



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

Number 21

February 2008

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.

SPECIAL WOMENS' DAY EVENT

SATURDAY 15TH MARCH AT 2.30 PM

(i.e. one week after the official Womens' Day)

**“30 years on from the Sex Discrimination Act and still counting...
when will women be equal to men?”**

***Lorely Burt, the Liberal Democrat MP for Solihull and their spokesperson
on Women & Equality will be talking to us at
The Friends Meeting House, George Road.***

As this meeting is on a Saturday afternoon we hope that those members who do not feel able to make our evening meetings will be able to attend and hear this high profile speaker. Some notes about Lorely follow:-

Lorely Burt is the first ever Liberal Democrat MP for Solihull and is their spokesperson on Small Business and Women & Equality. After graduating in economics from University College, Swansea, Lorely started her career working in the Prison Service as an assistant governor before moving into the field of personnel and training. Moving back to the Midlands, she set up her own award-winning training company and worked as a director of companies in marketing and financial services. She entered local politics in 1998 when she was elected to Dudley MBC. She stood in the 2001 General Election in the Dudley South constituency and for the West Midlands region in the European Parliamentary elections of 2004 and was ultimately successful in overturning a large Conservative majority in Solihull in 2005. Following her election she was appointed a Liberal Democrat spokesperson on Northern Ireland and served on the Treasury Select Committee. After the election of Sir Menzies Campbell to the party leadership in March 2006, Lorely was appointed spokesperson on Small Business and on Women & Equality. In Parliament she has voted very strongly for a transparent Parliament and investigating the Iraq war as well as the ban on smoking in public spaces. She is strongly against proposals for ID cards, changes to the anti-terrorism laws and replacement of Trident. Lorely was a co-sponsor of Evan Harris's Abolition of Blasphemy motion, tabled on January 9th this year. In one of her most recent contributions to debates she pointed out that women-owned businesses comprise only 14 % of total UK enterprises (& only 8% in the West Midlands!) whereas in America the figure is 30 % and she urged the Government to look seriously at the issue of supply-side diversity - a cultural norm in America but not yet in the UK.



THE END OF THE CRIME OF BLASPHEMY IN THE UK ??

The 140 year battle that Secularists have waged against blasphemy law in England is on the brink of being won. The Government have agreed to bring forward an amendment to the Criminal Justice & Immigration Bill in the House of Lords that would scrap the antiquated law, after consulting with the Church of England. In other debates the C of E has indicated that the law is an anachronism but, as The Times asked, “Why is it necessary to consult the Anglican Church at all? Are we going to start consulting burglars on the breaking and entering laws?” Last month the Church was not yet acknowledging that abolition was inevitable and may resist after all, seeing it as the first step towards disestablishment. So maybe it's not the end after all....

ROYSTON ERIC GREEN Ph.D., B.A.(Hons), L.T.C.L, L.G.S.M, A.I.L. (4/6/1937 – 8/11/2007)

As mentioned in the last "News & Views" our member Roy Green sadly died just a few days before its publication. Most of the committee joined with family & friends at Rowley Regis crematorium for his funeral, which was conducted by our member Percy Lea, on 26th November. I am indebted to Mandy Meakin for the lovely photograph of Roy, Mary Wood for her poem and 'spaghettigazetti' for the following 'blog' which is a fine tribute to one of our more active members.

"It is with enormous sadness that I must report the recent death of Dr Roy Green of Rowley Regis. I first met Roy many years ago through Disability West Midlands, an organisation he had been committed to for nearly 30 years. Roy was both a wheelchair user and was blind. He was also a Doctor of Psychology, a professional counsellor and an exceptionally sharp minded man, being a member of Mensa.

In his individual way, Roy was a great campaigner for the equal rights of disabled people and was never afraid to speak his mind on access issues, but in a subtle and non-confrontational way. He was warm, good-humoured and instantly personable. In spite of his profound level of impairment, both sensory and in terms of his mobility, his perception was as sharp as anyone I have ever met. On occasions in the past I have been Roy's personal assistant at meetings and conferences and was always impressed by his knowledge and insight into the people and organisations around him. Sight loss did not prevent him from having an awesome knowledge of humanity and society.

