



# NEWS & VIEWS



[www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk)

New Series

Number 26

June 2009

*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 Tova & Vic Jones' house : 3 Yelverton Drive, Harborne, B15 3NT**

(It is off Anstruther Road which is off Norfolk Road, close to the 21, 22, 23, 29 & 103 bus routes.)

**Friday 12<sup>th</sup> 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 Tova (0121 454 4692) to co-ordinate food and drink offerings.

### **PAST EVENTS**

Since the last News & views there have been three very successful meetings so it is perhaps just as well that we have had to start using the larger room at the 'Friends'. An audience of 34 turned up to discuss Spirituality and hear Simon Price explain how he uses the word in his work with Sandwell's 'Community Wellbeing Service'. Another large gathering heard Tim Betts deliver a fascinating talk, illustrated by Powerpoint slides, on the history of Surgery. This was the second time Tim has spoken to us and the mutual enjoyment of his visits is such that he is likely to feature again on our 2010 programme, speaking on a new topic. The socials in town co-ordinated by Lorna and the ramble in the Romsley countryside led by John Lester attracted smaller numbers but there was another audience of around 30 to hear Howard Brown speak impressively about how he came to disbelieve in religion through using his time in prison to make a comparative study of religious texts, especially his discovery that the Noah and Adam stories are just reworkings of reworkings of even older stories. He also made interesting comments on the value of prison as a means of punishment and a disincentive to re-offending. There was a large queue to buy signed copies of his book "Journey Through Darkness" which is as good a read, as Howard was to listen to. His more detailed book on his religious studies is due out soon so keep checking his website [www.journeythroughdarkness.com](http://www.journeythroughdarkness.com) if you are interested in obtaining a copy.

### **GROUP MERCHANDISE**

At last you have the opportunity to purchase a T shirt which will help to publicise our group. Perhaps It will also give you the opportunity to spread the word about Humanism to inquisitive strangers and maybe help others less confident than yourself to declare their atheism or agnosticism. At the very reasonable price of £5.00 (£6 if you want it posted) we have S, M, L & XL in stock and you can have any colour you like so long as it's white.

Keep a look out for Brum Hums badges... Coming Soon!!!

If there is any other merchandise you think we should have on our website please tell one of the committee.



*Making sense of life without God*

[www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk)

## **EVOLUTION AND RELIGION**

I was prompted to write this by an article in my local paper, the Solihull News, in February. It was written by the vicar of St. Alphege Church. After stressing that the Bible was never meant to be taken literally, and condemning creationism, the vicar writes: "The scientific evidence for Evolution is now so overwhelming that it is baffling how anyone can make the case for creationism. The debate should be about this:- having accepted the reality of Evolution as the explanation for how we came about, is the force lying behind our creation by this method just a random chance or the divine will of God?" Then, in March, there was a television programme entitled "Did Darwin Kill God?" presented by one Conor Cunningham from the Dept of Theology, Nottingham University. He introduced himself as a Christian and an admirer of Darwin and then proceeded on the same lines as the above quoted article.

The approach of many of our biologists, led by Richard Dawkins is "if only they could understand and accept evolution they would stop believing in God". We can see that this is not so! We have been here before, some 400 years ago. When Galileo proposed that the Earth is not the centre of the world, the Church found this suggestion heretical. And yet today this fact has been accepted by all religions. Can there ever be a scientific discovery which will convince the believers that there is no God? Probably not. Maybe this is because the need to explain the universe and life on Earth is not the main reason why people believe. But that is another story. Olga Farooqui

[Ed: The BBC's religion website reports the results of a recent survey of 2000 people across in London by the theology think-tank Theos which asked people their views on evolution and the origins of mankind. Whilst 31% believed that evolution removed the need for God, 20% rejected Darwin's theory of evolution and instead think human beings were created by God within the last 10,000 years and 12% stated that they believed in intelligent design. Interestingly 27% believed in theistic evolution - the belief that humans evolved by a process of evolution which can be seen as God's plan. This is the approach taken by Cunningham in the recent TV programme Olga mentioned. Perhaps more people would accept that humans evolved if people like Richard Dawkins didn't make the stark "either Evolution or God" choice.]

