



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

Number 18

May 2007

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.

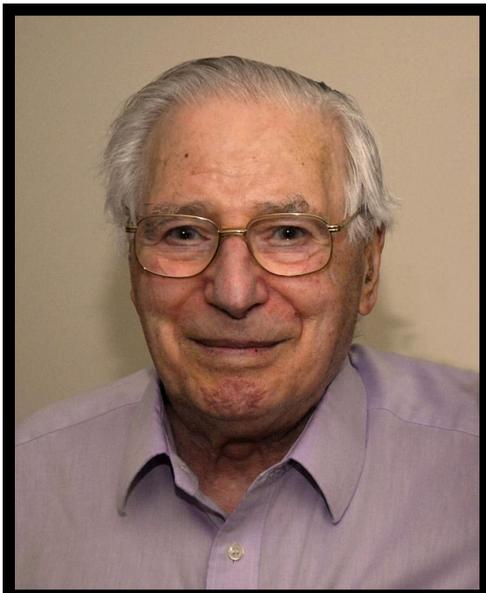
RECENT EVENTS

Our last three meetings have had a 'home grown' flavour to them with the speakers being members or relatives of members. In February, Roy Green talked about the problems he has encountered in his work and everyday life and how he has battled to overcome them. A month later Danny Collman gave an interesting Powerpoint presentation which showed how Birmingham volunteers go about recording, checking and distributing local news to the blind via the 'Talking Newspaper' service. I think we were all amazed at how little of the volunteers time goes into actually reading the items and how much is spent on the cleaning, copying and packaging the tapes. We were also concerned that their equipment is all geared to recording on cassette tapes and sooner or later they will have the major financial costs of switching to digital recording.

Most recently Peter Wynne Willson gave us a blow by blow account of his battle to delay the conversion of Dartmouth High School to a City Academy and gain as much information and as many assurances as possible regarding it's future curriculum and approach to religion. Amazingly the present governors only heard about the proposed change in status via the press when the whole thing was arranged and agreed at the highest government levels. The sponsor putting up the £2million is 'local' businessman Eric Payne but a major figure in Precept, the future management company, is David Pope who is a member of an organisation who's mission is "the enlargement of God's Kingdom". At meetings they went out of their way to assure parents that it would become a "local neighbourhood school with a Christian ethos and an emphasis on Design and Enterprise", not a "Faith School". What this seems to mean, however, is that it is set to become an 'Independent Faith School, funded by central government with no local accountability, but not a Church School'. For his £2 million, the sponsor gets to have control of appointments to the Management Trust to whom the school will be leased for 200 years at a 'rent' of just £1 per year! No long term commitment to putting in funding there!! Even worse, it was pointed out that of the 46 city academies set up so far in the UK, fewer than half have seen their sponsors pay out their promised £2 million!!! The meeting was a real eye-opener and fortunately we had another good attendance in the mid 20's. If you haven't been to a meeting recently, you should make the effort

to come as they are *even more* interesting now there is a more varied audience input.

Sadly one person who was not at the last two meetings was Frank Hyam, who sadly passed away on 10th March after a short spell in hospital. Frank became our Hon. Treasurer in year 2000 and continued to keep our finances in order in spite of advancing years and failing eye-sight. He was a regular at committee meetings and, although he didn't speak very often, when he did make a contribution it was always pertinent and worth reflecting on. We shall all greatly miss his presence and wry sense of humour at our social get-togethers and it was with sadness that we started our March meeting with a minute's silence in his honour. A Humanist ceremony celebrating his life was conducted by Birmingham Humanist member Vic Jones at Streetly Crematorium & I am indebted to Vic for supplying me with the obituary included in this Newsletter.



OBITUARY for FRANK HYAM

1st May 1916 – 10th March 2007

Frank prepared for his funeral ceremony some years ago and left written instructions. He wrote, "I have lived most of my adult life without a belief in a god and wish my funeral ceremony to be reflective of this." His wish was carried out at the Humanist ceremony held on 26th of March at Streetly Crematorium. He died at the age of ninety after a very short illness.

Frank was born in Liverpool, he was the eldest of a family of four children. He won a scholarship to attend Liverpool Institute where he took his School Certificate and Higher Examinations. He left at the age of eighteen to work in accountancy studying for his articles, this was interrupted when he volunteered for service in the Royal Air force at the start of World War Two in 1939.

He served in Uganda and in North Africa in Cairo and Italy when it was invaded by allied forces and then in Corsica. On his demobilisation he came to live in Birmingham to finish his Accountancy training Frank worked as a chartered accountant as a partner at James Stanley and Company. In 1966 he became a lecturer in accountancy at the Matthew Boulton College and stayed there until retirement age. That did not stop him working he kept his private practice going from home until January of this year.

