



NEWS & VIEWS



www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

Number 35

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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

Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on 10 June 2011, with nineteen members attending. We are most grateful to Jane Wynne Willson for allowing us to use her house for the AGM again this year.

Here are a few items of note, extracted from the reports of BH officers:

- Our Chair, Adrian, is very involved both with local atheists/sceptics meet-ups and with social media – all good ways of spreading the word about our group. The BH Facebook page now has 423 friends – do have a look at it, if you're on Facebook.
- The reasons for our change of venue to the Moseley Exchange building were explained – it's cheaper than the Friends Meeting House, and is a bright (and warm!) venue, with free on- and off-road parking nearby. It has disabled access and is near regular bus routes. We can advertise our meetings free of charge on the Exchange's noticeboard and website.
- We were delighted in November when the BHA Group Representatives Annual Meeting (GRAM) was held in Birmingham – the first time for many years that it has been held outside London. Five committee members attended and met with some of the BHA bigwigs and people from other groups.
- During the year we held four social events, seven meetings with speakers and eleven 'Last Tuesday' meet-ups at Bennetts Bar.
- We currently have 74 paid-up members.
- Malik, our web designer, reported on the number of 'hits' on the website – 26,020 since January 2011. In the ten days since the launch of the new website, the number of hits was 1,729. 72% of those visiting the BH website bookmarked it, which is encouraging news.

The officers remained the same as last year, as did the membership of the committee, except for one addition: we welcomed Jane Wynne Willson back on to the committee.

The AGM passed two resolutions:

- to give free membership to students (please note that, according to our constitution, changes to our subscription arrangements do not take effect until the following financial year, so it will be April 2012 before we are able to offer this)
- to amend the constitution, allowing the committee use its discretion to make donations larger than the usual limit of £100.00 to any single organisation in any one calendar year, for special projects related to Humanism.

Under AOB, there was a discussion about the problems experienced by some members in hearing the speakers at our meetings. It was agreed that the committee would look into buying some kind of microphone system to deal with the problem. (In fact, we borrowed some mikes for the very next meeting, four days later – we hope that this helped!)

Influencing Parliament

On 14 June 2011, Naomi Phillips spoke to the group about the work of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. In her role as Head of Public Affairs at the British Humanist Association, Naomi acts as administrator to the APPHG. This is a cross-party group of Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords of all three main parties. It has over 100 members. There's a small number of members who are very active, Naomi said, but others are less so. Associate membership of the Group is also open to staff of MPs and peers and staff working for the House of Commons or House of Lords.

The Group meets around four times a year to hear speakers and discuss relevant issues, as well as to share information and receive briefings on matters of interest. These matters are wide-ranging and include the promotion of a rational approach to bioethical, medical, and scientific issues, the defence of free speech and civil liberties, and education.

Naomi explained how the BHA works with the Group, providing its members with briefings and information on issues of concern to humanists, with a focus on new and forthcoming legislation. When campaigning on a particular issue, they often work in partnership with other MPs and member of the House of Lords who are not members of the group. Sometimes they find they have unexpected allies, she said – someone who does not share humanist views on other matters, but who has strong views on a particular issue. It can be very beneficial to have a supporter of this kind.

Some of the issues that the APPHG has recently been concerned about are:

- religious discrimination in admissions to faith schools and in new state-funded academies and 'free schools'
- aspects of the national curriculum, including RE, PSHE and the teaching of evolutionary theory
- the outsourcing of public services under the government's 'Big Society' agenda, and the dangers inherent in giving such contracts to faith-based organisations – since religious groups can discriminate in the provision of services and employment, there is a risk that a public service that used to be universally accessible will no longer be so
- reform of the House of Lords, with bishops no longer sitting in the House of Lords as of right.

Although there are many concerns about measures being brought forward by the present government, especially those relating to faith schools and the outsourcing of public services, the actual volume of legislation has decreased under the coalition government, Naomi said. As a result the BHA has been able to scale down slightly the resources it devotes to parliamentary work, and to put more emphasis on other aspects of its campaigning work.

Moseley Festival Street Fair

On Saturday, 9 July 2011, Birmingham Humanists once again participated in the Moseley Festival Street Fair, *writes Percy Lea*. The main aim of our stall was not to make a profit but to ensure that Birmingham Humanists remain a recognisable and valid part of the community. To this end, we certainly generated quite a bit of interest among the bustling throng of people passing by. Our stall had a clear identity, displaying the name of our group, humanist posters specifying our aims and values and a colourful 'Life without Religion' banner, created by one of our members. The table was covered with a large white tablecloth emblazoned with the logo of the British Humanist Association.

