREEDOM ?

The Chairman, Harry Stopes-Roe welcomed the audience at the Selly Oak Friends' Meeting House and began by reading a statement. We should, he said, note particularly the question-mark in the title of the conference and, though we might not reach a conclusion we must try to understand the views of others who may find the ideas of Humanism threatening. Humanists must always work from fundamental principles but need to recognise that there are those who believe in the idea of a God.

It was decided to delay the start of the programme until all the speakers had arrived and a period of discussion followed which involved Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society and Timothy Laurence who described himself as a Bible-believing Christian. Keith pointed out that the growth of religion needed to be balanced by the growth of secularism so that the absurdities of religion could be pointed out. Totalitarian religions did limit freedom as for example in Northern Ireland where the church seemed to have the whole population in its grip. Religion having untrammelled power could be very dangerous in spite of the good that it so often did. Child abuse by members of the church was denied and hidden by the church – an example of the misuse of power. Another example was the denial of human rights by Islam in the case of Dr Sheikh who was imprisoned for alleged blasphemy and lawyers and judges in Pakistan were so intimidated that they were afraid to become involved in the case. Timothy said that Jesus spent a lot of time preaching against religious dominance. Religion should not be allowed to dominate and he was not here today to defend religion but to arrive at the truth. Keith pointed out that in 1866, Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society was five times elected as M.P. for Northampton but was not allowed to take his seat in Parliament because he would not take the oath. This was at one time a problem for Nonconformists and Jews as well. The old universities would not admit non-Christians. Keith was asked to explain the differences between the NSS and the BHA and replied that the NSS was not specifically ethical but simply rational. It did not become involved in ceremonies either. Harry enlarged on this point from the BHA point of view.

The day's programme then began with a talk by Keith Porteous Wood who said that he approached the subject from a liberal, permissive, human rights point of view and he was in favour of democracy. With freedom, he pointed out, came responsibility, not libertarianism. He did not believe in forgiveness – what had been done could not be undone. Democratic laws were necessary but should not have a religious basis or favour religion and there should be no exemptions from them for religious organisations. Freedom of speech was essential since if we did not have the ability to discuss problems openly there was no chance of solving them. Blasphemy laws were bad and even the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill 2006 had the effect of making each religion attempt to use it for their own ends. People who objected to shows like 'Jerry Springer – the Opera' were not compelled to watch them but should not be allowed to prevent others from doing so. On this subject the Council of Europe was predictably woolly but eventually decided that there should be no more legislation restricting the freedom of speech. He was less optimistic about the United Nations. Apostasy should never be an offence and any equality of rights legislation should not permit exceptions. Religious schools should not be allowed to discriminate on grounds of belief, lifestyle or sexuality when employing teachers. Commercial organisations were sometimes blameworthy when, for example, they sold cars at discounted rates to missionaries. It was hypocrisy to allow the Boy Scouts to continue to administer a religious oath on grounds of historical precedent. It was hypocrisy too for churches to restrict employment because of sexual orientation and the Roman Catholic church's ban on the use of condoms was a disaster for Africa where AIDS was spreading rapidly. The Vatican could well be accused of genocide.

He was not ultra-liberal, just practical, and it seemed incredible that in the 21st century, sixteen year-olds in some state funded schools were still forced to observe religious rituals. Nevertheless, the Joint Churches Education Committee had issued a document saying that even nineteen year-olds should be compelled to attend collective worship.

Timothy Laurence then began his talk by stressing the importance of admitting error, quoting Richard Dawkins's description of the scientist's reply to the person who demolished his long treasured theory. He embarked on a well thought out and brilliantly presented argument and reminded us that indoctrination could be political as well as religious. Even rationalists had to guard against irrationality.

We should respect each other's rights and, while he was trying to defend truth, he would not wish to hide his religious identity. Even Reason had to make assumptions and it was as difficult for Humanists to be sure the data on which they depended were true as it was for Christians. How, for instance, can we possibly know whether the universe is a closed system or whether there is something outside it?