Frank's family was important to him, he and Mary had known each other for four years and married in 1951. They settled in their house in Streetly five years later and brought up their son Richard there. They were delighted with the arrivals of their grandchildren Alec and Bobi. Frank supported his grandchildren and Richard, always turning up for concerts and plays they were involved in and even to Bobi's football matches in the freezing cold weather.

Frank had many other interests. He had a genuine love of travel and he enjoyed the getting there as much as being at his destination, when younger he drove his family on holiday to destinations in Europe camping as they went. Later they travelled to Russia and Poland and to Thailand and Hong Kong. Along with some friends he had planned a river cruise on the Elba for later this year.

From his experience in the armed forces Frank was an active member of the Royal British Legion and especially the Forward Branch of which he was at times Chair and Treasurer, he enjoyed monthly lunches with fellow members. He was also a supporter and member of the Association of Jewish Ex Servicemen (AJEX).

He joined the University of the Third Age to improve his already fluent French. He was an active treasurer of the Dudley Canal Trust, which did such sterling work in the restoration of the Dudley Canal Tunnel. He was a long time member of the Birmingham Humanists and its treasurer for the last seven years.

Frank loved classical music and traditional jazz and he chose the music you hear today in preparation for this ceremony (Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, Beethoven's 9th : Ode to Joy, Pachelbel's Canon, words of Bertrand Russell & verses from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.)

Walking was another of his passions. This allowed him to combine a few of his interests in one event: mountains, camping, pubs and eating. From an early age Richard and his friends would join Frank on regular walking trips. Frank re-found his interest at that time, completing the Pennine Way, Coast to Coast, Offa's Dyke, Three Peaks and Lyke Wake walks and others when he was in his 60's.

Frank also wrote in his preparation notes:-

Thanks to my wife Mary for many years of love and companionship and to my son Richard who I hope will remember me with affection.

Thanks to my friends especially to those both young and old with whom I have shared the pleasures of walking and the good companionship of the evenings.

Thanks to the Legion and AJEX whose work I have been privileged to share.

I have not wittingly injured any person and hope therefore that I have left behind no enemies.

I have lived a full life and enjoyed all of it. What more can a man ask. I hope that I have made some small contribution to my fellowmen as part payment.

We all know that he made a huge contribution to his family to his friends and the many organisations and groups with which he was associated .

Vic Jones

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Defender of the Faith ?

I was amused by John Markey's comments on my coverage of the Day Conference last year but am unrepentant. I think he has missed the point. Timothy Lawrence's talk was well thought out and brilliantly presented, as I said. Imagine that you had to defend an indefensible thesis like Christianity; could you have done as well as he did? I spoke to him during the interval and congratulated him on the quality of his presentation but said that I disagreed with it all. As a piece of showmanship it was unsurpassed and the pity is that he believed it.

John Lester

Don't get too Philosophical !

Basically I support Humanism because it opposes religion – any religion. I am not really interested in philosophic discussions - we are born, we die, and that's it. Why should we humans think we are so special there must be more to life than seven decades and two (Shakespeare's measurement). There you are, I am getting philosophical. In my teens I would have argued as strongly against Humanism had I known of it. Harry Scharf

Disturbed & Saddened

It was interesting to see that someone had attempted to record the history of the Birmingham Group now that it has reached its 45th birthday, but I was quite disturbed to see that there is so little knowledge or record of the Group's early history.....I'm not so much worried about myself being "airbrushed" out of the Group's records, but I was very saddened to see the cursory reference to Fred Lyne as having been Chairman for "several years". There was no reference to Fred at all in the main body of the November article and I would like to quote a short extract from my first report to the Group on becoming Chairman in 1971:- "To a somewhat shocked A.G.M., the Vice-Chairman, Tony Brierley, paid tribute to the 8 years of dedicated service and the many hours of precious leisure time sacrificed by Fred, both in the wider interests of the Humanist Movement and, particularly, in the interests of the B.H.G"..... For the sake of the Group's records, I am enclosing herewith copies of the Annual Reports and Programmes from 1971 to 1974. It is interesting to note that with a balance in the bank of £76.69, I reported in 1971 that we were "in a sound financial state". I look back at those early years in the late 60's and early 70's, presided over so competently by Fred Lyne, as the golden years of Humanism in Birmingham and it seems a pity the Group has so little record of them. I hope that this contribution will fill in some of the gaps and become part of the Group's archive.

Trevor Lock

(Editor: I have to apologise for being so ignorant of the Group's history. Indeed that was one of the reasons I set down as much as I knew in the hope that it would stir memories that would perhaps enable a proper historical booklet to be produced as part of the group's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 5 years time. Many thanks indeed for your help, Trevor; maybe others will be moved to find artefacts or recall memories of the Group's past.)

Wonder what impact?