Many people were attracted to the stall by the wide variety of second-hand books donated by our members and supporters, and by the chance to play our 'Humanist Heroes Spin Wheel', with winners free to choose a book from the stall.





We also had on display humanist t-shirts and mugs, all with an appropriate logo, and also a good variety of humanist leaflets, pens and badges provided by the British Humanist Association.

Fortunately the weather was kind to us, but the success of our Moseley Festival Street Fair stall was significantly due to the members who volunteered to join the rota for staffing the stall. These were the real humanist heroes – they gave out leaflets, mingled and chatted with the public, answered questions and encouraged people to join us. Many thanks to all those involved in supporting our Birmingham Humanists' stall. We'll certainly be back again next year.

The Peace Room at St Mary's Hospice

In January 2011, BH Secretary Victoria Denning became the Humanist representative on the Diversity Reference Group at St Mary's Hospice. She was invited to be one of the speakers at the ceremony to open the Peace Room at the hospice. Here is a transcript of what she said.

Good afternoon. I am Victoria Denning, a Celebrant with the British Humanist Association and I am very honoured to have been asked to contribute a few words to this special ceremony for the official opening of the Peace Room at Birmingham St Mary's Hospice.

This room has been made available as a little sanctuary for all people, whatever their beliefs, colour, gender or age. It is a space for people to reflect on issues concerning life and death and to hopefully find tranquillity that will help take them forwards in the next minutes, hours, days, months or years of their life. It is a safe, quiet place for patients, family members, friends, volunteers and staff – in fact, all of the St Mary's Hospice community. It is a place one can withdraw to for reflective thought and to find peace of mind, free from the distractions of everyday life.

Whoever we are, and whatever point in our lives we have reached, there are times when we need to find peace. People coping with life-limiting illnesses and those close to them will be helped to enjoy a better quality of life if they can find peace. This may be through reading, listening to music, looking at photographs or pictures or doing whatever is important to them. Finding peace will help to relieve feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, shock and isolation – the feeling of being in the wilderness not knowing which direction to take.

As the Dalai Lama said: *'Peace, begins within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighbouring communities, and so on.'*

Peace is inextricably related to love and freedom. It is achieved with the help of those who care for us and it frees us to continue through troubled and difficult times. Peace gives us the power to continue in a positive manner. Everyone needs time to find their own peace.

I would like to finish with a poem that I feel eloquently expresses the value of a place such as this.

*There is a time for everything and a season for everything on earth.
A time to be born and a time to die,
A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time to mourn and a time to dance,
A time to seek and a time to lose,
A time for silence and a time for speech,
A time for love and a time for peace.*

I hope that everyone who enters this room, whether they be working, visiting or staying in Birmingham St Mary's Hospice, will find here, respite, contentment and, most of all, peace.

BHA Conference 2011

We are grateful to Tulpesh Patel, Chair of Aston University Humanist Society, for the following report on the recent BHA conference.

After a seven-year hiatus, the BHA Annual Conference returned, to tackle a pretty big question, that of the meaning of life. While it's impossible to capture all the ideas and questions of the weekend, I've done my best to pull together the messages from each of the talks.

After a fantastically funny, typically scatological opening routine from comedian **Robin Ince**, and a fiercely contested pub quiz, hosted by long-time Egghead **CJ de Mooi** on the Friday,



Professor Peter Atkins kick-started an excellent series of talks on the Saturday by taking us through 'The Limitless Power of Science'. As with his superb popular science writing ('Galileo's Finger' is an absolute must-read), some of his talk was pure poetry. Wonderful metaphors and turns of phrase captured the imagination: 'science is a wonderful flow of ideas, each tributary bringing greater understanding'; 'myths are the admission of ignorance: stylish clothes with no emperor within'.

The talk concentrated more on knowing and understanding the universe, rather than on the meaning of our lives within it. The gist of Professor Atkins' robust thesis is that everything, including 'nothing', is within science's reach; the scientific method is the only way to discover the nature of reality. His fascinating talk laid the foundations for some heated and surprisingly polarised discussion during the rest of the conference.