## **WORKING HARD NEED A HOLIDAY?**

When I lifted myself up carefully from the chair the earth started shaking. I know it did because I did not have to try to move my feet for the world to start rotating at the wrong speed. The room started spinning and there was something very wrong because my arms and legs started to wander of their own accord. I opened the window and let the rain spatter on my face; each drop set me free. I went outside, walked around and every colour was so vivid, so new to me that I felt almost unworthy of the extraordinary spectrum before me. In that moment I was reborn and the dark recesses of the womb I had hidden in for all these years had shattered and wasted away forever. The grass was a deep, earthy green; everything seemed to be moving of its own accord. The streets turned from stone to silver and, as the rain stopped, the glorious sun steeped all aspects of my misery with peace. In that moment I knew I ruled the world; I knew that I could control time, movement, life. The apologetic clouds seemed to move faster and as they revealed the strongest cyan sky I have ever known, my heart ached as I knew the terrible grief in realising that this moment would not last forever.

I walked along this paradise and passed people by, seeing humanity for what felt like the first ever time. My eyes filled with tears and the closer people came to me I saw their every fear, all the content imperfections that marked their appearances. The truth is that I had always wanted to belong with humans in a way where I felt at home with them and in this moment we all shared the same heart. Their faces were all unfamiliar to me and their expressions were all new and exciting and strangely, unintelligible. This new world I was seeing scared me, I must admit. It is shameful to think such things but I wondered if I belonged in a place so beautiful, with all my darkness. I toyed with the prospect of death, wondering if the greater good would be to leave this world as it should be: innocent, beautiful, untouched, clean. But the persuasive rays of the sun guided me as I walked and I felt every wound heal, every fear dissolve.

The world was mine. How intangible the world had become. How bright and shameless these hues were, unafraid to reveal their sheer brilliance. Everything was so very soft; there were no details, no secrets. Everything was as it should be. My heart bled for the unknown I had stepped into and I wondered if the planet would ever stop shaking, if every particle would stop moving. I thought about the consequences of the action I had taken to get to this place and feared I may never leave. Then I started to grow paranoid that this beautiful blurry place would never leave me. Part of me grew weary and resigned to the fact that even if I escaped then I would never forget just how much perfection the big, bold lines of my surroundings carried. I knew that if I got away and made it on the outside that I would constantly miss the simplicity of everything, objects marked by colours and shapes. Love reverberating all particles until matter could no longer bear to remain still.

Most of all I knew that without this place I would miss the immortality in this strange atmosphere. I put my glasses back on; reversion to normality. I carried on with my work. M Malik

## **THE CAMPAIGN TO ELIMINATE FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)**

Those in Howard Brown's audience will know that two of his main anti-religion campaigns are against the Roman Catholic stance on condoms (in March this year the Pope again inaccurately claimed that condoms increase the problems of HIV/AIDS infection!) and the tradition in many Muslim societies of female genital mutilation. I empathised, particularly with the latter, having read Waris Dirie's book "Desert Flower" (ISBN 978-1-86049-758-2) and thought it was about time I featured this topic in News & Views because it is an amazing and widely unknown statistic that every 10 seconds a girl somewhere in the world becomes a victim of FGM.

Female circumcision, or FGM as it is more aptly referred to today, occurs predominantly in 28 countries in Africa but it is also practised by some in the UK and other 'civilized' western nations. The UN estimates that this practice has been performed on 130 million girls and women and at least 2 million girls are at risk each year of being the next victims – that's 6000 a day.