Roy was actively involved in a number of local disability and non-disability organisations in Sandwell but was not one for the limelight. He always had a unique and insightful take on the often complex events, situations and relationships in the community and voluntary sector. He was forthright and not one for compromise but he also knew how to bring about change through gently persistent, scientifically objective and utterly ethical debate. Roy was also a keen contributor to local radio and other media, his soft voice instantly recognisable as a regular caller on BBC Radio WM. He also had a huge capacity for facts and general knowledge, he once appeared as a contestant on Anne Robinson's *The Weakest Link*. When I asked him about the experience he told me "Anne was very pleasant off-set, but I was pleased to find that she was as objectionable and rude to me in front of camera as she was to the other contestants. That's what I call equality!"

That just about sums up this brilliantly sharp-minded gentleman.

In recent years, Roy's life became particularly difficult through mounting ill health and his death is a huge loss to our whole community. We have lost a quiet, unassuming but inspirational genius. God bless you Roy, it was an honour to have touched lives with you. The beloved hill at Rowley which forms part of the horizon from my home near Oldbury and was Roy's home for many years, has lost a brilliant and awesome chunk of it's celebrated rock."

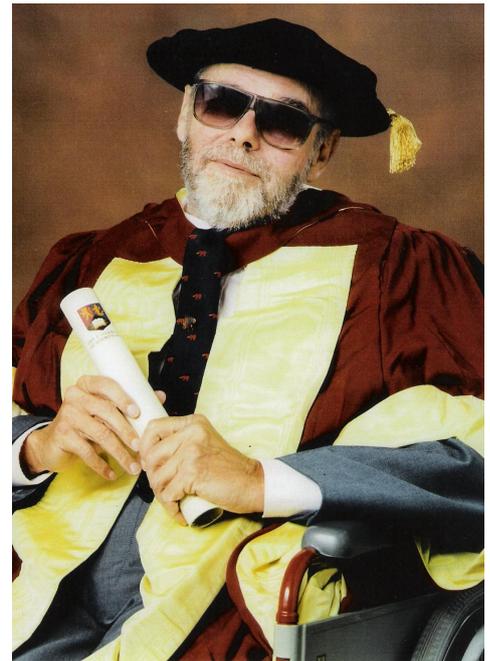
(from <http://spaghettigazetti.blogspot.com/2007/11/death-of-dr-roy-green-of-rowley-regis.html> of 19/11/2007)

"Roy" by Mary C. Wood

This house which was your prison and your home
seems just as cluttered now, although it's weeks
since you have left. You never had your filing in control
but always knew where something was, unless
some *helpful* person tried to tidy up and then
We felt your fury; your chair shook
white-knuckled gripping, you spun your wheels;
your eyes shot bullets, a hail of white fire.

We were completely unprepared for your going;
we shouldn't have been, although you hid all pain,
for you had taped all your instructions, funeral,
will, down to the last details; your papers, books
to this library; your fridge to him; your rugs to her;
somehow you fill this room with your ideas.

We turn on your voice, still needing to confirm
some information – feel you teasing us,
as if you were saying, "*I have only gone a minute;*
I will be back to check that you have sorted things."



(Richard and Mary Wood knew Roy for many years. They had a blind, disabled son, Jonathan, to whom Roy was very helpful.)

PAST EVENTS

Unfortunately we suffered 2 late speaker cancellations this winter which resulted in replacement events being arranged at very short notice. The first of these was a "Show & Tell Evening", 9 days after our annual Remembrance event, led by Danny at Percy's house, and this proved very interesting though only 10 people attended. The following items were shown, handed round and discussed:-

Danny Collman – Piece of the Berlin Wall mounted alongside a model Trabant

Kelvin Watson – Millennium Compilation of his Haiku poems.

John Lester – Nightwatchman's Monitor (clockwork circa 1940)

Harry Stopes-Roe – 1 flint Spear tip from Swanscombe and flint & obsidian Arrow heads.

John Edwards – 2 Siderite Meteorites (4.5 billion years old) and a Tektite from the moon.

Percy Lea – Replica of an 11th C Door Knocker from Durham Cathedral

Olga Farooki – Elephant (Ganesh?) carved from Polish Rocksalt

As the three other people had not brought items, some additional "treasures" were produced.

