



# BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

## NEWS AND VIEWS

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

New Series

Number 19

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*We are always pleased to welcome as new members those who believe we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs and who try to make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values. Our group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association, The Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association & the National Secular Society.*

### Two Important Future Events

#### BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS' DAY CONFERENCE

**Saturday 15th September 10.30am – 4.30pm, (doors open from 10am)**

#### “CONFLICTS IN EDUCATION”

**at the Friends Meeting House, Bristol Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham 29.**

**(Directions:- From the City – Go through Selly Oak, under the railway bridge and across 3 sets of traffic lights onto the dual carriageway & turn left immediately after a bus stop onto the drive of the Quaker Meeting Place.**

**From Northfield / M5 – Climb hill towards Selly Oak (beware speed camera) and curve left and right past Weoley Park Road. Immediately past a bus stop note and use the 'U' turn facility and, now heading in opposite direction, turn left after a bus stop.)**

**Provisional timetable:- 1000 Coffee and biscuits 1030 Chairman's Welcome  
1040 **Bill Anderson (Deputy General Secretary of the Birmingham NUT)** 1140 Break  
1150 **Rev. Chris Wilson (Multifaith Chaplain at Cambridge Regional College & National Officer for the Ass'n of Teachers & Lecturers)** 1250 Buffet Lunch 1400 **Robin Martlew (a Cambridge Humanist who is a member of the Chaplaincy Group)**  
1500 Question-time Panel 1600 Tea and Farewell.**

It is anticipated that there will be time for questions or points from the audience at the end of each speaker's presentation and that all sorts of conflicts, including disruptive behaviour, self-segregation by students, assemblies, faith schools, religious differences, infiltration by extremists, veils, sex education etc may crop up and that discussion will range from Primary & Secondary Schools into the realms of Further and Higher Education.

**Cost (which includes a buffet-style lunch and light refreshments)  
is just £12 per person (after 8th September cost is £14 per person).**

Please send your cheques (made payable to Birmingham Humanists) to  
Danny Collman, 14 Westover Road, Handsworth Wood, B20 1JG

There should be ample chance to socialise, question the speakers and discuss these important and topical issues. **You can't afford to miss this one!!**

#### Tuesday 9th October 7.45pm

**Stuart Pedley-Smith: “Belief, Belief Systems and Truth”**

**at the Friends Meeting House, George Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 15.**

Stuart is a master practitioner of Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) which might be defined as “a study of subjective experience” - that is how we view the world and process the information that we see, hear and feel. Your beliefs have a significant impact on creating “your view of the world”. Beliefs are a major “filter” that changes ‘what is there’ into ‘what fits best with what you think should be there.’ Stuart will outline the NLP framework as a possible tool that members might use to make sense of their own beliefs and those of others.

## **RECENT EVENTS**

The Ramble at the beginning of May was well attended and proved to be an enjoyable event as did the social evening later that month at John Lester's house. There was an excellent turnout at the AGM, hosted at Chez Wynne Willson, and with over 20 people in attendance the meeting spilled out into the conservatory! Two members travelled from Ludlow to be there and the oldest participant was 86 years young so shame on those who couldn't be bothered to attend! The 'American supper' proved to be a superb spread – a very enjoyable preliminary to the 'official business'. Several committee members changed their roles but at the end of the meeting there was still one vacancy for an ordinary member, due to Frank Hyam's sad passing earlier this year. Once again we owe a big debt of thanks to Jane & William for offering us their home as a venue and for co-ordinating the offers of food.

Maryam Namazie unfortunately had to cancel her visit to speak to us in July but Mr Virdee & Mr Lavkesh Prashar of the Asian Rationalists kindly agreed to fill the gap in our programme. They gave a very interesting account of superstitions that have spread to this country with immigrants from the Asian sub-continent and how the Rationalists (based in Handsworth) are trying to counteract these.

## **THE ANNE WHITE BEQUEST**

Members may remember that in 2004 Anne left the group a very generous bequest and the committee have been trying to spend some of this in an appropriate way. As Anne was a Head Teacher in Birmingham for several years it was felt that we should first try and use some of the money to publicise Humanism (& Birmingham Humanists) in local schools. An attempt to make secondary schoolchildren aware of Humanism through an essay competition with prizes of £300 and £150 proved a dismal failure. Although around 100 schools were sent details and an eye-catching A4 poster in May 2005, not one entry was received!