The operations are usually performed in primitive circumstances by a midwife or village woman. They use no anaesthetic. They cut the girl using whatever instruments they can lay their hands on: razor blades, knives, scissors, broken glass, sharp stones, and in some regions their teeth. The process ranges in severity by geographical location and cultural practice. The most minimal damage is cutting away the hood of the clitoris, which will prevent a girl from enjoying sex for the rest of her life, to infibulation, the most severe form of mutilation which is performed on 80% of the women in Somalia. The aftermath of infibulation includes the immediate complications of shock, infection, damage to the urethra or anus, scar formation, bladder infections and the risk of septicaemia, tetanus, HIV and hepatitis B. Long term complications include chronic and recurrent urinary and pelvic infections that can lead to sterility, cysts & abscesses, painful neuromas, dysmenorrhea, depression, frigidity and increasingly difficult urination. Most of the women suffer for the rest of their lives from physical and psychological pain; sometimes there is pooling of menstrual blood in the abdomen and many of them die.

Waris Dirie ran away from her family, a tribe of nomads in the Somalian desert, after she had suffered circumcision in order to avoid an arranged marriage. She eventually became a top fashion model on the London, Paris and New York circuit. As a result of her story which was told on TV, she was asked by the United Nations to become a Special Ambassador in 1997, helping the fight against FGM. She has set up a Foundation based in Austria which has issued the following aims:

### **The Waris Dirie manifesto**

#### ***Her 15 goals are to want::***

1. everyone in Europe to recognise genital mutilation as a problem common to all countries and one we can no longer shut our eyes to;
2. every religious community to take a clear stand against the practice of genital mutilation;
3. every FGM victim needing help to get the help she needs;
4. all European governments to issue regulations to protect girls from genital mutilation – in Europe and abroad;
5. all European governments to pass legislation enabling perpetrators and their accomplices to be brought to justice;
6. it to be mandatory for every incident that comes to light of mutilation of a minor to be reported for prosecution;
7. all European countries to regard genital mutilation as equal to political persecution and as grounds for asylum;
8. everyone to be enlightened about the status of genital mutilation: not culture, but torture;
9. all genital mutilation victims at last to be treated with sensitivity and respect;
10. all health workers to become well-informed about FGM and to know how to help victims,
11. all victims, where it is their wish, to have free access to surgery to counteract the damage and to receive psychological counselling;
12. genital mutilation to be a subject that people can and will openly discuss;
13. all the groups working to combat FGM to come together and agree on their policy and strategies;
14. all organizations working to combat FGM to have sufficient funding to be able to function efficiently;
15. everyone in Europe to put into action my dream of an end to genital mutilation.

By logging on at [www.waris-dirie-foundation.com](http://www.waris-dirie-foundation.com) you can sign this manifesto to support the fight against FGM. Every single signature will be collected, to confront the European Union and other governments with the issue. Obviously you could also make a donation to help stop this cruel crime.

If you want more information you can e mail [waris@utanet.at](mailto:waris@utanet.at) or write to Waris Dirie Foundation, Millennium Tower, 24<sup>th</sup> Floor, Handelskai 94-96, 1200 Vienna, Austria.

