



NEWS & VIEWS



www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

Number 40

December 2012

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

Chaplaincy for all

For our meeting on 3rd September, Birmingham Humanists were guests of the Chaplaincy Department at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Sue Shewring, an Anglican member of the chaplaincy team, spoke to us about its work.



Sue Shewring

The chaplaincy has a large multi-faith team, Sue told us, representing six of the major faiths. In addition, they have contact names for people from other faiths willing to offer support to fellow-believers. She stressed that the purpose of the chaplaincy team is to support people of all faiths and of no faith. They are there to meet patients' needs, she said, not to convert or evangelise.

She recognised that not all people who might appear to come from a particular religious background (eg Muslim, Sikh, Christian) necessarily practise their faith. However, she said that when someone is facing death or a serious illness, they may start to think about religion again. She gave examples of the kinds of questions that patients often ask – 'Why me?' 'What have I done to deserve this?' 'How long have I got?' 'What will happen to my family?' – and emphasised the importance of listening to patients and responding to their concerns.

However, it was disappointing that Sue did not seem to understand that a person with a strong religious faith might not be the best person to offer support to someone without religious beliefs. She seemed to think that all she needed to do in those circumstances was not to talk about God. She even asked us: 'What would you, as a Humanist, offer to a patient that is different from what I would offer them as a fellow human being?' She accepted what we said about the importance of being able to talk to someone with a similar point of view and shared assumptions, but I'm not sure how convinced she was.

She seemed very proud of an example she gave us of support that she offered to a non-religious family who wanted some sort of ceremony to mark the passing of the person they loved. She said she was asked to 'Say a prayer, but don't make it too religious.' It did not seem to have occurred to her that the family might have preferred support that matched, rather than contradicted, their own beliefs.

There was some discussion about the cost of the chaplaincy service, about which members of the group were concerned. Sue told us that the chaplaincy is paid for by the NHS, as there is statutory requirement to meet the religious needs of patients. At the QE, Christians, Muslims and Hindus have paid chaplains, while the Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish chaplains are honorary.

The meeting ended with Sue taking up our offer of putting forward the names of Humanists from our group who are willing to provide support to non-religious people. Several of those attending the meeting put their names down on the spot, and it was agreed that John Edwards would follow this up and liaise with Sue about publicising this service.

'An object/words of interest'

For our meeting on 3rd October at Percy's house, we invited people to bring along an object or a quotation that was important to them and to say a bit about it.

The topic of this meeting obviously didn't strike a chord with our members, as attendance was very poor. Items brought along by those who did come ranged from a Humanist ring to a photo of a reception at the House of Lords, from some sheet music to a 'Happy Humanist' t-shirt (a favourite of Harry's – he's pleased that it shows a human who looks happy but not inebriated, as he dislikes the 'drunken human' on the BHA's logo!).

Halfway through the evening, things took a new turn, with the arrival of three young friends of Percy's, who had come along to find out more about Humanism. The meeting transformed itself into an enquirers' evening, with a very wide-ranging discussion focusing on questions to do with creation and evolution, astronomy and the age of the universe, and living a good life with and without religion.

This has confirmed the committee in its view that it's time we devoted one of our meetings to a general discussion of humanist issues – this will be of benefit to enquirers and new members, but also give existing members a chance to share their views. This won't be before April (meetings up to then are already planned), but expect to see a 'What Humanism means to me' evening in the programme for Spring/Summer 2013.

Towards a secular, democratic society

On 7th November, Dr Ken Ritchie from Republic spoke to the group about why the campaign for a secular state is an essential part of the republican campaign.

Ken began by examining what the monarchy is, and what powers it has. Although the monarch no longer runs the country, he said, the monarch is still the head of the state, the church and the army and has immense political power – even if much of this is more theoretical than real. He pointed out ways in which the monarchy upholds social stratification, the status quo and the establishment, including the Church of England. The Queen claims to represent the whole nation, but she is sworn to uphold the C of E, which only 40% of the population, at most, adhere to.



So how do we move, on, Ken asked. If we were writing a constitution now, he said, we wouldn't identify one person to be head of state for the rest of their life, to be succeeded by their son or daughter. Such a constitution should have a preamble stating what kind of democracy we are, who owns the country, how it is run and what are its values – the supremacy of the people, not of an individual.