The hubris of the limitless power of science was neatly contrasted in the next talk by **Julian Baggini**, who explained how, despite the best intentions (or, according to Professor Atkins, the potential ability) of science to know all there is to know, humanist/atheist philosophies are distinctly lacking in some important human elements, which, rightly or wrongly, allows religion to retain a foothold in minds and societies.



The idea of 'transcendence' became a running strand of discussion throughout the weekend. Can humanists feel the same transcendent, out-of-body, oneness-with-the-universe that religious people feel, or are they qualitatively and quantitatively different? Julian, somewhat controversially, suggested that secular transcendence is just weaker and thinner. The idea of community also generated a lot of discussion. I enjoyed a lengthy chat with a few folk in the lunch queue about whether, as members of the BHA, we felt that we belonged in a community. It would be interesting to know what the wider membership thinks.

Discussions between the talks inevitably turned to the issue of the new BHA President, given the sad news that AC Grayling no longer feels that accepting the position would be tenable. This isn't the place to discuss the merits of the whole New College of Humanities venture, but it was universally agreed that Grayling would have made a fantastic figurehead for the BHA.

Andrew Copson ably stepped into AC Grayling's shoes for the planned conversation with outgoing BHA President, **Polly Toynbee**. Polly has been an undeniably great President for the BHA, tirelessly campaigning for greater social equality, secularism and the defence of things that humanists hold dear. She was frank in expressing her dismay, disappointment and anger at the actions of the current government, and what she called a return to 'economic primitivism'. We must keep vigilant and fiercely fight the Localism Bill, which is taking away public services and handing them over to private companies, or worse, religious organisations. Case in point: the Salvation Army taking over from Eaves Housing the running of a service that supports trafficked women.



Polly suggested that, in life, meaning comes from living and that we are programmed for progress; that is not to say, however, that humanism is a synonym for liberalism or socialism. Humanism is based around a core ethical philosophy, political with a small p – something a member of the audience was also very keen to stress.

Stephen Law was the next afternoon speaker and certainly won the award for best title to a talk: 'Believing Bullshit'. His talk was based closely around ideas from his new book of the same title, which explores how and why people can be drawn into believing absolute nonsense or, to use Stephen Law's phrase, how they fall into 'intellectual black holes'. The problem is that holding false beliefs doesn't end with benign pixies in the bottom of the garden; they can very quickly become dangerous and exploitative – see: periodic mass suicides of those belonging to messianic cults, children accused of witchcraft in Africa, people dying because their beliefs in homeopathic medicines prevented them (or much worse, their children) getting proper treatment, and so depressingly on. Given the adage that 'you can't reason someone out of something that they didn't reason themselves into', how people manage to claw themselves back from beyond the event horizon of the intellectual black hole is an interesting question.



He offered advice on presenting robust defences when debating purveyors of 'bullshit'. For example, to the charge that you can't prove a negative, it's true that in the case of God we cannot be 100% certain that God doesn't exist, but we can show it to be so beyond reasonable doubt. Of course, whether religious apologists appreciate reasoned argument is a different matter, what with atheism also being just another matter of faith.

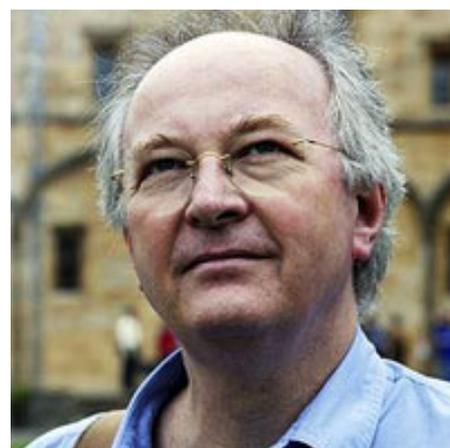


Chris French took a different approach to the conference theme, presenting examples not of what gives our lives meaning, but of why we seem to find meaning when it isn't there. This first problem is that our brains just can't help looking for patterns, which is down to hyperactive survival mechanisms that conferred evolutionary advantage. The importance of faces is also hard-wired into our brains. We see faces in everything, including toast, buns and jelly beans. The second problem is that we actively go looking for meaning because of our innate need to attribute effects to an active agent or cause; better to always run at the first sound of a possible threat than to be wrong just once and get munched up by a tiger. The effectiveness of his electronic voice phenomena demonstrations in illustrating just how fallible our

brains are is astonishing. The general opinion of those I spoke to after the day's events was that Chris's practically-oriented talk was a fun and welcome relief from the dense mix of science and philosophy of the talks that preceded it.