Our assumptions needed to be favourable, as for example that which says we ourselves are worth loving and should therefore love one another: this was the essence of the biblical assumption. The Humanist view was that man is the measure of all things whereas Christians needed the verification of an external standard, i.e. God. At this point Humanism and Christianity parted company and believers were content to accept the Bible as evidence because the gospels, which he claimed were written no later than thirty years after the events they described, were so consistent in the story they told. They were written, he said, in the lifetime of eyewitnesses and the original texts rather than later copies are available for study.

After the lunch interval Amir Ahmed spoke from the Muslim point of view. Islam, he told us, was a way of having peace by obeying God, and a Muslim was simply one who did this. He told the story of his father who once said to him, "My freedom is absolute – but it stops where yours begins."

In a dialogue with his daughter, Naseem, the various freedoms were defined. Amir described the Muslim view of God and said that Abraham was the first Muslim. Jesus was not a Muslim but was revered because he was born of an immaculate conception while Mohammed came to right the wrongs done by the successors of Jesus.

Muslims believed in djinns and angels, heaven and hell so that there was really more in common between faiths than things which divided them. Knowledge and belief ran in parallel; we did not need to have knowledge in order to believe and vice versa. There was nothing to fear from Islam and while religions were not a threat, individuals and groups within them could become one. There were dangers in having rigid laws which could in changed circumstances become untenable but their foundation should not change. Islam was currently being reported as hostile but the suffering of Muslims is greater than that produced by the puny efforts of the misguided members of the faith who feel compelled to fight. We needed to find and rid ourselves of the causes of terrorism.

It was now the turn of Naseem to speak from the point of view of that most unrepresented and misrepresented group – female Muslims. The concept of freedom was not universally agreed. Total freedom was impossible and we could only expect to have so much; there had to be a balance. Was it just, she asked, that people should have the right to publish cartoons offensive to Islam without considering the feelings of those who would be offended by them? Personal freedom is limited by personal restraint and not by religion. Rules are only effective if obeyed and it is the individuals who break them who destroy our freedom. She ended by stressing that she was not forced to follow Islam but was free to choose and freedom came with responsibility.

The discussion which followed was lively and wide-ranging. The subjects covered included apostasy, Sharia law, undesirable suras from the Koran, the definition of God and the limitation of freedom resulting from having to subscribe to a set of beliefs. There was general agreement that religion should not take political power and that it was important to foster education and awareness.

The proceedings ended with a vote of thanks to speakers and organisers from one of the 32 participants in what had been a most successful conference.

REPORT ON THE MOZFEST by Percy Lea (which arrived just too late for the last issue)

BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS AT MOZFEST

Our participation in Moseley festival on Saturday June 24th was a success. This was the second time that we have had a Humanist Stall at the festival and it drew a reasonable amount of attention from the general public. Once again our Humanist Wheel of Fortune, electric ‘Question & Answer’ and ‘Manipulative Skill’ devices, plus a wide variety of second hand books, proved to be effective in attracting people to our stall. We made a small profit of £18 on the day but the main purpose of our presence was to increase our visibility in the community by direct and positive contact with the public. The local clergy were aware of our presence and came over to our stall to comment on our activities. One young priest asked if it would be OK for him to refer families to Birmingham Humanists if they requested a secular funeral – a significant indicator of our legitimate presence and acceptance within the local community.

Many thanks to all those members who came along to support our stall on the day and helped us distribute various leaflets and other Humanist information to those who indicated some interest in our activities.

SECULAR CHRISTMAS FESTIVITIES

- some novel ideas from NSS member, Sue Cauty

With my son and his family coming to Fiji to spend Christmas 2006 (our first Christmas with our grandsons) and mindful that they belong to that group that is not truly religious yet is given to celebrating Christmas and Easter, I asked myself, what is an atheist Nanna to do for two lads aged 6 and 10? How could I deny two young lads the fun and excitement of Christmas? Hijack Christmas, of course! Christianity hijacked it a couple of thousand years ago, so why shouldn't Secularists and Humanists hijack it now?