In terms of our political voice, we ought all to be equal. To give legitimacy, the head of state should be someone we have chosen. They should stand outside politics, have a clearly defined, limited role and be equal before the law with other citizens. Whatever their religious views, these should remain private – as head of state, they should not be attached to any religious faith.

Republicans and secularists may fear that they are swimming against the tide, Ken said, with opinion polls two to one against republicanism. Nevertheless, the process of the erosion of the powers of the monarchy will continue – and we need to give it a nudge along the way. Specific actions that could help with this are to:



Ken Ritchie speaking on 7 November

- get rid of the exemption of the royal family from the Freedom of Information Act
- change the oath of allegiance
- cut down on the lavish entertainment and travel costs of the monarchy
- get rid of the idea that it is the role of the monarch to advise the Prime Minister
- disestablish the church (though the C of E is currently doing a good job of making itself redundant, Ken said!).

The Q & A session that followed showed how engaged audience members were with the topic. There was lively debate on a wide range of issues, including:

- the royal prerogative
- how to destabilise the monarchy
- the history of the Levellers and Diggers
- how to arrive at a non-political head of state – the most difficult question for republicans, said Ken, as you need someone with enough experience to represent the UK with visiting heads of state. Nevertheless, it would be better to have an elected president than a monarch, even if it was someone who had previously been a politician.

If you'd like to find out more about Republic or would like to make a donation to support its work, you can do so by going to its website www.republic.org.uk.

Just a click away

Here are links to several websites that you may find of interest.

Humanists for a Better World – the introduction to this website says: 'Humanists are committed to working with others for the common good – and many of us do. This website is intended to encourage humanists who'd like to act collectively and individually to help create a more peaceful and sustainable world.' They are currently encouraging people to become involved in Climate Week, the UK's biggest climate change campaign, which is on 4–10 March 2013. Each year half a million people attend 3,000 events focusing on how people can live and work more sustainably. See <http://h4bw.org.uk>



The Society for Old Age Rational Suicide (SOARS) – unlike Dignity in Dying, which campaigns for the right to an assisted death only for terminally ill people, this organisation has the long-term objective of 'getting the law eventually changed in the UK so that very elderly, mentally competent individuals, who are suffering unbearably from various health problems (although none of them is "terminal") are allowed to receive a doctor's assistance to die, if this is their persistent choice'. It considers that it is the ultimate human right for a very elderly person to choose to have a dignified death, avoiding further suffering. SOARS is led by [Dr Michael Irwin](#), a former Medical Director of the United Nations, and a former Chair of Dignity in Dying. For further information, see the SOARS website at <http://www.soars.org.uk/>

On the website of the **International Coalition for Religious Freedom** are the papers delivered at the Conference on Religious Freedom and the New Millennium. Although this was in 1998, there is much that speaks to us now in the paper presented by Clinton Bennett on the UK context. He points out 'the degree to which the established church in England, the Church of England, enjoys privileges' and asks 'Who qualifies, as a Christian, or as a Muslim, for membership of a SACRE? Could an Ahmadi Muslim or a Unification Christian serve? Can the teachings of these minorities be included in religious education?' These continue to be very pertinent questions – as you can see in our report of our recent meeting with the Chair of Birmingham SACRE. You can find this paper at www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=153&Itemid=57

'**A Ten Point Vision of a Secular America**', a presentation by Sean Faircloth, the author of the book *Attack of the theocrats: how the religious right harms us all and what we can do about it*, in which Sean offers a new strategy for atheists. See <http://old.richarddawkins.net/videos/644419-atheism-a-new-strategy-richard-dawkins-foundation-for-reason-science-us>

Creationists Claims Index – an i-phone app that is a fully sourced, cross-referenced, and searchable reference guide for refutations to common creationist claims, based on the book *The counter-creationism handbook* by Mark Isaak. See <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/creationist-claims-index/id340531927?mt=8>

BHA Group Representatives Annual Meeting 2012

John Edwards reports on this year's GRAM, at which attendance was good, and where he learnt that, if you're trying to run a local campaign, it's important not to be seen as an 'aggressive atheist' – instead you should present yourself as a 'defensive rationalist' or a 'champion of fairness'!

Session 1

This session was presented by Jeremy Rodell of West London Humanists, who had just lost their case against Richmond Council, which had approved a proposal for the Catholic Church to set up two new secondary schools, without opening this up to competition from other interested parties. Jeremy described how the group organised the campaign over two years – he reckoned it took up 50% of his time. Even though the campaign did not succeed, it was still useful, he felt, as it attracted lots of new members.

