



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

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.

**Don't forget to start off 2009 properly at our
"BRING-ALONG-A-FRIEND NEW YEAR MEAL"**

Monday 12th Jan 2009 at the WING WAH in OLDBURY (7 pm for a 7.30 pm seating)

Please contact Lorna Rhodes on 07757 335 499 to let her know the number in your party
(or e-mail her at supersparlady@netscape.net)

PAST EVENTS

An audience of 21 viewed my PowerPoint presentation on Humanism in September and made some very useful comments and suggestions. I was hoping by now to have incorporated these into a revised set of 'slides' and intended to reproduce these as a double spread in this issue of "N&V" but this task has not yet been completed and this issue is pretty full anyway, so this will have to wait until the first 2009 issue. The meeting at John Lester's house was very enjoyable and the overwhelming majority of the 14 present agreed that there were several threats from Islam in the UK, and not just from fanatical Muslim extremists. However, we also agreed that other religious faiths also posed a threat by virtue of their propensity to indoctrinate at places of worship and in faith schools, their ability to manipulate the media, and their actions in the House of Lords, blocking certain legislation and gaining exemptions from other so that they are still allowed to discriminate.

At the Remembrance meeting in Percy Lea's house, Danny Collman focused on the Holocaust and how this had affected his ancestors. Eleven people attended and agreed that the media's militaristic emphasis to 11th November needed to be replaced, or at least supplemented, by of focus on the civilian casualties in wartime and in conflict areas in general.

The first Monday in November saw the first 'Social' meeting organized by Lorna Rhodes. 6 people met up at Bennett's Bar in town to chat for a couple of hours and a 7th turned up just as they were leaving. It is hoped to make this a regular feature of the group's programme.

CHARITY OR BRAINWASHING

At this time of year, Samaritan's Purse aka Operation Christmas Child rears its ugly head again in many schools. It is operated by Billy Graham's son Franklin, whereby children are asked to pack shoe boxes with gifts for poor children. In fact, rather than relieving suffering, these boxes are used to promote what Vicar Giles Fraser called 'a particularly toxic form of Christianity'. Maybe you will come across Samaritans Purse posters or hear about teachers pushing this scheme in assemblies or classrooms. If so please try and draw their attention, or the Head teacher's, that on the Samaritan's Purse website, Franklin Graham makes it very clear that the real motive behind this scheme is "*the advancement of the Christian faith* through educational projects and the relief of poverty" (my italics) Next year perhaps we should write to the heads of local schools who have been taken in by this scheme. I must try and remember to write to my local newspapers as well !!

WORKING TOGETHER ??

Muriel Fraser of the NSS recently commented that the "Humanist Liaison Group" wasn't really helping to create a less religious society because it's policies did not state they were against Religious Education in state schools nor state-funded chaplains in hospitals, colleges or prisons. I thought this might have been some sort of religiously-inspired, pseudo Humanist group but Naomi Phillips of the BHA informed me that this was quite wrong. Apparently it has no policies as a group because it is purely a liaison group, whose members are the BHA, the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain, GALHA, the Rationalist Association & the South Place Ethical Society. The 'intention of the group is to foster increased communication and understanding between its members, and cooperation and collaboration on matters of mutual interest'. Shame the NSS didn't sign up so it could get it's fact right.

THE PAGAN ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS (PART 2)

Part 1 was some time ago (Nov 2005) so part 2 is long overdue! The fascinating facts on how our customs came about are from an edited extract of "Christianity, Astrology and Myth", a book by Larry Wright, published in my December 2000 "Freethinker".

Mince pies, popular in the 16th century, were made of mutton and spiced raisins. The latter ingredient is the origin of our modern mincemeat. The church, and in particular the Puritans, looked on mince pies with disfavour as having derived from the consecrated cakes of the pagans. They were formerly baked in a coffin-shaped pastry case, recalling the Egyptian custom of passing around at banquets a small coffin containing a figure of Osiris. The coffin had the sign of the cross upon it and reminded the guests of their mortality. In fact, the Puritans in 1644 attempted to prevent all merry-making on Christmas Day. Under an Act of Parliament, they succeeded in killing off the festival in Scotland. In England, however, Charles II repealed the Act.