I plan the following: On December 1st we shall open the first window of The Family Calendar I shall make. Each little window will reveal the name and or photo of a family member, past and present, ending with the youngest. Then we shall sit down to make our own Family Day Cards to send to friends at home and abroad. We shall put up a tree decorated with bows, glass balls, and strings of tiny shining balls. The tree will represent our Family Tree. The bows, being love-knots, will represent the love we strive for as a family. The glass balls will represent the fragility of our connection and our need to respect our differences. The shining strings will represent the cord binding the secularist families around the world. We shall have a special Family Cake. And there will be a Family Pudding Stirring at which each person will express a reasonable wish that an event take place during the coming year - such as a wish to be treated to a Devonshire cream tea next summer, and the others promise to try to make it come true.

The gift-giving will be simple and unostentatious - the emphasis being on a meaningful gift to which much thought has been given. We'll enjoy a Family Feast of reunion and toast absent family members and friends; toast and remember those family members who died during the year; and toast and welcome new family members who were born. We shall invite at least one person we know who has no family. Then, when they return home to England, I shall imagine my young grandsons telling their friends 'Our Nanna doesn't have Christmas Day, she has Family Day because we are all so special'.

(from the NSS *Newsline*. To receive it weekly, send a blank email with "Subscribe to *Newsline*" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk)

The Future of Religion in the UK ? Recent predictions from 'authoritative sources' indicate that by 2040 there will be more people worshipping in mosques in Britain than there will be in churches !

"I WANT TO UNVEIL MY VIEWS ON AN IMPORTANT ISSUE"

(This is the full text of Jack Straw's column in the Lancashire Telegraph of 6th October which triggered the debate on how far the United Kingdom should go down the road of Multiculturalism.)

"It's really nice to meet you face to face, Mr Straw," said this pleasant lady in a broad Lancashire accent. She had come to my constituency advice bureau with a problem. I smiled back. "The chance would be a fine thing," I thought to myself but did not say out loud. The lady was wearing the full veil. Her eyes were uncovered but the rest of her face was in cloth. Her husband, a professional man I vaguely knew, was with her. She did most of the talking. I got down the detail of the problem, told them that I thought I could sort it out, and we parted amicably.

All this was about a year ago. It was not the first time I had conducted an interview with someone in a full veil, but this particular encounter, though very polite and respectful on both sides, got me thinking. In part, this was because of the apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds — the entirely English accent, the couple's education (wholly in the UK) — and the fact of the veil. Above all, it was because I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone "face-to-face" who I could not see.

So I decided that I wouldn't just sit there the next time a lady turned up to see me in a full veil, and I haven't. Now, I always ensure that a female member of my staff is with me. I explain that this is a country built on freedoms. I defend absolutely the right of any woman to wear a headscarf. As for the full veil, wearing it breaks no laws. I go on to say that I think, however, that the conversation would be of greater value if the lady took the covering from her face. Indeed, the value of a meeting, as opposed to a letter or phone call, is so that you can — almost literally — see what the other person means and not just hear what they say.

I thought it may be hard going when I made my request for face-to-face interviews in these circumstances. However, I can't recall a single occasion when a lady has refused to lift the veil; most seem relieved.

Last Friday was a case in point. The veil came off almost as soon as I opened my mouth. I dealt with the problems the lady brought to me. We then had an interesting debate about veil wearing. This contained some surprises. It became clear that the husband played no part in her decision. She had read books about the issue. She felt more comfortable wearing the veil when out. People bothered her less.