## **WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?**

Bill Green spotted the following about an article published on 22<sup>nd</sup> January in "Dagen", a Swedish newspaper with an orientation towards Christianity. Apparently the pastor of Saronkyrkan (a Saron Church in Gothenburg) Erik Holke, was preparing a sermon for his Sunday service when he remembered an advertisement on how the company 118 800 have answers to everything. "I was going to preach on the subject 'Who is Jesus?' and thought that their answer could be a good starting point so I sent the question via SMS and soon received a reply. According to them "It is he who, in the fictional religion of Christianity is the Saviour. The fairy tale states that he lived 2000 years ago and walked on water and other stuff." This answer surprised Erik who said "It felt quite remarkable" and he contacted the paper, who telephoned 118 800 to ask about this 'misinformation'. "It's a great answer! It couldn't have been better. I'm the one who wrote that answer," said Markus Öhman, the CEO of the company. "I think the answer is self explanatory. I am a rational atheist, and that answer is the truth." "Is it an objective answer?" asked the paper. "Yes, all sensible people think that Christianity is fictional," Marcus replied. The paper reported that the conversation continued on the lines:- "It sounds like it is based on your own beliefs rather than objective facts?" "No, it is very scientific" "So it was a reasonable response?" "Yes absolutely! Erik must realize that he will receive honest, scientific answers from us." "How do you go about things when you collect the facts to other answers? Do you base them on your own convictions?" "The answer he received was the truth; everyone knows it is the truth." "..... not Erik." "He has been misinformed." "You mean that the issue is simple because it's knowledge that 'everyone knows' – really?" "But, there are always facts that someone does not agree with. We can not protect ourselves against that." "In this case there are 2 billion people who do not agree with you." "People are crazy." Eventually Markus had to admit that his company's response could be seen as a bit provocative and that "perhaps it could have been more elegant and diplomatically written" and, since customer reactions were very important to the company, said he would gladly refund the SMS cost to Erik Holke, if he felt that the answer he received was arrogant. However, Erik refused saying, "Actually it ended up being a very good starting point for my sermon."

## **"THE BEST WEBSITE I HAVE SEEN ALL YEAR"**

I thought that other members of Birmingham Humansists might enjoy browsing a website that I have been spending some time on recently. [www.ted.net](http://www.ted.net). TED stands for Technology Entertainment Design and is an American non-profit organisation. Their aim, as described on their website is to "Offer free knowledge and inspiration from the world's most inspired thinkers". The website hosts a large number of lectures and talks by prominent business leaders, politicians, technologists and scientists. Filmed at their annual conference, each generally lasts about 20 minutes, and the quality of the subject matter and speakers really is remarkable. Their aim, to improve the world by making high quality and inspiring ideas and presentations available to the masses, is a credit to the internet. A few that I consider real gems are: (if you are at a computer you can click the links)

Dan Dennett: Ants, terrorism, and the awesome power of memes

[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/dan\\_dennett\\_on\\_dangerous\\_memes.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/dan_dennett_on_dangerous_memes.html)

Steven Pinker: A brief history of violence

[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/steven\\_pinker\\_on\\_the\\_myth\\_of\\_violence.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence.html)

Philip Zimbardo: How ordinary people become monsters ... or heroes (The Lucifer Effect)

[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/philip\\_zimbardo\\_on\\_the\\_psychology\\_of\\_evil.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/philip_zimbardo_on_the_psychology_of_evil.html)

Richard Dawkins: An atheist's call to arms

[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/richard\\_dawkins\\_on\\_militant\\_atheism.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/richard_dawkins_on_militant_atheism.html)

I hope that members who take the time to view these enjoy them!

Andrew Foster

## **IHEU RECEIVES LARGEST-EVER GIFT**

The International Humanist & Ethical Union has recently received a gift of more than US\$2.5 million from the estate of the late Victor Kay, a long-time Humanist who lived in Los Angeles, California. The bequest is the largest individual gift in IHEU's 57-year history. "This is a transformative, momentum-building gift that demonstrates real leadership on behalf of Mr. Kay," said Sonja Eggerickx, president of the IHEU. "IHEU is extremely grateful, as this underwrites our efforts as the leader in Humanism around the globe." The bequest, to be known as the "Victor Kay Humanitarian Fund", is a trust fund to be treated as the IHEU's other endowment funds. Income from the Fund will be available to support IHEU in all of its mission and general operations, starting in 2010. You can read more on the IHEU's website



