



BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS

NEWS AND VIEWS

www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

Number 22

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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

BIRMINGHAM HUMANISTS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

At Jane & William Wynne Willson's house :28 Garland Way, off Heath Road South, Northfield

Thursday 19th June 6.30 for 7.45pm start

For the past few years there has been a "Bring A Plate Buffet" and social get-together before the AGM and this year is no different. Please phone Jane (0121 475 6508) to co-ordinate food and drink offerings.

PAST EVENTS

There was a larger audience for the Tuesday evening debate on how far Humanists or Humanism should be against religion than there was for the Saturday afternoon talk on discrimination by the MP for Solihull which seems to confirm our survey results that members are more interested in meetings devoted to religious or humanist topics than to social or medical issues. Lorely Burt gave us some interesting glimpses of life in the House of Commons but did not stick all that closely to her own chosen title involving female equality.. In her weekly Newsletter, e- mailed to interested constituents, she mentioned her visit to us as follows:-

"There was plenty to do (this week) including my usual Saturday surgery, canvassing, a talk to Birmingham Humanists and a ride on Michael Clancy's red tractor to mark St Patrick's Day and more importantly his setting out to go from Lands End to John O'Groats to raise money for the Prostate Cancer Charity. Unfortunately, the Humanists talk coincided with the England/Ireland match on the final day of the Six Nations. But much as I love a game of Rugby they were definitely worth it.

Humanists' approach to life is based on humanity and reason. They think that moral values should be drawn from human nature and experience, and decisions should be based on the available evidence and an assessment of the outcomes of a person's actions rather than a sacred text or tradition.

I have done some work on their behalf in Parliament, raising an Early Day Motion to say they should be able to marry in their own premises: giving them equality with religious groups. I also supported my colleague Evan Harris's Bill on blasphemy: an outdated concept with, in my view, no place in a multi faith society.

All of that said, they were an argumentative and feisty lot, their questions and arguments testing my own opinions on many subjects. The talk was about a long-standing issue with me: equality, and particularly equality for women. They were fascinated and appalled at my description of the chauvinistic way that parliament operates, with no crèche for members' children (staff get childcare vouchers) but above all the 'Punch and Judy' politics enshrined in our adversarial, two-party system. They were amazed when I told them about the wall of noise emanating from Labour or Conservative benches if your question is interpreted as critical to them, the shouting, cat-calling, pointing and shouting 'reading, reading' if you dare to read from your notes.

Women comprise less than 20% of these 'honourable members', and ethnic minority women only 0.3%. How can we get laws that reflect the needs of everyone if the people who make the laws don't look like the people they serve?

Personally I think that more women would be a hugely civilising force in parliament. And we don't have to sacrifice all our traditions to make things run more efficiently. When every vote takes 15 minutes, you would really think there was a better way for over 600 MPs to spend their time!"

There were around 34 people at the debate, including quite a few new faces. I was sorry to have missed it as I heard that the discussion was 'free-ranging' and the general consensus was that Humanists had to be more anti-religion than neutral towards it. The 7 or 8 who went on the April walk led by John Lester enjoyed it but found it more tiring than usual because it was so muddy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Olga Farooqui

WHAT IS HUMANISM FOR?

I was saddened when, at the end of our last meeting on Humanism v Religion, Danny said that he was no longer sure if he is a Humanist. It seems to me that this is all a big misunderstanding. At the meeting we concentrated on what it is that Humanism is against and we agreed that we are against the undue influence exercised on our lives by organised religion. But this is only a small part of what it means to be a Humanist. Not every atheist is a Humanist. Humanism is a positive stance. To quote from the Minimum Statement of Humanism: "It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values..." We accept the 'Golden Rule' as the ethical way of behaviour, coming from our nature and from reason, not from a supernatural being.

The problem is that as long as organised religion is exerting its influence on many parts of our lives – faith schools and opposition to birth control and voluntary euthanasia for example – we have to concentrate our limited resources on opposing them there. If this influence of organised religion ceased, in other words if we lived in a fully secular society, we could then concentrate on the positive aims of Humanism, trying to make this world a better place to live.

When I lived in Southampton I knew that many members of the Humanist group there, those who had the time and energy, did all sorts of voluntary work. I have a sneaking suspicion that the same is true here in Birmingham. All this is being done quietly, without advertising Humanism. Maybe this is wrong. Maybe the BHA should produce a big 'Happy Human' badge to wear on such occasions? After all many people wear crosses.

(Ed: Our group does have some tasteful 'Happy Human' pendants & chain that can be worn around the neck in the same way as people wear their crosses for a very reasonable £5.00!)

