



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

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New Series

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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.

PAST EVENTS

There have been 4 events since the last issue of 'News and Views'. We are grateful to Bill Green for hosting a summer barbeque, which was by all accounts very enjoyable as the weather was not typical of 'summer 2007'. There was a clash of events on 27th September. A dozen members supported the Balti meal while others attended the protest meeting on Academies in the city centre which was arranged after our programme was published. According to Jane the meeting was really enlightening and the implications horrendous. The whole future of education in this country is on the line - no exaggeration as the sponsors are almost all business people with no knowledge or understanding of educational issues and their aim appears to be to turn out business people like themselves. The religious issue seems the least of the threats, especially as a parliamentary question has revealed that only 17 of the 47 current Academies have religious sponsors. There will be further meetings and, hopefully, a strong campaign in Birmingham will get off the ground. The talk on 'Neuro-linguistic programming' attracted an audience of 21. If people want to know more on the topic they will have to find £2,000 to attend a course, so our 'free' evening was very good value! I am grateful to John Lester for a report on the Day Conference "Conflicts in Education" which follows:-

Birmingham Humanists Day Conference. Saturday, September 15th 2007.

The Chairman, Eddie Roberts, welcomed the audience to the Selly Oak Friends Meeting House and after mentioning the group's future programme introduced the first speaker, Bill Anderson, a teacher with 30 years experience in Secondary and Comprehensive schools and now a full-time union official and Deputy Secretary of Birmingham NUT. The speaker began by pointing out that teachers today were so pressed for time that they had no chance to reflect on policy and methods. Children also were adversely affected by our educational system and 1 in 4 of them would at some time suffer some degree of mental illness. Teachers were said to dislike change and to become defensive if asked to accept it. They experienced problems with violent children; English girls being the 5th and Scottish girls the 6th most violent in the world. Among boys, 60% of Scottish, 30% of English and 26% of Welsh had exhibited violence at some time. Deficient planning of new schools produced yet more problems as exemplified by a city academy which cost £48 million and yet had no play area for children. Instead they had the "opportunity to rehydrate during the learning process." The stress of modern conditions produced problems with adolescents so that in a sample of 433 teachers, 92% had been verbally and a lesser proportion physically abused by pupils. Schools were formal structures offering pupils continuity, especially to those whose home lives were chaotic and were sometimes their only experience of calm.

Other conflicts faced by teachers were connected with religious extremism, work load, performance management and pay levels. They were expected to cope with children with special educational needs and sometimes felt threatened by faith schools and academies. How inclusive should a school be expected to be? The government had ceased to talk to teachers' organisations or to listen to them. They were systematically de-skilling the profession by the introduction of classroom assistants: the important measure was no longer the teacher/pupil ratio but the adult/pupil ratio. There were also problems about selection, and elitism was far from being abolished. The religious ethos was gaining the upper hand, central rather than local organisation prevailed so that the idea that "It takes a village to raise a child" no longer applied. Increase in technology had brought with it a vast increase in human knowledge and the value of traditional teaching skills was tending to diminish thus adding to the anxieties of teachers. There was a tendency for the technology to overshadow the teaching and the tail was wagging the dog. Teachers were expected to be accountable in around 40 different ways and education seemed to have become a contract in which an unsuccessful pupil had the right to blame his teachers rather than himself. A good evidence base was necessary in order to effect improvements and in a dynamic society a certain amount of conflict was required if this was to be achieved. Processes needed to be changed, youth should have a voice and more local control and variety was essential. The aspirations and expectations of parents should not be ignored but, at the same time, differences in social class should not dominate school admissions. There was conflict, too, with some governing bodies who wanted to interfere with the daily running of their

schools. To be a good teacher it was necessary to cope with all these problems, to turn up to school regularly and continue to care about children's emotional and intellectual needs.

The next speaker was Tony Kelly, a teacher and social worker with a Master's degree in Criminology who is currently based in the West Midlands Equality and Diversity Unit in Birmingham. He began by recommending the book "Taking a Stand" by Gus John which deals with the disadvantages still suffered by black people everywhere. His own Jamaican qualifications were not recognised in the UK so that he was not allowed to teach over here. Institutional racism still prevailed and was a legacy of British colonialism. It was often denied but, as he put it, "at least you know where you stand with the BNP and the Ku Klux Klan." Racism is a learned behaviour – there are no racist babies. Acceptance of a fault is necessary before improvement can take place and it was still true that countries which recognised foreign degrees still excluded those of black and Asian nations. In spite of this there was still a brain drain from the Caribbean.