## **BRUM HUMS NOW SUPPORTS UGANDA HUMANIST SCHOOLS TRUST (UK)**

As mentioned in the last News & Views the Committee felt that the group should be helping the above Educational Trust and Birmingham Humanists is now contributing financially. At the end of March we made a payment of £120 as a Scholarship to meet the costs of one student for a year, including school fees, uniform, school food, books, writing materials and a contribution to teachers' salaries and running costs. The constitution sets a limit of £100 as a donation from the Group to a single organisation, but Professor Richard Lea asked that his expenses be donated to support the Humanist Academy in Uganda (which was mentioned at the Darwin Day meeting) so this was added to the group's donation. The committee would like to continue this level of donation for 4 years in order to see one child through their schooling and will seek approval to do so at the A.G.M. Apparently I made a slight error in the last News & Views as the initial set-up costs for the Humanist Academy came from various sources. The Rationalist Press Association helped to purchase the land on which the school is built. Also, our donation is worth £24 more than its face value for the Trust, as a charity, is able to claim Gift Aid on it. Maybe it will continue after that or maybe we will try and have specific fund raising events or targets; it's up to the membership to make their views known. If you wish you can telephone Steve Hurd on 0182 750338 for more information on gift aiding, specific targets etc. Letters to the school, perhaps telling them something of what life is like in UK, are also welcome and I hope to be able to print news from the school from time to time in News & Views.

## **MORE ON THE BUS ADVERTS**

In March the Advertising Standards Agency investigated the Atheist Bus Campaign advert after receiving a number of complaints, including one from Stephen Green of the evangelical organisation Christian Voice, that this was offensive to believers and that the claim 'There is probably no god' could not be substantiated. It ruled that the advert did not contravene advertising codes because it was expressing the opinion of the advertisers which was "not capable of objective substantiation." Although the ASA acknowledged that the content of the ad would be at odds with the beliefs of many, it concluded that it was "unlikely to mislead or to cause serious or widespread offence."

In response to the adverts which ran on the side of 800 buses across the country, as well as 1,000 posters in London's Underground trains, the Trinitarian Bible Society spent £35,000 putting a religious verse on 183 buses in London and gave details on how to obtain a copy of the Bible! The Society's assistant general secretary, David Larham, actually praised the atheist promotion for helping put the idea to advertise religion back in their minds saying "I was pleased to see the (atheist) campaign, because it's good that the country is a free country where people can voice their opinion and declare their belief."



Similar Atheist initiatives have been organised or are in the pipeline in other countries including Spain, Italy, Canada and Australia but one in Italy ran into problems because it was too dogmatic. The slogan intended for the side of buses in Genoa read: "The bad news is that God does not exist. The good news is that we do not need him." A billboard agency in Northern Italy refused the commission for the atheist drive and the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Genoa, whose Archbishop Angelo Bagnasco is president of the influential Italian Bishops Conference condemned the campaign. Raffaele Carcano, national secretary of the Italian Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics said "It is more than probable that political and religious authorities exerted pressure. In no other part of Europe is the Church's influence as strong on politics and citizens' lives as in Italy."

## **NON-RELIGIOUS ON THE RISE IN THE UNITED STATES.**

Secularity continues to grow in strength in all regions of the United States, according to a recent study. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) questioned 54,461 adults in either English or Spanish. With a margin of error of less than 0.5%, it provides the only complete portrait of how contemporary Americans identify themselves religiously, and how that self-identification has changed over the past generation. Americans claiming no religion increased to 15% (from 8.2% in 1990 & 14.2% in 2001). New England has now taken over from the Pacific Northwest as the least religious section of the country, with Vermont (34%) leading all other states by a full 9%. Many people thought the 2001 findings were an anomaly but now they know it wasn't: 'No Religion' is the only group to have grown in every state of the Union." Only 1.6% of Americans call themselves atheist or agnostic but based on stated beliefs, 12% are "no god" or "unsure" while 12% are deistic, believing in a higher power but not a personal God. The number of outright atheists has nearly doubled since 2001, from 900 thousand to 1.6 million. 27% of Americans do not expect a religious funeral at their death.

## **GOOD ON HIM !!**

Apparently a judge in Spain has ruled that crucifixes hung on classroom walls are unacceptable as they contravene the secular & neutral nature of the country's constitution.