I sent off my copy of Dawkins's book to MP Frank Field on 5th April with a letter. I wonder what the impact will be when all the M.P's get one. Ian MacDonald

Part of the letter follows "Dear Mr Field, As part of a national initiative I pledged to send my copy of Professor Dawkins's latest book to a nominated Member of Parliament. The initiative has proved successful in that pledges have been received for every single MP. I selected you to send my copy to because in the interviews I have watched on TV in which you have taken part you have always demonstrated a rare ability to talk sense. You clearly speak from conviction and are not afraid to question or even go against the Party line. For this reason I believe that you will be prepared to find the time to read this book and will be prepared to change your mind on religious matters even if this means rethinking whatever indoctrination you may have received in your early life. There are many issues you have to deal with in your Parliamentary work where historical precedent as well as a powerful religious lobby means that religion obtains an undeserved advantage. I am a member both of the National Humanist Association & of the Birmingham Humanist Group."

How to Recycle a Goat!

Give a poor family a goat → The goat produces manure → The family grows more crops to eat and sell → The family doesn't go hungry → The goat produces more goats → The family sells a goat to pay for school → The family keeps a goat → The family gives a goat to their neighbour → Give a poor family a goat → etc.

Letter from Christian Aid

(Editor: Good idea for gaining more funds; however I'll be giving to Oxfam or Action Aid)

TRADE SHOW by John Lester

The NEC had seen a great variety of exhibitions. The Motor Show had been held there and, at the other end of the scale, the Cake Decorating Exhibition. At first the public had flocked to see the shows but was now tiring of them and attendances were falling. The management became worried and began to think how it might once again attract the crowds. They needed something spectacular and perhaps a bit controversial to fill the huge car-parks and keep the turnstiles busy. They thought long and hard but each idea was discarded as too dull. Just when the situation was looking desperate, the most recently appointed office-boy produced a suggestion. "How about The Faiths Show?", he asked.

The management were at first inclined to pour cold water on the idea since none of them had thought of it himself, but further consideration made them realise that, properly managed, this could become a real money spinner. An advertisement was drafted which invited all the faiths in Britain (which today means all the faiths in the world) to book a stand at the exhibition in order to promote their various beliefs or lack of them. The response was massive and it soon became clear that one exhibition hall would be insufficient to house the show which eventually occupied three.

No less than 58 varieties of Christianity were represented (thus outdoing Messrs Heinz) and a similar number of divisions and sects of all the other major religions booked stands within a day or two of the advertisement's appearance. The management were wise enough not to allocate adjoining stands to two sects of the same religion in case fighting broke out, but separated them by one of a different faith. The more prosperous the religion, the more grandiose was its display whereas some of the minor faiths had to agree to share. One sect, which had only 12 members (because they knew that only 12 souls were going to be saved at the Day of Judgment), asked if they could set up their stall free of charge. They were refused and picketed the show for the whole of its three days.

Extra fire-extinguishers had to be provided to satisfy Health & Safety regulations because incense and candles were to be allowed on the displays. Even so, the Armenian Church were forbidden to deploy their flaming torches and had to be content with offering the public the chance to shake a sistrum. There was a great deal to interest the public who bought lots of religious trinkets, thus delighting the exhibitors who realised when they had struck lucky. High technology was not lacking either, with solar-powered prayer-wheels and radio-controlled aspergilla attracting great interest.

The exhibition was at the height of its busiest day when, in the largest of the halls, there suddenly appeared a dazzling light. As it faded, a luminous male figure could be seen hovering above the crowd. "Hello" it said, "I'm God."

"That's torn it", said the man on the Humanists' stand.

The devout prostrated themselves, or knelt according to their custom, fearfully wondering what was going to happen next. The Hindus, who had expected an elephant or something with an awful lot of arms, were disappointed but they too made obeisance in their own way. The crowd waited breathlessly for the next divine pronouncement but it never came. A quavering voice eventually broke the silence. "O Lord", it said, "Pray tell us which of all the religions gathered here today is the true faith."

"None of 'em", said God, and vanished in a mighty wind which blew out all the candles. The result of the visitation was predictable. The crowds in the other two halls refused to believe that it had happened while those in the largest hall were embarrassed by their initial reaction to it and dismissed the whole thing as a clever stunt devised by the organisers of the show. Everybody carried on as before and the managers of the NEC, seeing they were on to a good thing, arranged to stage the show again next year. God was disappointed.

"You can't tell 'em anything", he said. "It's time I retired"

THE DREAM by Harry Scharf

I have lived a reasonable life: have lived seven decades and a bit. I have had my health misfortunes: experienced hospitals and clinics. For four decades I was married, Unfortunately my wife died from cancer - a common enough curse these days. When she died there was the usual talk of meeting again when it is my turn to follow her. Something to look forward to - meeting my wife again!

No, I am joking. She was a good woman and we lived a reasonably happy life together. I do not know in what circumstances we would meet. Would we be angels floating in the stratosphere playing harps? I cannot believe it will be like that. Will we have an audience with God? I had better go in my best clothes just in case.