John Edwards – 2 foot Walrus tusk carved with Scrimshaw.

John Lester – Twice life-size model of a Harpsichord Jack

Olga Farooki – 1910 Photograph of her Mother as a child in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Unfortunately Anita Morrison-Fokken suffered a fall and incapacitating fracture and so was not able to come to speak to us in January. Instead there was a lively discussion evening on an article from the Times Educational Supplement on 18th Jan entitled "Non-faith Schools Can Be Spiritual".

In between these events, members attended an enjoyable pre Christmas Social, thanks to John Lester's hospitality, and a New Year Meal at Wing Wah. The latter was attended by 17, including a couple of new faces, and was again a great success. There were also a couple of unofficial 'diary' events that were attended by some Birmingham Humanists – the inaugural meeting of the new Lichfield Group and the lecture, also in Lichfield, given by Professor Steve Jones, which is reported on the following page.

A Warm Welcome to New Members Roger Boden and Barbara Foster

HAIKU

If like me you had never come across Haiku, here are some examples - the first three are by Kelvin Watson and the last of unknown origin. Each has to be 3 lines with 5,7 & 5 syllables and usually expresses 2 contrasting concepts.

CARPE DIEM Pare away at life; Steadily reduce the stock; Burn away the wine	NATIONAL LOTTERY A sort of bingo With no night out – just stay in With lonely longing
MAGPIES Big, cruel, early birds Steal, amass, intimidate; Millionaires, too.	CHASTISEMENT If smacking children Was a new Olympic sport Britain would take gold.

WELL DONE NICK CLEGG !

Speaking on Radio 5 Live, the new Lib Dem leader, Nick Clegg answered the question "Do you believe in God?" with a simple, if hesitant, "No". Unfortunately, the rapid-fire format of the programme didn't give him much opportunity to expand on his answer. Later, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, told 5 Live presenter Simon Mayo that atheists politicians' disbelief in God "matters less to me than to know they are honest and reliable and that what beliefs they have they hold sincerely. This isn't a country where Christianity is imposed by law. It's a country with a nominally Christian majority. And that's good. And whoever becomes prime minister has to understand that and work with it rather than against the grain of it."

Editor's note: His Holiness is speaking twaddle again. What he means by 'nominal Christian majority' is really 'a tiny minority of practising Christians' and of course Christianity IS still imposed by law on our children under-16 in assemblies!

“WHY EVOLUTION IS RIGHT AND CREATIONISM IS WRONG”

- the 18th Erasmus Darwin Lecture by Professor Steve Jones at Lichfield's Garrick Theatre

Several members attended this event organised by Lichfield's Science & Engineering Society, which likes to think that on Evolution, 'Erasmus thought of it first!' Steve Jones started by pointing out that the Creation story of Adam, Eve & the apple that we are most familiar with, is not the one with most adherents in the model world. In China and the Far East they believe that a god Pangu grew from an egg until, at 30,000 feet tall, his head hit the sky and exploded. His eyes became the sun and moon and the fleas and lice from his body became men and women respectively. Of course both cannot be correct and there was no possibility of testing either. On the origin of our planet, he recalled that Usher had calculated the Earth to have been formed at October 4th 404 BC at 1130am and that, incredibly, over 40% of Americans think that it was created in the last 10,000 years – out by a factor of approximately 150,000,000 ! The audience laughed and applauded when he showed a slide of the famous comparative pictures from www.bushorchimp.com.

Turning to evolution, Prof Jones explained, as he does to his students, that “I am a geneticist and my job is to make sex boring.” He showed the classic Punch cartoon of shocked waiter confronted by a gorilla in a dinner jacket and mentioned Queen Victoria's 1841 comment when she saw an orang utan in a zoo that it “was awfully and frighteningly human.” He felt this was touched on the main reason that so many non-biologists were so frightened by the concept of evolution: that it demeans humans and lowers us to the level of ordinary animals. He pointed out that this understanding has had some benefits, for it gives primates the same status and rights as humans. However, it was incorrect to see humans as “just a monkey shaved!” We have lost some genes to do with smell and keratin production and also have a much smaller tongue. This makes chewing food more dangerous (choking is once of the commonest causes of death) but too large a tongue makes speech impossible. And it is language and the ability to reason that makes us human, he argued.