## **AND ON HIM !!**

President Barack Obama made history in his Inaugural Address by mentioning "non-believers" in a passage in which he referred to various faith groups. He outlined a largely humanistic agenda, promising to "restore science to its rightful place," as the USA collectively face the massive challenges facing us as a country in the twenty-first century. Significantly, in affirming the pluralistic character of American society, the new President expressly included "non-believers" among Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus, as part of the body politic, saying ***"For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace."*** Paul Kurtz, chairman and founder of the "Centre for Inquiry" said "It truly is a historic and remarkable achievement of significance that the President of the United States referred to non-believers in recognition of the growing number of Americans - now numbering tens of millions -who hold no religious affiliation. As far as we are aware, this is the first time this has happened. It is also noteworthy that he called for the restoration of science to its rightful place and the application of technology to the improvement of human life. We applaud his courageous optimism in outlining an audacious program for the future."

## **& IN CASE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN ALREADY WHAT AN IMPROVEMENT THAT IS.....**

"The vast majority of our imports come from outside the country."

"If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure."

"One word sums up probably the responsibility of any Governor, and that one word is 'to be prepared'."

"I have made good judgments in the past. I have made good judgments in the future."

"The future will be better tomorrow."

"We're going to have the best educated American people in the world."

"I stand by all the misstatements that I've made."

"We have a firm commitment to NATO; we are a part of NATO. We have a firm commitment to Europe; we are a part of Europe."

"Public speaking is very easy."

"A low voter turnout is an indication of fewer people going to the polls."

"I have opinions of my own - strong opinions - but I don't always agree with them."

"We are ready for any unforeseen event that may or may not occur."

"For NASA, space is still a high priority."

"Quite frankly, teachers are the only profession that teach our children."

"It isn't pollution that's harming the environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."

Thank you and "Goodbye", George W. Bush.