Will there be a life hereafter? Will it be like the life heretofore? Indeed, will there be a choice between heaven and hell? Will I meet the Devil? If I do, will we get on? If I die in winter it will be nice to get warm down below, or will I find it too hot? I do not like extremes.

Well, the time came when I died. I was in hospital having suffered a serious heart attack. I discovered later that the doctors gave me a 10% chance of recovery. For better or worse I did recover. - I woke up to find our daughter sitting by my bed looking very worried - that I might recover? She denied that that was her attitude. When I opened my eyes and saw her I was surprised. She had not been there before I closed my eyes and simply drifted off to sleep. I had not been given my human rites (sic), and I had not said any quotable last words because I had not expected not to wake up, so far as I had thought about it at all.

I opened my eyes, saw my daughter and remarked in surprise, "Am I still alive?" I did not know whether to

be pleased or disappointed. My daughter was in tears (of pleasure or disappointment?) at seeing me looking up at her. She held my hand to comfort me, though it was she who needed comforting.

I had experienced death, I was sure. In fact, the doctor and nurse who had looked after me had told me I had died. "What was it like?" they asked me later when I had recovered a little. I told them it was all a disappointment. I had not met God or Jesus; I did not see any angels; there was no sound of harps playing - and I had looked forward to that. Also, I did not see any sign of hell; no Devil to greet me & no warm fires. The whole experience was just a big con!

I am going to write to the local rag and tell those people who call themselves Christians about my experience and impress on them that they are living in Cloud-cuckooland; a dream world, where their beliefs are an illusion. I will shake them out of their complacency and tell them they have no grounds for their tribal fantasies. I realise it will disturb them, that they may feel life has nothing to offer them without their God, that their pronouncements come to nothing. I might even feel sorry for them, but I shall have the satisfaction of knowing I was right all along – that their beliefs are no more than that and that there is no truth in what they believe.

Is what I have written true? Do you believe it is true? You may believe it is but it is not necessarily safe to believe it. Belief, as I have tried to impress on others, is not fact. Truth as Christians see it is what they choose to believe. Only what they choose to believe. So how do we decide what is true? It is only what we choose to believe. You may believe what I have written, but is it true?

GINA'S FIGHT AGAINST EXTREMISM

by Kathryn Richards

A Muslim woman from Birmingham is leading a fight against extremists in her own community after forming a group that is determined to celebrate being British. Gina Khan, 38, from Ward End, hopes the venture will help drown out radical voices and denounce cultural and religious practices she sees as outdated and fuelling extremism. She described how she had been subjected to a forced marriage at the age of 16 and how this had subsequently become a polygamous arrangement. She believes forced and polygamous marriages are rife throughout Birmingham and need to be rooted out because of the damage they cause.

Since voicing her opinions, scores of people across Birmingham have asked to join Gina to discuss their thought and experiences "I'm so glad people are listening and reacting," said Gina. "People tell me I should be careful but I'm not scared, why should I fear speaking the truth? I'm not criticising the Quran, I'm challenging an interpretation of it. "If we tackle the hidden epidemics of forced marriages to people from abroad and polygamy, which happen in the name of our culture, then we can tackle jihadists that also operate under the same banner." Since speaking so publicly about her own experiences, she said she had been overwhelmed by the positive response. "We're not supposed to speak out," she said. "The community has been deadly silent on these issues and it's not right that the spokesman from the Central Mosque (Doctor Mohammed Naseem) should be able to talk for us all, especially when he comes out and says the terror arrests are all a conspiracy. "That's not how we all think, but we have no platform, no one asks for a moderate viewpoint."

Anwar Afzal, 50, from Yardley, has offered Gina the use of his function hall and business expertise to help her organise meetings. He said: "There is a fear among Asian people about speaking out against something that is supposed to be 'our culture'. Radicalists give a bad name to our community. Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance; I can't see how suicide bombers can fit in. I'm also appalled at the way forced marriages are used to gain immigration status and the way that both women and men suffer in their name. I hope that helping Gina will lead our community forward. I hope it will teach people to think for themselves, at least it's a platform for our voices to be heard." Gina reckons too many young Muslims and even politicians were obsessed with the situation in the Middle East and not looking closer to home. "I'm not saying I don't have empathy with these people but we're not taking care of our own and they're going astray. It took the London bombings for me to realise, this isn't all in my head," she added. Khalid Hussein, from Yardley, 35, is another who hopes to join Gina. He said: "It's time to raise our voice and no longer be afraid. When Gina said she wants everyone, Jews, Christians all British people to join together against the radicals, I just thought I want to help and contribute, especially after the 7/7 bombings. I don't know what we can do but maybe just talking and not being afraid is a start."