While I'm at it, I may try and clear another misunderstanding. In his handout at the meeting Danny writes: "I am not an android. Emotions, feelings come into the equation". He seems to be accusing Humanists of being devoid of any feelings and emotions. I think this notion originated at a meeting some two years ago when we were discussing spirituality. Of course we all have feelings, we wouldn't be human otherwise. It's just that some of us do not like the word 'spiritual' because of its connotations. All the evidence suggests there is no spirit existing independently of the body and that all our thoughts and feelings are functions of the living brain.

(Ed: The problem of what spirituality means to Humanists and believers in non-theistic life stances is one of the things referred to in most 'A' level Religious Studies syllabuses and I have had to give it more thought recently. One of the best expositions on a Humanist view of Spirituality formed part of a letter by Albert Adler of London to "The Freethinker". In April 2008 he wrote:-

"The dogmatic atheist (not an altogether unknown phenomenon) reacting perhaps to an earlier force-feeding, whether imposed by family or society or both, of religious doctrine, will presumably insist that all experiences and values have a material basis and that therefore spiritual experiences and values (meaning by "spiritual" that conviction or emotion which arises in the mind and cannot be explained, which cannot be examined and reasoned about) is no more than a baseless chimera – a mere fantasy of the religious mind.

Of course the godmatic believer on the other hand advances such experiences, such convictions, as proofs or at least manifestations of his (highly improbable and altogether unprovable) God. 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 a proof or manifestation of some supernatural power. Many things about life, and indeed existence itself, we don't yet understand and some things mankind may never understand. But this is no reason for embracing the plainly irrational....

.....It may be asked: What do I mean by spirituality and spiritual experiences? I mean no more and no less than the uplifting of the spirit (or awareness if you like) which raises it above that purely selfish or self-regarding state of mind that normally holds sway and prevails as we seek good or benefit or advantage for ourselves and ours – though not of course necessarily entailing harm to the interests of others – and which, however occasioned, unites us to a sense of joy and reverence for life in any or all of its varied shapes and forms. In my opinion it is this state of mind, evoked perhaps by nature or art or being touched by human sympathy, which is often enough taken to be proof of the supernatural when in fact it is proof only that the mind is capable of rejoicing in life and its wonders – whether natural or man-made."

From Ian MacDonald

A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE

If you listened to the 'Sunday Programme' on Radio 4 at 7.10 this morning you would have heard an interesting discussion on the matter of MPs voting according to their conscience. There was a Catholic representative in the studio as well as a Church of England one. David Steel representing the Church of Scotland was also present and there was also a secular representative. I felt ex Lib Dem leader made an excellent point in stating that when the Catholic hierarchy hoped that MPs would vote according to their conscience, what was meant was that they should vote in accordance with their church's decision that the proposed bill was immoral. He maintained that if he voted in accordance with what his church believed that would not necessarily coincide with what his conscience told him. Of course that opened up the question of how conscience should be defined. He seemed to think it was how a person felt on a particular issue. But of course people could think very passionately on issues but be completely ignorant about them and those of a secular disposition might suspect that this could be the case if Catholics did not take the trouble to understand the scientific argument.

When one of the religious representatives made the claim that religion had been an immense influence for the good in terms of making people live a moral life, the secular representative naturally responded by saying that you didn't need to have any religion to live that kind of life. He might have added, though he didn't, that the history of most religions in respect of morality could not be upheld by any person of conscience today. The persecution of millions for simply not conforming or being accused of not conforming, to the existing definition of a heretic, should be enough to humble any religious person that they alone should speak for morality.

VISITS TO SCHOOLS & COLLEGES

In the last 6 months Birmingham Humanists have received two invitations to talk about Humanism to 'A' level Religious Studies students. Last November Jane Wynne Willson and John Edwards visited King Edward High School for Girls in Edgbaston for two sessions, each of around 1hr 30 minutes, with around ten 17 year old girls of differing religious backgrounds in each group. They were able to explain briefly how they personally came to Humanism before describing humanistic views on ethics, religions and spirituality. The two R.S. teachers sat in on the first session and were 'out-performed' by most of their students when invited to complete the ice-breaker 'Quiz' from "Humanist Dipper" which purports to show whether one inclines towards or away from Humanism. There were plenty of thought-provoking questions and it looks as though we will be invited back next year. The opportunity also arose to hand over copies of "Humanist Perspectives 2" (for the R.S. Dept) and "The God Delusion" (for the school library).

Then in February the chance came to speak to 3 groups of students, also following the AQA Religious Studies syllabus, at Cadbury Sixth form College in Kings Norton. This seemed a good opportunity to try out Danny Collman's "powerpoint presentation" on Humanism, although as the sessions were only 1 hour this had to be used selectively so as to allow plenty of time for questions & discussion. The mixed-sex groups were again of 17-18 year olds and the first was completely muslim (following the Islam 'option' not surprisingly) Numbers were slightly larger than at King Edwards Girls and the students seemed less inclined toward the Humanist approach but again it was an interesting experience and we may well be invited back again next year.