More black children were permanently excluded from schools, they were punished more harshly for less serious offences and praised less often. They were more likely to be placed in lower sets and less likely to be included in a register of talented students. In examinations they achieved fewer A grades and after leaving school were more likely to remain unemployed or to be assigned menial jobs. They were also more at risk of turning to crime. Even so, black children truanted less though they might be more disruptive. If a school got a bad name because of violence, bullying, drugs or guns this was denied and the problem ignored.

Though a few improvements had taken place, the English tradition of not getting involved slowed the process down. "Every child matters" was too often just a form of words and generated no action. The faults did not always lie with white people since there were undesirable aspects of Jamaican tradition too. Fathers played little or no part in bringing up their children, education was seen not to be a macho thing and 80% of university students in Jamaica were women. There was a need to engage with the parents before any improvement could be expected.

In the question time which followed the audience raised points about institutional racism – did it take the spotlight off individual behaviour and was it too aggressive a term? Would not 'unintentional racism' be more accurate? It was pointed out that there was discrimination against the disabled too and, despite a plethora of reports, politicians seldom took effective action. The evil of permanent exclusion from school was emphasised and solutions suggested. There was an interesting discussion about the observed deterioration of performance and behaviour of children on entering secondary school. Was it connected with puberty, the change from being top dog to being bottom dog, or the change from one teacher to many teachers? The high academic performance of Asian children was mentioned and thought to be due to a style of parenting often seen also in white working class families.

The afternoon session began with a talk by Robin Martlew, a retired teacher, and ex-County Councillor.. He was now the Humanist member of the chaplaincy group at Cambridge Regional College. Religious groups, he told us, were assumed automatically to be the right people to manage institutions. Moral education was the aim of chaplaincy and 'Faith in Further Education' wanted to monopolise this. Belief was an acceptable word but faith was not. Chaplains were not allowed to proselytise and they were not counsellors. Few students, he found, knew what Humanism was. He attempted to do his job by appearing amongst the students, "loitering with intent" as he put it, in the hope of being approached. This was seldom effective and participation in tutorials was more successful. He wanted to arrange a presentation day – a Darwin Day perhaps. It was a waste of time to try to prove the non-existence of God and he preferred to try to interest students in such questions as 'What are we?', pointing out that though we were highly individual we needed to communicate and cooperate with understanding and empathy. We needed each other's skills. 'What is best for me and for others?', 'What is good?' Thinking for oneself was an important element of Humanism.

He then asked the audience to divide into groups to consider topics such as:

- Challenging without proselytising.
- What issues are most relevant to 14 – 19 year olds?
- Making the most of a multi-faith structure.
- How could we present a Darwin Day?
- What alternative events might there be?

A panel discussion then followed led by the two previous speakers only, since Bill Anderson had had to leave early. A large variety of topics was discussed including the upbringing of children of various cultures, the legacy of slavery, the problem of gangs, one-parent families, solving the drugs problem, drunkenness in young people, and the need for support for vulnerable families.

The Chairman thanked the speakers and the conference ended after what had been an interesting and thought-provoking day for the 28 participants.

MEMBERSHIP FEES & NEW MEMBERS

Something I forgot to mention in the last issue was that a proposal for a small increase in membership fees was approved unanimously at the AGM. From 1st April 2008 it will cost £10 per year to be a member of Birmingham Humanists or £27 if you pay for 3 years in one go. If all present members rejoin, our membership will have increased to around 80.

Again it is a pleasure to extend a warm welcome in print to several 'New Members' -

Liz & John Knowles, Richard Cutler, Maxine Henry, Dr Zulphi Malik, Mrs I Newsham & Ms Janet Woods. Liz & John are hoping to set up a new group in Lichfield but we hope we will continue to see them and at our events. If anybody needs a lift to a meeting please get in touch.