## **LIB DEMS MAKE PROGRESS ON RELIGION AND SCHOOLS**

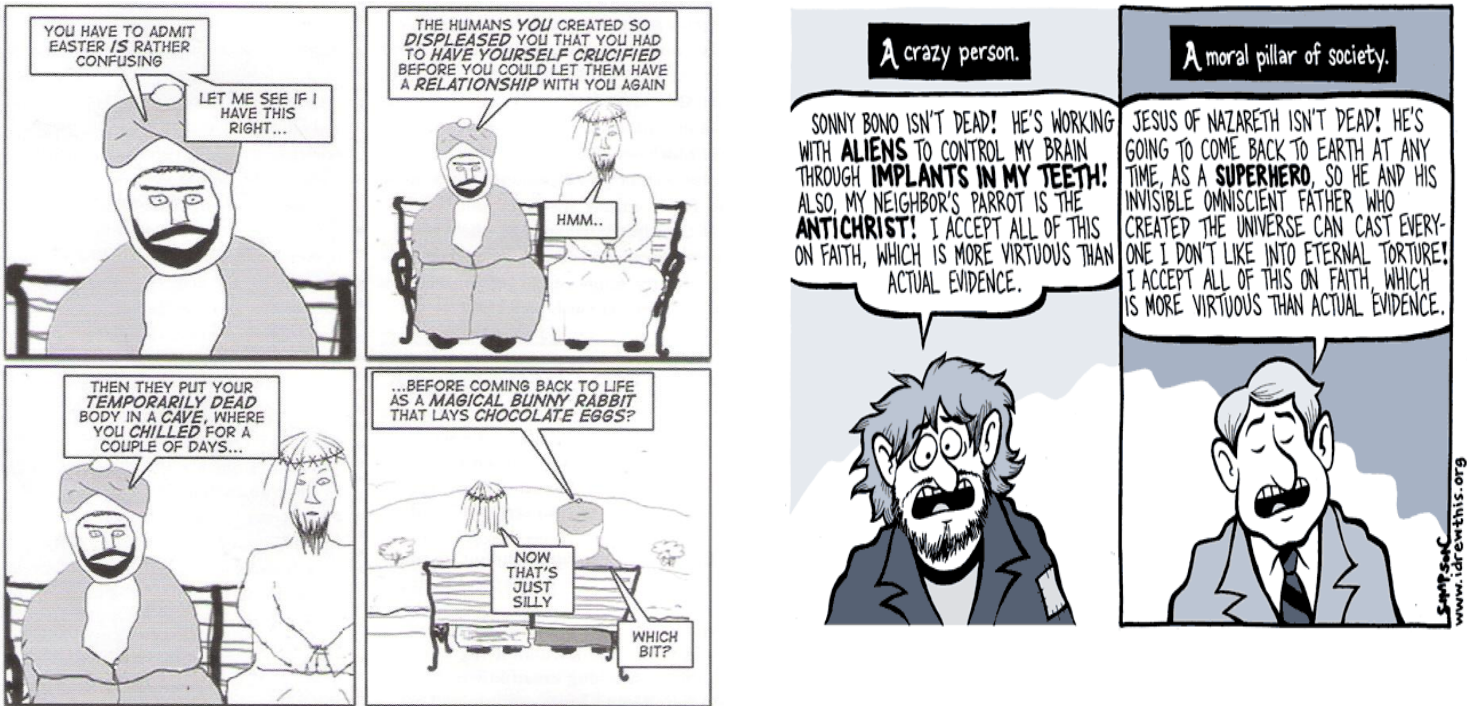
At their recent conference at Harrogate, the Liberal Democrat party adopted a new policy on education which included various provisions on religion and schools. Their most significant step was to say that no new state-funded religious schools should be permitted to discriminate in their admissions policies on grounds of religion or belief, although they stopped short of extending that prohibition to existing religious schools. The BHA contributed to the Lib Dem's thinking behind their new policy through written and oral evidence to their policy working group last year, and also as part of an Accord delegation to a meeting with the Lib Dem education front bench. Andrew Copson, BHA Director of Education and Public Affairs, said, "This is the first time a major party has recognised and sought to address the dangers in religious segregation that will be created by new religious schools. Together with their progressive policies on RE, worship and employment in religious schools, it marks a good step forward for those in the Liberal Democrat party and elsewhere who care about an inclusive state education system."

**AT LAST!! INCONTOVERTABLE PROOF THAT GOD EXISTS!!**



About time - a smile from Heaven.

“Freethinker” subscribers will be familiar with the “Jesus & Mo” cartoons that feature in most issues. I thought readers who do not get **“The voice of atheism since 1881”** might be interested in seeing one. You can see more by logging on to [www.jesusandmo.net](http://www.jesusandmo.net) or taking out a special 6 month trial subscription to the NEW LOOK monthly magazine for just £5.00. Amazing value!! Just send a cheque to “G W Foote & Co” at Freethinker, PO Box234, Brighton BM1 4XD.



*"I gradually came to think there's nothing up there. For me, when you're dead you're dead. We invent these stories about what will happen afterwards to deal with the knowledge of dying. But the natural world has existed for millions of years with organisms that never even considered it."*  
 (Paul Higgins, star of “The Thick Of It”, telling how he went from trainee priest to atheist, *Daily Record*)

**A VERY WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS**  
**Glen Eades, Sanjay Chouhan, Francis O’Regan, Carolyn Sugden  
 & Santiago Flores Torres. We thank you for your support  
 & look forward to meeting you at some of our future events.  
 (Incidentally, most joined us via the Group’s new, improved website using Paypal.)**

**It is hoped to produce the next issue around the middle of August. 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](mailto:jaejed@hotmail.com)**

Contributors note that material in “News & Views” may be utilised by other Humanist groups, with acknowledgements