The fact that the BHA has now launched its "Humanism For Schools" website, provides us with another opportunity to contact schools, for we will certainly be trying to draw this new resource to their attention. So far we have concentrated on Secondary Schools. Should we start to contact Primary and Junior Schools? There are so many of them the task is a formidable one and getting our message across could be very challenging!

HUMANISTS QUOTATION QUIZ

John Lester wondered if members can identify the source of the following quotations?

- 1) And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin
The littlest fish may enter in."
- 2) "Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead.
- 3) "RELIGION, n. A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Uknowable. SAINT, n.. A dead sinner revised and edited."
- 4) "Thou shalt have one God only; who
Would be at the expense of two?"
- 5) "Had I been present at the Creation, I would have given some useful hints for the better ordering of the universe."
- 6) "William Outram: He was a tall spare leane pale consumptive man; wasted himself much, I presume, by frequent preaching."
- 7) "Man is by his constitution a religious animal."
- 8) "And Easter Day, we didn't get to the country,
So we took young Cyril to church. And they rang
A bell,
And he said right out loud, *crumpets*."
- 9) "I count religion but a childish toy, and hold there is no sin but ignorance."
- 10) "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people."

Answers elsewhere in this issue

SUCCESS & FAILURE ON BLASPHEMY!!

There can not be many members who have not heard that the House of Lords finally voted by 148 votes to 87 to abolish the common law offence of blasphemy on 5 March 2008. There was a near record turn-out of bishops but, perhaps surprisingly, they were split between those accepting the inevitability of change and those lamenting the signal that abolition would give about the decline of religious influence.

Fewer perhaps will know that the NSS – which has been pressing for the abolition of the offence of blasphemy for 140 years – is to hold a "Bye-Bye- Blasphemy Party" in Central London at lunchtime on Saturday 21st June (Tickets £20 or £10 for students)

I can't help feel their celebrations are premature for elsewhere in the world the green light was given for the passing of new laws even more pernicious than the UK blasphemy one. Roy W Brown of the IHEU described what happened at the Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva on 28th March:-

VOTE ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MARKS THE END OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

For the past eleven years the organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), representing the 57 Islamic States, has been tightening its grip on the throat of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yesterday, 28 March 2008, they finally killed it. With the support of their allies including China, Russia and Cuba (none well-known for their defence of human rights) the Islamic States succeeded in forcing through an amendment to a resolution on Freedom of Expression that has turned the entire concept on its head.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression will now be required to report on the "abuse" of this most cherished freedom by anyone who, for example, dares speak out against Sharia laws that

require women to be stoned to death for adultery or young men to be hanged for being gay, or against the marriage of girls as young as nine, as in Iran.

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan saw the writing on the wall 3 years ago when he spoke of the old Commission on Human Rights having “become too selective and too political in its work”. Piecemeal reform would not be enough. The old system needed to be swept away and replaced by something better.

The Human Rights Council was supposed to be that new start - a Council whose members genuinely supported, and were prepared to defend, the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet since its inception in June 2006, the Human Rights Council has failed to condemn the most egregious examples of human rights abuse in the Sudan, Byelorussia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and elsewhere, whilst repeatedly condemning Israel and Israel alone.

Three years later Annan’s dream lies shattered, and the Human Rights Council stands exposed as incapable of fulfilling its central role: the promotion and protection of human rights. The Council died yesterday in Geneva, and with it the Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose 60th anniversary we were actually celebrating this year.

There has been a seismic shift in the balance of power in the UN system. For over a decade the Islamic States have been flexing their muscles. Yesterday they struck. There can no longer be any pretence that the Human Rights Council can defend human rights. The moral leadership of the United Nations system has moved from the States who created the UN in the aftermath of the Second World War, committed to the concepts of equality, individual freedom and the rule of law, to the Islamic States, whose allegiance is to a narrow, medieval worldview defined exclusively in terms of man’s duties towards Allah, and to their fellow-travellers, the States who see their future economic and political interests as being best served by their alliances with the Islamic States.

Yesterday’s attack by the Islamists, led by Pakistan, had the subtlety of a thin-bladed knife slipped silently under the ribs of the Human Rights Council. At first reading the amendment to the resolution to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression might seem reasonable. It requires the Special Rapporteur:-

“To report on instances in which the abuse of the right of freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination ...”

For Canada, who had fought long and hard as main sponsor of this resolution to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, this was too much. The internationally agreed limits to Freedom of Expression are detailed in article 19 of the legally binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and are already referred to in the preamble to the resolution. If abuse of freedom of expression infringed anyone’s freedom of religion, for example, it would fall within the scope of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion. To add it here was unnecessary duplication.