He felt that evolution could be summarised in just 3 words - “descent with modification”- and was simply a product of genetics plus time. He teased the audience with the comment that evolution was “so simple it could almost be physics!” and tried to deflect some of the audience's abhorrence of Darwin by pointing out that it was Sir William Jones (no relation!) who first thought of the idea of Evolution in 1794. W.J.'s study of world languages made him realise that they could gradually change into different ones and he actually produced an evolutionary tree for language.

Professor Jones then turned to a modern example of evolution that we have seen within our own lifetime – the changes in the “Aids virus”. HIV was first discovered in USA in 1981 but it's RNA had mutated and changed in many different ways in the last 25 years – the virus had evolved. We are now almost 100% certain that the virus first became a human pathogen back in the 1930's in the Congo, probably as a result of an African being scratched or bitten while hunting monkeys for food. A sort of “fossil” virus had been identified in stored blood samples from the continent at that time.

He felt that fossils were the main direct evidence for evolution but that trying to convince Creationists that this was so was impossible because of their obsession with gaps. As he pointed out, when new remains are discovered that neatly fill a gap in the fossil record, creationists usually point out that this makes things even worse – now there were two gaps! He pointed out that evolution was central to biological understanding and that the Church was able to accept the truth of the theory in Victorian times. It is only in recent times that many religious folk have felt it to be incompatible with faith in God. He recalled asking one of his biology students who had religious faith about how he reconciled the two. “That's easy,” said the student, “you evolved, we were created.”!!

In questions after he had finished his talk, Steve gave short shrift to those who expounded creationist views or wanted intelligent design to be seen as a theory on a par with evolution. When asked how closely we were related to plants, he provoked amazement when he stated we shared 50% of our genes with bananas!

BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS' LIBRARY

Percy Lea reports that our library is once again available to members at all of our meetings held at The Friends Meeting House in George Road. Thanks to John Lester, who has made an excellent stand for our bookcase, the library is now raised above floor level and is much more accessible. All books have been categorized and colour coded – Humanism, Agnosticism & Atheism (BLUE), Religion (RED), Philosophy, Politics & Sociology (GREEN) and Miscellaneous (YELLOW). A complete colour-coded list of all books is available for members to peruse prior to choosing a book. There have been 9 recent additions thanks to the generosity of members. More next issue.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Regarding Humanism and Religion (from Harry Stopes-Roe)

There are four basic ideas: *Humanism* and *Religion*, *Life stance* and *Naturalistic*.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union has stipulated a Minimum Statement of Humanism. All members of IHEU accept this statement when they join.

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.” [Note the way God is rejected.]

Religions are life stances which accept a super-natural element.

Life stance: An individual's or a community's relationship with what they accept as ultimately important; and the commitments, theory and practice of working this out in living.

[Humanists claim that human beings are ultimately important. Theism, A-theism and Agnosticism (*as such*) are not life stances; because they (*as such*) lack the “working out in living”.

Naturalistic: The Universe is **naturalistic**: Values, purposes and meanings derive only from evaluations by, and intentions of, natural beings. A **natural being**: a being capable of consciousness and limited by a material body. [Eg a human being. A God is, of his nature, **Super-natural**.]

Humanism is a naturalistic life stance, all religions are super-natural life stances. It follows that if Humanism is true, than all religions are false. If any religion is true, then Humanism is false. Humanism therefore, of its very nature, confronts all religion, it is against all religion. But that does not mean that Humanists must always be explicitly attacking religion. In particular, Humanists should be sensitive to those for whom their religion is important. Many Christians accept that the State should be secular: that is, not prejudiced for, or against, any life stance. We can work with them to that end.

Problems come, however, from the other side. Religions believe that their fundamental beliefs come from God, and therefore carry His authority. This makes them problematic in civilised society. If their “beliefs” come from God, their “beliefs” are God-given truths, not mere beliefs. How can they give equal status to the falsehoods that deny their truths? Further, if there is no God, then religious leaders have no special authority. If Humanism were true, religious leaders lose their present privileged position in society, able to dominate us. There are these in-built pressure on religious leaders to reject the idea of an open society which is fair to all life stances. For these and other reasons, Humanism suffers discrimination in our society.

Here Danny misses the point. At the bottom of the first page of his article in BH News and Views of last November he accuses Humanists of “potentially moving into the realms of hypocrisy” by ourselves “feel[ing] strongly that ‘they’ should not be trying to persuade us of the wrongness of our beliefs.” Abe Alpre in his letter in the same issue says much the same. But Humanists DO NOT say this. They object to religious people *imposing* the practical consequences of their beliefs on us and other people. This phenomenon is by no means of minimal significance! Last autumn Christians killed a small move towards allowing the Humanist conscience on voluntary euthanasia. The Churches collected a large sum of money and their Bishops campaigned, successfully. More important, Rome is a major influence for destroying the future of the world. The future depends as much on limiting population growth as it does on limiting resource use. Rome is actively preventing effective birth control.

Humanists want the Open Society (the Secular Society) where we can *all* express our views as strongly as we like, and no particular views are given special privileges. Every life stance has the right to try to persuade the community as a whole to accept legislation according to its views. But there are two constraints on this. First, over the centuries, the West is coming to recognise certain basic human rights (eg equality for women). Religions can not be allowed to break these rights. Secondly, no life stance has the right even to seek legislation which would limit other life stances in expressing their consciences. There are problems in the last two points taken together. These will be discussed (at the April meeting).

Finally, Abe does serious damage when he repeats the old mantra that there is no common core to Humanism. Humanists may express things differently, but they agree the essence. The IHEU statement is a reasonable expression of that essence.

A DURHAM EXPERIENCE by Percy Lea

My first visit to Durham Cathedral in July, 1972, was a unique and memorable experience. It coincided with the annual Miners' Gala and from early morning, throughout County Durham, miners marched with their colliery brass bands and with banners held high, towards Durham City. It was thirsty work and the need for liquid refreshment on the journey was met frequently as the miners marched from pub to pub. Gala day is a community celebration and an opportunity for Durham folk to relax and enjoy themselves. Subsequently, the number of marchers swelled as local people joined the throng which converged slowly, but in high spirits, towards the City Racecourse alongside the River Wear. No racing took place on Gala day when the racecourse was converted into a fairground site for much appreciated family entertainment.

Throughout the morning, colliery brass bands and their followers arrived sporadically at the racecourse. The site was soon festooned with the colourful colliery banners and the uniforms of the tanked up bandsmen sprawled out on the grass. Shortly after the music had ceased, the amplified speeches of the miner's leaders and supportive politicians on the raised speakers' platform, could be heard followed by cheering and applause.

However, all this changed in mid-afternoon when the bandsmen gathered themselves together - straightening their jackets, putting on their caps and positioning themselves with their instruments ready for the entry into the cathedral. The sound of brass band music resonating off the cold solid walls and lofty ceiling of the cathedral was breath taking. The ethos and dark grandeur of the ancient edifice was immediately enhanced. The robes of the Bishop of Durham, his entourage and the cassocks of the cathedral choir were perhaps less significant than the colliery banners and the uniforms of the bandsmen, but together they created a spectacular effect. By association - this annual service for Durham miners and their families, combined with the sight, sound, ethos and resultant emotional involvement of individual members of the congregation, reinforced the pseudo spiritual significance of this grand and festive occasion.

Durham Cathedral is a fine example of early Norman architecture and as a humanist I feel that its historical significance is greater than its religious appeal. The building of Durham Cathedral began in 1093 by the first Norman Prince Bishop, William St Carileph, a wealthy man who enjoyed a unique position of secular and ecclesiastical power. The construction of the cathedral continued for more than 40 years and during this period considerable forced labour and suffering must have been imposed upon the local people by the Norman overlords. Such buildings were a permanent reminder to a subservient population of Norman dominance. Bishops were fundamentally feudal lords who ruled with the authority of an occupying force. They controlled land from the Tees to the Tyne and also far to the North to the Scottish border. Basically, the cathedral was a fortress church whose main function was to guard the border and Norman Soldier Bishops led armies against the Scots. Sir Walter Scott described Durham Cathedral as " half church of God, half castle' gainst the Scot. "