Philip Pullman, author most famously of the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy, and most recently 'The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ', was one of the highlights of the weekend for me. In a conversation on stage with Andrew Copson, he suggested that the meaning of life is to be found in the connection between things, and that, in terms of purpose, his aim was to 'increase the amount of consciousness in the universe'. That said, however, he is forceful in stating that it is never his aim to crowbar morals into his novels; 'I'm not the Post Office: I'm not in the business of delivering messages.'

Returning to the topic of the meaning of life, he offered a message that really spoke to me: We should live a life such that we have a story to tell that is both true and interesting at our deaths. Such an inspirational, life-affirming and humanist sentiment sums up why he very much deserved the award for services to humanism, presented at the evening's gala dinner.



The second day of the conference featured two talks and the closing statement from Andrew Copson. Comedienne and classicist **Natalie Haynes** offered a potted history of the ancients, skimming through topics from her new book, 'The Ancient Guide to Modern Life'. In all of 45 minutes, Natalie delivered fantastically funny skits covering, among other things, slavery, misogyny, poetry, etymology, feminism and country living. I imagine that there are not many other conferences where the speaker can open with a story which ends with shouting about Star Wars, can toss around Latin phrases with impunity, and can say 'satyrs are a bit rapey'. On the topic of the meaning of life, Natalie offered that her favourite ancient misogynist might have come close with his idea that, all told, a healthy mind and body is infinitely preferable to money, power or beauty.



Professor Richard Norman closed the last talk with a discussion of whether meaning is made or discovered. He deserves a huge amount of credit for weaving together the weekend's talks, debating the ideas that had been presented and really tackling the issues surrounding discussions of the meaning of life. Professor Norman suggests that we have the question all wrong; it's not a question of discovering or making a meaning for life. Rephrasing the issue as 'what makes life meaningful is...' allows us to arrive at a more satisfying answer, which neatly captures some the answers put forward by the other speakers.

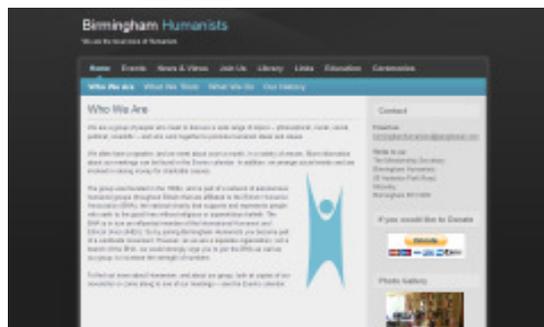
Professor Norman suggested that the things that make life meaningful are the things we do and experience and how they affect others. The meaning of life may be in relationships and the

making of friendships; it may be 'raising the amount of consciousness in the universe'; making others happy; having a story to tell at our death. For me, the BHA conference went some way to doing all of those things; while it by no means answered the question of the meaning of life, I think it contributed in no small way to adding a little meaning to the lives of those who attended, and for that huge thanks must go to the BHA team and all the speakers.

BrumHums new website...

If you're a regular visitor to our website, it won't have escaped your notice that it has a new look. We think that its appearance is now more attractive and up-to-date, and that the structure is much clearer – we hope it's easier for people to find their way to the information they want. Many thanks to Malik, our web designer, for all his work in getting the new website up and running. He tells us that the number of 'hits' has gone up considerably since we launched the new site in June, so we must be doing something right!

If you haven't seen the new website, please do take a look at it and let us know what you think. We're always looking for ways to improve it.



...and another one

Our Secretary, Victoria Denning, who is a Humanist Celebrant, also has a new website (www.victoriadenning.co.uk), where she gives information about humanist ceremonies and about the services she offers. Useful information on the site includes a link to a natural woodland and green burial ground.

Choosing to die

In June 2011 the BBC showed a moving and thought-provoking documentary film made by the writer Terry Pratchett, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Here are some press reports of the film.

BBC summary

In a frank and personal documentary, author Sir Terry Pratchett considers how he might choose to end his life. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2008, Terry wants to know whether he might be able to end his life before his disease takes over. Travelling to the Dignitas Clinic in Switzerland, Terry witnesses at first hand the procedures set out for assisted death, and confronts the point at which he would have to take the lethal drug.