OK, I said, but did she think that veil wearing was required by the Koran? I was no expert, but many Muslim scholars said that the full veil was not obligatory at all. And women as well as men went head uncovered the whole time when on their Hajj — pilgrimage — in Mecca. The husband chipped in to say that this matter was "more cultural than religious". I said I would reflect on what she said to me. Would she, however, think hard about what I said — in particular my concern that wearing the full veil was bound to make better relations between the two communities more difficult? It was such a visible statement of separation and of difference. I thought a lot before raising this matter and still more before writing this. But if not me, who? My concern could be misplaced. But I think there is an issue here.

"THE GOD DELUSION" – RICHARD DAWKINS

Richard Dawkins, the Charles Simonyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, addressed a full house at Birmingham Public Library Theatre on Wednesday 11th October where his new book 'The God Delusion' was the subject of his talk. He was accompanied by his wife, the actress Lala Ward, and together they provided an entertaining & informative evening based upon readings from selected chapters of his book.

He strongly denounced belief in the existence of an all powerful supreme being as quite irrational, and also the source of much world wide suffering. Such belief was often responsible for fuelling wars, bigotry and the abuse of children. The perceived God of the Old Testament was described as sex obsessed, cruel & tyrannical, and belief in the more benign God of some Enlightenment thinkers was nevertheless, quite illogical. Dawkins commented on the dispute between supporters of 'intelligent design' and Darwinism, particularly in America. He emphasised that it was also currently undermining the teaching of science at Emmanuel College in Gateshead, a government subsidised City Academy.

Nevertheless, it was most encouraging to see that a large proportion of the audience were young people keen to listen to Dawkins' lecture. They were also very receptive to the distribution of our Birmingham Humanist leaflets and copies of our August Newsletter within the Library Theatre - several temporarily left their seats to make sure of getting a copy! We need to target this age group whenever possible to make them aware of our Birmingham Humanist activities. It was apparent that many of them clearly identify with our lack of belief in the supernatural.

Philip Pullman, prize winning author of childrens' fiction, is also a distinguished supporter of the British Humanist Association. He has described 'The God Delusion' as "so well written, in fact, that children deserve to read it as well as adults. It should have a place in every school library – especially in the library of every 'faith' school." Perhaps we should consider what we can do to enable this to happen in Birmingham Secondary schools.

Percy Lea

"REMEMBRANCE"

Our annual Remembrance event at Percy Lea's house on Friday 10th November attracted around 14 members. Danny Collman again led the solemn part of the proceedings and then showed some video clips (of 1st Battle of the Somme & the final part of Black Adder) to get a discussion started. During this he circulated an email he had received the previous night from ex-member and newsletter editor Adrian Bailey which provoked more debate. The letter was entitled:

Why I'm not going to the Remembrance event.

The last BHG Remembrance event I attended had an effect on me. I co-organised it with Danny, and we decided to show a film about the war in Afghanistan. In hindsight, maybe it wasn't completely appropriate for the event but, even so, I was shocked by the response to it. Some members were angered by the film and our showing it and I realised that some Humanists are fundamentally pro-war and anti peace. This still saddens me.

Afterwards I reflected / rationalised that the pro-war Humanists tend to be old men who lived through the Second World War, and that their militarism sprang from a process I call "SISO", that is 'Shit in, shit out'. People who have had bad experiences tend to pass them on to others. On the other hand, people who haven't lived through war (and who haven't been indoctrinated by their parents or their education) tend never to want to have any such experience.

Part of the problem is the intractable belief that the Second World War was A Good Thing, when it was, of course, a very bad thing; an evil thing, no less. Countries were destroyed, millions were killed. And for what? To remove the Germans (and Russians) from Poland. Now, I like the Polish people and I have nothing against their country, but I would argue that the price was too high. Ah, but you say, we got rid of Hitler. So we did, but who the Germans have as their leader is really their own affair. Ditto the Yugoslavs, the Afghans and the Iraqis. It's only my business insofar as the treatment of minorities is concerned, and when I think of the 400,000 Hungarian Jews who were transported to concentration camps in 1944 I think how unlikely it is that that would've happened if there hadn't been a war on.