It's not just Muslim people that have joined Gina's call. Claire Rovira, from Balsall Heath, is agnostic but says it is everyone's responsibility to speak out and help people be proud to be British. Moseley School has also asked Gina to give a talk to sixth formers and she hopes that she will also establish a voice for women in Birmingham's mosques. "We're mobilised through fear not to challenge practises within our religion and culture. But our parents came to this country to escape strict regimes."

Contact Gina Khan through us at 0121 234 5048

Thanks to Andy White who spotted this in the Bham Post on Feb 12th.

DON'T FORGET! OUR MEMBERSHIP YEAR ENDED ON 31ST MARCH 2007.

SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE NOW DUE FROM ALL THOSE WHO PAY ANNUALLY OR WHOSE TRIENNIAL SUBSCRIPTION HAS EXPIRED. REMINDERS SHOULD BE INCLUDED WITH THIS ISSUE IF YOU NEED TO RENEW. WE HOPE YOU WILL DO THIS ASAP, THANK YOU.

NEWS FROM YOUR COMMITTEE

At present Tova Jones and Danny Collman are dealing with running the day to day finances of the group and John Edwards is trying to draw up the accounts for 2006/7. This is perhaps a good time to remind members that **the AGM is to be held on Wednesday 27th June and that all positions are open to any member. However, we are particularly looking for volunteers to stand and serve on the committee as Chairman, Treasurer and a Publicity Officer and are also hoping that we have somebody in our membership who would be able to take over the running and updating of the group's website.** If you feel you would like to stand for one of these posts or just join the committee as an ordinary member, please contact one of the present committee who will be only too pleased to give you more information and help you stand.

Some of you may have been wondering what has been happening to the Anne White bequest. Trying to draw Humanism to the attention of secondary school pupils by offering large cash prizes (£150 & £300) for an essay on a humanitarian subject obviously failed. It appears not one pupil needed the money enough to be bothered to try and write around 1000 - 1500 words for there were no entries submitted at all in spite of sending posters to around 135 schools!!

So we are now in the process of writing to schools offering to supply them with copies of either or both of "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins (to go in their library) & the BHA's "Humanist Perspectives 2 – Resources on Humanism for Secondary Teachers (for the library or staff room).

From a pilot mailing it appears around half of the schools are interested in taking up this offer, which is likely, therefore, to reduce the bequest fund by around £1,500.

BOOK REVIEW: "WITHOUT THE FAITH" by Bill Mcllroy

Bill Mcllroy has written a fascinating story of freethinkers in Brighton and Hove and the city's Humanist Society (which formed in 1958) has spent heavily in getting it published as a 24 page, illustrated booklet. "Without the Faith" is not simply a list of famous freethinkers who lived in the town, the author also outlines the development of Brighton as a health centre, popular holiday resort and bed of radicalism and freethought. Personalities who appear in its pages range from anarchist Peter Kropotkin to Princesses Victoria and Alice, the daughters of Queen Victoria. Literature is represented by Ivy Compton-Burnett, Arnold Bennett and Patrick Hamilton and other notables include Herbert Spencer, Henry Salt, Rowland Hill and GJ Holyoake. Denis Cobell, a native of Brighton and former President of the National Secular Society, has written an interesting forward and Bill has dedicated the work "to all those who have helped to make this city the most godless in Britain" (according to the 2001 national census)!

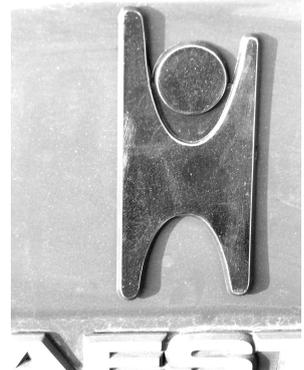
The price is just £2.25 plus 35p postage but *there is a 25% discount on three copies or more which will then be sent post free* (i.e. 4 copies cost just £6.75; 8 cost £13.50)

Please send cheques or postal orders (made payable to 'Brighton & Hove Humanist Society') to Bill Mcllroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road, Hove, BN3 1RU together with your name and delivery address.

HUMANISMS ANSWER TO THE CHRISTIAN FISH

Are you fed up with seeing those silver fish outlines on the rear of the car in front, signifying that the owner is a true believer. Well now you can get your own back and help show that Humanism is alive and well in the UK. I am hoping shortly to receive a supply of silver adhesive "Happy Humans" from the Evolve website in the USA. These measure 4 x 2 inches and are great conversation starters when you're in a parking area (though not too good at 70 mph on the M6!)

If you'd like one please send a cheque or postal order for £4 to cover cost plus postage to the editor, John Edwards. Any profit (which will be very small) will go to the group's funds.



ANOTHER CLERICAL ERROR!