Catherine Gee in the Telegraph

Sir Terry Pratchett, the much-loved fantasy novelist, has Alzheimer's. It's a disease that no one recovers from, your condition will only get worse. And then you will die. When you die, according to British law, is not within your control. Nature decides when your suffering will end. In Choosing to Die, Pratchett sensitively tackled the extremely complicated issue of euthanasia. He declared from the outset that, in his opinion, the timing of his death should be his choice, not the government's. ... The argument he put forward here was that assisted suicide for the terminally ill should be legal in the UK – a view that has naturally drawn criticism from an anti-euthanasia group.

... Of course, for many terminally ill people, the warm, safe, relatively pain-free death offered by Dignitas is not an option. It costs around £10,000 and many could either not afford it or would not wish their families to have to pay for it, though this issue was skirted around in the film. The argument for such a facility to be made available in the UK is certainly a powerful one – as are the arguments against.

The Independent

'Who owns your life?' asked Terry Pratchett, the 63-year-old novelist diagnosed with Alzheimer's three years ago. The question lay at the heart of his profoundly affecting journey to Dignitas to explore the prospect of assisted suicide for himself, and accompany two British men who ended their lives in the Swiss euthanasia clinic.

... Pratchett delved deeply into the manner and method of our inevitable departure, and to what degree this should be self-determined. While he spoke of the campaign to have the right to die legalised in Britain, he never veered into out-and-out polemic. His tone was personal and inquisitive, and there was enough doubt to give his outlook psychological texture and moral complexity: 'I know a time will come when words will fail me, when I can't write my books. I'm not sure I will want to go on living. Is it possible for someone like me and you to arrange for themselves a death that they want?' The question was clearly a wrenching task for Pratchett, who wiped away tears on numerous occasions and asked himself what he would want when it came to the crunch.

... The two men he followed might have ended their life sooner than was necessary, Pratchett argued, so that they could have the death they would eventually want, and so that their families could not be punished for assisting them. "It struck me the reason Peter was going now was to help to protect his wife. If you help someone to die, you may be prosecuted," Pratchett said.



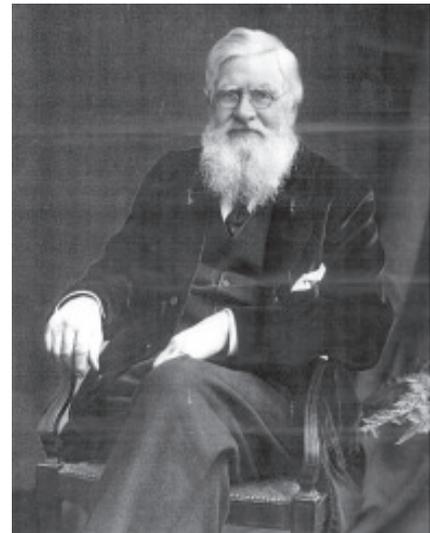
Sam Wollaston in the Guardian

Everything about this moving but not over-sentimental film really makes me think assisted death for the terminally ill is not just a good idea but a human right (more importantly Pratchett feels the same and the news at the weekend was that he's signed up).

If you'd like to consider further the issues raised by this film, come to our meeting on 18 October, when Jo Cartwright from the charity Dignity in Dying will talk to the group about issues relating to assisted dying and other end-of-life decisions, and will outline the campaigning work being done by Dignity in Dying.

Ever heard of Wallace-ism?

Alfred Russel Wallace is the unsung hero of the development of the theory of evolution by natural selection. The theory was first put forward in a paper of which Wallace and Darwin were joint authors. However, in recent years Wallace has been overshadowed by Darwin, who is often given sole credit for this discovery. Here's some information about Wallace from the Wallace Fund website (<http://wallacefund.info>), which has been set up to keep Wallace's memory alive, and from a blog on the Beagle Project website (<http://thebeagleproject.blogspot>).



Wallace Fund website

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) was one of the 19th century's most remarkable intellectuals. His link to Charles Darwin as the co-discoverer in 1858 of evolution by natural selection would alone have secured his place in history, but he went on to make very many other significant contributions, not just to biology, but to subjects as diverse as glaciology, land reform, anthropology, ethnography, epidemiology, and astrobiology. His pioneering work on evolutionary biogeography led to him becoming recognised as that subject's 'father'. Beyond this, Wallace is regarded as the pre-eminent collector and field biologist of tropical regions of the 19th century, and his book *The Malay Archipelago* (which was Joseph Conrad's favourite bedside reading) is one of the most celebrated travel writings of that century and has never been out of print. Add to the above that Wallace was deeply committed to and a vocal supporter of spiritualism, socialism, and the rights of the ordinary person, and it quickly becomes apparent that he was a man with an extraordinary breadth of interests who was actively engaged with many of the big questions and important issues of his day.

