



# NEWS & VIEWS



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

New Series

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*Humanists are a large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people. We are always pleased to welcome as new members those who believe we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs and who try to make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values. Our group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association, the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association & the National Secular Society.*

## Past events

### The God problem

**On 16 September, Chris Smith gave a talk on her experiences as a volunteer in Uganda. This included an account of the work that she did under the auspices of VSO, a description of other activities she became involved in during her 2½ years in Uganda, and an expression of her views on the impact of religion on everyday life in Uganda.**

Before her retirement from teaching maths in a secondary school, Chris had decided to apply to VSO. Having been selected, she experienced the excellent, participatory training; this emphasised the need for volunteers to be culturally aware and sensitive.

Chris was offered a placement at Bushenyi College in Uganda, to teach secondary level maths to trainee primary teachers. In addition to her direct teaching of students, Chris supervised teaching practice and went into primary schools, co-teaching and using different methods and materials. She also set up small group tutorials to support students before exams – until then these had been held in huge groups of 100 to 150 students.

The other activities in which Chris became involved were extremely varied and included:

- 'Guidance not violence' workshops for teachers, to discourage the use of physical and demeaning punishments – these used a participatory style with debate and discussion
- the Silent Voices\* organisation for the parents, carers and teachers of deaf children, which put on theatre productions to promote its work. It aims to change ideas about disability, which is often blamed on the devil or witchcraft.
- a self-help group for children and young people in difficult circumstances, which involves them in a range of activities including horticulture and a poultry unit
- a visit to a local game park for children from a hospice who are HIV positive or who have other life-limiting conditions.

On her return, Chris and two other volunteers set up a small charity called Silent Support\* which supports deaf young people through vocational training.

Although this is a government college, Chris told us, religion was the default position. There was a daily act of collective worship and most people went to church on Sunday. There are adherents of lots of different Christian denominations in Uganda, as well as many Muslims. Because Chris is white, it was assumed that she was a Christian.



*Fortunate, one of the vocational training students, who is learning hairdressing*

Christian beliefs overlay traditional beliefs and superstition. For example, Chris came across a deaf student who believed that his stepmother had bewitched him. When a child died shortly after birth, the reaction was 'It's God's will.' There are certain practices, such as child sacrifice, that are greatly feared. Genital mutilation is on the increase again.

Religious teachings and traditional attitudes are responsible for the terrible oppression suffered by gay people in Uganda – 'The worst place in the world to be gay', according to a BBC programme earlier this year. Recent attempts to bring in new laws with even more severe penalties for homosexuality have been shelved for the moment, but the position of gay people remains perilous.

The most explicit anti-homosexual comment that Chris came across was from a Christian minister at a Christmas performance, who, in his preaching against Western media, included a description of anal rape.

There are, however, Christians who take a much more liberal stand on issues of sexual morality. For example, at a meeting at the college to decide what to do about pregnant women students, the view of the Catholic priest was that 'we should pretend that we don't know they're pregnant until after the exams.'

Chris also told us that, before she applied for VSO, she had heard Steve Hurd, chair of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust, speak. Having a placement in Uganda allowed her to experience and support the work of one of these secondary schools and she spoke warmly about what is being achieved there.

The notice outside Bushenyi College asks those attending it to 'leave the college a better place than you found it'. Chris said she hopes that this is true of her time at the college.

\* You can find more information about Silent Voices and Silent Support on page 9 of this newsletter.



*Amon, another trainee, learns shoe-making*

## **Brum Hums @ the Lord Mayor's Quiz**

**John Edwards reports on how our team of quizzers fared.**

On 29 September, Adrian Bailey, Peter Manchester and I turned up at the Great Hall of Birmingham University to represent Birmingham Humanists in the 13th Lord Mayor's Mega Quiz. We were one of 64 teams battling it out to claim a prize, while trying to raise lots of money for the Lord Mayor's charities. Most of the other teams had clever names, but we stuck to 'Birmingham Humanists'. As the team names (plus scores, after a few rounds) were shown on a large screen at the front of the room, this served to give the group a fair amount of publicity.

There were a maximum of four in a team. While we waited for our hoped-for fourth member to arrive, we perused the categories to see which round we would play our joker on – Food and Drink; Geography; Musical Medley; Sport; Nature/Pets; History; The Movies – All Action; General Trivia; Europe; or Birmingham. We tended to favour Geography, and in the end settled for that, as when the quiz started, we were still one brain short (we were at least this all night!).

The ebullient Carl Chinn was the question master. A team of young cadets from a local army regiment raced up and down the lines of tables, collecting the answers at the end of each round.

Playing our 'Joker' early in Round 2 proved a good move, as we got 7 out of 10 in that round (which was then doubled). When the scores first came up after three rounds, we were sitting nicely in 3rd equal position, with 20 points. Unfortunately that was as good as it got! At the half-way stage we had slipped to 22nd equal with 34 points, and we continued to slide, finishing the evening with 65 points, which put us equal 35th. Our excuses were/are:

- we were a man/woman short
- we didn't stick to water as a drink!
- some rounds had more than 10 points on offer – one had at least 13, which was obviously a big advantage to teams lucky enough to have chosen it for their 'Joker'
- we changed several correct answers during the three minutes 'thinking time' at the end of each round (as you inevitably do!).

However, we now know what toxophily is; what a winebibber is; who was the second Star of Fame on Birmingham's Broad Street; that our Town Hall opened in 1834; and that almost all the items in the Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace (designed to show off Britain's talents to the world) were cast, forged and erected by firms from Birmingham and the Black Country!

For some reason I was pleased that the winners for the previous two years, 'Pill Harriers', finished 2 points behind this year's champions 'Utopia', who scored 100 points (out of 110, 115 or even 120? – who knows or cares!). Maybe we can do better next year?

The raffle raised a record £407 for charity and the whole evening raised several thousand pounds. You can see all the results at <http://www.247.tv/megaquiz>.

## Having a good death

**On 18 October Jo Cartwright, the Press And Campaigns Manager of Dignity in Dying, spoke to the group about how and why Dignity in Dying campaigns for a change in the law on assisted suicide, and about the work of the charity Compassion in Dying, which tries to help people take control over end-of-life decisions under the current law.**

**Dignity**  
in dying

Jo began by outlining the history of Dignity in Dying. It was the Voluntary Euthanasia Society until 2006, when it changed its name. Its central aim is to enable people to achieve a good death. It no longer supports voluntary euthanasia, but works to change the law on assisted dying.