The cathedral still retains the air of a fortress but its religious significance in a 21st century secular society is perhaps an illusion. This masterpiece of Norman architecture was built to maintain control of the population rather than to worship a perceived supernatural being. Within its enormous structure sound resonates impressively as it would within a large cave. This enhances the music played or sung within the cathedral, all of which is composed and performed by talented mortals. The presence of marble statues, ornate tombs, religious artifacts, symbols and plaques on the cathedral walls, indicates a need of irrational and insecure people to appease a perceived supernatural being with a view to acquiring life in the hereafter. The 17 century poet Andrew Marvell wrote :
" Priests were the first deluders of mankind,
Who with blind faith made all their reason blind. "

Fear of the unknown combined with an inability to come to terms with the inevitability of death is a major contributor to religious belief. Only irrational belief can claim to enable mankind to achieve immortality. Such belief is basically a denial of common sense, logic and considerable evidence from scientific research into the origins of diverse life on planet earth. It is a paradox that man's creativity tempered with fear and insecurity has enabled him to create gods to compensate for lack of knowledge and understanding of man's place in the natural world.

Nevertheless, a visit to Durham Cathedral can be a most rewarding experience in terms of appreciating the incredible architectural achievements of man in the 11th century. Similarly, the Pyramids of Egypt provide us with a sense of awe at the skill of ancient peoples but the gods they worshipped are long gone.

“CELESTIAL SYNOD” by John Lester

“Welcome to the Fourth Millenary Synod, gentlemen”, said Zeus whose turn it was to take the chair. “Ladies and gentlemen”, corrected Athene who was sitting in the front row. “And animals”, miaowed Bast from the comfort of her cushion.

“That’s enough of that”, thundered Zeus, “We have a lot to get through and I don’t want this meeting to drag on for 105 years like it did last time. I am going to ask the Holy Ghost to introduce the first motion which is going to be contentious, so let’s get on with it.”

The Holy Ghost shimmered into action. “My view”, he said, “is that each religion should send one representative only to this conference. That is why I am here alone to represent Christianity. All three of us could have turned up and had a vote each but we thought that would be unfair.” A loud murmur of dissent arose but was swiftly quelled by the chairman.

“Polytheistic religions are getting their own way far too often”, continued the Holy Ghost, “and considering that they are rather old halo these days it doesn’t seem right that their gods should be able to outvote the monotheistic ones.”

Hear, hear”, broke in Allah, “And when Siva’s around we never dare decide anything on a show of hands.”

Zeus was finding it harder to keep order now and had to overcome the temptation to allow rioting to break out since his own status, too, was under threat from these suggestions. He controlled himself with some difficulty and the meeting with rather more. When order was eventually restored, another voice was heard. “We need to go further than this”, said Jehovah, “because many of the polytheistic religions are no longer active; they have no followers and nobody is left to worship their gods. Why should they be represented here at all? The trend is for fewer gods per religion and if it continues we may end up with none at all. We only exist because people believe in us.”

“I shall always be a god”, retorted Allah.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, lad”, said the Holy Ghost quietly.

“Let me remind you, ladies, gentlemen and animals”, said Zeus soothingly, “that we are omnipotent.... Aren’t we?” he added more hesitantly. “The whole point of this synod is to decide on our plans for the universe over the next thousand years. We don’t want to use our omnipotence in conflicting ways or we shall lose the support of humanity. They are beginning to see through us as it is and I, for one, do not want to have to re-train for another career this far into eternity.”

“Mr Chairman”, interrupted Osiris, “don’t you think that we made a mistake several meetings ago when we decided that, having put mankind on earth, we would let them work things out for themselves.? Humanity is in a right mess and it is time we forgot our squabbles and did something for it.”

“Cats manage much better” commented Bast in an aside to Ganesa who waved his trunk in agreement. “We may already be too late”, said Mithras, “I haven’t had much to do lately so I have had time to watch what the humans are up to. They seem to be developing a god of their own and, though it is at an early stage of development, shrines to it are beginning to appear in almost every household.”

“Humans can’t possibly make a god”, objected Zeus, “Where would they get the materials? They don’t have the recipe for ichor for a start. What are they going to make it from?”

“Silicon mostly”, said Mithras.