Jeremy's advice slides about running a campaign will be sent out soon or will be put up on the Groups Hub.

Q: Does our group need to find a local campaign that would resonate with the public? Not one to do with SACRE!



Press coverage of the Richmond Council case

Session 2: Working better together

Sara Passmore outlined the BHA's hopes for its new relationship with local groups. We should all be using the Groups Hub, she said, especially for the speakers directory (30 currently listed), to help fill our programmes. There were lots of grumbles that this was too difficult to access, with only Chairs and Secretaries having the power to amend things, plus complaints that affiliated groups were no longer featured on the map.

Sara gave the group numbers situation as:	2012	2011
Partners	32	–
Affiliates	17	72
Undecided	14	–
Former groups (too small /objecting, etc)	11	–

The BHA has now taken back control of its website from the third party that was running it, as it was getting too expensive to alter things. The new website should be launched shortly. All groups will be on the new map eventually, in different colours according to their status.

Due to the Data Protection Act, the BHA can't give partner groups the email addresses of existing members in their catchment area – only those of new members, but they are working to try and advertise partner groups directly to existing members.

Session 3: BHA Local representatives/volunteers.

The BHA is trying to get funding from trusts to help train trainers and local group reps. They will be running another pilot course, probably in Manchester, aimed at training people who speak about Humanism.

They want to know what each local group has been doing in its community, with what organisations, so that they can share the info on the hub. They recommended local groups to get involved with:

- equality officers of the local council
- interfaith groups (NB Try and change the name to 'Interfaith and Belief' first, and then get on to them!)
- ROC (Redeeming Our Communities) – this charity has initiatives happening all over the country
- Champions of Faith groups
- Sea of Faith (for agnostic members of the churches).

The BHA suggested trying to get belief on the agenda/in the name of such groups by saying things such as 'I'm a member of the BHA and I'm representing the views of non-religious people.' This may not be strictly true, as there will always be some people who say you don't represent their views, but then, when did a vicar or a Muslim leader represent all their 'flock'?

GALHA has now become LBGT Humanists (galha) and they would like a contact person in each BHA local group.

David Britain of UKAFHA reported that there was now a Zoroastrian presence at the Cenotaph, representing perhaps a dozen or so in the forces, plus a Rabbi representing 80 Jews in the forces, while UKAFHA was still barred from representing 25,000 non-believers on the pretext there is not enough room! Campaign materials on Remembrance Day will be sent out to local groups earlier next year to try and crack this injustice.

There were then three short workshops on improving communication, including one on the Groups Hub.



Speakers and delegates at GRAM

Session 4

After lunch Richard Norman and Phil Veasey led a session about whether or not to accept invitations to debate, and whose offers it's best to refuse. Their advice was not to go ahead if all you want to do is to win the vote – this is usually unlikely. There should be agreement beforehand, they said, on rules regarding format, and on whether images are allowed. For security it may be best to ask for prior registration of attendees. They asked that you give feedback to the BHA afterwards. The BHA may put a helpful section on the Groups Hub and may offer training if there is enough demand.

People/organisations to avoid: Anjem Choudhary, Muslim Debate Society and Hamza Tortis

OK list: Delwar Hussain and Julie Siddiqi

Session 5: Increasing membership

David Warden of Dorset Humanists reported on the group's efforts to build membership. Their membership was growing at a slow rate: 2011 – 131 members; 2012 – 148 members, with an annual sub of £12. It has built up gradually over 10 years, but now that most stuff was on their website there was no obvious benefit from becoming a member, other than wanting to support the group.

They hold 24 public meeting a year, two per month – one on a Saturday afternoon and the other on a weekday evening in a hotel in the town centre, which attracts younger people. Attendance is between 30 and 80 (averaging 40).

Activities to increase their local profile include having debates with a local theological college, attending Freshers' Fair, running a course on Humanism, organising lunchtime events, delivering leaflets to homes near the community centre where they meet, putting ads in the local 'What's on' magazine (printed and online). They also have a presence on Facebook and Twitter, and send out a monthly bulletin (to 200 people by email and 60 by post). They hope to try setting up a gazebo in a town centre soon to talk to people.

Sara Passmore said that online direct debits would soon be available for BHA membership and she was urged to see whether the BHA could do a deal with Meetup to get local groups a better rate.