Canada’s position was “Requesting the Special Rapporteur to report on abuses of [this right] would turn the mandate on its head. Instead of promoting freedom of expression the Special Rapporteur would be policing its exercise ... If this amendment is adopted, Canada will withdraw its sponsorship from the main resolution.” This stance was echoed by several delegations including India, who objected to the change of focus from protecting to limiting freedom of expression. The European Union, the United Kingdom (speaking for Australia and the United States), India, Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala and Switzerland all withdrew their sponsorship of the main resolution when the amendment was passed. In total, more than 20 of the original 53 co-sponsors of the resolution withdrew their support.

On the vote, the amendment was adopted by 27 votes to 15 against, with three abstentions.

The Sri Lankan delegate explained clearly his reasons for supporting the amendment:

“.. if we regulate certain things ‘minimally’ we may be able to prevent them from being enacted violently on the streets of our towns and cities.”

In other words: Don’t exercise your right to freedom of expression because your opponents may become violent. For the first time in the 60 year history of UN Human Rights bodies, a fundamental human right has been limited simply because of the possible violent reaction by the enemies of human rights.

The violence we have seen played out in reaction to the Danish cartoons is thus excused by the Council – it was the cartoonists whose freedom of expression needed to be regulated. And Theo van Gogh can be deemed responsible for his own death.

Freedom of expression is that right which – uniquely – enables us to expose, communicate and condemn abuse of all our other rights. Without freedom of expression and freedom of the press we give the green light to tyranny and make it impossible to expose corruption, incompetence, injustice and oppression.

But however important freedom of expression may be for us who live in the West, its overwhelming importance for those who live under the tyranny of Islamic law was highlighted by a courageous group of 21 NGOs from the Islamic States who issued a statement yesterday appealing to delegations to oppose the amendment. See <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/petition-hrc.pdf> Incredibly, following the vote on the amendment, the Council descended even further into chaos. At the very last moment, Cuba introduced an oral amendment – clearly against the rules of procedure. When Canada objected they were overruled by the President. When Slovenia – on behalf of the European Union – tried to intervene on a point of order and ask for a ten-minute adjournment, they were ignored. When they tried to protest in another point of order their right to do so was challenged by Egypt, and the Egyptian objection was upheld.

The main resolution was then put to the vote and was adopted by 32 votes in favour, none against, with 15 abstentions.

The NGO community now needs to think carefully about what purpose can any longer be served by continuing our engagement with the Human Rights Council, and by fighting for values that are no longer accepted within the UN system. I have personally been involved with the Human Rights Commission and Council for the past five years and can see little benefit in continuing. Our well-argued position papers are ignored, our speeches are interrupted with repeated and irrelevant points of order, and we are not even supported in our efforts by the western delegations who, shockingly, did not even vote against today's travesty, but abstained.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights died yesterday. Who knows when, or if, it can ever be revived.

I used to wonder what States who felt it necessary to kill people because they change their religion thought they were doing in the Human Rights Council. Now I know.

The wafer-thin sham of an international consensus on the promotion and protection of human rights has finally been exposed for what it was – a sham. The fragmentation of human rights now appears inevitable. The proposed Islamic Charter on Human Rights (read "Duties towards Allah") will certainly go ahead, as will the creation of a parallel Islamic Council on Human Rights. But the OIC will nevertheless continue to attend and dominate the UN Human Rights Council, thereby ensuring its continuing emasculation and descent into total irrelevance.

Just five months before he and more than 20 of his colleagues were killed by a terrorist bomb in Baghdad, the then High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sergio Vieira de Mello, wrote:

"Membership of the Commission on Human Rights must carry responsibilities. I therefore wonder whether the time has not come for the Commission itself to develop a code of guidelines for access to membership of the Commission and a code of conduct for members while they serve on the Commission. After all the Commission on Human Rights has a duty to humanity and the members of the Commission must themselves set the example of adherence to the international human rights norms – in practice as well as in law..."

States who are genuinely concerned with human rights should immediately withdraw from the Council until such time as all member states as well as those offering themselves for election agree to honour their pledges, and undertake to expel any member state which, having been put on notice regarding its human rights record, fails to put its house in order within a reasonable timescale.

Failing this, what better tribute to Sergio de Mello could there be than to create an alternative organisation – Kofi Annan's organisation of the willing - whose members agree to adopt Sergio de Mello's guidelines and code of conduct – and are actually held to account.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION R.I.P.

EVENTS IN INDIA

Bill Green and Eddie Roberts recently attended a meeting in Handsworth sponsored by the Asian Rationalist Society (Britain) unfortunately, but of necessity, called at short notice. Bill reports that they were given an excellent talk by Babu Gogineni from Hyderabad, a member of the IHEU.

"This man is a truly gifted public speaker and he gave one of the best speeches I have heard in a long time. He spoke for around an hour without notes and for our benefit in English rather than Hindi or Punjabi. For those of you who could not attend you missed a treat and if you ever get an opportunity to hear him speak again, go out of your way to attend.

(Ed: He came and spoke to our group in 2005!!)