Richard Dawkins' book "The God Delusion" provided us with another opportunity to contact schools and 132 State and Independent secondary schools and VI Form Colleges in Birmingham, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton were offered a free copy of the book and a copy of the BHA publication "Humanist Perspectives 2" earlier this year. We enclosed a sae and 50 replies (38% response) were received with most Librarians grateful to take both books and only one turning down the offer completely. To save postage the committee delivered the books to schools by hand and this personal contact meant that several who had indicated they only wanted "The God Delusion" were in fact happy to take the BHA publication as well.

We are now looking at getting at least one of these publications into the schools that did not respond by sending a copy of "Humanist Perspectives2" to the Heads of Religious Studies at the start of the next academic year and repeating the offer of a copy of "The God Delusion" to them. In writing to the schools we have also been able to publicise the 2006 Day Conference, make the offer of a Humanist speaker or panellist for general or religious studies classes and hopefully make several people in each school aware of our group's existence.

## **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN EXISTS !!!!**

Your editor feels that he has to confess that he and his wife paid a brief 4 hour visit to the Kingdom of Heaven in June but, sinners that they were, the "Powers That Be" allowed them to return safely to the Midlands. Yes, the Kingdom of Heaven does in fact exist and if you go to 51° 10' N 4° 40'W you'll find it too! Apparently in 1836 Lundy Island was bought for 9,400 guineas by William Hudson Heaven, who claimed it to be a "free island" and successfully resisted the jurisdiction of the mainland magistrates. In consequence Lundy was often referred to as "the Kingdom of Heaven" until the Heaven family sold it in 1918. The epithet became even more appropriate when the Reverend Hudson Heaven, licensed as curate in charge of the island from 1864, received a large legacy, which he devoted to the erection of a permanent stone church with a 74 foot high tower dedicated to St Helena. This was completed in 1886 at a cost of £4,104 5s 7d (plus architect's fee of £286 0s 8d) and a ring of eight bells was cast in 1897 and hung for a further £425 18s 6d ! One of the editor's friends is a member of the 2008 World Champion Bell Ringing team and they travelled over to the island last year in order to ring a full peal on this same set of bells.

## **COUNCIL OF EUROPE SAYS RELIGIOUS GROUPS SHOULD BE PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE BUT NOT CRITICISM & CALLS FOR THE REPEAL OF BLASPHEMY LAWS**

A recent NSS Newline reported that early in July The Council of Europe passed a resolution calling on member states to repeal all laws relating to blasphemy. It also said that religious groups must accept that in a free society their activities and doctrines cannot be protected from criticism and open examination. The only restrictions on public debate about religion should be dictated by public order concerns and incitement to hatred and violence, the Council resolved. The resolution, which was passed with a large majority in Strasbourg, said that "criticism of religious groups should be tolerated in democratic societies." However, the council did put a limit on religious criticism and freedom of opinion and said that it was not allowed to incite hatred, disturb the public order or be targeted at individual members of religious groups.

## **BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS' LIBRARY**

Librarian Percy Lea reports that during the past 18 months there have been 21 additions to our library. i.e. 5 donated books and 15 books plus a CD-rom bought by the group. These include:-

- ‘ HUMANISM - AN INTRODUCTION ’ by Jim Herrick. The historical development of humanism and its philosophical underpinning.
- ‘ RELIGION AND DARWINISM ’ by Robert Hinde. An analysis of religion from an evolutionary point of view { BHA Voltaire lecture 1997, }
- ‘ TRUTH : A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED ’ by Simon Blackburn. Does truth really exist in a world with so many contradictory beliefs, habits and religions ? This book offers positive guidance to those who believe the truth is out there.
- ‘ CHRISTIANITY AND HUMANISM ’ by Alan Naylor - Smith. A critical analysis of Christian beliefs and Humanist alternatives by a BHA member and ex-clergyman.
- ‘ DARWIN’S WATCH -THE SCIENCE OF DISCWORLD III ’ by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. A winning combination of science and compelling Discworld fiction. The story of evolution as it has never been told before.

### **EDUCATION :-**

- ‘ HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES 1 ’ { for primary school teachers. }
- ‘ HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES 2 ’ { for secondary school teachers. }
- ‘ SPEAKING IN SCHOOLS - GUIDANCE FOR HUMANISTS ’ :-
  - [a] Speakers Pack - group training.
  - [b] Speakers Pack - individual.
  - [c] Notes and quotes for speakers.

**CD-Rom** ‘ LIVING WITHOUT GOD. ’ An encyclopaedic collection of all aspects of atheism, agnosticism and humanism, including humanists talking about their beliefs.

- ‘ THE END OF FAITH : RELIGION, TERROR AND THE FUTURE OF REASON ’ by Sam Harris. A devastating critique of global religions - an excellent book recommended by Richard Dawkins and BHA News.
- ‘ THE GOD DELUSION ’ Richard Dawkins.
- ‘ WITHOUT THE FAITH ’ W J McIlroy. 3 copies.
- ‘ GOD IS NOT GREAT ’ C Hitchen.
- ‘ THE DAWKINS DELUSION ’ Alister Mc Grath. Donated.
- ‘ CONTROVERSY : THE HUMANIST ENCOUNTER ’ H Hawthorn.  
Donated.
- ‘ THE TWILIGHT OF ATHEISM ’ Alister McGrath. Donated.
- ‘ JOHN STUART MILLS ON ..... ’ Humanist Philosopher’s Group. Donated.
- ‘ ATHEISM- GENETICS TO GEOLOGY ’ M de Bono, Jr. Donated.

**Humanists Beware in N.E. Malaysia!** People who try to turn Muslims away from Islam to other religions or atheism now face increased penalties in the state of Kelantan where the state legislature, ruled by conservative Islamics, has raised the highest penalty for proselytizing to Muslims to 5 years in jail (up from 2) and a £1,400 fine and 6 lashes. They’re obviously very sure of the devoutness of their ‘brothers and sisters’!

## **OUR NEW BHA PRESIDENT**

Political and social commentator Polly Toynbee has been appointed as the new President of the British Humanist Association (BHA), taking up the office that fell vacant with the death of comedian Linda Smith last year. Accepting the appointment, Polly said, "I am honoured to be appointed President of the BHA at a time when not for many years has there been such a need to promote a Humanist view of the world. Religious fanaticism is the clear and present danger all around the world. We need to oppose religious zealotry by promoting the positive and liberating case for believing life on earth is precious because the here and now is all there is and our destiny is in our own hands. Mankind itself has all the innate moral strength it needs, without inventing divine reward and wrath.

'Humanism is tolerant of all beliefs, so long as they oppress no-one else, including weak members of their own communities, and so long as they seek no special privileges from the state. The Humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, living without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love and leaving a good legacy.'

Welcoming the appointment, chief exec Hanne Stinson said, "We are all delighted. Polly is highly articulate, and well respected as a commentator on social affairs and religion: just the sort of person we need to raise the profile of the BHA and help us get the views of the people we represent across to government and opinion-formers. She is a great opinion-former herself, and I am sure she will do a wonderful job for us. Linda Smith – the BHA's much loved President until her tragically early death last year – will be a very hard act to follow, but I am sure that Polly can do it."

## **"WHY EVOLUTION IS RIGHT AND CREATIONISM IS WRONG"**

Your chance to hear Professor Steve Jones locally. He has been touring the country giving the lecture "Why Evolution is Right and Creationism is Wrong" to help counteract the push for Intelligent Design to be taught in schools. He will be appearing at the Lichfield Garrick Theatre on Monday 19<sup>th</sup> November (2 days before our group meeting on "Mental Health")

Tickets cost £9 for (but just £2 for students booked through their schools or colleges). Tickets may be booked by phone on 01543-412121 (when it will cost an extra £1 to pay with your credit card) or by post from The Box Office, Lichfield Garrick, Castle Dyke, Lichfield, WS13 6HR (in which case they want 50p extra for postage). It's sure to be a sell-out so don't leave it too late to book.

## **THE 'O' PROJECT**

The O Project is a new web based project created by NSS member Hamish MacPherson. The project seeks to dispel negative images people might have about humanists as being in some way amoral and to promote good relations between humanists and believers. The site contains a number of resources and is currently gathering names of people who support its aims. See [www.oproject.co.uk](http://www.oproject.co.uk) for more information.

## **CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS & "THE GOOD LIFE" ON THE WEB**

Did you see the recent Question Time on BBC1 where Christopher Hitchens sat opposite his brother and Daily Mail columnist Peter Hitchens? It was fascinating television so greatly did their views differ. Well now those with Internet access can see more of the evangelical secularist and atheist Hitchens debating "Is God...Great?" at King Middle School, Berkeley, USA last May, with Chris Hedges. Watch it at [http://www.zombietime.com/hitchens-hedges\\_debate/](http://www.zombietime.com/hitchens-hedges_debate/)

A much less strident Humanist voice can be seen and listened to at <http://www.in.tv/faith27.php> as Brian McClinton of the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland has produced a sort of 'Thought for the Day' video on the Irish News site on the theme "The Good Life"

## **DID THE M.P.'s GET THEIR "GOD DELUSIONS"?**

The religious might see it as a sign that the Almighty has been at work! Ian Macdonald recently sent the MP Frank Field a copy of Richard Dawkins' book. He wondered why he had received no acknowledgement and so wrote again and received the reply from his secretary that "Unfortunately I cannot trace receiving a copy of the above. As you can image a large amount of mail does come into the office, so I hope I haven't missed the book, but as far as I can tell we do not have a copy in this office." Let's hope it turned up eventually!

## **THE GOSPEL TRUTH ? by John Lester**

How many gospels are there? Most people would unhesitatingly answer that there were 4 but they would be wrong. There are several other gospels from early times which have survived in manuscripts written in Greek, Latin, Syrian and Coptic but never found a place in the Bible. They contain stories which were unacceptable to the compilers of the Bible and so they were omitted.

Perhaps the most famous legend from one of these gospels, which is as entertaining as any of the more orthodox biblical legends, concerns the child Jesus making sparrows out of clay. As he did this on the Sabbath he was considered to be profaning it and the matter was reported to his father who went to investigate and reprimand his son for the misdeed. When his father appeared, Jesus clapped his hands and said "Go" whereupon the sparrows flew away chirping. There really was no answer to that. This charming story comes from the Gospel of Thomas but what follows tells of a darker side to the character of Jesus. In order to make the clay suitable for the manufacture of sparrows he had created pools of water from a brook but "the son of Annas, who was there with Joseph, dispersed the pools with a branch of willow." This so annoyed Jesus that he withered the son of Annas there and then and later struck dead a child who had bumped into him by accident. Not surprisingly, the parents of both children complained to Joseph who remonstrated with his son saying, in effect, "You are making us unpopular." Jesus' response was to strike both his accusers blind. It is no wonder that the Gospel of Thomas never appeared in the approved version of the New Testament even though it does contain accounts of more benign miracles in which people are healed or raised from the dead, a wooden beam is stretched to a serviceable length, and water is carried in a cloak.

There is also a Gospel of Bartholomew which recounts Jesus' disappearance from the cross. After the Resurrection, Bartholomew somehow managed to get an interview with Jesus during which it was explained that on vanishing from the cross Jesus had gone down to Hades "to bring up Adam and all that were there with him." The interview goes on for a long time during which Bartholomew asks many more questions and is answered in a way which seems to satisfy him. Following this, Bartholomew, together with Peter, Andrew and John, try to interrogate Mary as to "how she conceived the incomprehensible and how she bare him that could not be carried." Mary is less forthcoming and says, "Ask me not concerning this mystery. If I should begin to tell you, fire would issue from my mouth and consume all the world."

The Acts of John form another rather verbose text which begins by describing how John restores health to Cleopatra the wife of Lycomedes. Somehow this act causes Lycomedes to die so that John has to raise him from the dead. Lycomedes, being rather pleased about this, has John's portrait painted and hangs it up in his bedchamber decked with garlands and surrounded by many lamps. This does not please John who protests that honour is being given to him rather than to God. Nevertheless, John is a good showman and puts on a display at the theatre during which he gathers together all the sick old women of Ephesus and restores them to health. Before leaving the city he miraculously destroys the Temple of Artemis. The story of Dives and Lazarus is retold and many other marvellous tales follow. John accepts a challenge from the chief priest, Aristodemus, to drink poison whose deadly effect has been demonstrated on two condemned criminals, and he survives. Aristodemus still will not believe in John's power to perform miracles so that John has to restore life to the two criminals in order to prove his point.