The **boar's head** was once a regular dish at Christmas. In antiquity the boar was sacrificed to the Sun God, for the injury it had caused. (According to the myth, Adonis was said to have died in consequence of a wound from a boar's tusk, in the Syrian month of Haziran from the Chaldean hazir or hog). The Saxons offered a boar to the sun at the winter solstice, while a similar observance evidently existed in Rome, as the poet Martial has a line: 'That boar will make you a good Saturnalia'. The boar with its round face and golden bristles (rays) was a solar symbol in Scandinavia, where also boars' heads were eaten at Yuletide. In Egypt, swine, normally "unclean" animals, were offered once a year to Osiris, in his character as a sun god.

The traditional **Christmas goose** is also of pagan origin. The most acceptable offering to Osiris was a goose. Further, it was the custom in Egypt to eat that bird only in the depth of winter. Juvenal, in his sixth satire, says that Osiris, if offended, could be pacified only by a large goose and a thin cake. The goose was the symbol of the earth god Seb, as well as being sacred to Juno, Cupid, and Brahma. It was the cackling of the geese of Juno in the Temple of Jupiter which saved Rome from a surprise attack by the Gauls. The monuments of Babylonia show that the goose was sacred there also, for the priest is seen with a goose in one hand and his sacrificing knife in another. Further, in Egypt the word *sa* signified both goose and son. In the fourth century CE, the Egyptian writer Horapollon, in his work *On Hieroglyphics*, says that the ideograph of a goose was chosen to represent a son from the love of that bird for its young, being always willing to sacrifice itself to the hunter that they might be saved. It appears then, that the goose signifies the Son - familiar to the pagan religions no less than the Christian - who voluntarily gives himself up as a sacrifice for those he loves. The turkey, introduced to Britain from America, is a comparatively modern surrogate for the goose.

The custom of **gift-giving** at Xmas goes back to the Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Kalends, sacred to Saturn and Janus, The very first gifts were simple items such as twigs from a sacred grove as good luck emblems, figs, honey and pastry. Soon that escalated to small items of jewellery, candles and statues of various gods. To the early Christian Church, gift-giving at the winter solstice was a residue of paganism and therefore severely frowned on. However, the people would not part with it, so the church absorbed the practice like so much else. The Council of Tours in 567 CE, declared that the whole period of twelve days between the Nativity and the Epiphany formed one festal cycle. The Roman custom of giving presents at the solstice season was retained across much of Europe. Throughout the medieval and early modern period, the traditional day for the exchange of gifts was January 1st known as New Year's Day despite the formal change of date for beginning the year to March 25th. The change of the New Year date from January 1st to the ancient New Year date of March 25th had taken place in 1155 in England, during the reign of Henry II. The date of New Year reverted definitively to January 1st at the calendar reform of September 1752. The giving of "boxes" at the solstice season is first recorded in the seventeenth century, when it had become the custom to give cash gifts - euphemistically known as "boxes" - to trades people whose services a customer had enjoyed during the year, to enable them to enjoy the holidays more. This practice eventually became forever Boxing Day, the 26th of December (St. Stephen's Day), during the reign of Queen Victoria.

Our use of the colloquialism **Xmas** has its true origins in the ancient mass or holy banquet celebrating the death and rebirth of the Sun God at the winter solstice. The ancients had celebrated the full "rebirth" of the Sun God at the vernal equinox (Easter), the ancient New Year - the Christians did likewise. Xmas did not originate from the initial Chi (X), of the Greek Khristos (Christ), as many Christian apologists claim, as this was a late adaptation by the early church from the monogram of Osiris / Horus. The word for Christmas, *Cristes Maesse*. (Old English), the Mass of Christ, is first found in 1038, and *Cristes-messe* in 1131. The title Christ had been the epithet of the many solar saviours of antiquity, millennia before the advent of Christianity. X was the sign of God, it represents the unknown

in mathematics and was selected, because of its legendary meaning. In Chinese the god was called Xangti, in Tibet Xiang the wise, in India the Buddha was called Xaca. The Islamic name of Christ is Ischa, which reading from right to left is nothing but X - Al Ischa the Saviour. XP Σ is the insignia worn by the pope on his breast surrounded by a solar glory. On the title page of some older editions of the *Latin Vulgate Bible*, the name of Christ is written XP Σ surmounted by Ω . This symbol is the sign of Libra at the autumnal equinox, demonstrating that XP Σ is astrological and equinoctial in origin, and it symbolised the sun at the equinox, in the sign of the Bull (Taurus). The insignia is therefore almost certainly Mithraic in origin, and was appropriated by the Catholic Church after its final establishment. (The Mithraic Temple in Rome was destroyed by a Christian mob in 376 CE, on the site of which now stands the church of -St Peter).