He described some events in India. Barely 150 km from Hyderabad is a village outside of which there is a Dalit (formerly known as untouchable) community. One of India's notorious godmen had announced that before the children in the community could receive an education they would need to make a sacrifice. Not a sheep or goat, but one of their children. It would have to be a human sacrifice he insisted. Fear spread through the community and children were kept from going to school. If a child sacrifice was going to happen the Dalits knew it would not be a child of wealthy parents. Here the Rationalists stepped in. They spend time in communities demonstrating the cheap conjuring tricks and sleight of hand which the holy men use to trick people into believing they have supernatural powers. They managed to persuade some of the young people and some elders in going with them to the temple to confront this godman. Having got wind that he was to have visitors he ran off and so there was great disappointment. However the community now feel enlightened and empowered to act against these villains.

The Rationalists are now finding that right wing groups are supporting the holy men, and the BJP Hindu fundamentalists who share power in government are influential in bringing forward laws to stop the Rationalists exposing the religious fraud taking place, exploiting peoples' vulnerability and ignorance. While this has been taking place in the Gujarat for some time, thugs have been beating up Rationalists in the Punjab and measures are being taken inside government to have Rationalist book banned.

Since this talk in a shocking affront to freedom of expression, in March 2008, the Government of Punjab, India, has banned four rationalist books and threatened legal action against the authors and translators, *Tarksheel Society of Punjab reports*. The supposed grounds for the ban is that the books are "incorrect literature" about Hindu deities. Below is part of an open letter asking for support to get this ban lifted :-

Dear Friends,

On Thursday afternoon, Punjab Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal (leader of Shiromani Akali Dal, a party supported by the BJP), imposed an "immediate ban" on four books, including Sri Lankan Dr Abraham T. Kovoor's renowned 'God, Demons and Spirits', translated into Punjabi by Megh Raj Mitter and his associates in 1985. And Punjab Government is said to be gearing up to take the legal course of action (like arresting the authors, confiscating the copies of books and banning the publication) as well.

Unfortunately, the Punjab government has forgotten the vital role these books have played in the development of rational temperament among the masses of Punjab. Ironically, about two decades back, with a written letter the state government had recommended these books for the libraries of the government run schools for the scientific knowledge they imparted. Also, when Mitter was awarded the Shiromani Lekhak Award by the Language Department of Punjab government in 2001, the citation of the award ceremony prominently hailed these very books. Today, fundamentalist forces, patronised by the government, are threatening to attack Megh Raj Mitter and other rationalist activists. A few rationalist activists were even attacked in the last few days.

Through this letter we appeal to all humanist, democratic, rationalist and secular people to come forward to help defend the right of freedom of speech and expression. It is not just a question of a few individuals or organisations, but also a matter of protecting the shrinking democratic space in the India. We appeal you to condemn this heinous act at every possible level. Kindly forward this letter to as many people as you can, write an appeal to President, Prime Minister of India, CM Punjab and Governor of Punjab. Regards Surjit Talwar (Editor, Tarkbodh)

For any queries you can contact on our Web site : www.tarksheel.com

Send an e-mail to the President of India at: presidentofindia@rb.nic.in

The Prime Minister of India: suggestpmo@pmo.nic.in

The Punjab & Haryana High Court, Chandigarh: hcourt@chd.nic.in

The Chief Minister of Punjab: cs@punjabmail.gov.in

The Governor of Punjab: governor@punjabmail.gov.in

An interesting side note and one which I have not seen reported in our own media is that at the same time as the fiasco that is Terminal 5 was happening, the city of Hyderabad, where the speaker came from, opened a new airport terminal which was larger than T5. It did not have the hullabaloo surrounding T5 because astonishingly, it worked. How can this be I ask cynically, that a supposed third world country can open a major civil project on time, under budget that actually works from day one and the UK cannot. Can you imagine what the results are going to be for the 2012 Olympics currently behind schedule and MASSIVELY over budget? This tells me that although the UK is one of the finest countries in the world to live in, assuming we will always be top of the tree compared to other countries perceived as poorer than ourselves, is arrogance that could, over time, turn the UK into third world country itself.”