Early in the Acts of Paul there is a long winded account of the virgin Thecla who is so impressed by Paul's admonition about chastity that she decides not to marry Thamyris to whom she is betrothed. Thamyris is naturally rather peeved about this and has Paul brought up before the proconsul. Paul is merely scourged but a rather illogical decision is made that Thecla must be burnt at the stake. Fortunately, Thecla turns out to be fireproof and survives. A further attempt on her life is made by tying her to a lioness but all the animal does is to lick her feet. They didn't give up easily in those days and arranged for Thecla to be attacked by both a lioness and a bear. This brought no better result since the lioness just lay down at her feet and, when the bear appeared, the lioness tore it to pieces. They did give up after that and Thecla continued to follow the teachings of Paul thus ruining Thamyris's chances of marriage.

These are extracts from just a few of the books which were considered unsuitable for inclusion in the New Testament, and most Christians, even if they had heard of them, would be discouraged from believing in them. This is really an unacceptable form of censorship which raises an important question. Why should people be expected to believe in one set of ancient documents selected by

men as worthy to be believed instead of another equally valid set which were rejected? In a court of law a witness is expected to tell not just the truth but the whole truth and not to conceal anything which may have a bearing on the case. The men who put together the Bible had an axe to grind and purposely concealed any evidence which didn't suit their cause. If these apocryphal books were considered unreliable why should we have any more confidence in those which were selected? For those interested to know more I would recommend "The Apocryphal New Testament" by M.R. James. (Oxford University Press 1924; later editions up to 1983 at least.) This is the same M.R. James who lived from 1862 to 1936 and who wrote ghost stories. He was a brilliant linguist, palaeographer, mediaevalist and a biblical scholar, being successively provost of King's College, Cambridge and, from 1918, provost of Eton.

### **SECULAR MUSLIMS SPEAK OUT BUT STRUGGLE TO BE HEARD**

The first Secular Islam Summit was held recently in St Petersburg, Florida. The delegates, who included Ibn Warraq and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, released the following declaration which received little or no mention in the UK Press. The Muslim Council of Britain makes no mention of this important statement on its website and the Council on American – Islamic Relations dismissed the summit as "illegitimate" (because few of the participants were 'practicing Muslims'). Thanks to "The Freethinker" you can see how the declaration reads:-

"We are secular Muslims, and secular persons of Muslim societies. We are believers, doubters, and unbelievers, brought together by a great struggle, not between the West and Islam, but between the free and the unfree.

We affirm the inviolable freedom of the individual conscience. We believe in the equality of all human persons.

We insist upon the separation of religion from state and the observance of universal human rights.

We find traditions of liberty, rationality, and tolerance in the rich histories of pre-Islamic and Islamic societies. These values do not belong to the West or the East; they are the common moral heritage of humankind.

We see no colonialism, racism, or so-called "Islamophobia" in submitting Islamic practices to criticism or condemnation when they violate human reason or rights.

We call on the governments of the world to:

- 1) Reject Sharia law, fatwa courts, clerical rule, and state-sanctioned religion in all their forms
- 2) Oppose all penalties for blasphemy and apostasy, in accordance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- 3) Eliminate practices, such as female circumcision, honour killing, forced veiling, and forced marriage, that further the oppression of women
- 4) Protect sexual and gender minorities from persecution and violence
- 5) Reform sectarian education that teaches intolerance and bigotry towards non-Muslims and foster an open public sphere in which all matters may be discussed without coercion or intimidation

We demand the release of Islam from its captivity to the totalitarian ambitions of power-hungry men and the rigid strictures of orthodoxy.

We enjoin academics and thinkers everywhere to embark on a fearless examination of the origins and sources of Islam, and to promulgate the ideals of free scientific and spiritual inquiry through cross-cultural translation, publishing, and the mass media.

We say:-

to Muslim believers : There is a noble future for Islam as a personal faith, not a political doctrine

to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'is, and all members of non-Muslim faith communities: We stand with you as free and equal citizens

to non-believers: We defend your unqualified liberty to question and dissent.

Before any of us is a member of the Umma, the Body of Christ, or the Chosen People, we are all members of the community of conscience, the people who must choose for themselves."

Perhaps members might like to draw the attention of this declaration to their MP and ask them to raise it at any meetings they have with self-styled representatives of the Muslim community such as the Muslim Council of Britain.