The 10 Paradoxical Commandments by Dr. Kent M. Keith

1. **People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centred. Love them anyway.**
 2. **If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.**
 3. **If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.**
 4. **The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.**
 5. **Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.**
 6. **The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.**
 7. **People favour underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.**
 8. **What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.**
 9. **People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.**
 10. **Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.**
- (Spotted by Brian Green on wikipedia.org)

A MID-WINTER MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE NSS

So, let's get this right – we're engaged in a battle of ideas, not of people. We all know what happens when people don't talk and discuss – they become suspicious of each other and they fight. So, my New Year's resolution is to talk, debate, discuss, explore and listen; to continue to struggle for a secular structure for society, but in a reasonable and rational way.

Secularism is about living together in peace and harmony, without exploitation and without coercion. It isn't primarily about attacking religion or religious believers. Although we may have a lot of sympathy with the rationalism of Dawkins and Hitchens, we realise that the argument about the truth or otherwise of religion is separate from the struggle for secularism.

Whatever we may feel about religion – and I know that many Humanists and NSS members have very strong anti-religious instincts – we have to be pragmatic and understand that religion is not going away. So, secularism tries to create a shared space where no-one can dominate. The veracity or otherwise of religious belief is a legitimate argument, but not one that is central to the creation of a secular society.

Secularism is about listening to other people's point of view, but sometimes agreeing to differ. It goes like this: you do what you want (within the law) in your space (temple, mosque, church, home), and we'll do what we want in our space (likewise within the law), and we'll agree not to interfere with each other while within those spaces.

But in the space that we have to share – the public square as it has been called - there can only be democracy, equality and individual human rights. The direction and shape of our society and culture must be agreed between us, believer and non-believer alike, not imposed by divine right or by superior strength. In that way, we all participate. We don't always get what we want, but at least we have the opportunity to lobby to change things by argument and persuasion, rather than by force and fiat.

But now, as the Christmas holiday approaches, and the time comes for reunions with family and friends, for the exchange of presents and for the sharing of good food and drink, we can live in peace with each other, at least for these few days. The churches are open for those who want them, and so are the boozers. Christmas carols will be sung and Monopoly played. Telly will be watched and snoozes taken. For those lucky enough to be in the warmth of good company, there will be a central feast and the sound of children enjoying what is, essentially, their special time. Our friends from Muslim, Sikh and Hindu backgrounds will be able to share in the excitement and enjoy the holiday, too. The mischievous forces that try to make life difficult for them should be challenged, but over the holiday time, we can try to put aside those man-made differences and just let it be. Let's leave the point-scoring and the arguing until next year. Despite the claims of some, this mid-winter holiday does not uniquely belong to one section of the community. Indeed, there is no reason why atheists can't enjoy it with a clear conscience. I certainly will and I sincerely hope you will, too. So, whatever your religion (or lack of it) and whatever your circumstances, I wish you a very happy Christmas – as well as a peaceful solstice time and a jolly holly-day.

Terry Sanderson 21st December 2007

(Ed: I felt this now out-of-date piece was interesting and worthy of reproducing in view of our Humanism v Religion debate and how the NSS is often perceived as being extremely anti-religious)

NEWS FROM THE COMMITTEE

The group was represented at the recent GRAM meeting in London by Danny Collman, who also chaired the meeting and reported back to the committee. At the start of December John Lester resigned from the committee in order to devote more time to his other commitments. Jane Wynne Willson is due to speak to the University of the Third Age in March and has just produced a major work on her family ancestry which includes several generations of Humanists. You can find out more on "The Chain of Love" from www.garlandpublications.co.uk if you are interested. Please keep me informed if you publicise Humanism in any way.

NEWS & VIEWS BY E - MAIL ??

It has been suggested that some members might prefer to receive their copy of "News & Views" by e-mail, thereby seeing any pictures in full colour and at the same time helping the group to save a small amount of money. It would also enable them to forward a copy to friends they think might be interested in Humanism and/or Birmingham Humanists. If this applies to you please e-mail me at jaejed@hotmail.com You should also e-mail if you would like an e-mailed copy in addition to a posted one. Note that neither of these choices will affect your membership subscription in any way !

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 utilised by other Humanist groups, with acknowledgements as to the source. Anyone objecting to this should let me know when they submit items.