“THE GREAT TANTRA CHALLENGE”

The latest “New Humanist” contains an interesting report of an event that over half the nation watched at prime time on India TV. It started when Sanal Edamaruku (President of the Indian Rationalist Association) and Pandit Surinder Sharma were invited to discuss claims that politicians in Madhya Pradesh were using tantrik powers to damage opponents. Sharma, India’s most powerful tantrik, hogged centre stage for much of the first half of the 30 minute programme, demonstrating the various techniques for causing harm to someone at a distance (such as burning their photo, torturing a little doll etc) and eventually boasted that he could kill anyone with mantras in just 3 minutes. This gave Sanal the chance to challenge him to demonstrate his powers on him there and then in front of the TV audience. At first the tantrik tried to ignore the proposal but, after it was repeated 5 times, he was goaded into agreeing to demonstrate his supposed powers. What happened after the commercial break has now been posted on YouTube as “The Great Tantra Challenge”. After 8 minutes of mantra-chanting had failed to injure Sanal, Sharma then tried sprinkling water and brandishing a knife – again to no avail. The programme time had long run out but the exciting situation prompted station managers to cancel the planned schedule of programmes and switch to “breaking news” mode. Even rationalists held their breath as Sharma then tried physical manipulation of Sanal’s head and the programme presenter had to intervene to stop this non-tantrik assault. Eventually, after 90 minutes of what now seems amusing buffoonery, the TV anchorman confirmed the charlatan’s total failure and the triumph of rationalism. However, Sharma tried to save face by introducing an allegedly infallible “Ultimate Destruction Tantra” that he would be able to perform at night. The UDT was performed in the studio courtyard and Sanal decided to play it safe and employ a personal bodyguard and some impartial observers to ensure there were no dirty tricks. Sanal had to sit at the “tantrik altar” – a fire blazing under the open night sky – while Sharma and 2 young tantriks threw photos, mustard seed & a signed piece of paper into the flames, waved peacock feathers, strangles a doll made from sticky-wheat and other ‘lethal’ devices. At midnight it was clear that the tantrik powers of one of India’s most powerful holy men had failed again and the show ended with a second triumph for rationalism.

A VERY WARM WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS, GHISLAINE MOUNTCASTLE & MIKE FOSTER

(Our membership now stands at almost 90 & will hopefully reach 100 before the end of the decade)

ANSWERS TO JOHN’S QUOTATIONS QUIZ

- 1) Rupert Brooke. “Heaven.”
- 2) Nietzsche. “This spake Zarathustra.”
- 3) Ambrose Bierce. “The Devil’s Dictionary.”
- 4) Arthur Hugh Clough. “The Latest Decalogue.”
- 5) Alfonso the Wise, King of Castile, 1221-1284
- 6) John Aubrey. “Brief Lives.” (One of the briefest!)
- 7) Edmund Burke. “Reflections on the French Revolution.”
- 8) T.S.Eliot. “Coriolan.”
- 9) Christopher Marlowe. “The Jew of Malta” (prologue).
- 10) J.S.Mill. “On Liberty.”

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.

WHO AM I, WHAT AM I, WHAT CAN I KNOW?

Who am I? I am an island. I am an individual whom no other human being can ever fully comprehend; and one who hopefully will evince qualities that will endear me to a few other members of the human race!

What am I? I am a human being comprising inherited genes, family circumstances and mores, and incidental influences, which I have gathered and collated into my own unique and valuable self, and continue to amend.

What can I know? I can know what is past – what is present – and what is hoped and feared for the future. Above all, I can know that demeaning my humanity, in the hope of an eternal non-humanity, will beyond doubt undermine my ability to ensure that the here and now is properly valued – devoid of injustice and war. I can ONLY know that what I have, here and now, is what I get.

From NSS Newline

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

We are not reincarnated or resurrected – just recycled!

Editorial

GOVERNMENT IS MAKING PROGRESS ON ITS COMMUNITY COHESION PLANS -- BUT IT STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO GO

A few months ago the NSS said that the government was making a big mistake by channelling its communication with the various Muslim communities in this country through the Muslim Council of Britain. We said at the time that the MCB was a theocratic organisation, more concerned with promoting Islam than creating community cohesion. It has taken a long time for the Minister for Communities, Ruth Kelly, to come round to our way of thinking, but at last she has said that the MCB is no longer flavour of the month, and that from now on money will only be given to organisations that are making efforts to undermine terrorist recruitment. She wants to consult more with younger people and women -- both things we had recommended.

Can we make another suggestion? It is that the government ceases to use the phrase “faith communities”? That it starts to consult the various ethnic communities -- including the indigenous white population -- as *people* rather than units of religion? Will it now sideline more “faith leaders” and instead give voice to the ordinary folk who can’t get a look in among the babble of priests, imams, bishops and theologians?

To try to speak to the British people -- of whatever ethnic background -- through the medium of religion is doomed to failure. The Church of England likes to think that it speaks for the nation, but it does not. Hardly anyone goes near a church any more. It is the same with mosques. Research shows that only 50% of Muslims go regularly to a mosque, so why are religious leaders considered the only ones capable of speaking for the diverse peoples who happen to be from a Muslim background in this country?

The government must learn sooner rather than later -- religion is the problem, not the answer, and that secularism can provide the protection that everyone needs from power-seekers and proselytisers. If anyone in the government wants to hear our ideas, we’re always willing to explain them.

ROWAN WILLIAMS SAYS HOSPITAL CHAPLAINS MUST STAY

In a move that has been condemned as self-serving by the National Secular Society, the Archbishop of Canterbury has told a government minister that hospital chaplaincy jobs should not be top of the list for cuts when NHS Trusts had to make savings.

Using his privileged access to the government, Rowan Williams told Lord Warner, the government Health Minister, that chaplains were not “part-time vicars, visiting their sick parishioners”, but had a special place in advising hospital executives and the NHS Trust, he said. Lord Warner told Dr Williams he would pass on his concerns to the local Strategic Health Authority, and would remind it

that Department of Health guidelines on chaplaincy were “very much in place”. Williams has now written to all Church of England chaplains saying: “I will be consulting with colleagues and other church and faith leaders to see how best we can continue to press the importance of religious and spiritual care within the NHS upon the Government and upon local NHS Trusts.”

Terry Sanderson, vice president of the National Secular Society, said: “The purpose of hospitals is to provide medical care -- that is what most people think their taxes are going to be spent on. Instead, tens of millions of pounds are being frittered away on these clerics whose services hardly anybody wants or would miss. If the Church thinks this is so important, let it provide the service out of its own considerable assets, instead of picking the pockets of taxpayers, who have never been asked if this is how they want their cash spent. If cuts must be made, front-line medical staff must be the last to go.”

The definition of “freedom” in Islam is unrecognisable to the Western definition

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By Abdul Rahman bin Hammad al-Omar

A. Freedom of Faith

In a country ruled by Muslim authorities, a non-Muslim is guaranteed his freedom of faith. He has the full choice, either to embrace Islam to deliver himself from disbelief and attain prosperity, or to stick to his religion, and hence, choose disbelief, distress and be a loser in the Hereafter. Such a choice provides a clear-cut evidence against the disbeliever on the Day of Judgment. Muslims are forbidden from obliging a non-Muslim to embrace Islam, but he should pay the tribute to Muslims readily and submissively, surrender to Islamic laws, and should not practise his polytheistic rituals openly.

Apostasy from Islam is grievous crime punishable by death. One who commits apostasy from Islam rejects truth after he had known it, thus, he does not deserve life and loses the (Raison-d’etre) of his existence. But if his apostasy is due to a violation of one of the principles of Islam, he should repent and ask Allah for forgiveness, and behave in accordance with Islamic rules.

Violations leading to apostasy are of many forms:

1. Idolatry: That is to worship others besides Allah, even if he considers those whom he associates with Allah to be intercessors and not gods (as a symbol of a pious man, or any other creature whom he thinks to be his intercessor to Allah). Islam considers one committing such acts to be an idolater or an apostate.

The likeness of those who commit idolatry under the name of intercession is as the likeness of a man who drinks wine after calling it by another name. Allah stated in the Qur’an (which means): “So serve Allah, offering Him sincere devotion. Is it not to Allah, that sincere devotion is due? But those who take for protectors others than Allah (say): ‘We only serve them in order that they may bring us nearer to Allah.’ Truly Allah will judge between them in that wherein they differ. But Allah guides not such as are false and ungrateful.” (39:3)

Allah also states (which means): “Such is Allah your Lord: To Him belongs all Dominion. And those whom you invoke besides Him own not a straw. If you invoke them, they will not listen to your call, and if they were to listen, they cannot answer your (prayer). On the Day of Judgment they will reject your ‘partnership’ and none (O men!) can inform you like Him who is All-Aware.” (35:13-14)

2. The Muslim must charge idolators, Jews, Christians, atheists and magians with unbelief. He should charge also with unbelief those who worship false deities and take for law regulations different from those which Allah had revealed. A Muslim commits the grievous sin of unbelief if he does not accuse such men with unbelief.

3. Sorcery is a form of unbelief, especially when it includes grave idolatrous deviation. Therefore, whoever practises sorcery, or gives his consent to such action after knowing that it is atheism is an unbeliever.

4. Whoever believes that there is a law better than the law of Islam, or that there is a system better than that revealed to Muhammad is an unbeliever.
5. Whoever dislikes Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam – may the peace and blessings of Allah be on him) or abominates any of the rules of Islamic law is an unbeliever.
6. Whoever ridicules any of the precepts of Islam knowingly is an unbeliever.
7. Whoever longs for the defeat of Islam and abhors its victories is an unbeliever.
8. Whoever takes unbelievers as friends and gives them support knowingly with abrogation to Islamic rules is an unbeliever.
9. To believe that there are certain men authorised to violate Islamic laws and perform what is contrary to them is unbelief.
10. Whoever shuns Islamic faith or law after being reminded of it is an unbeliever.
11. To deny or reject any of the fundamentals of Islam is unbelief.

All these examples of deviation which lead to apostasy are supported by evidences from the Qur’an and prophetic traditions. We should beware of committing any of these deeds.