MANY A TRUE WORD IS SPOKEN IN JEST

Soon after the last "News & Views" went to be photocopied I heard a tirade against religion by the stand-up comedian Marcus Brigstocke on Radio 4's "The Now Show". It was so akin to what I sometimes feel and what I wish some politicians would say in more moderate tones that I listened to it again on the Beeb's website so that I could reproduce it here for our readers for whom that programme is not compulsive listening. I hope no one takes offence by me printing it.

"I'd like to start this week with a request and this one goes out to the followers of the 3 Abrahamic religions – to the Muslims, Christians and Jews. It's just a little thing really but do you think that when you've finished smashing up the world and blowing each other to bits, and demanding special privileges while you do it, do you think maybe the rest of us could have our planet back? I wouldn't ask but I'm starting to think that there must be something written in the special books, that each of you enjoys referring to, that tells you it's alright to behave as precious, petulant, pugnacious pr__ks. Forgive the alliteration but your persistent, power-mad punch-ups are pissing me off! It's mainly the extremists – obviously - but not exclusively. It's a lot of mainstreamers as well. Let me give you an example of what I am talking about:-

Muslims: Listen up my bearded and veily friends! Calm down, O.K?! Stop blowing stuff up! Not everything that is said about you is an attack on the prophet Mohammed and Allah that needs to end in the Infidel being destroyed. Have a cup of tea, put on a Cat Stevens record, sit down and chill out! I mean what's wrong with a strongly worded letter to 'The Times'?

Christians: You and your churches don't get to be millionaires while other people have nothing at all! They're your bloody rules – either stick to them or abandon the faith. And stop persecuting and killing people you judge to be immoral. Oh, and stop pretending you're celibate as a cover up for being a gay or a nance. Right, that's 2 ticked off.

Jews: I know you're God's chosen people and the rest of us are just... whatever, but when Israel behaves like a violent psychopathic bully and somebody mentions it, that doesn't make them anti-Semitic! And for the record your troubled history is not a licence to act with impunity now.

So when the letters come, and I'm guessing they will, I can guarantee that each one of those faiths will be utterly convinced that I've singled them out for special criticism. All will be convinced that they're the ones being picked on. The Abrahamic faiths are like Scousers – they're always convinced they have it harder than everyone else!

And why is it that all of these faiths claim to be peaceful when even the most fleeting glance at the history of warfare will tell you otherwise? The relationship between religion and warfare is very similar to the relationship between Ant and Dec – you could have one without the other but I'm not sure anyone would see the point! I wouldn't actually like it but it would be refreshing to hear one of them come out and say, "Oh, our faith is as violent as you like. We love a scrap, we do, honestly. Our book says fight, fight, kill, maim, fight, destroy, fight, murder, kill & fight. That's why I signed up! I'm a bit naughty – know what I mean?" But, no; all of them claim to be peaceful religions. Right!? Peaceful right up to the moment someone takes something they think is theirs or says the wrong thing or looks at them funny and then it's fighty, smashy, kicky, punchy all the way.

I know this will upset a lot of people, and frankly I don't care, but I'm getting so sick of religious people screwing it up for the rest of us. Please, don't kill us! Seriously, as far as I'm concerned this is the only chance we get. When we die, it's all over. There's no virgins and pearly gates waiting for us, no big bearded man saying "Right, how do you think that went then? Bit mixed? Ooh, killed a lot of people in my name, I see! No, that's not really what I had in mind actually. Umm, tell you what! Have another go as a worm!"

While we're at it, I'm sick of religious people forcing their children to define themselves by the parents' faith. A 4-year old is no more a Christian than he is a member of the Postal Workers Union. This week Lydia Playfoot, who took Millais School in Horsham to the High Court so she could wear jewellery to prove she was staying a virgin for Jesus, lost her case. Good! I'm glad! I don't care how many times her parents claim it was her idea. Rules is rules and if you want to wear a ring that tells everyone you're not having any sex you can get married like the rest of us! Now the lawyer for the chaste Miss Playfoot said a question the judge would have to answer was "what are the religious rights of schoolchildren in the schools context?" Well I'm no judge but if you want my opinion. None, no rights, no religious rights whatsoever. School is for learning. If you want to have a little pray before Maths so that God will prevent Mr Figgins from setting too hard a test or prevent the PE teacher from being a colossal pervert, then go right ahead. If you want to pop on a feather head-dress & chant & mumble & sacrifice something & improvise, you can do that in your own time. Or take a drama course, pretend it's art, get a degree in it; that's what I did! The lawyer, Mr Diamond, argued "secular authorities cannot rule on religious truth!" Well Mr Diamond,

my point is that religious truth is a foxy one because religion, by its very nature, doesn't tend to concern itself with truth. By the time all the singing & candle-lighting & toadying & condemning & hiding from science is done, truth's given up and gone to the pub for a pint! Here's the truth, right? Faith is about as interested in truth as I am hearing about Anthony Worrall Thompson .i.e. not very.

Now I know that most religious folk are moderate & nice & reasonable & wear tidy jumpers & eat cheese like real people, and on hearing this they'll feel pity for me rather than issue a death sentence, but they have to accept they are the powerhouse for the 'nutters'. Without their passive support the loonies in charge of these faiths would be just that – loonies, safely locked away and medicated, somewhere nice with views of trees and a channel to god. The ordinary faithful make these vicious tyrannical thugs what they are. Without the audience to prop it up, 'Heat' magazine & fundamentalist religious fanatics go away." (shortened ever so slightly by your Scouse Editor)

Perhaps surprisingly, the letters that the BBC received the following week were mostly supportive of Marcus's tirade, even some religious folk found it amusing apparently.

THE BIBLE REVOLUTION

Those of you who watched the TV programme under the above title on Monday 9th April may have shared my fascination as the story unfolded over two hours. Clearly the aim of the producers was to leave viewers feeling exultant over the fact that an English version of the Bible available for everyone to read for themselves had eventually been printed and sold in vast numbers. We were shown the Archbishop of Canterbury claiming that if it were not for the prodigious effort of William Tyndale this could never have been achieved. Much of the programme was devoted to showing us how the power of the Church and the Government had combined to prevent this from happening. Draconian punishments were the order of the day for anyone daring to undermine the power of the priests. However, I wonder how many of those who watched the programme asked themselves the question - where was God when all this burning at the stake was taking place? Since the Bible was being claimed to be 'the word of God' wouldn't you expect that He would be the protector of those who were devoting their lives to propagating that word? Instead Tyndale, having spend years in exile while translating the Bible from Greek, Latin and Hebrew, was betrayed by a man pretending to be his friend and ended his life with five hundred days in solitary confinement before being burned at the stake. Thomas Cranmer who carried on his work met the same fate. A nice reward you might think.

But Tyndale spent a lot of time translating the Old Testament so he should have been in no doubt that the God referred to was vindictive and merciless and had a rapacious appetite for punishment of both individuals and tribes. Would not any unbiased observer also be able to make the devastating indictment that He was also incapable of differentiating friend from foe? It would hardly be surprising if Tyndale's last thought was that the God of the Old Testament was the real God. The most baffling aspect of the programme to me was why a God who supposedly had the power to create the world in the first place found himself either powerless or disinclined to help those who were so clearly trying to do what he presumably wanted. Wouldn't a more suitable response be to perform a worthwhile miracle like making copies of 'His Word' available in every language to every earthly inhabitant and, at the same time, giving them all the necessary ability to read it? In the end what his lack of intervention proved - yet again - was that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That is the reality of the world we live in and it is unlikely to change. Certainly the history of religion offers no confidence that there lies the path to such change.

Ian Macdonald 10th April 2007

JUBILEE DEBT CAMPAIGN

The last BHA News highlighted the fact that the world's poorest countries still give \$100 million each day to the rich world to pay off old debts. Too often these 'debts' arose from self-interested or irresponsible lending, in order to win political support or lucrative contracts. Poor people in debtor countries often did not benefit at all. For example, Indonesia is still repaying over £500 million to the UK for weapons sold the former brutal dictator Suharto, even though we knew such weapons were being used against the Indonesian people. Now this debt now costs Indonesia almost 4 times as much as its budget for health and education combined!! Thanks to campaigner action, 22 countries have had extensive debt cancellation linked to the diversion of money into basic services for the population. However, until rich countries accept responsibility for their part in the debt crisis – and cancel debt accordingly – millions more people in the third world will continue to suffer. Please send a message to the Secretary of State at www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk .

TO WILLIAM'S OPEN LETTER: A RESPONSE BY DANNY COLLMAN

As William said in his letter - when someone suggested that Humanists are against 'religion', I was quite loud in my disagreement. I plunged in without thinking - again! William was quite right in his letter to berate me for commenting on 'Humanists': I should have said 'Humanism'. We have some hair-splitting to do here: the 'ist' v the 'ism'. It may well be that some Humanists are 'against religion'. The question is - is 'Humanism' as a philosophy of life 'against religion'? I would argue that the Philosophy of Humanism accepts that people have religious belief, and that where those beliefs cause the Believer to follow the Golden Rule (indeed, often causing the Believer to do much good in the world), then Humanism is not 'against' either the person or his religious beliefs. Conversely, where those beliefs do result in harm to others, then Humanism is against both the person and his beliefs.

Some more hair-splitting: 'religion' v 'the religious'.

In talking about 'religion' we are actually referring to the writings contained in the 'holy book' of that religion. Most of us will be thinking of Christianity and the Bible - both Old and New Testaments, with perhaps a peripheral nod towards Islam and the Qur'an. And in referring to the Bible, we all 'know' that it contains ideas and stories which are perniciously evil as well as other stories and ideas which we ourselves follow willingly (if sometimes unknowingly) - and ideas and stories for all stages between evil and goodness. We 'know' this despite the fact that most of us have not read so much as a word from the Bible for a very long time - 10 years in my case, school-days for some - or perhaps ever.

William, along with others, sees the (highly-publicised) evils of so many religious people - and there are plenty of examples for them to find - but knows nothing of (or chooses to ignore) the good done by so many other religious people. Shakespeare expressed it very well in "Julius Caesar":-

"The evil that men do lives on, the good is oft interred with their bones".

We all know very well, and William expressly tells us about the evils that have been committed over the centuries in the name of religion. We also know of the evils being done to this day in the name of religion. I don't deny any of it.

Question: are these present day evils being done by all religious people? Are they being done by even the majority of religious people? Question: are we talking about 'religion', or about the followers of a religion - who have their own interpretation of the passages they have chosen to use to justify their acts of evil?

A third piece of hair-splitting: 'religion' (singular/generic) v 'religions' (plural). It is sometimes difficult to point out to the Secularist, who usually keeps away from religion as from a nasty smell, that there is no 'religion'. Instead, there are both many religions, and many sub-divisions of those religions. These many religions and sub-divisions have just one thing in common: they refer to a God of some kind - but not necessarily a Creator God, and not necessarily one which is Omniscient and Omnipotent. Christianity is the exception among these religions and their sub-divisions. Exceptional in two ways: (1) It has far more sub-divisions than all the others put together. (2) The Christian idea of God is different. Jesus features in all the sub-divisions, but in some he is God, while in others merely the Son of God - and in yet others, he is both. And what does all that have to do with this argument? Well, the various adherents of the various sub-divisions of the various religions don't see eye to eye. Hence the various conflicts throughout history and throughout the world.

So, let's go back to my 2nd question: 'religion' or 'the followers of religion'? If we are talking about the religion itself - as shown in their holy book - as being the cause of the world's problems, then how do we account for the thousands, the millions, of acts of goodness and kindness done by other followers of a particular religion - any religion? And this point of good things coming from religious people is important in our context. Equally important is the fact that so many people (intelligent and educated as well as others less so) get massive comfort from their beliefs, without feeling the need either to murder other human beings, or in any other way abuse them. Yes, there are countless examples of religious people doing and saying things which we find seriously unacceptable. Against that there are those other countless millions who get that physical and emotional comfort - and there are also the countless numbers whose good deeds, large and small, are prompted by those same religious beliefs. And are we, as secular Humanists, exempt from the extremism of action or attitude which we deplore in the religious - even if ours have differing motivations?

So what was I actually suggesting at the AGM? I was suggesting, strongly, that Humanism is not against 'religion'. I will accept fully that many Humanists will be against many religious people, will be against religious privilege - including Voluntary schools and faith-based Academies (of which type of Academy there are very few). But Humanism is not against 'religion' as a generalised, all encompassing word. There are many good things included in that word - many good stories, many good ideas. I have no problem with William's assertion that Humanists should approach life in a rational way, asking for evidence and logical argument as a basis for our thoughts and actions. I have no problem with personally rejecting religious beliefs for which empirical evidence is lacking. But rejecting those beliefs does not put me against them - as in Confrontation. It merely means that I have different beliefs which I consider to be more rationally based.