To clarify things, Jo gave definitions of the terms 'assisted dying', 'assisted suicide' and 'euthanasia':

- Assisted dying is about giving terminally ill adults greater control over the time and manner of their death. This requires the patient to take the final step and administer the life-ending medication. They can apply for the medication only if they are dying and if they have mental capacity.
- Assisted suicide is when people who are chronically ill and/or disabled (but not terminally ill) are given help to end their lives. Dignity in Dying does not support assisted suicide.
- Euthanasia is when a doctor takes direct actions to end a patient's life. This may be either voluntary or non-voluntary. Dignity in Dying does not support either type of euthanasia.

Jo then looked at the arguments for changing the law on assisted dying. There are two questions we should ask, she said:

- Is there a need for change?
- Can change be made safely and not leave people at risk?

### The need for change

Dignity in Dying believes that change is needed because palliative care cannot always relieve the suffering of people at the end of their lives. With advances in medical care, people are now kept alive much longer than they were in the past. Of course we should work to improve palliative care, but in conjunction with the option of assisted dying.

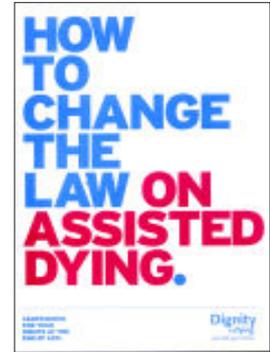
Under the current law, it is illegal to help someone to kill themselves. Guidelines on prosecution for assisting a suicide were published in 2010. These identified the factors that would make prosecution more or less likely and made it clear that compassionate assistance is unlikely to result in prosecution. However, problems with the current law are that:

- each case is treated individually
- people go to Switzerland to get the assistance with dying that they are unable to obtain legally in this country – we shouldn't be exporting this problem to another country
- those travelling to Switzerland often die far sooner than is necessary, because they are afraid they may not be able to make the journey if they wait
- it can be difficult for those who have planned to travel abroad for an assisted death to change their minds, because of the problem of cancelling arrangements
- loved ones who accompany the person who is going to die may return to face criminal investigation while they are grieving
- people attempting to kill themselves at home may not be successful, and may put their relatives in danger of prosecution.

## Can change be made safely?

What is needed to protect people is upfront safeguards, not guidelines for after the event. In order not to leave people at risk, Dignity in Dying believes that the law should be changed to allow assisted dying, with the following safeguards:

- 1 The individual must be a terminally ill adult and a resident of the UK. People with a chronic illness or disability who are not terminally ill would not be eligible for assistance to die.
- 2 The patient must have the mental capacity to make the decision.
- 3 The process must be entirely voluntary and initiated by the patient.
- 4 Two doctors, a consultant and an independent doctor, must agree that the patient meets the eligibility criteria set down in the legislation.
- 5 The doctors must inform the patient that they can revoke the request at any time.
- 6 There must be discussions to explore why the patient wants an assisted death, and what pain and symptom relief is available, as well as other palliative and supportive options.
- 7 There should be a 'cooling off' period between the request for assistance being formally accepted and receiving the life-ending prescription.
- 8 The patient must take the medication themselves.
- 9 Data would be recorded to ensure that the process was effectively monitored and reported.



Jo looked at concerns that are often expressed about assisted dying, at how the safeguards answer these, and at the experience of places (eg Oregon in the USA) where assisted dying has been legalised. For example, in response to the worry that assisted dying would introduce a 'duty to die', with relatives putting pressure on dying people to have an assisted death, Jo cited evidence from Oregon that the main reasons for wanting an assisted death were not the fear of being a burden on family members, but the loss of personal choice and control, and no longer being able to take part in enjoyable activities. She stressed that legislation would include safeguards ensuring that potential cases of abuse would be picked up as soon as possible.

At present in the UK, Jo pointed out, there is no formal regulation of the decisions of dying patients at the ends of their lives. In Britain, if someone wants to be assisted to die, they might get help from a sympathetic doctor but this will never be recorded or checked. No one would ever know whether that person really wanted to die, or whether the doctor made the decision for them because they felt it was in their best interests.

In countries that have changed the law on assisted dying, end-of-life decisions are made in an open and honest environment that is open to checks for abuse.

### End-of-life decisions under the present law

The rights of patients under the current law, and how those rights can lead to a better death now, are the central concerns of the charity Compassion in Dying. Jo outlined what these rights are, and how Compassion in Dying can help people to exercise them. Patients with mental capacity have an absolute legal right to refuse medical treatment, she explained. Those who currently have capacity can make arrangements for a time when they may come to lack it. This includes making advance decisions (in effect, refusing consent to certain forms of treatment) or appointing proxy decision makers with lasting powers of attorney.

Compassion in Dying provides, free of charge, Advance Decision forms, which anyone can use to set out their instructions about the circumstances in which they would wish to refuse treatment. There's an information line which provides support to enable people to fill in the forms effectively. Compassion in Dying also gives free information to patients on setting up a Lasting Power of Attorney.

Jo ended by welcoming some recent developments, including the End of Life Care Plan for patients, introduced by the Department of Health in 2008, and guidance published by the General Medical Council in 2010: *Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making*.

For further information about Dignity in Dying, visit its website at [www.dignityindying.org.uk](http://www.dignityindying.org.uk). For copies of Advance Decision forms, and for other information and advice on end-of-life decisions, go to the website of Compassion in Dying at [www.compassionindying.org.uk](http://www.compassionindying.org.uk).

## The UK Armed Forces Humanist Association

**On 15 November, David Brittain gave a talk about the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association. This was an appropriate time of year for his talk, as one of the concerns of UKAFHA is the lack of representation of Humanists, and of others with no religious beliefs, at Remembrance Day ceremonies, and specifically at the Cenotaph.**



David began his talk by explaining the origins of UKAFHA. It was set up in 2003 by Major Henry Cummins, whose experiences in Kosovo had a profound effect on him, and caused him to reject his Anglican faith. He saw at first hand what religious divides can do to a society. He also began to question the role of army chaplains. Why did they talk about God in the heat of battle, even if the soldier in the foxhole was not a believer? When he asked the chaplains that question, there was always the stock answer: 'There are no atheists in foxholes!' Well, yes, there are, and Henry knew it. And by now, he was one of them. Henry decided that something should be done. He decided that he was a Humanist, joined the BHA, and established UKAFHA.