Also noteworthy was the BHA and NSS co-sponsored the launch of "The Council of ex-Muslims of Britain" on June 21<sup>st</sup>. This hopes to build on the success of similar groups operating in Germany, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

### **HUMANISM – "TIME FOR CHANGE" PROJECT**

Richard Hogg of South Hants Humanist Group has started a project to promote Humanism across the UK. His idea is to try and make 100,000 more people aware of Humanism by encouraging 10 Humanist volunteers from each UK Humanist Group (of which there are around 50) to each deliver 200 leaflets each in their local area. That would equate to 2000 leaflets per group, and 100,000 leaflets in total, although how one would know whether the recipients had not already heard about Humanism is not clear. He estimates the cost & effort to be £6-£8 (for 200 leaflets to be printed based on a bulk order) and approximately 2 hours per volunteer to deliver the leaflets by hand in their local area. According to the website (<http://humanism-timeforchange.blogspot.com>) where you can view the leaflet, 23 local groups have already pledged support. Birmingham Humanists tried something similar a few years ago with little effect so far as we could judge. Have we 10 volunteers to help this project? You can speak to Richard on 02392 370689

## AN OPEN LETTER TO DANNY COLLMAN

Dear Danny

During "Any other business" at the AGM you made a loud statement to the effect that "Humanists are NOT against religion, they are neutral about it." I strongly disagree with this, but it seemed an inappropriate moment to start arguing. However I do feel that it is an important issue, and that as our Secretary your public statements are of concern to all of us: what you say may be thought to be authoritative, or at least representative of our views. And so I am writing this to put the opposite case. I hope that doing this in an open letter in the Newsletter will perhaps encourage you (and anyone else interested) to set out your views calmly and clearly.

No doubt your statement was intentionally exaggerated in claiming to be true of all humanists: they tend to have their own opinions, so that it can be foolhardy to say that anything would be supported by all of them. My own observations from talking to hundreds of humanists over the past 60 years is that the vast majority, far from being neutral, are against religion in a number of ways. They believe religions to be untrue, they see them as the cause of much evil and misery, they think 'faith' should be excluded from political matters, they regard it as a moral duty for humanists to act where they can to prevent the religious from indoctrinating others, especially children. To back this up with more objective evidence, firstly I would remind you of the AGM a couple of years ago when we discussed whether the BH should be affiliated to the NSS. You argued strongly that we should not, claiming that the NSS, (unlike the BHA) made attacking religion a priority, and that Humanists should not support this. In spite of your vigorously expressed views the meeting voted overwhelmingly for the affiliation (I think yours was the only vote against). This convinces me that most of our members are 'against religion'. A second bit of numerical evidence comes from the recent poll in the UK which produced the result that a substantial majority of those polled agreed with the view "religion is a cause of problems, not a solution to problems". This is surely very encouraging for humanists. And it means that a majority of the population, let alone a majority of humanists, are 'against religion'.

Your AGM assertion was that humanists are neutral to religion. This leads me to the different question as to whether humanists should be neutral to religion. (Compare the statements "The Headteacher is neutral over race issues" with "The Headteacher should be neutral over race issues"). I would like try and explain why I think it is not only true, but also right, that most humanists oppose religions. I will limit myself to the four themes hinted at above.

We should firstly be against religions because we do not believe them to be true. 'Faith' is used by religious apologists as a nice positive-sounding word for 'belief without supporting evidence', — what in other circumstances is called 'superstition'. In my view humanists should be rationalists, that is to say we should base our lives on a scientific approach, asking for evidence and logical argument as a basis for our beliefs and actions. This requires us to reject as delusions beliefs which do not live up to this standard.

Some people will say that it is not our affair if other people have delusions, provided that these do no harm. There may be some truth in this, but it has no relevance when considering religious delusions. History provides one with endless examples of the harm done by such beliefs. Christopher Hitchens in his splendid recent book (*God is not great; how religion poisons everything*) leaves us in no doubt. For example he provides an account of his answer to a question put to him in a TV discussion "Imagine you are in a city on a dark evening and you see a large group of men approaching. Would you be worried or reassured if you were told that they were coming from a prayer meeting?" He replied that he had indeed found himself in just such a situation a number of times. He describes the experience in Belfast, in Beirut, in Baghdad, in Bombay, in Belgrade and in Bethlehem. He describes the murderous behaviour of the religiously-inspired people as he saw it happening in these places. The religions vary, — Catholic against Protestant in Ireland, Suni against Shia in Iraq, Hindu against everyone else in Bombay, Christian against Muslim in Bosnia, — but the killing goes on everywhere. Hitchens ends this diatribe with "And this is only the letter B". (*God is not great*, pp 18 to 28, from Chapter 2, "Religion kills") The total number of people slaughtered over the centuries because of other people's religious beliefs numbers millions, and of course it is still happening, as we see virtually every day on the TV news.