The **Christmas Pantomime** can be traced to the *pantomimus* of Classical Greece and Rome. In England the tradition took the form of the Christmas mumming play, still performed in a few places, whose death and resurrection theme owes nothing to Christianity but a great deal to solar allegory. Modern pantomime began in the early eighteenth century, inspired by the *pantomimus* of old, and partly by the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*. Consisting of ballets on mythological themes, together with the Harlequinade, it has been gradually modified into the familiar Christmas entertainment of today. Its fairy-tale basis still perpetuates the ancient solar lore. Nearly all the fables presented (fairy-stories, tales of heroes and giants) come down to us from our pagan forebears. All have the same theme - the relationship between sun & earth, night & day and summer & winter. For instance, the sparkling gold Harlequin symbolises the sun.

The origins of **Santa Claus** are relevant here. When the Dutch came to America and established the colony of New Amsterdam (New York), their children enjoyed the traditional visit of Saint Nicholas on December 6th, for the Dutch had kept this Catholic custom even after the Reformation. St Nicholas was said to have lived in Myra (Turkey) in about 300 CE. Born an only child of a wealthy family, he was orphaned at an early age when both parents died of the plague. He grew up in a monastery and at the age of 17 became one of the youngest priests ever.

Many stories are told of his generosity as he gave his wealth away in the form of gifts to those in need, especially children. Legends tell of him either dropping bags of gold down chimneys or throwing the bags through the windows where they landed in the stockings hung from the fireplace to dry. Later, when England took over the colony and it became New York, this kindly figure of *Sinter Klaas* (pronounced like Santa Claus) soon aroused among the English children the desire of having such a heavenly visitor come to their homes too. The British settlers were glad and willing to comply with this wish of their children. However, the figure of a Catholic saint and bishop was not acceptable in their eyes, especially since many of them were Presbyterians, to whom a bishop was repugnant. In addition, they did not celebrate the feasts of saints according to the ancient Catholic calendar. The dilemma was solved by transferring the visit from December 6th to the winter Solstice (Christmas) and reinventing Santa Claus. Thus the Catholic saint was completely replaced by an entirely different character. Each Protestant country or region developed their own gift-giver. In France he was known as *Pere Noel*. In England he was Father Christmas (always depicted with sprigs of holly, ivy, or mistletoe). Germany knew him as *Weihnachtsmann* (Christmas man) - this later mutated into *Christkindlein* and *Kriss Kringle*.

In 1804 the New York Historical Society was founded with **Nicholas** as its patron saint, its members reviving the Dutch tradition of St Nicholas as a gift-giver. In 1809, Washington Irving published his satirical *A History of New York* by "Diedrich Knickerbocker", a work that poked fun at New York's Dutch past - St Nicholas included. In 1821, a New York printer named William Gilley issued a poem about a Santa Claus who dressed all in fur and drove a sleigh pulled by one reindeer. The man-sized version of Santa became the dominant image around 1841, when a Philadelphia merchant named J W Parkinson hired a man to dress in Kriss Kringle clothing and climb the chimney outside his shop. In 1863, a cartoonist for *Harper's Weekly* named Thomas Nast began developing his own image of Santa. Nast gave his figure a flowing set of whiskers and dressed him in fur from his head to his booted feet. Nast's 1866 montage entitled *Santa Claus and His Works* established Santa as a maker of toys; in 1869 a book of the same name collected new Nast drawings with a poem by George P Webster that identified the North Pole as Santa's home. Finally, a Boston printer named Louis Prang introduced the English custom of Christmas cards to America, and in 1885 he issued a card featuring a red-suited Santa. Santa Claus in his red suit had become a standard image by the 1920s. This belies the folk myth that claims the modern image of Santa Claus, a jolly figure in a red and white suit, was created by The Coca-Cola Company. The jolly, red-and-white garbed Santa Claus figure was already a standard in popular culture - years before artist Haddon H Sundblom drew his first Santa portrait for Coca-Cola in 1931. Sundblom, a commercial illustrator, began to

work for Coca-Cola in 1924, and from 1931 on he created at least one painting of Santa Claus every year for use in advertisements by The Coca-Cola Company. Sundblom's creation helped popularise an existing image.

Thus, our Father Christmas figure is just another pagan aspect of the festival of the annual rebirth of the sun, and has become as potent a symbol in Catholic countries as in Protestant.

<p style="text-align: center;">A WARM WELCOME TO NEW MEMBER LIZ KRAHEK And Seasons Greetings to all our members & readers</p>

GROUP REPRESENTATIVES' ANNUAL MEETING – GRAM

At the beginning of November, I went to the Group Reps' Annual Meeting in London (which is called GRAM by everyone except me – I don't like either initials or anagrams). I go every year. Abe Alpren has occasionally accompanied me, but mostly I'm on my own – which is a shame: I think it's interesting. The Annual Meeting has been happening for at least ten years and used to attract about 20 Groups. This year there were about 60 people from around 40 Groups.

There are always speakers from among the Groups – speakers who have arranged for their subject to part of the Programme. This year there more than ever – 8 speakers on such subjects as:

Humanist Schools in Uganda Membership Recruitment Local Group Support

I was one of those eight – speaking on that subject that we have had so much fun with this year – Humanism v Religion. I wanted these Reps to take the subject back to their Groups – for me this question goes to the very heart of Humanism. One speaker told us that Humanists in Uganda have actually founded two schools – and are desperate for funds for such 'bread & butter' stuff as books, equipment & water. Another speaker announced the results of the Group Website Competition (you know – the one that none of us knew a dicky bird about because we don't look at the BHA website). By the time you read this, OUR NEW WEBSITE should be up and running at www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Please take time to have a look and give us some feedback.

You might also take a look at the website of Hull & East Riding Humanists (who were the winners of that competition) and also those of Suffolk Humanists, Devon Humanists, South West London Humanists, Berkshire Humanists and Vegetarian Humanist Group.

The Group Reps' Meeting is an annual way of getting to know people from other Groups around the country – getting together with them, talking about what we do, what they do. A useful cross-fertilisation of ideas and a sharing of information and knowledge. The one apparent drawback is that it is always in London. There was the suggestion 2 or 3 years ago to take it out of the capital, but it became rapidly obvious that 'all roads lead to Rome': Getting to the London venue is fairly easy from Birmingham - train to Euston, bus to Theobald's Road & a 200 metre walk to Conway Hall. I usually walk from Euston to the Hall – good exercise and just 20 minutes.

Conway Hall is a meeting place for all British Secular organisations who want a central meeting point for their people around the country – but any organisation can book rooms there. It would be nice if someone could join me next year when I go to the 2009 Group Representatives' Annual Meeting – but I won't hold my breath. Danny Collman, Group Secretary

WELL SAID BARACK (et al)

"Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those who have no faith at all". (Barack Obama)

"Freedom of religion does not always guarantee the right to behave in a manner governed by a religious belief and does not confer on people who do so the right to disregard rules that have proved to be justified." (Ruling from European Court of Human Rights on a French Sikh man who was denied the right to wear a turban in a driving licence photo)

And the judge in Spain who ruled that crucifixes hung on classroom walls are unacceptable because they contravene the secular and neutral nature of the country's constitution.

A Reminder: Lichfield Group meets on the second Tue of each month at 8p.m. in an upstairs room at The Kings Head pub, Bird Street, Lichfield. Tel 0845 200 8473 for details

PROSTHETYLISING ATHEISTS (From Joan Bakewell's column in "The Times")

A young woman who writes sitcoms for a living came up with an idea around June, posted it on a comment-is-free website (on 21st Oct) and saw it mushroom into something global. The idea of the atheist bus, which will bear the slogan "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life", will not even leave the garages until January, but it has caught the popular imagination. More than that, it has ruffled the feathers of established religious spokesmen, prompted tentative support from unlikely corners and even breached the citadel of religious broadcasting. By 24th October there were 1,800 supportive comments on the blog site and £83,000 had been pledged. With offers pouring in from as far afield as Russia, Chicago, New Mexico, New Zealand and Ohio, Ariane Sherine, the idea's begetter says: "The sky's the limit - except, of course, there's nothing up there." There have been calls to spread the message to Ireland, Spain, Manchester, the US, Cardiff, Australia and Wales ... Manchester again ... and less hopefully to Kabul and Alaska. There are some surprising contributors: The Christian think-tank Theos has donated £50 in the belief that talking about God is a good thing and there is no such thing as bad publicity. (Ed: somebody called Jesus also gave saying "Don't tell my Dad"!)

The notion has even broken into the sacred minutes of the Radio 4 spot *Thought for the Day*, which has been locked in conflict with the British Humanist Society for what seems years. One bright idea from a 28-year-old woman and the atheist bus makes it on to the programme. Not since Going to Work on an Egg has an advertising initiative made such



an impact, and for so little cost.