By the time of his death Wallace was probably the world's most famous scientist, but since then his intellectual legacy has been almost completely overshadowed by Darwin's, largely thanks to the 'Darwin Industry' of recent decades. This 'industry' has led to a highly 'Darwinocentric' view of the history of modern biology, and as a result many of the important contributions made by Darwin's contemporaries, like Wallace, are currently underestimated and undervalued.

Beagle project Blog

1 July 2008

Today we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first public announcement of what Richard Dawkins has called '...the most momentous idea ever to occur to a human mind.' He was of course referring to the theory of natural selection, the primary mechanism driving the evolution of life on our planet; an idea actually discovered independently by two minds, not just one. Whilst the owner of one of these brains, Charles Darwin, is rather well known, the possessor of the other, Alfred Russel Wallace, is not exactly the household name he once was. So who was Wallace and how did he come to be the co-discoverer of what is probably the most revered (and reviled) idea in human history?

... My working hypothesis to explain the overshadowing of Wallace by Darwin is as follows: In the late 19th and early 20th century natural selection as an explanation for evolutionary change became very unpopular, with most biologists adopting alternative theories such as neo-Lamarckism, orthogenesis, or the mutation theory (see *The eclipse of Darwinism*). It was only with the modern evolutionary synthesis of the 1930s and 1940s that natural selection became the generally accepted mechanism of evolutionary change. By then, however, the history of the discovery had been forgotten by many (there was a new generation of biologists) and when interest in the theory revived, many wrongly assumed that the idea had first been published in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Thanks to the 'Darwin Industry' of recent decades, Darwin's fame has risen exponentially, eclipsing the important contributions of his contemporaries, like Wallace.

If you'd like to know more about Wallace, keep an eye on the BH diary. We're hoping to have a speaker about him early next year. The information I've found about him on the internet has certainly whetted my appetite!

There's nothing good about faith

Whenever you encounter the word 'faith', writes **John Lester**, it seems to occur in a context of approbation. Having faith, it seems, is generally regarded as something worthy of praise, and people who lack it are regarded as somehow deficient or even immoral. Yet, among the definitions of faith in the OED, we find the following:

Belief proceeding from reliance on testimony or authority

Belief in the authority of divine revelation

That which is, or should be, believed.

None of these definitions contains any reference to rationality. They can be construed as saying that faith is belief without good supporting evidence. There are some things which, because they seem likely, we can accept without requiring much in the way of evidence. If, for example, someone told me that his watch was accurate to a minute a year, I would not ask him to prove it. If he then went on to claim that the hands of his watch were turned round by a little man who lived inside it, I would certainly ask to be shown the little man. Even if the claimant had always proved trustworthy in the past, a strange assertion like this would need to be proved by unshakeable evidence before I would be prepared to accept it.



Extraordinary claims need to be backed up by extraordinary evidence, yet all the time we hear from the faithful statements which are clearly absurd and yet which continue to be believed by millions of people. The people who make such fanciful claims are usually quite rational in other respects, and they are so often very pleasant and benign folk, given to good works. As a Humanist, I feel a bit frustrated to find that religious people can very often be much nicer than sceptics.

Even so, belief in anything must be supported by reliable evidence and the continuation of that belief should be conditional on the evidence remaining good. A scientific theory may be accepted for a long time, only to fall when new knowledge destroys its foundation. Scientists recognise this and regard it as good.

Faith, on the other hand, is entirely bad. To have faith is to negate the human capacity for rationality. It is not something to be praised and its possession is to be condemned. As Humanists, we should wage war on the word whenever we encounter it, pointing out to those who profess it that not only are they being unreasonable but they are also belittling humanity.

Biblical contradictions by Clearasmud – No 1: Creation

Then the Lord said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' (Genesis 2:18)

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every bird in the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them... (Genesis 2:19)

So Adam was created before the animals! A bit at odds with our evolutionary ideas, but at least the Bible is clear on this point.

And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds, and the cattle according to their kinds... (Genesis 1:25)

And God said, 'Let us make man...' (Genesis 1:26)

So God created man in his own image... (Genesis 1:27)

Oops! So now it's saying the animals came first? And, if humans are flawed and can be sinful, then so must God be, if we're made in his image.

Look out for another classic contradiction in the next issue of N&V.