A Humanist celebrant named Denis Cobell was appointed as the first Humanist Chaplain for the armed forces. But he was a Chaplain in name only. Humanist Chaplains were not recognised in the armed forces, and anyway, since there were clearly thousands of forces personnel who were not religious, Denis could not even begin to support them all personally.

When Denis retired in 2008, David was appointed to succeed him. It became clear to him that UKAFHA was in the doldrums. With committee members scattered all around the world, what was needed was an administrator, someone to pull together the views of the membership and represent them. This is what David set out to do.

It quickly became clear, David told us, that strong feelings were held by those who felt overlooked, ignored, and even abused if they declared that they were not religious. Some members claimed that they were coerced into placing 'C of E' on their personnel records, and that they were told they might not get a decent funeral if they declared their Humanism. And forces personnel are obliged to attend parades with a religious component.

One of the biggest causes of angst is the Remembrance Day ceremony. It's 5% about the suffering of war, and 95% about God, said David. Humanists and non-believers don't get a mention, unless the pastor decides to mention them. For example, in the service at Bedford cenotaph last year, the only reference to anyone of no faith was along the lines of 'We pray also for those unfortunate people who have tragically lost their faith, and are no longer able to follow the true path of Christ.'

The BHA has made several approaches to government about the Remembrance Day ceremony at the Cenotaph. In 2005 it requested that Humanists be included in the planning for the ceremony, along with the fourteen representatives of religious groups who were already involved. This request was refused. In 2009, the BHA asked if it could be formally represented along with the other groups at the London Cenotaph. This was again rejected.

David gave us the MoD's figures on the religions of those in the armed forces: out of 186,360 people in uniform on 1 April 2011, there were 156,540 Christians, 730 Hindus, 610 Muslims, 480 Buddhists, 120 Sikhs, 80 Jews, and 'trace elements' of Druids, Pagans, Rastafarians, Spiritualists, Zoroastrians, Wiccans and Baha'is. The number of people recorded as 'of no religion' was 24,730. The number on non-religious service personnel is steadily growing.

Since last year, UKAFHA has been asking Humanists to take part in local Remembrance Day ceremonies around the country. Twelve groups participated in 2010, rising to 25 this year. (See page 6 for a report on Birmingham Humanists own contribution to this.) UKAFHA is keen to increase this still further in future years, and perhaps even to hold separate Humanist ceremonies.

David outlined some of the decisions made at UKAFHA's Annual General Meeting in January 2011:

- it became an integrated part of the BHA
- it was agreed to develop the idea of Garrison Celebrants, people who are already celebrants within the BHA network, who volunteer to 'adopt' a military base near where they live. They will essentially represent the face of Humanism at their local military station.

In April UKAFHA ran into controversy when it produced a recruiting poster which offended many Christians in the armed forces. This was largely because the question on the poster

(‘When you are in combat, do your thoughts turn to God, or do you think about your family and your mates?’) was so near the bone. It caused such a furore that David felt obliged to volunteer to withdraw the posters – but this in turn provoked an outcry from UKAFHA’s own members. A positive outcome from the affair was a meeting between David, the Chaplain of the Fleet and Andrew Copson from the BHA, at which the Chaplain acknowledged the concerns of Humanists, the need for Humanists/atheists to be mentioned respectfully at Remembrance Day services, and the need for Humanist garrison celebrants.

David reported that his job title has now been changed to Secretary, and he spoke about plans for the future. This includes work at the military prison at Colchester Barracks, where many prisoners are attending Alpha course meetings, tempted by the free refreshments (luxurious compared with prison fare). The aim is to counteract the damaging and derogatory things about non-religious people that inmates are hearing on the Alpha course.

Membership of UKAFHA has quadrupled over the last eighteen months, but it still needs to make more people in the services aware of its existence. There will be roadshows in 2012, with participation from Andrew Copson and, possibly, from Professor Grayling, the patron of UKAFHA.

Although UKAFHA does get some support from the BHA, it is always in need of further funding for its work, David told us. Anyone wishing to make a donation, should contact Tamsin Van Dyken or Blakely Nixon on 020 7079 3580.

## Remembrance Day and non-religious people

**Below is the text of a letter that John Edwards wrote to his local paper, Solihull News, and to national newspapers.**

After all the fuss over the ban on England players wearing poppies at the friendly international with Spain this weekend, many British citizens will be amazed to hear that someone in high places in the UK is outdoing Sepp Blatter and his FIFA cronies!

For the second year in succession, the British Humanist Association has been prevented from laying a wreath at the Cenotaph on behalf of the United Kingdom Armed Forces Humanist Association, in memory of the many non-religious servicemen and women who gave their lives for the country.

Although there will be as many as fourteen different religious groups, each with official representation at the Cenotaph ceremony, there is no room, or rather willingness to make room, to recognise the 14 per cent of service people who state that they have no religion. To put this in context, ‘all other religions apart from Christian’ make up just 1.7 per cent of all armed forces personnel. In 2010 the government recognised the contribution of non-religious people to the armed forces but said there was ‘limited space’. This year they say it is because the Queen lays a wreath ‘on behalf of everyone who suffered or died in war’, yet they continue to give special status to minority religions out of all proportion to their number, and insult those of no religious faith.

For the UKAFHA, a group which works on behalf of the many thousands of non-religious serving armed forces personnel, the exclusion from the Cenotaph in London is a major issue, as they feel saddened and angry that thousands of currently-serving non-religious army personnel are not recognised, let alone the many from the past. This seems especially unfair when there is official recognition of the non-religious at the commemorations in other UK capital cities such as Edinburgh and Belfast and a number of locations locally, including Shirley, where John Edwards of Birmingham Humanists was allowed to lay a wreath at the ceremony at the memorial to the war dead on Remembrance Day itself.



*John Edwards lays a wreath on behalf of Birmingham Humanists and UKAFHA*

# Will you still *love me* tomorrow?

**John Edwards reports on our December meeting, at which guests mingled with wine, soft drinks and snacks before a seasonal talk by comic novelist Mil Millington from Wolverhampton.**

Mil's talk was based around the three highlighted words in the title and started with a warning that there would be sex and swearing! Before starting on his first reading, from *A Certain Chemistry* (a novel about the slippery nature of free will), Mil explained how it was that he unintentionally came to be writing novels. He was working as an IT manager at Wolverhampton Poly in 1995, which was when the internet started up (less than twenty years ago!). Wanting to become proficient at html, Mil slapped down some text on things that he and his girlfriend had been arguing about, and used this to practise formatting, highlighting, etc. He was shocked two years later when, looking at the statistics for the Poly's server, he found that this page was at the top, with around 10,000 hits per week; more than the English Department! It appeared that people were stumbling across his webpage by accident, and telling their friends, who were then checking it out. In 2000 he started getting emails from editors saying that they liked the webpage and that he ought to write a book, which they would be willing to publish. So it was that he ended up writing for Hodder and Stoughton – but not two weeks after setting up the webpage, as the newspapers reported!