## **THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF HUMANISTS**

On 25<sup>th</sup> February the House of Lords held a debate on *'Human Rights: Religious Belief'* in which Lord Macdonald of Tradeston CBE, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (which now has 120 members from both Houses of Parliament and across all main political Parties) raised the need to recognise continuing discrimination against Humanists, and for progressive religious and non-religious people to work together against religious intolerance and persecution. He stated that "the non-religious now make up a significant proportion of the UK population. Most of these non-believers lead good and responsible lives with commitments to human rights and democracy. We humanists have a long history of work for a more open, inclusive, just and tolerant society." He then drew members attention to the UN Special Rapporteur on Religion or Belief (whose remit includes non-religious beliefs) who noted that "in many cases, societal pressures mean that the non-religious cannot openly express their beliefs....while the UK finally abolished blasphemy laws last year, sadly, in Pakistan, it is punishable by death. Those who reject religion face particular dangers. These so-called apostates can have marriages annulled and their children taken away. In many Islamic countries, apostasy is indeed still punishable by death". Looking again internationally and to the UN, Lord Macdonald warned the House about grave problems with the UN Human Rights Council saying that British Humanists have been particularly concerned about the decisions being taken by the UN's Human Rights Council, which seems increasingly to be dominated by undemocratic political and religious interests. The HRC recently amended the mandate of the UN's rapporteur on freedom of expression to impose serious restrictions on "freedom of expression and belief". This amendment was imposed by an alliance of Islamic Governments backed, significantly, by China, Russia and Cuba. World Islam now has a dominating power on the UN Human Rights Committee, and is seeking to get a resolution which will in effect condemn "Islamophobia", by which they mean 'any criticism of Islam'. He asked whether this concern was shared by the UK Government, and whether they were taking any concerted action with other democratic states to ensure that no state guilty of systematic violations of human rights should serve on the Human Rights Council?'

Finally, Lord Macdonald asked the Minister, Lord Malloch-Brown, whether he would encourage the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to bring the British Humanist Association on board to its "Freedom of Religion panel", which advises the FCO on many important issues. Despite the need for equal treatment on grounds of religion or belief, which includes non-religious beliefs, and the willingness of humanists to contribute to the discussion, at present the panel has only religious representation.

### **HELP REQUIRED**

If any members of the Group are in London near to the BHA offices at 1 Gower Street WC1E 6HD it would be useful if they could pick up bulk supplies of relevant leaflets and advertising material.

Lorna is interested in trying to get a Member Involvement Working Party off the ground. Any members are interested in joining her in this venture please get in touch.

Do you fancy producing the occasional copy of News & Views? As editor I would welcome a bit of assistance. Articles are always gratefully received but if someone feels they could produce a whole issue now and again this would be a big help, especially at times when I might be out of Birmingham for 3 or 4 weeks. Likewise Lorna would find an assistant to job-share her role as social secretary of great value. Such helpers do not have to attend our fascinating committee meetings!

### **ERRATUM**

Guy Hordern (Chairman of Birmingham SACRE) e-mailed me back in March to point out that in the Foreword of the Agreed RE Syllabus (signed by him and Cllr Lawrence) it clearly states "These values, which are shared by many who have no religious convictions, have shaped Birmingham's past and contribute to its present". My statement in the last News & Views that the syllabus "... completely ignores the fact that people without religious faith can and do share the same qualities" is therefore wholly inaccurate. I accept that they included the statement in the Foreword precisely because they recognised that many who are atheists or Humanists have been able to identify with values and virtues which promote and describe 'flourishing humanity' and I apologise for my oversight and misrepresentation. I was thinking about what was said on the DVD that I viewed when I wrote the sentence. The DVD states "the big idea is to use the qualities shared by people of religious faith as a starting point. These qualities are divided into 24 dispositions". As usual the insertion of the phrase "people of all faiths and none" would have made things clearer.

Guy Hordern also said that he was awaiting advice from the City Council's solicitors as to whether Birmingham Humanists could have a representative with voting rights on Birmingham SACRE. My understanding is that it is possible for anyone to attend their meetings as an observer.