Mad Hatter's Tea Party?

The levels of ignorance and prejudice displayed by members of the American 'Tea Party' movement are truly frightening. The most terrifying thing of all is that anyone in the United States could take these politicians seriously. Here's a selection of recent quotes:

'There are hundreds and hundreds of scientists, many of them holding Nobel Prizes, who believe in intelligent design.' Michele Bachmann

'You know what, evolution is a myth ... Why aren't monkeys still evolving into humans?' Christine O'Donnell

'I absolutely do not believe in the science of man-caused climate change. It's not proven by any stretch of the imagination ... It's far more likely that it's just sunspot activity or just something in the geologic eons of time. Excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere 'gets sucked down by trees and helps the trees grow.' Ron Johnson

'They [Republicans] say: "You're too conservative." Was Thomas Jefferson too conservative? I'm tired of some people calling me wacky.' Sharron Angle

'American scientific companies are cross-breeding humans and animals and coming up with mice with fully functioning human brains.' Christine O'Donnell

'Ground Zero Mosque supporters: doesn't it stab you in the heart, as it does ours throughout the heartland? Peaceful Muslims, pls refudiate.' Sarah Palin

'Do you know, where does this phrase "separation of church and state" come from? It was not in Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists. ... The exact phrase "separation of church and state" came out of Adolph Hitler's mouth, that's where it comes from. So the next time your liberal friends talk about the separation of church and state, ask them why they're Nazis.' Glen Urquhart

'The greatest threat to America is not necessarily a recession or even another terrorist attack. The greatest threat to America is a liberal media bias.' Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX)

Did you know...

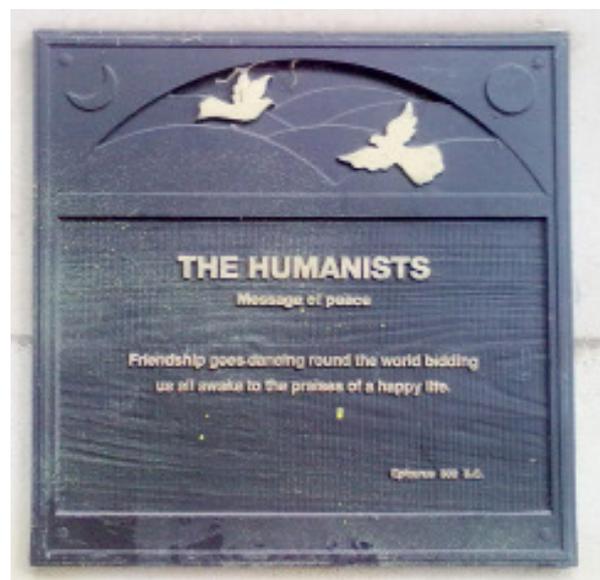
...that there's a humanist plaque in the Peace Garden beside St Thomas Church in Bath Row? The garden was created in 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. When the G8 summit was held in Birmingham in 1998, world leaders planted trees in the garden to represent their different countries.

Comments about the garden on the internet include:

'A oasis of calm in the busy city'

'The Peace Garden is a gem that Birmingham keeps well hidden. It's a well tended green space where you can take time out to just relax and think.'

Here are some pictures of the garden.



Daily collective worship in schools

Why is this still a legal requirement in England, asks the National Secular Society. Below is part of its report on the recent BBC poll.

New research by the BBC indicates that the law requiring a daily act of collective worship in Britain's state-maintained schools is widely ignored and not wanted. Almost two-thirds (64%) of parents told a survey that their children did not attend such an activity and over two thirds (67%) of parents do not support enforcing the law.

A Church of England spokesman pointed out that most primary schools do have collective worship or a daily period of reflection (but non-daily collective worship, and any reflection without it, falls short of the law). Naturally, the Church of England wants the law to be followed to the letter, although its spokesperson this week said it was not the Church's job — or its desire — to 'enforce' the law. Senior clerics played down this draconian law, presumably to deflect calls for its reform. Their implication of it being voluntary is a long way from what the law actually says: that children will 'take part in' an act of worship of a mainly Christian character.

Following the release of these findings, National Secular Society Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood called for the law on collective daily worship to be repealed, saying it infringed pupils' human rights. 'As the BBC survey confirms, the law requiring daily collective worship is being widely flouted, which shows that it is time for it to be reviewed – and, in this case, repealed,' he said. 'England is the only country in the western world to enforce participation in daily worship in community schools. To do so goes beyond the legitimate function of the state and is an abuse of children's human rights, especially those who are old enough to make decisions for themselves.'