I hold it as a truism that war is not an answer to anything. At least not interventionist war. (Civil wars are a different kettle of fish, for although they are often terribly brutal, sometimes it may be necessary to rise up against a tyrannical leadership.) I fail to see any justification for the recent military interventions in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan or Iraq. Such interventions kill and maim many civilians, destroy infrastructure, and give children permanent health problems.

I support our armed forces. I need them, and we all need them, to protect us, and to a certain extent to protect our interests. It worries me that when politicians make half-assed decisions like the invasion of Iraq, they are damaging the military. Who wants to join a chauvinist army led by idiots? Chauvinists and idiots, that's who. Back in the 1980's I considered enlisting in the Territorial Army but I wouldn't countenance such a job today. Not to follow the orders of a government that is more interested in attack than defence. And I know I'm not alone.

Remembrance, to me, means to learn from past mistakes. It does not mean a support for the military solution to conflict. And every time we do fight it should make it less likely that we shall have to fight again. To the extent that the Second World War had that effect, I concede that it served a purpose. If a war has the opposite effect it has failed. Our current (mis)adventures in Asia are p---ing people off no end and only increasing the likelihood of further conflict. God knows why any Humanist would be in favour of them.

Twenty four hours later this provoked the following response from Ian MacDonald

Dear Danny,

There wasn't really the chance to read and digest the paper you passed out at last night's meeting. However, I have now done that and feel I need to respond. If nothing else it again highlights how we humanists can differ so fundamentally about everything except the existence of God and of an afterlife.

First of all I think we need to separate out what we feel about wars which are to defend our own country from attack and wars where, for whatever reason, we find ourselves involved in attacking other countries. I will tackle the first of these to begin with and will maintain that the Second World War came into that category. It is only from hindsight that we can fully appreciate how close a call we came to being overrun by the Germans. If the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic had been lost, as they so nearly were, the implications for all of us would have been catastrophic. If the writer of the paper is a Jew, the best he could have expected was to end his life in some concentration camp. Our support for Poland may have been the reason we entered the war, but by that time even Neville Chamberlain realised he had been duped over Hitler's objectives. We have to give thanks to Churchill who, almost alone had seen the dangers for some years and was at last in the driving seat. Those with a similar attitude to the writer, and in particular Lord Halifax, would have thrown in the towel and allowed Hitler to invade.

When the writer says he supports our armed forces and claims we need them to protect us, you have to wonder at what point he would finally agree that we would be justified to go to war. Thanks to people with

his viewpoint, we entered the Second World War seriously unprepared. When, with reservations, he says we need our armed forces to protect our interests, he opens up a much wider and I suggest a more contentious issue. When Iraq attacked Kuwait for instance Saddam was certainly threatening our interests because we couldn't foresee the outcome and oil is an indispensable requirement of industrialised nations. Should we have just let him get away with it? What if he was then emboldened to unseat the Saudi Arabian Royal Family which controls some 50% of oil supply and reserves?

In the days when the British Empire covered half the globe there were few if any inhibitions about attacking other countries at the least suspicion they were endangering our interests. Other colonial powers were no less 'trigger happy' and we don't need to dwell too long on which was more exploitative or cruel in the methods adopted. The creation after the Second World War of the United Nations heralded what it was hoped would be a more civilised approach to dealing with countries who wanted to attack their neighbours. As Britain is a major player in that organisation, it is up to us to see to it, not only that we support it, but that we do all we can to make it live up to its objectives. But if other member countries are unwilling to play their part, where do we stand? The writer clearly feels we should simply let whatever atrocities are taking place to continue to take place. To my mind that mentality will take us back to the dark ages; but I will accept that it is hard to draw the line as to where the United Nations should interfere or simply make clucking noises of disapproval.