Speaking as Tom, in a long-term relationship with Sarah, who works at Iceland but is commissioned to write a biography of a Scottish Megastar called Georgie, Mil amusingly described an awkward, embarrassing situation involving male nudity, erotic photos, an erection and a returning girlfriend. The point of the scene was to show love as a test case for free will and choice. Apparently psychological research has shown that you can predict quite a lot about who people will fall in love with and it's not much to do with free will. It seems love and physical attractiveness are pretty damn close; you fall in love with someone of approximately the same level of attractiveness as yourself. Research using interviewees at the end of bridges of various degrees of rigidity has also shown that excitement and fear make a person seem more attractive. Also, the more attractive the people you surround yourself with, the less alluring you will appear. A fetish for knee-length boots also featured in the discussion before we broke for coffee.

In the second half, Mil read from *Love and Other Near Death Experiences* (his book about people's compulsion to find an external reason and 'meaning' for their lives) about the dilemma of Philip Hall, a 32 year old man with an operable brain tumour. The operation will keep him alive and retain his memory, but will destroy the part that made him Philip by changing his personality. He can feel his wife Helen gradually drifting away from him with each medical consultation as, of course, she will be affected if the 'Philip who is yet to be' is totally different from the 'Philip who was before'. This might not sound funny, but it is, because of the way it is written. The crux is the decision he has to make about whether or not to have the operation. After reflecting that he is not the same person he was when he was a 5 year old, or a teenager, or a 25 year old, Philip decides to toss a coin! And there Mil left the story, as he wanted us to take part in a survey he was conducting, that might feature in future e-book versions of the novel. We all had to write our thoughts about whether he should have the operation or not, and give our reasons, which we then discussed afterwards. We seemed by be a slightly unusual audience, in that only one person decided that Philip shouldn't go ahead. Mil felt it was interesting to hear everyone's thoughts on Philip's operation dilemma and he hoped the audience had enjoyed the evening as much as he had.

For those who didn't see the notice on West Midlands Atheist Meet-Up, Mil's other books are *Instructions for Living Someone Else's Life* (about the nature-nurture conundrum) and *Things My Girlfriend And I Have Argued About*, which is about public sector workplace politics and the misunderstood subject of bickering, which 'because of its very non-relevance' illustrates something Mil feels about atheism. We never got to discuss this – if you want to find out more you'll have to read the book. All are currently available (and reviewed) on the Amazon website.

# Supporting Humanist schools in Uganda

**Bill Green writes about the Rainwater Harvesting Project in Uganda, in conjunction with the Uganda Humanist School Trust (UHST).**

It is strange how disconnected bits of information can get pulled together to result in worthwhile action. This narrative shows how this can happen.

Some while ago you may remember that Steve Hurd from the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust (UHST) came to give the Birmingham Humanists a talk about what they were trying to achieve and were actually achieving in Uganda.

All the Humanist schools teach the Uganda national curriculum and prepare students for public examinations. At the same time, they aim to develop self-confident students who care for each other and for their local communities. The schools encourage students to be open-minded and questioning. They are taught to respect evidence and to appreciate the need for shared human values. In order to foster a spirit of understanding, students are introduced to both religious philosophies, as required by the national curriculum, and secular humanist philosophies.

Deo Ssekitooleko, Director of Fair View School, expresses his aspirations as follows: 'We are determined to protect students from any form of indoctrination. Instead they will be exposed to various world views. They will be encouraged to think freely, to be rational and sceptical, to value and respect humanity and to be tolerant towards others.'

'Practical skills for self-employment and survival out of school will be encouraged. This is in response to a high level of unemployment among school leavers and dropouts. Field days will be organised for students to do practical work and get involved in community social welfare activities. School-community collaboration is our school's raison d'être.'

The Uganda Humanist Schools Trust seeks to raise funds to enable these hopes to be realised. I think that all Humanists would consider these to be worthwhile objectives.

The Birmingham Humanists group has been left a legacy by Anne White for the 'furtherance of Humanist ideals'. It seemed to me that we should be using some/all/part of these monies for something other than the general running costs of the group. So at the 2010 AGM I was successful in getting the group to agree to donate up to £1,500 for a rainwater collection project with the UHST.

I am also a member of the Rotary Club of Walsall. All Rotary Clubs are placed in district groups and are connected throughout the world by Rotary International. Each district has sum of money allocated to it by Rotary International to be used for 'District Simplified Grants'. Individual Rotary Clubs can apply for one of these grants and, provided certain criteria are met, the district will 'match' the initial monies raised. Projects are looked on favourably if they meet specific criteria, which include education, children, the third world, the provision of water and benefit to a community. In this instance, so many boxes were ticked that this project was likely to win approval from the grant-allocating committee.

This meant that, as long as we could find £750 seed money, we could apply for a £750 grant. As I already had approval to arrange a donation of £1,500, there was no problem in finding the £750 seed money. It also seemed that we might have a way to make the Anne White Legacy go even further. Through other Rotary connections, an estate agent in Walsall (Fraser Wood Midlands) advised that they had some funds in their allocated charity account, and they liked this project and were prepared to put £150 into it. This meant I only needed to use £600 of the allocated Anne White legacy.

The application was approved, and the funds were allocated and donated. Then we heard that the school originally chosen had lost its licence. Unfortunately the grant rules meant that we could not just switch the funds to another school. We had to go through the entire grant process again. I will not bore you with the admin details and the hoops leapt though, but it was a pain. I am pleased to report the second application was accepted and eventually the funds made it to another UHST sponsored school.

Finally the good news. The tanks were installed this autumn to coincide with the completion of the girls dormitory block. They are working, full of water and are providing water to all using the site.

So that leaves one question. What should our next project be?

# Silent Voices

'Silent Voices' is a Ugandan NGO formed by the parents and teachers of deaf children. It exists to improve the lives and opportunities of deaf children and their families. In Uganda, as in many developing countries, deaf children are often neglected. They may be rejected by their parents, brought up by grandparents or other carers, and not sent to school. In the Bushenyi area of south west Uganda, there are now fourteen primary schools and one secondary school where deaf children can learn sign language and be supported in their learning.

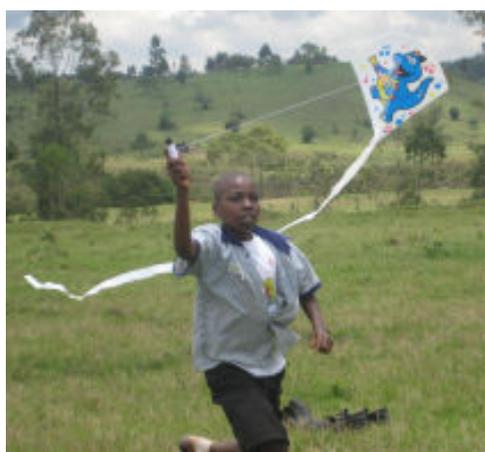
The parents and teachers established 'Silent Voices' in 2008 with the help of a VSO volunteer. The organisation currently:

- supports the secondary school where deaf pupils are welcomed
- runs a Vocational Skill Training programme for deaf young people to spend twelve months with a trainer learning a skill such as tailoring, carpentry, hairdressing or shoe-making
- has funding for a project to improve the teaching of deaf children
- has an income-generating project where families raise pigs.

There are about 160 members who meet in five groups across the area. Some of the groups are in very rural areas where communication is a real issue, but the commitment of the parents is such that they will walk for three or four hours through the hills to attend a meeting.

Silent Support is a small UK charity set up by three former VSO volunteers, principally to raise the funds for the Vocation Skill Training programme of Silent Voices. We believe that this is an extremely worthwhile project, as it gives the young people a future income-earning capacity. As an additional benefit, the young people are placed with trainers in the community. Local people see that deaf young people are able to learn, and tell others about it, encouraging other families to send any child with a disability to school.

The programme pays a small fee to the trainer, lends the young people the equipment, provides materials for practice and monitors the experience. It is a low-cost programme, costing less than £200 per person, but one for which it is difficult to raise funds in Uganda. Silent Support was established this year and is registered with HMRC for Gift Aid purposes. This year we are supporting ten deaf young people in training placements and we expect to support at least as many in 2012.



*Kite flying at the Activity Day in 2009*

Silent Support is also raising funds for a repeat of the very successful Activity Days held in 2009 and 2010. At these events deaf children come from across the region and join together in sports, crafts and games. We believe that this is a very valuable experience and gives deaf children the rare opportunity to meet other deaf children and learn through social contact and activities. The event is held at the Bushenyi Primary Teachers College and involves student teachers, VSO volunteers and Peace Corps volunteers. We need to raise £750 to repeat this event.

For further information, contact Chris Smith on [chris.vsouganda@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:chris.vsouganda@yahoo.co.uk).

**At our September meeting we made a collection for the work of Silent Support. If you were not present and would like to make a donation (or if you'd like to add to what you have already given!), you can send it to Silent Support at 53 Victoria Road, Shifnal, TF11 8AE. Silent Support (XT28128) is registered with HMRC and UK tax payers can opt to add Gift Aid to any donation simply by giving their name and full address.**

## 'You just don't understand my religion' is not good enough

**In article from the series 'Heathens progress' in the Guardian (7 November 2011), Julian Baggini stresses the importance of proper engagement in the debate about religion, and looks at the strategies sometimes used by religious people to try to negate the arguments of those criticising religion.**

Terry Eagleton's quip that reading Richard Dawkins on theology is like listening to someone 'holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is *The British Book of Birds*' is a funny and memorable contribution to a debate that is rarely amusing and frequently forgettable. Whether you agree with the charge or not, the complaint is of a kind we have become very familiar with: disputants in the religion debate are talking past each other because they do not have a sufficiently rich understanding of the positions they stand against.



I'm very much in sympathy with this view, and this series is largely an attempt to try to find more constructive points of engagement that can only emerge if we ditch lazy and tired preconceptions about those with whom we disagree. At the same time, however, I'm all too aware that 'you just don't understand' is a card that is often played far too swiftly and without justification.

Most obviously, it cannot be the case that the views of someone who is most immersed in or knows most about a religion always trump those of a relatively uninformed outsider. People who live and breathe a faith know more about it than those who do not – but this quantitative advantage does not guarantee better qualitative judgements. If it did, by the same logic, we should take the word of the earnest astrologer of 40 years' standing over the clear evidence that it's all baloney. Indeed, being deeply immersed may be a positive disadvantage, in that it might make it impossible to take a clear-sighted, impartial view. So Dawkins and his ilk are correct when they say that they are not obliged to become experts in theology in order to make criticisms of religion.

Of course, there is a level of ignorance that makes reasonable criticism impossible. But where that is the case, it should always be possible to point out what elementary mistake the critic has made. It is never reasonable to fob someone off on the basis that they do not understand: it is always necessary to explain what they do not understand. But also – and here's the rub – it's essential to make it understandable. Rule one of intellectual engagement is that all parties must sincerely attempt both to understand others and to make themselves understood.

It has become evident to me, however, that many people, especially the religious, suffer from a kind of conceptual claustrophobia. Their beliefs are of their essence somewhat vague and they are terrified of being pinned down. Although critics often leap on this and claim that this betrays woolly thinking, evasion or obscurantism, I think that there are times when such a refusal to commit is justified.

I remember, for example, an impassioned talk I once heard by the recently sainted Giles Fraser. Recounting the story in Exodus of Moses going up the mountain to meet God to get the Ten Commandments, Fraser said: 'The higher he goes up the mountain, the more the mist comes down. The closer he gets to God, the less and less he is able to see.' Meanwhile, at Sinai's foot, the idolatrous masses are 'running around building a golden calf, making God into a thing'.

It is always possible to think there is a fog when really it's just that your glasses have steamed up. But I'm not only prepared to allow that an intelligent religious faith might have a big fat mystery at its heart, I think it must have. Only the most juvenile gods are like super-humans we can truly understand. If there is a God, it must surely passeth all understanding.