Are you an Egghead?

If so, there's a chance to test out your quizzing skills! Birmingham Humanists are taking part in MegaQuiz 2011, in aid of Lord Mayor's Charity Appeal, and we need volunteers for our team. The quiz will be held at Birmingham University on 29 September. If you'd like to be in our team, email Adrian Bailey at baileynagy@blueyonder.co.uk by 21 September.

Human Rights Film Festival

The first ever West Midlands Human Rights Film Festival has just been launched. It goes on until 4 October. The Birmingham International Film Society (BIFS) is hosting the festival, whose programme covers a range of issues and Articles relating to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Screenings are taking place at various venues, including the Midlands Arts Centre (mac), Vivid, the Light House in Wolverhampton and Birmingham Library Theatre.

For full information about the festival, see the website www.birmingham-film.org/human-rights-film-festival.

Humanist Library news

The latest addition to our library is David Swanson's book 'War is a Lie'. David is an anti-war activist who hates war and despises those responsible for it. He emphasises that all wars have 'been sold to both sides as a fight between the forces of good and evil'. David believes that politicians lie to convince the public that 'they are in the right and the enemy undeniably in the wrong.' Further, politicians not only justify war but enable it to continue long after the death toll indicates 'the utter futility of continuing with the bloodshed'.

This book is recommended to members, particularly those who may believe in the concept of a 'just war'. The issues raised by David Swanson are certainly worthy of discussion and debate.

Percy Lea, Librarian

Avete

As John Edwards signed off with a Latin greeting in the previous issue of News & Views, I thought I'd better introduce myself in the same way. My name's Carolyn Sugden, and I've been a committee member of Brum Hums for just over a year. I've agreed to take over as editor of N&V, and I'll do my best to keep up the high standards set by John in his seven years as editor. Many thanks to John for all his hard work during that time, and for the support and advice he's been offering to me as the newcomer.

If you've got any items – an article, a letter, a photo or a piece of news – that you'd like to contribute to News and Views, please send them to me (Carolyn Sugden, 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB – carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk). Any suggestions for topics we should cover, or for ways of improving the newsletter would also be gratefully received.

Campaigns and welfare group

You will see from the diary that we're starting a new series of meetings, the Campaigns and Welfare Group. Here's a message from our Chair, Adrian Bailey.

I've been getting a bit fed up with just chatting about stuff rather than doing something about it, so I've decided to run a monthly meeting where we can get together and try to make some extra progress in areas that are important to us. My wish to do this has been partly sparked by the terrible events of early August, which made me resolve that whether government and the religions make it easy for us or not, we've got to be a part of the national recovery.

We could address both local and national campaigns (on issues such as faith schools; religious education; hospital, prison and university chaplaincies; bishops in the House of Lords; and unacceptable cultural practices, for example), and matters to do with local welfare – the well-being of members; humanist education; and support for non-religious people in our communities.

At the first meeting on 5 October (see the Diary for full details) we'll decide which issues will be our priorities and which we are able to work on first. Bring your ideas along!

Consulting our members

The committee would like to ask you for your views on a couple of matters:

- 1 Have you got any suggestions for a different place to meet for the 'Last Tuesdays' social meet-ups? We've been using Bennetts Bar in the centre of Birmingham for some time, but we've been wondering whether another pub (or some other venue) would be better. For the next few meetings we've decided to try out different places. The September and November meetings will be at the Wellington, which is just across the road from Bennetts Bar. In October we're experimenting by holding the meeting in someone's house. Percy Lea has kindly agree to host it (for full details, see the Diary). After that, it's up to you where the meetings are held.

When you're thinking of possible locations, please remember that it would need to be somewhere fairly central that's accessible to people using different methods of transport. We'd especially like to hear from people who already attend Last Tuesdays (Do you think Bennetts Bar is the best place? Would you still come if we moved somewhere else?) and from those who don't come at the moment, but who might if the venue was different (What venue would suit you better?).

- 2 Are there any topics you'd particularly like us to cover at future meetings? Or any speakers you'd like us to invite? As you will see from the Diary, we've already got a number of meetings planned, but we're always looking for fresh ideas for topics that will interest our current members – and attract new ones!

Please send your suggestions to me, Carolyn Sugden (contact details above) and I will pass them on to the committee.