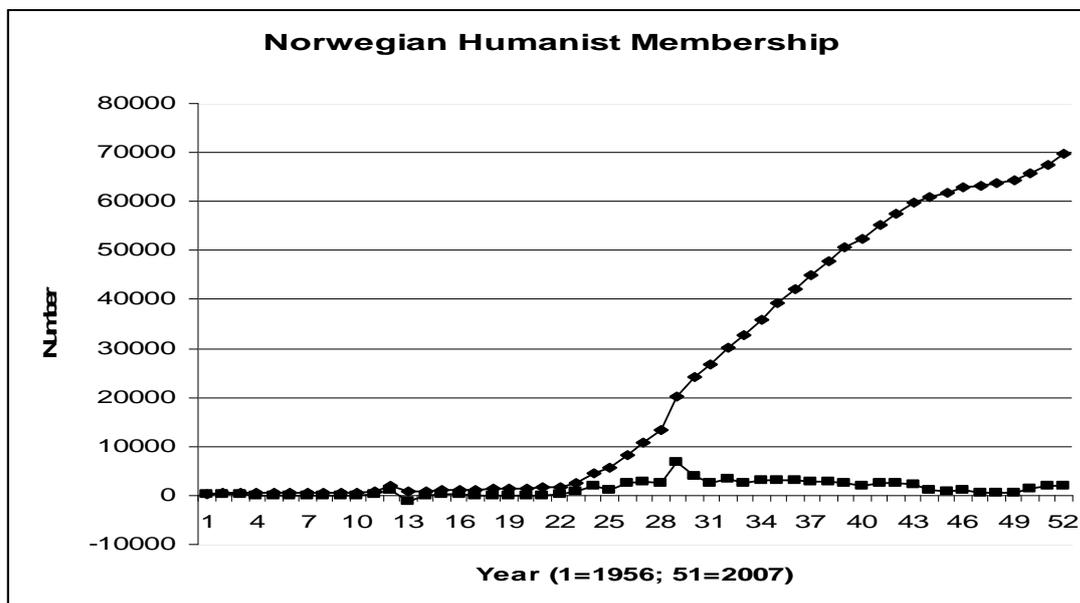
The new monk arrived at the monastery and was assigned to help the other monks copying out the old canons and laws of the church by hand. He notices that all of the other monks are copying from copies and not from the original manuscript and decides to go to the head abbot to question this, pointing out that if someone made even a small error in the first copy, it would never be picked up. In fact the error would be perpetuated in all the subsequent copies. The head monk said to him "We have been copying from copies for centuries but you make a good point, my son." At that the abbot goes down into the dark caves beneath the monastery where all the original manuscripts were held as archives in a locked vault that hadn't been opened for hundreds of years. Hours go by and nobody sees the old abbot return. After 24 hours the young monk gets really worried and goes downstairs to look for him. He finds the old monk banging his head against the wall and wailing "We forgot the 'r'; we forgot the 'r'..." His forehead is all bloody and bruised and he is crying uncontrollably so the young monk asks the abbot what is wrong. With a choking voice the old abbot replies "...The word is celebrate!"

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY ?

“A secular state is the only guarantee of religious freedom for all.”

NORWEGIAN HUMANIST MEMBERSHIP APPROACHES 70,000 IN ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

The Norwegian Humanist Association had a net increase of 2,043 members in 2006, after allowing for deaths and withdrawals. In total, over 4,000 people joined the association during its 50th anniversary year. At the start of 2007, the total membership stands at 69,640. The 2006 achievement is the largest increase since 1998. The NHA has increased its membership steadily since its foundation in 1956. During this period, there were only two years in which membership decreased. In both of those years, however, NHA had less than a thousand members and was insignificant compared to today's organization of nearly 70,000 members and 60 employees. After a slow but steady increase during the 1970's, the increase in membership really picked up speed from 1980 onwards. When the '80's began, the association had 4,448 members but 10 years later, this had increased to 35,954. This explosion in membership continued throughout the 1990s and by the year 2000, membership stood at 60,917. Now, six years later, NHA is approaching 70,000.



The Norwegian Humanist Association is, decidedly, the world's largest Humanist organization. NHA's sister organizations in Denmark, Sweden and other countries are small in comparison, for example the Swedish Humanist Association only has around 3,500 members (but it too is enjoying fairly strong growth). Understandably, Kristin Mile, NHA's General Secretary is pleased that the growth in membership has increased momentum. She believes this is due largely to the extra attention being given to the association's most important issues during the past year: There is an ongoing and intense debate in Norway about separation of State and Church. The country still has a state church, but a government-appointed committee has recommended a partial separation, and this is now being debated in the political parties, churches and the media. There is also a struggle about mandatory religious education in the Norwegian school system where it is taught as "Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Education" (KRL). The European Court of Human Rights held a Grand Chamber hearing on this topic in December 2006, and its decision is expected in 4 to 8 months time. Finally there is renewed attention on the so-called "Christian object clause" of the Education Act, which states that children are to be given a Christian education. A government-appointed committee, of which Kristin is a member, is to come up with a proposal for a new object clause for education. Kristin is optimistic about the future and emphasises "When a series of studies shows that around 70% of the Norwegian population do not believe that a god exists, it says something about the huge potential recruiting base we have." (Written by Evan Gran from IHEU News)

To put the above article in perspective the BHA has just announced that their membership has just reached 6,500 and are now targeting 10,000. Let's hope "From small acorns...." comes true.