I will stop at this point in the hope that I have said enough to raise some hackles, but possibly also to bring forth some sympathetic responses. Yours Ian

Over to you dear readers. Who has raised your hackles the most ?

A WEBSITE THAT YOU SHOULD GET YOUR RELIGIOUS FRIENDS TO LOOK AT

<http://whywontgodhealamputees.com/important.htm>

Here's is a slightly edited part of it:-

"Why won't God heal amputees?" may seem like an odd name for a Web site. The reason for choosing it is simple: this is one of the most important questions that we can ask about God. The question probes into a fundamental aspect of prayer and exposes it for observation. This aspect of prayer has to do with ambiguity and coincidence. To help you understand why this question is so important, let's look at an example. Let's imagine that you visit your doctor and he tells you that you have cancer. He is optimistic & he schedules surgery and chemotherapy to treat your disease. Meanwhile, you are terrified. You don't want to die, so you pray to God day and night for a cure. The surgery goes well & when your doctor examines you again 6 months later the cancer is gone. You praise God for answering your prayers and totally believe with all your heart that God has worked a miracle in your life.

The obvious question to ask is what cured you? Was it the surgery / chemotherapy or was it God? Is there any way to know whether God is playing a role or not when we pray? God might have miraculously cured your disease, as many Christians believe. But God might also be imaginary and the chemotherapy drugs and surgery are the things that cured you. Or your body's immune system might have cured the cancer itself. When your tumour disappeared it might simply have been a complete coincidence that you happened to pray. Your prayer may have had zero effect. How can we determine whether it is God or coincidence that worked the cure?

One way is to eliminate the ambiguity. In a non-ambiguous situation, there is no potential for coincidence. Because there is no ambiguity, we can actually know whether God is answering the prayer or not. That is what we are doing when we look at amputees. Think about it this way. The Bible clearly promises that God answers prayers. For example, in Mark 11:24 Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." And billions of Christians believe these promises. You can find thousands of books, magazine articles and Web sites talking about the power of prayer. According to believers, God is answering millions of their prayers every day. Tell them to say the following prayer:- "Dear God, almighty, all-powerful, all-loving creator of the universe, we pray to you to restore all amputated limbs on this planet tonight. We pray in faith, knowing you will bless us as you describe in Matthew 7:7, Matthew 17:20, Matthew 21:21, Mark 11:24, John 14:12-14, Matthew 18:19 and James 5:15-16. We pray sincerely, knowing that when God answers this completely heartfelt, unselfish, non-materialistic prayer, it will glorify God and help millions of people in a remarkable way, In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

So what should happen? Clearly, if God is real, limbs should regenerate through prayer. In reality, they do not. Why not? Because God is imaginary. Notice there is zero ambiguity in this situation. There is only one way for a limb to regenerate through prayer: God must exist and God must answer prayers. Whenever we create a unambiguous situation like this and look at the results of prayer, prayer never works. God never "answers prayers" if there is no possibility of coincidence. Every "answered prayer" truly is a coincidence, nothing more. "God" doesn't "answer prayers" at all. The belief in prayer is pure superstition. Non-ambiguous prayers (like those of amputees) show us, conclusively, that the whole idea that "God answers prayers" is an illusion created by human imagination.

HAPPY 45TH BIRTHDAY BIRMINGHAM HUMANIST GROUP.

A "Birmingham Humanist Group" first appeared in 1961 but after a few meetings it fizzled out, the name being just a rallying point with no actual membership. It wasn't until the following year that regular meetings started to be held as a result of Tony Brierley, who was then working full time for the Ethical Union, getting around 50 interested people together. Tony put a notice in "News & Notes" (the Ethical Union newsletter) about the group reforming. This stated "At a well-attended meeting of Ethical Union members and enquirers convened by Mr Brierley at the Arden Hotel, New St, Birmingham on May 23rd, it was agreed that a Birmingham Humanist Group should be formed." At a subsequent meeting Dr Colin Campbell, a Birmingham-born 22 years old who had just completed a Ph.D. thesis on the history of the Humanist Movement, became the group's first Chairman and his wife volunteered to be Secretary. The group continued to meet at the hotel near the Odeon Cinema for several years and often the attendances were around the 30 mark. Issues such as abortion reform and compulsory religious services in schools were then topical and helped to keep members actively involved. Of course members of a new group are often more zealous too. In 1964 the Campbells moved to York, where Colin took up a lectureship in Sociology at the university. 2007 will thus be the 45th Anniversary of the Group's true foundation.

In a telephone interview with group member and 'News & Views' editor Adrian Bailey back in 1992, Colin made the interesting comment that "it's true with all groups that it's easier to start them up than keep them going. Humanist groups are different from other organisations, particularly religious ones, in that you shouldn't expect people to join and stay for a lifetime. People move on to other things – still Humanists but engaged in a practical activity." I'm not sure I see why this should be more likely with Humanists than, say, Methodists but unfortunately he doesn't seem to have elaborated on this point. Colin did however send a special congratulatory message and hoped that the BHG would continue to prosper for the next 30 years.

Well we're half way there and I'd like to ask our members if they consider we are prospering? I joined in the early 1990's and don't feel that the Group has really 'prospered' in the 15 or so years since then. Back in 1991 events were organised under several headings: Birmingham Humanist Group (i.e. South Birmingham) *Organised by the Committee*, Chester Road Humanists *Organised by the Secretary, Adrian Bailey, in co-operation with Danny Collman, David Ballard & Liz Wintle*, Lichfield Humanist Group *Organised by Anna Sadowski, in co-operation with Ifor Griffith and the Secretary*, Daytime Humanists (Edgbaston) *Organised by Vic & Tova Jones & Young Humanists Organised by Adrian Bailey*. Even if some of these meetings were attended by very few people this could be seen to be a healthier, more active state than at present.

How typical are we as a Humanist Group? Well, Margaret Nelson of Suffolk Humanists carried out a survey last year which was completed by 22 groups (self selected; there are around 45 groups advertising their presence on the rear page of 'The Freethinker') and it seems from her results that in many ways we are fairly average. All responding groups were affiliated to the BHA, 16 to the NSS and 8 to IHEU but only 2 were affiliated to GALHA. Annual membership cost varied from £1 (Huddersfield Humanists) to £15 (Greater Manchester Humanists) and the average was £7. 14 groups met at least once a month and 4 bi-monthly; two-thirds on weekdays and one third at weekends, usually Sunday. 6 groups met at members' homes, 4 at Friends Meeting Houses, 6 at Community or Day Centres, 2 in Council Buildings, 1 in a University room & NE Humanists at the Literary & Philosophical Institute. Leicester Secular Society was unique in that it meets weekly on Sundays in its own hall, the cost of which it stated was "considerable!" Typical numbers at meetings ranged from 7 (Isle of Wight Humanist Group) to 15, but North East & East Kent Humanists said they regularly got an attendance of around 24. The average number of guests at meetings ranged from 1 to 5, although 9 groups did not give a figure or stated 'occasionally'. 14 groups said they offered lifts to meetings but only 6 did 'home visits'. Only 4 groups stated they had members under 30 years of age and only 3 groups had fewer than 70% of their members under 60 years old. Most groups had 0 – 4 celebrants but NE Humanists had 11. Around 80% included going to a restaurant in their activities, 33% would occasionally visit the theatre, cinema or an exhibition, 25% had practical sessions such as mail shots or letter writing and 25% sometimes held games evenings. Around half had occasional film or slideshow. All but 6 groups stated they had

received donations of various kinds and 5 sometimes held fund-raising events, mostly via the sale of publications, coffee and the like, although Suffolk Humanists held a raffle at every meeting.

I don't know if anybody has complete records going back to the very early days but during the last 20 odd years the following people have been at the forefront in "keeping it going".