But embracing this mystery comes at a price. If, like the archbishop of Canterbury, your faith is a kind of 'silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark', then think very carefully before you open your mouth. Too often I find that faith is mysterious only selectively. Believers constantly attribute all sorts of qualities to their gods and have a list of doctrines as long as your arm. It is only when the questions get tough that, suddenly, their God disappears in a puff of mystery. Ineffability becomes a kind of invisibility cloak, only worn when there is a need to get out of a bit of philosophical bother.

Also, maintaining that some aspects of religion are ineffable doesn't mean that all are. Indeed, it entails that some are very clear indeed. Ask Fraser, for example, if he thinks God is a thing and he should answer clearly and unequivocally, no. Likewise, people should be able to give clear answers to straight questions such as 'Was Christ's resurrection physical, leaving an empty tomb?', even if that answer is 'I don't know'. Maintaining, for instance, that it is naive to read the gospels as literal history is – or should be – to maintain that the events it describes did not, or need not, have literally happened.

I need to make these issues clear now because over the coming weeks, in the name of trying to uncross some wires and get some real discussion going, I'm going to be trying to get greater clarity about just what different camps in the religion debate are really maintaining. I anticipate all sorts of objections of the kind I've mentioned: that I'm simplifying; that I'm trying to eff the ineffable; that I am being too literal minded. I want to make it clear right now that these kinds of responses won't work as get-out-of-jail-free cards. They need justification.

We also have to be willing to accommodate the fact that belief comes in infinite shades and varieties. No two people believe exactly the same thing, and that presents another opportunity for evasion: plausible denial that you believe what is being attributed to you. We have to accept that, to make progress, we sometimes have to say, 'That's not quite what I think, but it may be close enough. Go on.' If anything less than perfect understanding counts as misunderstanding, then everything is misunderstood.

Everyone says that they are in favour of greater mutual comprehension, but the failure to achieve it is not just a result of people not making the effort to understand. Often it's just that people refuse to make themselves understood.

## **Biblical contradictions by Clearasmud – No 2**

'The dead shall be resurrected; and the dead shall be raised...' (1 Corinthians 15, 32)

'And as the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away, so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more.' (Job 7, 9)

So will the dead be resurrected or not then? Glad I'm not putting too much effort in worrying about that thorny problem!

More 'truths' from the Bible in the next issue.

## **New member**

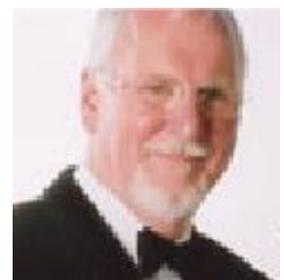
**We'd like to welcome Terry McGrath as a new member of BrumHums. Here's what he told us about himself:**

Originally a Scouse Git. Came to Brum in the early 60s as a naive 21 year old art student completing an Art Teacher Training Course. Taught in various Midland secondary schools before saving my sanity by bailing out after 30 years to follow my first love – traditional jazz trombone and sax playing. Still enjoying this to this day (see [www.eurekajazz.co.uk](http://www.eurekajazz.co.uk)). It pays for the racing of my vintage 1920s sports cars around the country's circuits.

Lived most of this time in wonderful cosmopolitan Moseley, where I have restored a derelict 1881 coach house with partner and jazz singer Sheila Fawkes.

Victim of Catholic mental and physical child abuse at school by 'Christian' Brothers, hence my strong stance against organised religion of any sort. I greeted Ratzinger last year on the Hagley Road with my large banner stating this.

New to Humanism, I am a fan of Richard Dawkins, Pat Condell and the late George Melly.



# GRAM report

**This year's Group Representatives' Annual Meeting was held on 26 November at the Institute of Education in central London. Adrian Bailey, who attended on behalf of Birmingham Humanists, summarises the discussions and looks at how our group could take forward some of the ideas that came up at the meeting.**

## **1 Ethical Juries**

This programme, pioneered by Michael Imison, and run by West London Humanists, feeds into the Secular Morality Project, which aims to show that there's a natural morality we all share. A dilemma is chosen and debated, using consistent ground rules, with the intention that the resulting decision can become part of an ever-growing common moral code. See West London Humanists and Secularists (<http://westlondon.humanist.org.uk/Secular%20Morality.html>) for more information.

If our members make some suggestions about dilemmas that we could discuss, we could choose one or two and have an Ethical Jury event next year.

## **2 'Making a stand'**

Members of Oxford Humanists described how they regularly have a stall in the town centre or at local events, and how they have gradually improved both their stall and the way they interact with members of the public. They believe it's a good way of connecting with local people, and it's been a means of welcoming quite a lot of new members.

We have an annual stall at the Moseley Festival, and I invite you to suggest other places we could set up stall during the year. Of course, to do that we will need volunteers to staff the stall!

## **3 Resolution Revolution**

Joanne Knowles spoke to us about this campaign, supported by the BHA. Children are encouraged to decide what would make a good New Year's Resolution, to work out how they will do it, and to actually carry it out.

Why not ask your local school if they're getting involved? The website is <http://resolution-revolution.org.uk>.

## **4 Websites**

Did you know that the BHA has sixteen websites? Andrew West, the new webmaster, told us a bit about what's good and bad about them, and about the 40 websites of local groups. He said the two rules for a group website are: include all the information an enquirer might be looking for, and make sure nothing's out of date. There was a lot of discussion of the relative merits of Facebook, Meetup, email and other ways of advertising group events. The Website of the Year award went to South East London Humanists.

## **5 Working Better Together**

It has been agreed this year to introduce a new closer relationship between local groups and the BHA nationally, for those groups that want it. At GRAM it was agreed that a wiki be set up as an online treasure chest of useful things for local groups, and there was discussion about the best way for the BHA and the groups to communicate with each other.

At its last meeting, your committee agreed that Birmingham Humanists should become 'Partners' of the BHA, and we will ask for your support for this at our next Annual General Meeting. Although we will retain full independence, we commit ourselves in general terms to supporting the BHA's aims and campaigns, and acting in some spheres as its trusted local representative. In return, we will have much wider access to the significant resources of the BHA.

## **6 Getting into the media**

PR expert Paul Blanchard gave a useful overview of how to get Humanism into the local media. He said we mustn't underestimate the importance of the simple Letter to the Editor (keep it short though!), since that's the most-read page of any local newspaper. When it comes to news stories, make sure that there actually is a story, he said! He told us (ironically?) to remember TRUTH: Topical, Relevant, Unusual, Tension, Human. If you're reliable and have something interesting to say, it's possible to build up good relationships with journalists, so that they actually start to phone you for stories.