Yet as advertising copywriting the slogan doesn't really cut the mustard. It has no lilt, no rhymes, no wordplay. And that word "probably" has opened a can of worms. Many bloggers have asked simply "why 'probably'?" "Probably" was what they worried over most. It's said that Richard Dawkins, who is contributing some £5,500, favoured the phrase "almost certainly". Another contributor explains that "in science nothing has certainty, only statistical probability". I can see the copywriters chewing their pens over that one. So "probably" stays. There are other reasons, too. Yesterday in her blog Ariane explained that inserting the word helped to avoid breaching the Advertising Standards Authority rules.

Meanwhile, in the same week a government minister, Phil Woolas - three weeks ago appointed Immigration Minister - speculated in a Times interview that within 50 years or so the Church of England will have lost the special position it holds at the heart of the country's life. He suggested that in any reform of the House of Lords the privileged position of the 26 Lords Temporal - the C of E bishops - would be up for consideration. The Church's disestablishment was suddenly within a lifetime's prospect.

This is exactly where the light-hearted atheist's campaign intersects with national affairs.

It has been obvious over recent years that well-funded religious lobbies have been bringing their influence to bear on a government legislative programme that includes considerations of abortion and the matter of assisted dying. In accordance with their specifically devout beliefs, such groups are able to challenge and defeat legislation that many of us would like to see liberalised. The unelected bishops in the House of Lords rise to speak against such moves as Lord Joffe's Bill to legalise assisted dying.

So what is the atheist bus achieving? First, it establishes a sense of solidarity among those who see religious sentiments carrying the day simply because they are well organised and well funded. From the tone of their blogs the bus-funders are often young people who feel that no one is listening to them. Now they are at least being heard.

Its second achievement is to convey the fact that atheists believe in something rather than nothing. It is a canard of the religious to suggest that atheism is an absence, a void, a moral vacuum. It is no such thing. It constitutes a body of belief in humanity and its virtues. A lack of faith and the decline of religion are often blamed for the current evils of society. Those without belief in God want it to be known that they have as strong a moral framework as those who follow ancient biblical texts and commandments laid down long ago by desert tribes. It is not an unreasonable thing to expect, and the bus is perhaps a jokey way of saying so.

So what next? There is money to spare already beyond the original plans of the organisers. Perhaps there will be billboards around the country. Stephen Green of Christian Voice predicts that such displays will be covered in graffiti. As he dares to declare: "People don't like being preached at"! My own fear is that while this has started in a gentle and un confrontational way, it may fuel the notion that people have to be antagonistic to those of other faiths. While it is spoken in the mood of live and let live, I am apprehensive that it may be seen by others as a move in the battle of faith-versus-science. Theology in all its centuries-old intricacies and science with its blossoming insights are both far too subtle to allow of such clichés.

Ed: The site had a fundraising target of £5,500 which Richard Dawkins said he would double. This was reached at 10.06 am on the launch date. When I looked at the site to type this the total donations so far was £124,325.08; enough to run a full advertising campaign across the UK with the slogan "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." If you haven't already given you can do so at <http://www.justgiving.com/atheistbus> up until 11th April 2009 when the 'page' closes. Your donation from now on will go towards extending the campaign with alternative atheist advertising slogans. As the website says "Thank you once again - you've been truly brilliant." Some suggestions by an NSS member posted recently on their Newline are:

"Still believing in fairies, angels, gods? Remember your humanity, and forget the rest";

"NO to Faith Schools – stop child mind abuse!";

"Religion makes enemies: 19 religious conflicts in the world NOW."

"If religion fights sex, which will win?"

I can't see the relevance of the last one but think the first is the better than the one that people gave all the money for. Hopefully we'll see something on a Birmingham bus in 2009.

AN ATTACK ON THE BHA IS AN ATTACK ON ALL NON-BELIEVERS

The British Humanist Association was under fire at the end of November for accepting £35,000 of public money to stage a series of seminars looking at equality issues in the workplace. The attack originated from a Catholic barrister, Neil Addison, who runs a website called [Religion Law](#). He sent an email round to his subscribers list seeking to portray the grant to the BHA by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to defray the cost of these seminars into some kind of scandal. He wrote: "It does really raise the question of whether the EHRC are actually willing to defend Religious Rights as they are obliged to by statute." The modest grant, of course, pales into insignificance besides the hundreds of millions that the Government pours into the pockets of religious groups every year, for example £5million to the Government's "Faith Group Capacity Building Fund" – to help "faith groups" to ...well, "capacity build",

Mr Addison's views were seized by *The Telegraph* which ran a headline suggesting that the £35,000 was being spent on the atheist bus campaign which the BHA is administering and repeated Neil Addison's quote "it's a bit like funding the Taliban to promote women's rights." This deception was then happily taken up and elaborated on by evangelical bloggers and Religious groups have also criticised the funding. However, but the Commission responded by highlighting the fact that grants had been awarded to a total of 285 organisations that work to tackle discrimination and promote equality and human rights. The NSS said it "sympathised with the BHA, which has tried so hard to foster its image of gentle humanism and interfaith engagement. It must be frustrating for them now to be portrayed as some kind of atheist fifth column." It reminded its Newline readers of Part 2 of the Equality Act 2006 is entitled "Discrimination on grounds of religion or belief". Then follows (in Section 44) the words:-

- (a) "religion" means any religion,
- (b) "belief" means any religious or philosophical belief,
- (c) a reference to religion includes a reference to lack of religion, and
- (d) a reference to belief includes a reference to lack of belief. (From NSS Newline)

IF YOU DON'T WANT SHARIA LAW SIGN UP NOW

At present, there is an e-petition on the net which has, at the time of writing, just 5566 signatures. Seeing as how it calls for an end to Sharia Law in Britain this is really abysmal. The deadline to sign up to it runs out on 1st Jan '09 so please take the time to try and add your 'signature' electronically at <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/shariastop/> You will then have to click on a reply in your inbox to make sure your 'signing up' counts.

“CHURCH SAYS SORRY FOR MAKING A MONKEY OUT OF DARWIN”

Since the last N&V the Church of England has developed a new section on its website to mark the approaching bicentenary of Darwin's birth in 1809 and the 150th anniversary of the publication of "On the Origin of Species" in 1859. At www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin one can see how in '[Darwin and the Church](#)' the organisation is now trying to take some credit for its work by emphasising how he "was surrounded by the influence of the Church his entire life", although they do have a section '[Darwin and Faith](#)' where they admit that "he slowly lost his personal Christian faith" because of his need for evidence and the sad death of a beloved daughter". There is also a 5 page essay by a Rev Malcolm Brown entitled "[Good religion needs good science](#)" in which he tries to explain why the church misunderstood and attacked Darwin in the 1860's. It basically admits that "natural selection, as a way of understanding physical evolutionary processes over thousands of years, makes sense" but warns that "natural selection should not be inflated into a general theory of everything" especially human social behaviour. He says "There is nothing here that contradicts Christian teaching. Jesus himself invited people to observe the world around them and to reason from what they saw to an understanding of the nature of God (Matthew 6:25-33)" and so is able to admit "subsequent generations have built on Darwin's work but have not significantly undermined his fundamental theory of natural selection." It ends with the following apology:-

"Charles Darwin: 200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still. We try to practice the old virtues of 'faith seeking understanding' and hope that this makes some amends. But the struggle for your reputation is not over yet, and the problem is not just your religious opponents but those who falsely claim you in support of their own interests. Good religion needs to work constructively with good science – and dare I suggest that the opposite may be true as well." I'm not at all sure about that last suggestion and am amazed by the Rev. Brown's egotistical & flawed understanding when at one point he states "If evolution is continuing, and humanity as we know it is not the final summation of the process". I think these statements need to be given an airing when people say that evolution is "only a theory" and therefore not necessarily true.

MISTAKEN I.D.

The following letter appeared in my local free newspaper from somebody trying to persuade readers that Intelligent Design is the likely explanation for such well-adapted life on Earth.. I hope my reply explains things succinctly 'as they really are'. Readers should feel free to adapt & use it should they encounter other pieces, espousing the creationists' 'new scientific theory'. Unfortunately these seemingly obvious facts are no longer covered in most GCSE Science syllabi and most adults appear unaware of the genetic facts underpinning the process of evolution, seeing it as synonymous with 'Darwinism'.

"It does the job"

So you think we polar bears just evolved then? (Letters) You think we just covered ourselves with all this white stuff as a camouflage – to sort of blend in with this freezing snow and ice. In the first place this white fur isn't white – it's transparent like glass. Actually it's a thin tube you can call a fibre optic. Each 'hair' conducts light (actually ultra violet light) down to my skin because I need that kind of energy for my heat. Of course, you scientists only discovered this fibre optic business recently. If it had taken us that long our ancestors would have frozen to death! Tell me – is this design or chance? But I'm not finished yet. Did you know that black absorbs heat? So my skin was designed black – get it? Mr Boulton of Shirley

My reply

Mr Bolton seems to be supposing that just because polar bears' fur and skin "do the job" they must have been 'designed'. Misunderstanding the basic facts of genetics and sexual reproduction seems to be the root cause of this commonly felt naivety, now masquerading as an alternative to evolution. The structures and chemicals which build a polar bear (& humans for that matter) are determined by an individual's DNA, which it inherits from its parents and a long line of ancestors going back millions of years. In each generation there will be a few, very tiny changes to this genetic code called mutations which, together with sexual reproduction, produce variation so that no two polar bears (or humans) are exactly alike – unless they are identical twins. Any 'designer' wishing to produce a polar bear would therefore have to do so by repeatedly & minutely tinkering with the DNA over eons of time. Such a 'designer' could in no way be seen as 'intelligent' as the vast majority of this tinkering is harmful, resulting in defective individuals less suited to survive and pass on their genes to future generations. Very few mutations result in an 'improved' version of the original and so rational people put the changes (mutations) down to chance rather than to a benevolent (or perhaps it should be malevolent?) creator. Mr Bolton's knowledge of physics is likewise flawed, for it is infra-red light which is heat energy. Channelling ultra violet light down to a dark skin through hollow hairs will not warm a polar bear in the slightest. In fact it will do more harm than good as it is more likely to induce mutations and skin cancers! By spreading such pseudo-scientific misinformation, Mr Bolton just helps make the case for biological evolution to be seen as the 'fact of life' it is.

J.E. written by a Mr Boulton)

POSITIVE SECULARISM – A NEW IDEA FROM THE POPE

It seems the Pope is behind moves to 'infiltrate' the secular agenda by trying to suggest that there are two kinds of secularism, one good, the other bad and in this he is being aided by Sarkozy, the President of secular France.

In December last year, Sarkozy visited the Vatican and seized the opportunity to develop a new idea that he called "positive secularism". Last September the Pope visited "the eldest daughter of the Catholic Church", as France is known to the Vatican, on a three-day state visit that took him from Paris to Lourdes. Sarkozy did it again, advocating in front of an evidently delighted Pope, the benefits of a secularism "more open to religions". In his speech, Benedict XVI blessed Sarkozy's idea declaring, "I pay tribute to your expression of positive secularism. Indeed, there still remain many open areas of discussion which we must deal with and resolve with determination and patience. I'm convinced that we need to reflect on the true meaning and importance of secularism anew."

What the Pope and president pretend not to know is that there is no positive or negative secularism (*laïcité* in French). Secularism is neutral - neither a dogma nor a doctrine. Secularism abstains from favouring one religion over another, or favouring atheism over religious belief. It is a political principle that aims at guaranteeing the largest possible coexistence of various freedoms.

From a strictly legal perspective, secularism is extremely positive: it creates a universal freedom to believe or not to believe, and protects individuals from any public interference in their belief, provided that their belief or lack of it does not disturb the peace. The supposedly "good secularism" put forward by the Pope & Sarkozy, is a secularism that would allow politics to mingle with religions. One which would, for instance, turn a blind eye to sects and their actions, one which would accept that people be treated differently according to their faiths, one which would blur the frontiers between the public and private spheres. Many French people are now wondering aloud: "Since when was the secularism born of the Revolution negative?"

It turns out that the term "positive secularism" was actually coined in 2005 by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, whose views have inspired two of Sarkozy's close aides & speechwriters, the practising Catholic Emmanuelle Mignon and the Dominican friar Philippe Verdin. So what we are witnessing is Sarkozy pretending to have an idea that originated at the Vatican, while the Pope, its delighted author, sits back and waits for the President to implement "his" idea. A few days ago, in an interview with the Catholic French daily *La Croix*, Benedict's private secretary clearly stated that the Holy Father expected the president of France to diligently transform this idea into acts. Machiavelli would be impressed.

(Based on "The Pope's plot" written by Agnès Poirier and published 18 September 2008)

SO WE ARE BELIEVERS AFTER ALL !!

In a recent NSS Newslines, Beverley Rowe raised the question of how to refer collectively to Christians, Hindus and members of other religions, since both "deist" and "theist" have specialised meanings. One of the suggestions was "believers" but he/she felt this would not do, commenting "Atheism differs from religions, not because they are belief systems and atheism is not, but because they are belief systems based on authority whereas Atheism is a belief system that denies authority and explicitly rejects any particular belief if it is contrary to scientific truths as best established at any time. Atheists who think they are not believers are fooling themselves."