CHAIRMAN Dr Colin Campbell 1962 – 64 Fred Lyne (several years) Andrew Hull 1987-89 Jane Wynne-Willson 1989 - 91 Harry Stopes-Roe 1991 -93 Jane Wynne-Willson 1993 - 94 Harry Stopes-Roe 1994 -97 Brian Goredema-Braid 1998 – 2001 Jane Wynne-Willson 2001 - 2004 Harry Stopes-Roe 2004 →	PRESIDENT Dr Martin Cole 1979 - 93 Professor Michael Goulder 1993 → VICE-CHAIRMAN Danny Collman 1988 - 91 Jane Wynne Willson 1991 – 94 Anne Dawes 1994 -97 Vacant 1997 - 98 Harry Stopes Roe 1998 - 2004 Jane Wynne Willson 2004 – 2006 Eddie Roberts 2006 →	TREASURER Steve Warburton 1987 – 88 Gary Phillips 1988 – 89 Andrew Hull 1989 – 94 Jean Denning 1994 – 96 Ken Morrison 1996 – 98 Danny Collman 1998 – 2000 Frank Hyam 2000 → VICE PRESIDENT Harry Stopes-Roe → 1991 Professor Michael Goulder 1991 – 2 Vacant 1992 →
MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY Edna Mayo 1962 - ? Tova Jones 1991 →	SECRETARY Verna Campbell 1962 – 64 Kath Kelsey (several years) Jane Wynne Willson 1987 – 90 Adrian Bailey 1990 – 93 Vacant 1994 – 2000 Danny Collman 2000 →	NEWSLETTER EDITOR Jane Wynne Willson, 1987 Andrew Hull & Gary Phillips 1987 Adrian Bailey 1988 – 1990 Danny Collman 1990 – 1991 Adrian Bailey 1991 - 1994 Danny Collman 1994 - 96 Jean Denning 1996 – 97 Jane Wynne Willson 1997 – 98 Danny Collman 1998 – 2002 Adrian Bailey 2002 – 2004 John Edwards 2004 →
PUBLICITY OFFICER Doug Lawson 1993	LIBRARIAN Gerry King 1991 – 97 Vacant 1997 – 2003 Percy Lea 2003 →	
PROGRAMME SECRETARY / CO-ORDINATOR David Green 1994 – 96 Jean Denning 1996 - 97 Jane Wynne-Willson 1998 - 2001 Whole Committee 2001 →		

This shows very clearly how much B.H.G. has depended on certain "stalwarts" filling key positions.

A VERY WARM WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS, PATRICIA & DAVID BODEN, PAUL HAYWARD, ESTHER JONES, MALCOLM MILLWARD, ANDREW PEARSON, EDWARD REDFORD & KELVIN WATSON

STAND UP FOR CREATIONISM

Ricky Gervais of "The Office" does a very funny stand up routine about creationism. It's a kind of anti-Alpha course and very anti-Intelligent design. See it here
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7520848619246996399&q=Ricky%20Gervais>
If you want to see a miraculous apparition of Jesus look at getbehindjesus.net

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY ?

Are youngsters at madrasas being taught the conventional "three R's" or are they learning regicide, repression and revulsion at pretty well anything post the Renaissance?

Do You Know Someone Who Might Be Interested In Humanism?

In addition to being circulated to all Birmingham Humanist members, "News & Views" goes to every member of Leicester Secular Society (as L.S.S. contributes to the cost of its production) and a complimentary copy is sent to around 25 other Humanist Groups or related organisations for their information. If you have a friend who you think would be interested in receiving details about our Group, the BHA and Humanism, please give their name and contact details to Tova Jones (0121 454 4692).

I receive complimentary copies of the Newsletters of several other Humanist groups and will be happy to let our members read these at our meetings as and when possible.

It is hoped to produce the next issue of "News & Views" 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 jaejed@hotmail.com