This is something that we as a group need to get on a more consistent footing. I if any members are interested in being our media reps, please let us know!

At the end I took the opportunity to give a brief explanation of a project I'm working on, called Moral Support, in order to garner some ideas and involvement to help me take it forward. The idea, in a nutshell, is to provide a resource for young adults to help them make good decisions. I've got going on this directly as a result of links made with the police since the riots in August, and indirectly as a possible logical consequence of my belief in the need for Humanist action.

## United Nations Association Birmingham Branch Concert

**Percy Lea reports on the United Nations Association concert held in Moseley on 16 October 2011, which he and Derek Lea attended as representatives of Birmingham Humanists.**

The key performers, in a wide ranging programme, were Stella Seaton-Sims (mezzo-soprano) and Michael Jones (piano/organ), both talented and experienced professionals who have performed together on numerous occasions.

Stella's repertoire of songs, by notable English and foreign composers, included Gabriel Fauré, Dmitri Shostakovich, Joaquin Turina, Samuel Barber, Anton Arensky, Hector Berlioz, Elaine Hugh-Jones, Maurice Ravel and Amy Beach. Michael Jones' excellent performances included Sigfrid Karg-Elert's 'Nun Danket' (organ) and several piano pieces, including Chopin's Waltz in C minor, Andaluza by Enrique Granados and Humoresque by Sergei Rachmaninov.

Five readings were interspersed in the programme. The readers were:

- Sarabhjeet Singh from the Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Temple (selected readings)
- Lloyd Robinson of the Ethiopian World Federation, who read extracts from the words of Emperor Haile Selassie
- Elena Denezhkina, Founder and Chair of the Midlands British-Russian Society, who, with Alexandra and Natasha Cambell, read 'After the Storm' by Boris Pasternak
- a Christian reader, Christopher Ramsden, who read an extract from 'The Prophet' by Khalil Gibran
- Percy Lea, a member of Birmingham Humanists, and of the United Nations Association, read an extract from 'The Life of Man' by Margaret Laws Smith.

This secular reading from Nigel Collins anthology *Seasons of life*, was well received by the audience and prompted several positive comments at the end of the concert. The 'I'm a Happy Humanist' logo on Derek Lea's T-shirt attracted some attention, which led to requests for information about our activities and meetings.

The evening's entertainment was well organised and much appreciated by the audience. It was a pity that so few of our members were able to attend, particularly as our non-faith participation in the event attracted much positive interest and comment.

During the past few years, the Birmingham Humanists' stall at the Moseley Festival, and our Moseley CDT centre meetings, have enabled us to become a recognisable group with a significant identity in the local community. It may be worth considering, as part of our Humanist Action Group, for us to tap into the latent local interest in our activities by organising a 'Human Rights' concert based on Humanist values with music, poetry and secular readings, in the Moseley area.

### Committee changes

We'd like to welcome Peter Manchester, who has recently been co-opted on to the committee of Birmingham Humanists. He will be looking after our website, taking over from Malik, who has recently resigned from the committee because of pressure of work.

We'd like to record our thanks to Malik for all his hard work on the website. We are particularly indebted to him for designing and setting up our 'new look' website, which is much clearer and more modern-looking than the previous one. Malik is still a member of Birmingham Humanists, so we look forward to seeing him at future meetings.

# Letters to the editor

## A question of faith

**David McKnight of the Berkshire Humanists group has sent the following response to John Lester's piece about the word 'faith' in the September issue of N&V. It's good to hear his positive comments on our group, even if he doesn't agree with everything printed in our newsletter (but then I don't suppose our own members do either...)!**

**To the Editor, Birmingham Humanists News and Views**

Thank you so much for sending your newsletter which makes a good and regular reminder of my views upon the excellence of your group. I gained this from the very occasional but worthwhile effort that I made to actually attend a meeting in person in Birmingham.

I feel minded to take exception, however, to the remarks by John Lester in the most recent newsletter No 35 Sept 2011, under the title 'Nothing good about faith'.

First, a few thoughts about the word faith\* itself. The word faith is one of a collection of words which the religions undoubtedly use to instil meanings that they exclusively want it to have. The rise in use to mean what a religion offers or requires loosely matches the decline in resonance of the word religion itself with many of the population. So something political in the use of words is going on here. We humanists are right to point out what we think is a weakness about the way people make their beliefs in general. Religionists think that faith is a great strength, of course, and play up to this at every opportunity. This, sadly, is all that they have left to defend many of their own beliefs. 'I put it down to my faith' has drawn many a theological discussion to a premature close.

Now to my main point. If we are going to say anything about the use of the word in a way which damages critical thinking, logic and reason, then we need to be careful about what we are saying, even though we are mostly in the world of semantics and tactics. Saying that there are no good uses of the word lays us open to attack. Also the word faith would hardly be present in the English language if it had no good uses.

I hope that we can agree upon a definition which says that faith is 'a belief that one gains without evidence' – or, succinctly, 'un-evidenced belief'.

To quash the total use of the word is foolish, because one has only to think of the things that we all believe about the future. How can one have **any** evidence about what is going to occur in the future? I am sure, however, that you have faith in some aspects of the future, if only that you will actually wake up tomorrow morning. In his videoed address 'The trouble with Atheism', Sam Harris says that 'even atheists need faith' – to understand and withstand the rigours of the attack of religionists. Thus we can have faith in mankind in its widest sense, even though we have no evidence for the vast majority of people. This is possibly because Humanists understand human nature. 'Human nature', the concept, is not, however, evidence itself.

So sometimes even we need faith and I am unashamed to admit that. Everyone needs faith at times. If it's carefully used with proper and reliable backup (science?), it can give people hope. This brings me to the real reason why I am writing. For some years Berkshire Humanists have used the strapline 'Faith in Humanity' because simply that is what a fair proportion of us believe. Further, we think that this possibly gives us an advantage if we are to work alongside religions to reach all people who need help in society. If we were 'A Faith', then this could lead to us getting some monies that were previously intended for the churches, and to us gaining more respect. Pleasingly, another group, in Milton Keynes, has also started to use this phrase in their advertising – perhaps they came to the decision to use these words independently of Berkshire Humanists. I know of no other use by humanists before Berkshire Humanists and outside the two groups mentioned.

So when I say to John Lester 'Have faith', I do **not** mean have a religion (or two). Religions, however attractive, have too many intractable conclusions to be useful to mankind. I mean, instead, have faith in yourself, in science and in your fellow proponents of logic and reason. You will need the very essence of the word 'faith' in order to produce the evidence that undecided people will need to switch away from religion. Then perhaps we can have a world without privilege or prejudice alongside a wellspring of happiness.