The key idea in all of this is Confrontation. William and others seem to think that 'disagreeing with religious people' must mean confrontation, challenge. That we as Humanists should be confronting, challenging, persuading religious people that they are wrong. Yet we as Humanists feel strongly that 'they' should not be trying to persuade us of the wrongness of our beliefs. This surely is potentially moving into the realms of hypocrisy. On the question of religious extremism. There's no argument that it exists - and in more places than mentioned by William - USA & UK for starters. So, is the fact that there are religious

extremists a good reason for being 'against religion'? For wanting confrontation with religious people? The simple fact is that there are religious extremists in pretty much every country in the world - and the media home in on them every chance they get. The problem is that the extremists are a small minority in all those places - but vociferous way beyond their numerical strength. Four countries come to mind as being exceptional: USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan. These are exceptional because the extremists are in power, in government, and therefore able to exert power over and above their numbers. Mostly, almost entirely, we're talking a fraction of a percentile 'extremist' to 'ordinary'.

Are Humanists; am I, against religious extremists? You bet.

Have I been in confrontation with people I considered to be extreme in their religion? Again, definitely. But that doesn't put me against, in confrontation with, their religion. It may well put me into confrontation with their interpretation of their religion - and with them. There are so many other people, many more, who get gentle comfort without interfering with people. Ok, so they're deluded and in so many instances, plain superstitious - but they're nice people and they get comfort from their beliefs.

William is vociferous on the problems of - opposition to contraception, persecution of homosexuals, female circumcision and many other activities. The generalisation he appears to make in relation to these activities I find breathtaking. Every one appears to be charged to Christianity. Well, no, they're not all down to Christianity. One of them indeed, is not even a religious practice: female circumcision is a cultural practice. A very widespread practice, acknowledged, particularly in northern Africa, and totally unacceptable - but neither Christianity nor Islam can be blamed for it. I'm assuming again that William has Christianity in mind for all the others he names, so again I must object to the gross generalisation. Am I splitting hairs yet again? William needs to name specific denominations. If he had accused Roman Catholicism, or the Evangelical movement, or even Fundamentalist Islam, I would have had no argument (the Orthodox denominations of Eastern Europe I don't know enough about). But 'religion'? No.

Then comes the attack on religion in education, and two of the three sentences leave me open-mouthed in astonishment. I have no problem with the implied idea that Faith Schools should be reduced within the State System and phased out. I believe this very strongly myself. But I do have strong objection to the sweeping statement 'religious indoctrination in State Schools'. Is William referring to secular State Schools, Voluntary Schools or Academies? I can't speak for Academies which are currently permitted to create their own curriculum, irrelevant of the National Curriculum, but as regards all other schools in the State System, they are required to teach Religious EDUCATION - which is a far cry from the indoctrination suggested by William. The other sentence, referring to "religious bigots.....pernicious ideas" left me dumbfounded - simply left me dumbfounded. It is secular bigotry, and I do not believe this of William. Religious Education is not indoctrination, and the teachers of the subject are not religious bigots, even in the faith schools. Teachers in churches, mosques, synagogues, etc, I can't speak for, but in schools within the State System teachers are required to teach about all religions from a curriculum agreed by the local Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education (SACRE). For Humanists, the one complaint is that some SACREs (including Birmingham) make no provision for non-religious attitudes to life.

The newly formed 'Labour Humanists' may well "oppose faith schools and academies (is that opposing all academies, or just the ones funded and operated by faith-based foundations?), but that doesn't put them 'against religion'. It puts them against Voluntary Schools and (probably) faith-based foundations running academies - a small minority or the totality of academies. I support them fully in those oppositions.

I must return to the question of bigotry. I know of my own knowledge that William is both highly intelligent and very cultured. I know that he has talents and abilities that I wish I had. I refuse to accept that the secular bigotry of that sentence was anything but a momentary aberration. Like so many older Humanists whose personal knowledge of education as a child dates from before the 1960s (perhaps long before), William seems to think of Religious Education as still being 'Religious Knowledge' (RK) or Religious Instruction (RI), when children were specifically taught Christianity - either the Anglican version or the Roman Catholic version. Children were taught the Ten Commandments, specific Bible Stories (which were taught as history), and by being required to learn various prayers and hymns by heart. And the ethos of the school was specifically that God exists and you'd better believe it boy (or girl). That teaching was indoctrination and was pernicious - I still know a dozen hymns and prayers by heart. I'm sure that such teaching still exists in Britain, but it is very much in the minority - and it is illegal. And OFSTED is there to ensure compliance (one thing good about it - there's not much else). School Assembly may well be a different matter. I can't answer for that. Religious Education involves learning about the major religions - what they believe, where they worship, how they worship. But nobody is expected to actually believe what they are taught - though obviously some will already believe. RE also increasingly involves learning about non-religious life stances.

Humanism as a philosophy is not 'against' religion per se. Humanists are and should be against religious extremism and we should be prepared to confront that extremism in all its manifestations. But let's keep away from secular bigotry. There are such people within Humanism. I hope Birmingham doesn't have any.

(Danny's original response ran to 4 sides of A4 and he declined my invitation to shorten it. I have edited out approximately 20 non-controversial lines. If you wish to read the full version please e-mail Danny or myself.)

Amazing? In a poll of 8 -16 year olds at Legoland in Windsor, 38% were not aware that Britain had taken part in World War II against Germany even though almost ¾ of them said they loved history!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Abe Alpren (August 2007)

The statement made by Danny Collman at the AGM to the effect that '**Humanists are not against religion, they are neutral about it**', was his own personal view and in no way could be regarded as being representative of ALL Humanists. If you presented an argument to 10 Humanists in a room you would possibly receive 10 different opinions. In his open letter to Danny in the last "News & Views", William Wynne Willson asserts that most of our members are '**against religion**' but this assertion could equally be legitimately challenged. The argument should not be phrased as '**against religion**' but rather '**against those who in practicing their faith, try to force their doctrines and hard-line views on others who follow their religion, or on those who follow a different religion**'.

Throughout the ages man has propounded these various religions as being the only way for people to live. Religion is not from God, it is from man and was written by man as a way to control and influence the masses. It is through the extreme and fundamental interpretation of those words that conflict, evils and miseries take place to the horror of the innocent who suffer. Of course we as Humanists should be protesting and objecting to those who force their opinions and strictures on others, who try to brainwash the populous or who act in the name of religion in a manner what causes chaos and despair. But all who are Humanists should be neutral and accept that some people can derive comfort and support from the religion they subscribe to. It is their choice and we can only try to change their views and attitude by reasoned, considered and fair argument. It is not only in Belfast, Beirut, Baghdad, Bombay, Belgrade & Bethlehem that those in power and authority justify their actions of murder, mayhem and mutilation. It occurs in many other countries where freedom and choice within the civil law should prevail. To fall into the trap of extremism by being 'against religion' will be, I am sure, counterproductive. Christopher Hitchens in his latest diatribe falls into this category and if we subscribe to his doctrines we place Humanists and Humanism in the same category as those we wish to expose for their hypocrisy and dogmatism.

MEMBERS' SURVEY PART 2

The second part of our group survey dealt related to our programme of events. Nobody felt we should have weekly meetings and 84% thought they should be monthly. 35% felt the programme currently arranged met their expectations and 58% felt it sometimes did. Thankfully nobody ticked the "Not up to expectations" box although 2 people didn't answer the question and so might be classed as 'not sure'!

In order of attractiveness the things members wanted to see on our programme were:-

Talks on Humanism / non-religious philosophies. (24 responses)

Talks by members on their interests and experiences (17)

Talks by more famous speakers or speakers of substance (17)

Discussions or "Topics for a Hat" type meetings (14)

Talks on other faiths and beliefs (12)

Talks on topics not related to Humanism or religion (11)

Rambles / Shorts walks (10)

Evenings involving music or members choices of music (9)

Evenings involving reading of poetry or book extracts of members choice (9)

Visits to restaurants / more frequent meals out (9)

Visits to other venues (9) [People suggested Museums, Exhibitions (2), Concerts (2), Art Galleries (2), Pen museum, Hockley & Museum of the Jewellery Quarter, Soho House, Places of Historic Interest, Bowling, Ballet, Comedy Clubs, Breweries & Pubs and Social meetings in members' homes]

Visits to the theatre or cinema (7)

Day visits to places of interest (6)

Other useful ideas that might eventually find their way onto future programmes were:- "something for young children", "something to attract new younger members", "recruitment activities", "meetings with neighbouring Humanist groups" and " Talks / News of local events / developments which Humanists should be challenging". The committee is also thinking about putting on occasional events during the day (as happened in the 1980's for people who didn't like to travel on dark nights) and would welcome some feedback as to whether this would be appreciated.