But religion is responsible for other evils as well as murder. The list of miseries caused by these deluded beliefs (particularly religious views about sexuality) is familiar and long and depressingly persistent: the consequences of Christian opposition to contraceptives in unwanted pregnancies and the spread of AIDS, female circumcision, the persecution of homosexuals, the censorship of literature, the destruction of works of art and so on. All these (many of them done with the best of intentions) are direct consequences of religious belief. It seems extraordinary to

suggest that those of us who do not hold such beliefs should remain neutral, and watch such events take place without protest or even criticism.

One particular aspect of protesting against the evils performed in the name of religion is to raise objections to political powers claimed by or given to religious authorities. You will appreciate that I feel that humanists have not only a right but also a duty to join with others in campaigning for a secular state. Should we accept without question the Bishops in the House of Lords? Are we to stay "neutral" when the BBC gives undue prominence to Clergy and Rabbis and Mullahs?

And most of all I believe that we should be working against the efforts of the religious to maintain and even expand their place in the educational system. In my view we should be vocal in our opposition to religious indoctrination in state schools. Do you really think that we ought to ignore the efforts of these religious bigots to spread their irrational and pernicious ideas among each new generation of children? To return finally to the original question of what humanists actually think as opposed to what they ought to think, you may like to note that the excellent newly-formed Labour Humanists (see [www.labourhumanists.co.uk](http://www.labourhumanists.co.uk)) include as one of their aims 'Opposing faith schools and academies'. So they are definitely "against religion" in at least this sense.

Yours sincerely William ([williamww@aol.com](mailto:williamww@aol.com)) July 2007

### **SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO OUR MEMBERS' SURVEY PART 1**

A big "thank you" to the 31 members who sent back the pink survey form enclosed in the last 'News & Views' – that is around a 50% response.

The first part of the questionnaire were based on a discussion document circulated at a committee meeting by Eddie Roberts, who felt that the objectives mentioned in our Constitution fitted into the 8 main categories listed. Of these, 52% of respondents felt that the most important was the political one *"to defend Humanist ideals and ideas and their adherents from misrepresentation and discrimination"*. In 2<sup>nd</sup> place was the social function *"to form a fellowship for mutual support and common action"* and 3<sup>rd</sup> was the educational role *"to cultivate the understanding and application of Humanist ideals and ideas"* (42 and 38% of replies). Next came the *"spreading of Humanist ideals and ideas"* (32%) and *"advocating a responsible, self-governing way of life that is of service to the community"* (29%). Only 3 respondents felt one of our main roles should be *"to help members in the art of living, and to help them raise the quality and value of their own lives and those of other people"*.

Some additional political aims were suggested:- *"to promote the removal of all religion from the apparatus of state"*, *"to expose and discourage superstition, religion and other non-scientific beliefs"*, *"to attempt to reduce the influence of religion and religious leaders"* and *"to promote a purely secular society and counter religious privilege in all its forms."* It is worth noting that at that time our new Chairman felt that *"increasing membership and publicity should be the main objectives of the group"* along with *"exerting political pressure at local level with special attention to education at all levels"* and possibly *"raising sufficient funds to enable the objectives of the group to be achieved within the next 5 to 10 years, as well as maintaining a reserve in case of the need for 'special-case' high expenditure"*.

The second part of the survey dealt related to our programme of events & will be summarised in a future "News & Views"

### **'GRAM' MEETING**

The BHA Group's Annual Meeting (GRAM) is to be held on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> November at Conway Hall Humanist Centre, 25 Red Lion Square, London. Each affiliated association is entitled to send 3 representatives and this year there is an interesting programme, including practical solutions to developing membership, as well as special interest groups and a general forum. Any member who would like to attend and is asked to let the committee know as soon as possible.

### **REQUEST FOR BACK ISSUE**

If anybody has a copy of "News & Views" New Series No 1 (late 2002 or early 2003) that they could send / loan to the editor, he would be very grateful as this issue is missing from the archives.

**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 [jaejed@hotmail.com](mailto:jaejed@hotmail.com)**

Contributors note that material in "News & Views" may be utilised by other Humanist groups, with acknowledgements as to the source. Anyone objecting to this should let me know when they submit items.