Do not discard a concept without thinking it through, just because the church uses it as a shield to cover up its own weakening offerings. It is still **un**-evidenced belief that we should attack, but in terms which state exactly what we want replacing.

\*Footnote on other similar words

'Trust' and 'confidence' are quite near in meaning to the word 'faith'. I feel that the real difference lies in the amount of responsibility shown by the truster and/or the trustee (which may be one and the same person, because we need to learn to trust ourselves.) Thus you can have faith without having trust, because you do not need any past experience to have faith, you just accept it. Trust and confidence require some previous experience on which to build, such as evidence of some behaviour with a good outcome. We all need a greater focus on responsibility.

### **Here's John Lester's reply to David's comments.**

I am encouraged by David McKnight's lengthy condemnation of my views on faith, since it shows that someone has actually read them. I take his point that there are other definitions to the word but, overwhelmingly, it is defined as belief without adequate evidence. I have already quoted the OED, but I am supported also by Dr Johnson, whose dictionary has nine definitions of the word. The first three, which are given as much space as the other six, are:

- belief of (sic) the real truth of religion
- the system of revealed truths held by the Christian church: the credenda
- trust in God.

Perhaps I didn't explain myself well enough, but my view continues to be that these definitions have tainted the word 'faith' to such a degree that any subsidiary meanings have acquired an undesirable aura. It would be best to abandon their use.

Without becoming mired in semantic squabbles, I suggest that the Humanists in Berkshire and Milton Keynes might do well to amend their slogan and use 'Trust in Humanity' instead.

## **Darwin and Wallace**

### **In response to the article about Wallace in the last issue of N&V, John Edwards has written with his views on the place in history that should be accorded to Wallace.**

Although I have long sympathised with the idea expressed in the article on Wallace-ism in the last News & Views, that he is the unsung hero in the evolution story, I must take issue with the idea that it is only the Darwin 'industry' of recent decades that has led to Charles Darwin's contribution overshadowing that of Alfred Russell Wallace.

It is true that their ideas were read out in a joint paper at the Linnean Society in 1858 and that Darwin would possibly never have aired his theory (until maybe a posthumous publication of *On the origin of species*) had it not been for Wallace's 20-odd page letter to him in 1858. However, although Darwin wrote to Lyell '*If Wallace had my manuscript sketch written out in 1842, he could not have made a better short abstract*', there were significant differences in their ideas.

Both men had been switched on to the idea of evolution through natural selection partly as a result of reading Malthus, but for Darwin the enlightenment came in the late 1830s, long after his return from the Galapagos, whereas Wallace first read *On the principle of population* in the mid 1850s while suffering from malaria in Malaysia.



Apart from priority of the 'original thought', there were differences in emphasis in their ideas. Wallace's concept of selection was the environment eliminating the unfit, whereas Darwin emphasised the cut-throat competition amongst individuals. Wallace was also concerned with the question of the purpose of natural selection, a question that Darwin had correctly dismissed. As an ardent socialist, Wallace was sure that evolutionary forces had to work

towards a just society; its point was to realise the ideal of perfect man. Of course, there is no purpose in evolution – as Dawkins so eloquently puts it: '*Nature is just piteously indifferent*' – so again Darwin's ideas were closer to what we now appreciate to be true.

Another argument against Wallace being seen as Darwin's equal was that, while the latter continued to carry out impeccable research into diverse biological taxonomic groups, Wallace became excited by topics that were currently in vogue, such as spontaneous generation and spiritualism. Indeed, Wallace was ultimately to conclude that higher spiritual powers were responsible for the large human brain. He even printed a pamphlet entitled *The scientific aspect of the supernatural* and in a letter to Darwin explained that his opinions had been modified after studying '*the existence of forces and influences not yet recognised by science*'. Darwin was horrified by some of Wallace's later writings, especially his review of the tenth edition of Lyell's *Principles of geology*, to parts of which Darwin had affixed exclamation marks to and a triple underlined 'No'. He later wrote to Wallace saying: '*I differ grievously from you, and am very sorry for it.*'

In 1876 Wallace went so far as to be a witness for the defence in the prosecution of a fraudulent American medium; Darwin, on the other hand, secretly sent £10 towards the prosecution's costs! It is this dalliance with spirituality and 'higher powers' that I think ultimately led to Wallace being seen as a far lesser light than Darwin in scientific circles. So much so that Huxley almost forgot to invite him to Darwin's funeral in Westminster Abbey!

To be sure, Wallace played a vital role in kick-starting the publication of modern evolutionary theory and made many significant contributions in other fields of science, but it was Darwin who more fully presented the evidence for natural selection and understood the mechanism and implications of the process. I would suggest that it is for this reason, rather than because of any scientific plotting, that he is perceived by the general public to be the 'discoverer' of evolution, even though the idea that species were not immutable and unchanging had been around for many decades before. Today the majority of the public fail to distinguish between the ideas of evolution and natural selection, and Darwin gets credited erroneously for proposing both!

## Listening to members' views

We've had a couple of responses to the request in the last issue of N&V for members to give us their comments/suggestions about our meetings. The first of these suggested that we need to do more to welcome new members. As a result, the committee has agreed that all new members will receive a 'welcome' pack, which will include a 'What is Humanism' leaflet and a 'who's who' sheet with photos of committee members. This sheet will also be displayed at our meetings, and committee members will wear badges, so that it is easy for newcomers to identify them. From time to time, we will hold special meetings to which new members are invited. We hope that these actions will help to make new members feel welcome.

The other member who contacted us made a specific suggestion for a topic for a meeting: 'Humanist culture – creating the resources for life for our children'. He made the point that those trying to bring up their children in a Humanist way don't have the rich fund of cultural resources – music, art, books, stories – that Christians can draw on. The aim of the meeting would be to identify what resources do already exist, and to look at ways of filling the gaps. The committee is still discussing this idea, and we hope to put on a meeting along these lines sometime in 2012.

Many thanks to the members who responded. Any further comments and suggestions would be very welcome. Please send them to me, Carolyn Sugden (37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB – carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk).

**We send all our readers our best wishes for the festive season, and for 2012. We hope to see you at the New Year meal on 8 January, and at the 'Good read' meeting on 16 January – see the Diary for full details.**