B. Islam confers freedom of opinion on Muslim on condition that it should not be used to violate Islamic precepts. Allah commanded the Muslim to stick to truth and say it wherever he may be heeding no censure of others. This is considered to be one of the highest ranks of fighting for the cause of Allah. The Muslim should also give good advice to Muslim rulers and admonish them to refrain from all kinds of transgression. Allah ordered the Muslims to refute false opinions and restrain those who call people to it from committing this grievous sin.

Such a system based on respecting the opinions of others so long as their opinions are not violating the law of Allah is most magnanimous system. Opinions contrary to the laws of Allah result in nothing but corruption and falsehood, therefore these should not be communicated.

C. Individual liberty is guaranteed in Islam within the broad limits of Islamic laws. Both man and woman have the right to practise all kinds of transaction: ie contracts of sale, donation, waqf, ... etc. As for marriage, both male and female have full liberty to select their spouse, but in exceptional cases, when a female agrees to marry a man who is not equal to her in religious rank (ie a man of bad reputation, or negligent of his religious duties such as prayer, fast ... etc), the female’s father or the most close relative to her has the right to interfere and oppose the marriage with a view to protect her faith, honour and her family’s interests. A female should not run about herself to complete marriage formalities, but her legal sponsor should do so on her behalf.

A contract for marriage is dependent on the consent of both the parties (the male and the female).

Two witnesses, at least, should be present at the time of concluding the contract and should sign it as witnesses.

According to Islam, man and whatever he owns belong to Allah. Therefore, all human behaviour should be within the limits explained by the commandments of Allah. Islam permits no transgression or extravagance; the laws of Allah are not only a guidance to His bondsmen, but they are also a source of mercy on them. To protect the Muslim society from all kinds of abuses and deviations, Islam has strictly forbidden adultery, fornication, sodomy, suicide and all forms of lewdness.

Allah ordained Muslims to shave off their moustaches, trim their nails, pluck out their armpits and pubic hair and to circumcise males.

Muslims are enjoined not to imitate the behaviour of Allah’s enemies, or commit their indecencies.

Behaviour-imitation will affect the Muslim’s attitudes, and may create in him a sensation of sympathy towards his enemy’s indecent mode of life. Allah wants the Muslim to be purged from all vices, and thus be a proper source for original Islamic thought, independent of all forms of man-made opinions, ideas, or modes of behaviour. The Muslim should be a model for others in both faith and behaviour, he should not be an imitator and dependent on others.

In the field of industries and technical knowledge useful to mankind, Islam commands the Muslim to strive and acquire this knowledge and experience even from non-Muslims. Knowledge belongs to Allah, and He is the Instructor who provides man with all forms of knowledge. The Holy Qur’an states (which means): “Taught man that which he knew not.” (96:5)

This promptness to acquire useful knowledge and science is the highest rank of reform and admonition for mankind in order to enable man to make use of his liberty, preserve his honour and dignity and protect himself against evil.

D. Islam protects man's privacy. It not only prohibits the Muslim from entering into other people's houses without permission, it also interdicts strictly glancing furtively at others inside their dwellings as well as prohibiting all deeds which encroach upon someone's security and right of privacy.

E. Allah has conferred on man the freedom of work. Man has the right to earn and expend within the limits explained by the laws of Allah. Work is a duty on man. He should work to support himself and his family. But, at the same time, Allah forbids strictly illicit gains which are the outcome of illegal deeds such as usury, gambling, corruption, theft, sorcery, fornication, and sodomy. Money gained by selling wine, pork, or practising forbidden kinds of entertainment such as singing and dancing is also illicit and prohibited. The Muslim should avoid earning money from illicit sources and should also avoid spending it for ill deeds.

By this method which regulates means of earning and ways of spending, Islam offers to man the most useful guidance to a prosperous and a very happy life.

How Times Change!!

In 1895 there were between 10 and 15 motor cars on Britain's roads. By 1900 this had only increased to around 100 and horse drawn carriages or pony and trap still had the roads virtually to themselves. It wasn't until the 1930's that the number of motor vehicles on Britain's roads reached a million.

In 1947 there were 20,000 steam trains running on Britain's Railways. By 1968 there were none. The Flying Scotsman locomotive was built in Doncaster in 1923 for the princely sum of £7,944 (at a time when city 'high-flyers' were earning £1,000 per year) and was the first engine to reach 100 mph.

Why do we join the BHA and local Humanist groups? I expect many of would say it is to 'spread the word' about Humanism but as Robert Ashby wondered in his piece in the Nov/Dec BHA News were does

Another would be to enjoy social contact with like-minded people. For some Humanists that might include argument and debate but such individuals must be aware that not all members want to argue and can find it offensive to be 'jumped on' if they inadvertently use a wrong word or phrase. Surely we all want the world to view Humanists as pleasant, tolerant and friendly people?

A spiritual experience to a Humanist would be something that "lifts one's spirits" and gives you an "emotional high".