CHANGE OF SECRETARY'S PHONE NUMBER

When I receive my copy of this magazine – paper, by post – I will assume that other members will have also received theirs and that you will all see this notice in it. On that basis, sometime during that day I will unplug the phone that has the number 0121-507-1773. Having unplugged it, I will then ask British Telecom to cancel the line. I had this second line put in some years ago to allow for my dial-up Internet connection, and have also used it as my Humanism line. I now have broadband which doesn't need that second line. Further, my use of that line for Humanism is almost zero – including wrong numbers, I reckon I receive as many as 40 calls on it a year – which even as an average is less than one a week. I can go two and even three weeks without that phone ringing. With a line rental of over £30 a quarter, it just isn't worth it. So, from that day onwards – you'll know the day, cos you'll receive your "News & Views" – you will call my mobile: 07748-075-578 and you'll leave a message if it isn't on

It is hoped to produce the next issue in late February. 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 utilised by other Humanist groups, with acknowledgements as to the source. Anyone objecting to this should let me know when they submit items.

ADDENDUM TO DECEMBER 2008 'NEWS & VIEWS'

The following article and correction were emailed to me on 25th October by member Olga Farooqui for inclusion in the next edition of "N&V". I safely filed it away in an electronic folder but then forgot all about it when I was compiling the December edition. As it is very relevant to our meeting on March 18th and there may not be another issue before this date, I am adding it as an electronic addendum to the December issue. ***My sincere apologies to Olga for not only inadvertently misrepresenting her intentions in the Autumn programme but also forgetting to include her article in the latest edition.*** John Edwards

SPIRITUALITY AND HUMANISM

First of all I must correct the entry in the previous Programme announcing our March 2009 meeting. I never raised the topic of spirituality with Southampton Humanists and it was never discussed there. We discussed it here briefly some time ago. I remember Danny Collman saying that for him, what he feels on top of a mountain, on a beautiful, sunny day is an example of a spiritual experience. Some agreed, some disagreed, but we didn't come to any conclusion. At another meeting Danny suggested that some humanists are androids, meaning presumably that they have no feelings. Finally John Edwards quoted a letter by Albert Adler to "The Freethinker" (News and Views May 008) where the author attempts to address the question of what spirituality means to a humanist. All this started me thinking about this issue but my understanding is at the moment very incomplete.

Let me quote some extracts from Adler's letter: "The dogmatic atheistwill presumably insist that all experiences have material basis and therefore spiritual experiences are no more than a baseless chimera - a mere phantasy of a religious mind.However I see no reason at all why the atheist should not accept the existence of so called spiritual experiences while not in the least accepting that such experiences are manifestations of some supernatural power. Many things in life we don't yet understand and some things mankind may never understand. But this is no reason for embracing the plainly irrational"

So, it seems that there exist, among humanists, two opposing views. One is that of the dogmatic atheist (android) : we must reject emotions because they can't be reasoned about. The other view, as presented by Adler, is very confused. He describes spirituality as something rather mysterious, at the same time insisting that it is not irrational. But the whole point is that feelings are, by definition, irrational. When we are happy, sad, angry, afraid or feel our spirits rising, reason has very little to do with it. We are overcome by feelings, whether we want to or not. Nevertheless all feelings have material basis in the brain. The existence of mood changing drugs, legal and illegal provide scientific proof.

So, what is spirituality? Are humanists spiritual? These are not merely academic questions. As John Edwards points out, they are referred to in most Religious Studies syllabuses, and I imagine that Humanists giving talks in schools and colleges may be asked such questions. Hopefully all will be clarified at the March meeting. Olga Farooqui

CHANGE OF DATE & WEBSITE

Within 24 hours of the 8 page issue of 'News & Views' being printed off, Professor Richard Lea found that he would not be able to keep the allotted date for his visit due to work commitments. Fortunately he is free the following evening so the **DARWIN DAY MEETING is now on FRIDAY 13th February – same time – same place.**

At the same time I received notice that the revamped Birmingham Humanists website, which a sub-committee has been working hard on for some months, had finally gone 'on-line' and replaced our old site. It is still a 'work in progress' with a few pages not yet finished but we think it is a big improvement and invite people to check it out at www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk We hope to have some interesting items on the sales page in the not-to-distant future so do have another look in about 6 months time. Well done and a big thank you to the sub-Committee members: Malik, Bill Green, Danny Collman & William Wynne Willson!