There was some discussion as to whether it's best to set up more small local groups. Devon Humanists said they will shortly need to have a new relationship with the BHA, as their membership has plummeted, due to more people getting involved in Humanism at various local centres. Soon they will have no members. Neither will the local groups, who increasingly just charge £2 to anybody who attends a meeting, doing away with the concept of a membership fee.

The Central London Group was in a similar situation and said that Meetup and Facebook are the key to increasing membership. They now have a book group, films, rambles and lunches – all at £2 per meeting.

One group operated a charity wine bar at each of its meetings. Members bring bottles of wine along, maybe donating them, maybe getting their costs back, and the money people pay for glasses goes to the speaker as a donation. The last one got £80!

Session 6

David McKnight of the Reading Group gave a short presentation on the benefits of using the interfaith scene to spread the word about Humanism. He recommended every group to join their local Faith Walk, and to find out about local decision-making partnerships and get involved in these. He has now volunteered to run a slot on Reading4U local community radio, because he sees real value in having discussions with other people via the air waves. He's called it Religion, Beliefs (and Science) with the strapline: 'No hymns, No rants, No, Really'. If people want to know more, he invites contact via RBS@ntworld.com or 07776 222138.

Session 7: Delivering courses on Humanism

The BHA will be running the two-day TTT (Training The Teachers) course again next year to help local groups run courses about Humanism in their area. There are four courses they suggest local groups might like to offer, depending on their area of interest:

- Exploring humanism (6 sessions)
- Aspects of Humanism (8 sessions)
- Applied Ethics (5 sessions)
- Death, Dying & Meaning (4 sessions).

Outlines of the content of these can be found online at www.humanism.org.uk/education/courses.

Somebody told of their experience on a school visit of a young lad asking them: 'Do Humanists celebrate Christmas?' He said something along the lines of 'Yes, any excuse for a party' and later got feedback from the teacher that in a later lesson the boy had told her: 'He always knew he was an atheist but now he was a Humanist because Humanists are atheists that party'!

Session 8: Website of the Year

The winner was Lancashire Humanists – www.lancshumanism.org.uk. They have Twitter and Facebook feeding directly into their site, which also has video clips and whole talks if the speaker allows their talk to be recorded. Their webmaster says he would be prepared to help other groups – david@davidbrindley.co.uk.

All in all, it was an interesting day. I also learnt that there are some other Wikipedias I must try and look up: Rational Wikipedia (<http://rationalwiki.org>) and (?) Iron Parrot Wikipedia. Has anyone else come across them?

Biblical contradictions No 5 by Clearasmud

The sins of the fathers

In Exodus 20 verses 3-5, it says: 'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.'

Again in Isaiah 14 verse 21, the Bible states: 'Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers; that they do not rise, nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities.'

Yet in Deuteronomy 24 verse 16, it clearly tells us: 'The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.'

So which is it?

Ex Cathedra

Adrian Bailey, Chair of Birmingham Humanists, reports on his stint helping with the British Humanist Association 'presence' at the recent Party Conference.

At the beginning of October I spent three days working with BHA colleagues Pavan Dhaliwal and Richy Thompson at the Conservative Party Conference here in Birmingham. We hosted a good fringe event with Anne Atkins, Andrew Copson, Lord Sheikh and Henry Bonsu (see www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/1126), but in general it was clear that there wasn't much sympathy for what we were doing or saying. There were a few 'out' atheists but most Tories are either religious or, at the very least, don't want to do anything to offend their religious supporters. I had a little run-in with Eric Pickles, who assured me he had nothing against Humanists, before boasting in his speech that his government had 'stood up for the role of Christianity and faith in public life.'



Henry Bonsu and Anne Atkins at the fringe event

I'm left of centre, but not particularly interested in party politics any more, and after the apparent disarray of Gordon Brown's premiership I was quite happy to let the Coalition 'have a go'. Was I naive? Apart from a few soothing noises, the Tories don't strike me as a progressive party. Cameron's Big Society idea, which sounded like some wishy-washy localism, has turned out to be an attack on the welfare state, a dogma-driven drive to replace council-run services with private-company-run services or voluntary schemes run by local churches. Now, I don't mind private-sector involvement in improving education, health or social services, but I think it's important we stay in control of these organisations, and there's nearly always far less 'value' for the taxpayer in privatisation than the politicians promise.