MERRY CHRISTMAS ???

At the risk of causing offence (as when I expressed 'Yuletide Greetings on behalf of the Committee' a few years ago!) I would just like to sincerely wish all readers "Compliments of the Season".

SNAPPY DEFINITION OF HUMANISM

Noting my absence on a Wednesday walk recently, friends asked my wife where I was and when she replied that I was at King Edward High School for Girls (with Jane WW) answering their questions on Humanism, they asked her what Humanism was all about. She said it was to do with "morals without religion" but later asked me if I would come up with a one sentence definition. Here's my effort – can members suggest other, perhaps better ones? If enough are received maybe we can have a competition, a vote and a prize!

"Humanism is a belief that denies the supernatural and a life after death and affirms that it is possible to live a good and moral life without religion or a belief in god."

APOLOGY

Humanists who are in my e mail address book recently received warnings of a virus and a telephone scam that both turned out to be hoaxes. I am very sorry for my naivety but I believed the source that forwarded them on to me to be an 'expert'. I promise that if I receive any such "warnings" in future I will endeavour to check whether they are hoaxes myself before I consider alerting others. Several kind folk suggested sites which one can use to do this so I am including them here in case other members do not know about them. A couple of people recommended Snopes as a website dedicated to debunking urban myths, email hoaxes etc. which is usually reliable. See <http://www.snopes.com/computer/virus/invitation.asp> and

<http://www.snopes.com/fraud/telephone/pds.asp>

Another person found my 'virus' was a hoax through Symantec

[http://www.symantec.com/business/security_response/writeup.jsp?docid=2006-022115-0852-](http://www.symantec.com/business/security_response/writeup.jsp?docid=2006-022115-0852-99&tabid=2)

[99&tabid=2](http://www.symantec.com/business/security_response/writeup.jsp?docid=2006-022115-0852-99&tabid=2) and another by looking it up in Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympic_Torch

However, as ordinary people make the entries in the last site I don't think I'd trust that 100%.

REQUEST FROM THE THOMAS PAINE SOCIETY

Robert Morrell, the society's secretary, hopes that if enough people pester English Heritage, a blue plaque might eventually be placed in London to commemorate the great radical. Apparently Islington Council & English Heritage both say there is no building extant in Islington where Thomas Paine lived & therefore no place appropriate for a plaque. However, there is a Co-op Bank on the very spot where the Angel Inn stood, which is where Paine wrote "The Rights of Man" during the 3 months from November 1790 to January 1791. This work influenced the French Revolution and earned Paine a place in the French National Assembly. If you are a 'fan' of Thomas Paine and feel he is worthy of such an honour please write to: - Libby Wardle, Blue Plaques Administrator. English Heritage, 1 Waterhouse Square, 138-142 Holborn, London EC1N 2ST mentioning the above fact and also remind her that there are very many blue plaques in London that commemorate people who lived or worked temporarily in buildings that once existed at that place or very nearby. You could also e-mail www.english-heritage.org.uk and mark it for the attention of Libby Wardle.

ROY GREEN

I have just heard from John Lester the sad news that Roy Green, the Humanist in a wheelchair who was a keen supporter of and contributor to our events, passed away on the morning of 8th November. Funeral details not yet available. A full tribute will appear in the next issue.

THE POWER OF PRAYER FAILS AGAIN

Sadly the parents of Madeleine McCann still do not know what has happened to their daughter but they (and their strong faith) are still given a high profile by the media. Strangely the feature writers seem to have overlooked the fact that the family must have been mentioned in the prayers of millions of religious people and yet not one of these prayers has been answered. Even the Pope has 'had a go' but still God declines to reveal any sort of answer. I suppose they put it down to him "working in mysterious ways" rather than thinking logically that there's nobody out there listening! However, you can be sure that next time somebody says "my prayers were answered", this will get full headline treatment on TV and in the papers. Is there a media conspiracy to try and brainwash the population on the effectiveness of prayer?

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

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