**'BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS' IS CURRENTLY ATTRACTING
INCREASING INTEREST AND WE ARE VERY PLEASED TO WELCOME**

THE FOLLOWING NEW MEMBERS, MANY OF WHOM CAME TO
THE NEW YEAR MEAL :- SANDRA FOX, LORNA RHODES,
TREVOR EADES, HENRY HODGINS & ANDREW WHITE

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations are in order to our near neighbour George Broadhead who recently received a lifetime achievement award from the National Secular Society. George has served as Secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association for the past twenty-six years. Unfortunately he was not well at the time and so was not able to receive the award in person. It was accepted on his behalf by Jim Herrick, a vice president of the NSS.

At the same meeting the geneticist and anti-creationist Professor Steven Jones was named "Secularist of the Year" and won the £5,000 Irwin Prize 2006 for his contribution to the promotion of secularism. He will be familiar to many for his many media appearances, and is admired for the large body of work he has contributed to the world of science. But most of all he is a great advocate of Darwinian evolutionary theory at a time when it is under renewed and sustained attack. He has, indeed, been hailed as a modern day Huxley, a 21st century Darwin's Bulldog, pitched against the might of the American Creationist Movement. Denis Cobell, then President of the NSS, said: "More and more students are being duped by the increasingly strident attacks on science by the forces of unreason. Professor Steve Jones has been highly effective in staving off these attacks. We salute him for this crucial work" In his acceptance speech, Professor Jones spoke of the attack from groups and individuals determined to sneak creationism, and its deceitful equivalent "intelligent design", into British schools, even into science lessons. "Normally I wouldn't engage with such people because it simply gives them legitimacy," he said, but such has been the pressure from them recently that he had felt it necessary to actively campaign against them and tour the country giving a lecture entitled "Why evolution is right and creationism is wrong." Currently 33% of sixth-formers believe in "intelligent design" compared to less than 1 in 100 ten years ago!!

CAMPAIGNS

The BHA are asking for members to write to their MP to ask them to sign Early Day Motion 723 calling for legal recognition of Humanist weddings and to ask them to support the removal of Bishops from the House of Lords. I did not bother to do the former as it was my Solihull MP, Lorely Burt, who was involved in drafting the motion in the interest of equality for all. However, I did write regarding Lords reform and received a very encouraging reply : *" I agree with your concerns regarding the automatic rights of bishops to sit in the House of Lords. I feel Jack Straw's recent proposals are a step in the right direction but not the giant leap I had hoped for. To this end I voted for an 80% and 100% elected Lords. Within these 2 options, the reformed Lords should be elected under a system which gives voters real choice (i.e.the Single Transferable Vote), not party lists. I therefore approve of the gradual phasing out of bishops over a period of years."*

Equally important is the need to write to your Euro MP to ask them to support the Brussels Declaration and not the Berlin Declaration. The latter promotes the idea of Europe's Christian heritage whereas the former is a statement of liberal democratic values & can be read in full at www.vision4europe.org where you can sign up for it yourself – please do. The website lists all the signatories and also contains a paper "A Secular Vision for Europe" written by a group containing Humanists, Catholics and a Muslim.

For some time now the NSS has been telling MP's that the government has been making a big mistake by channelling its communication with the various Muslim communities in this country through the Muslim Council of Britain since the MCB is a theocratic organisation, more concerned with promoting Islam than creating community cohesion. It has taken a long time for the Minister for Communities, Ruth Kelly, to come round to this way of thinking, but at last she has said that, from now on, money will only be given to organisations that are making efforts to undermine terrorist recruitment. She wants to consult more with younger people and women -- both things the NSS had recommended.

Now the NSS is making another suggestion. It is that the government (& all Atheists, Secularists and Humanists ?) cease to use the phrase "faith communities". It is asking that ministers start to consult the various ethnic communities -- including the indigenous white population -- as *people* rather than units of religion. As the NSS says, "The government must learn sooner rather than later

that religion is the problem, not the answer, and that secularism can provide the protection that everyone needs from power-seekers and proselytisers. “

It is hoped to produce the next issue in around 3 months time.

Please keep sending your articles, letters, news or suggestions to the editor, John Edwards, 157 Welford Road, Shirley, B90 3HT or e mail to jaejed@hotmail.com

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.

If you have a complaint about a particular item (such as Thought for the Day being used to express political views or attack secularism) then an official complaint to the website will elicit a response.

Although I would applaud approaches at local level to all sections of the media, a concerted and concentrated campaign to the BBC at this time may help to heighten our profile and support proposed meetings between the BBC and our representatives.”

If you want to add your voice to those trying to stop the spread of faith schools you can do so by signing the on-line petition at the permanent web address <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/endfaithschools/>

<http://www.mrdeity.com/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdVucvo-kDU&mode=related&search=atheist> some you know and some you probably didn't

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Anonymous

Newton Day

Don't forget to raise a glass to Sir Isaac on his birthday, December 25th.

Dear John,

What do we do ? We have a lot of enjoyable arguments for a start and these are great fun. We try, though not with much success, to interest other people in Humanism. We have interesting talks and presentations at our meetings. We write letters to the papers and try to interest the media sometimes. We organise a day conference each year. We have a Newsletter thanks to you. We could no doubt try to do a lot more but since all of us are busy with a variety of other interests as well as Humanism this would not be easy. That's a start anyway.

All best wishes,
John.

An Alternative Christmas Message

Dennis Cobell, then President of the NSS, broadcast the following on BBC Radio London on 25 December 2004 as an alternative to the Queen's faith-laced message.

"Every year as a secularist I am asked if I celebrate Xmas: when I say 'yes'. I am asked, 'Why?' Since I am not a Christian, what right have I to join in? Obviously pious Christians celebrate Xmas because it marks the birth of a saviour - but the number of practising Christians is quite small, and much of the winter binge has little to do with 'Christ-Mass'. In addition, apart from Christians, there are other faiths at this time of the year with their festivities: Hindus have just had their Diwali with lights and fireworks, Jews their Hanukah, and this year Muslims have had Eid. For those of us secularists, with no faith, we can refer back to pagan winter-times which pre-date much of modern Xmas.

Our Xmas festival is nothing but a continuation of the winter solstice festivity; for the ecclesiastical authorities saw fit, about the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century to transfer the date of Christ's nativity from January 6 to December 25', wrote Sir James Frazer in "The Golden Bough" - a book on Magic & Religion published in the early 20th century. The Eastern Orthodox churches still observe the January date. In earlier times the church took over much that passes for our modern Xmas: the two main ones were the Roman Saturnalia - a time of feasting and drinking, exchange of gifts, and when masters and slaves changed roles. In northern Europe there was the ancient Yuletide associated with the winter solstice.

Thus it is entirely appropriate for secularists to join in: the yule-log was burnt to mark the return of the sun at the darkest time of the year. Many now speak of SAD - seasonal affective disorder. Having some fun, brightening up the cold days of shortest daylight, and a break from work has nothing to do with what Christians believe about the birth of Christ. Though it has to be said that the notion of a Virgin Birth - somewhat disregarded by many modern churchmen - has its roots in many other religions and folk tales from ancient Egypt and Greece. Both Buddha and Zoroaster are reputed to have come from virgin births according to some myths.

What of our more modern customs? We decorate our homes with holly & ivy - evergreen plants staying green throughout the winter. Mistletoe is a revival from Celtic religion and was sacred to the Druids. The Xmas tree was made popular here when Prince Albert - Queen Victoria's consort - placed one outside Windsor Castle in 1841. Xmas cards, with some early examples displaying family rather than religious, scenes, really took off with the introduction of the - ah fond memories - penny post in 1840.

As for eating and drinking - there was a time in the seventeenth-century when Puritan Christians opposed the levity and licence this brought about. Such items as mince pies derive from consecrated pagan cakes. The Xmas pudding - the traditional round and flaming one - is a symbol of the rising of the sun from its winter lethargy and the optimism of rebirth- looking forward to the brighter days to come, and then on to Spring. All this is associated with the natural cycle of the seasons. Sun worshippers are part of this tradition; some are lucky enough to make an overseas escape. So there is an entirely secular reason for celebrating at this time.

Xmas is often spoken of as a time of 'peace & goodwill'; a quite inappropriate association with the war and strife caused by the zealots of faiths. Of course, as secularists we cannot believe in the truth of the nativity tale about Christ's birth; anyway, much of it is recognised as historically

inaccurate by theologians. But so long as it is put alongside pantomimes - which parents & children enjoy at this time of year - I can see no reason for objecting to it. It is a fairy story - angels singing in the sky and wise men coming to see a baby Jesus; however, if David Blunkett's legacy of a Bill to outlaw Incitement to Religious Hatred goes on the statute book I may have to be careful what I say about this in the future!

Secularists thus have plenty of reason for joining in, alongside those of faiths other than Christianity. As one 19th century - Ingersoll - secularist/freethinker said: "the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, but the way to be happy is to help others to be happy". So Season's Greetings or a 'Merry Christmas', one and all!