Sorry for talking about politics. I promise I won't do it again!

Have a happy Christmas, or whatever you prefer to call it.

Adrian

Birmingham SACRE

During the time that BHA staff were in Birmingham for the Conservative Party conference, we set up a meeting with Barry Henley, the new Chair of Birmingham SACRE. Those attending the meeting were Richy Thompson and Pavan Dhaliwal from the BHA, and Adrian Bailey and Carolyn Sugden from Birmingham Humanists.

It was a very friendly meeting and we were pleasantly surprised at how open Barry was to the idea of Humanist representation on the SACRE. However, he told us that he was currently unable to consider offering us a place on Committee A because of the judicial review being brought by Ahmadiyya Muslims, who have been refused a place. If they win, he said, we could also have a place on Committee A. In the meanwhile, he would be happy to co-opt a Humanist representative on to Committee D.

Following the meeting with Barry, Richy and Pavan said they would contact the Ahmadiyya Muslim group to find out more about their case.

In the meanwhile, members of the committee are continuing to attend SACRE meetings as observers. It was agreed at the recent committee meeting to write a formal letter to Barry Henley, requesting a place on Committee A.

We will keep you updated with any new developments. We're hoping that we will be able to learn from the experiences of Mike Lake, who will be speaking at our January meeting. Mike has been representing non-theists on his local SACREs (Derby and Derbyshire) for some time, and also visits schools to talk about non-theist ways of looking at the world – something that Humanists are increasingly being asked to do.

Press watch

There have recently been a number news stories of particular interest to atheists and humanists, including reports of the Reading University's Atheist Society being 'thrown out of freshers' fair over blasphemous Mohammed pineapple' – see the [Daily Mail](#) and [the Huffington Post](#), among others. This may sound like just a student prank, but it has more serious implications.

There was also the widely reported case of the boy who was unable to join the Scouts because he wasn't willing to take the Scout oath. It was interesting to contrast the news reports of this with some of the commentary. For example, The Telegraph's initial news report was relatively neutral – here's short extract.

Schoolboy 'banned from Scouts for being an atheist'

An 11-year-old boy has been banned from joining the Scouts because he doesn't believe in God, despite his Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist peers being offered an alternative oath to swear.

George Pratt had attended his local Scout group for ten months, and was expecting to be invested in the group along with his friends. But, after being required to swear the traditional promise, he found himself unable to join, as he does not believe in God.

George, 11, said that he was 'very disappointed' in the decision, calling it 'unfair', and claiming he feels left out from experiences and trips his friends are attending. His father, Nick Pratt, has accused the Scout movement of being 'narrow minded' and 'intolerant', saying his son is being 'excluded because he doesn't believe'.

However, on the next day The Telegraph ran a very unpleasant piece by Graeme Archer, urging George to take the oath, regardless of his beliefs. It was headlined 'Just take the oath, George – we all benefit from a little creative hypocrisy' and included the following: 'We've suffered enough from individuals, clubs and societies being skewered on the 'tolerance' agenda, which translates 'rights' about avoiding 'discrimination' into legal action ... only this morning I've read about the £3,000 or so awarded to the gay couple who found no room at their desired inn, due to its owners' Christian beliefs. (Three grand, to not stay in a B&B! Where do I apply?)'

Here's the BHA's comment on the case.

What it means to swear an oath

Last week we reported on an 11 year old, George Pratt, who has been refused membership of the scouts because he is an atheist. This is an issue that many people responded to with messages of support. However, we also received a number of responses suggesting that one can 'just say the words' and that pledging a religious oath as an atheist doesn't matter because there is no one there to hear it. This made us think a little about what it means to swear an oath, and the value we place on words, vows, and affirmations. There are ceremonies that mark important moments in our lives. The words spoken are both a public showing of commitment to a person, cause, or organisation, and the public acknowledgement of undertaking of responsibilities. When an oath or affirmation is said it should be sincere and honest. As one parent on Twitter responded: They expect 'all to take the oath'. So they would prefer my child to lie?! #curious life lesson!

The BHA supports George in his refusal to swear allegiance to god in the Scout Promise and we would like to see an end to this discrimination. Children should not have to lie in order to fit in, nor be discriminated against for their religion or beliefs.

Contributions to News & Views

We are always glad to include articles, news items or other contributions from our members. Please send them to me, Carolyn Sugden – carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk, 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB.