



# NEWS & VIEWS



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

New Series

Number 37

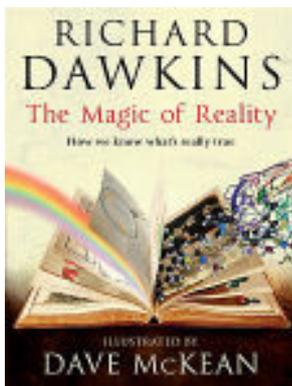
March 2012

*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

### 'Who was the first human?' and other evolutionary cameos

**At our Darwin Day meeting, John Edwards outlined some of the main topics in Richard Dawkins' recent book *The magic of reality*. He followed this with a quick-fire tour of interesting facts about evolution from authors including Stanley Wells and David Attenborough.**



John's talk focused on Chapter 2 of *The magic of reality* – 'Who was the first person?' Dawkins begins by looking at creation myths from various cultures, including Tasmanian, Norse and Jewish/Christian. What we need to ask ourselves, Dawkins says, is whether each story, or any part of it, is true. The answer to the question 'Who was the first person?' is that there never was a first person, as every creature ever born belonged to the same species as its parents. It was only the very gradual change over generations that resulted in human beings.

Dawkins suggests trying a thought experiment: imagine a picture of yourself, then one of your parents, grandparents, great grandparents and so on, going back 185 million generations. If you piled up the pictures, the pile would be three miles high, and the picture of your earliest ancestor would show a fish!

As the book is aimed primarily at children and young people, it is lavishly, and beautifully, illustrated. Each chapter looks at the myths and fables people have used over the centuries to explain natural phenomena – and then shows how scientific explanations are just as exciting and wonderful.

Other facts about evolution in John's talk came from:

- *The journey of man* – in this Stanley Wells shows the routes that modern humans, who originated in Africa between 150,000 and 200,000 years ago, took out of Africa, and how they colonised the rest of the world.
- The Geographic Project – through analysis of DNA this project maps the human family tree.
- *Life stories* – in one chapter in this book, David Attenborough traces the process of discovery and knowledge about arthropods, an intermediate step between reptiles and birds.
- *The greatest show on earth* – Richard Dawkins puts forward the evidence for evolution.
- *The ancestor's tale* – Richard Dawkins again, this time looking back at the most primitive organisms.



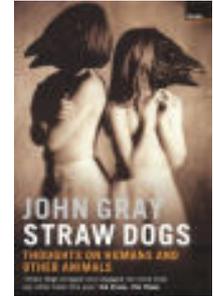
## A good read

At our meeting on 16 January, at Percy's house, the books that members recommended were very varied and interesting. One member said he had been worried that he would be lowering the tone of proceedings by talking about a novel, rather than some intellectually demanding philosophical tome! This wasn't at all the case, however – the books chosen ranged from autobiography to critiques of Christianity, from fiction to popular (and unpopular!) science.

Here's a list of the books that were discussed. Where it's not obvious from the title what the book is about, I've added a short explanation.

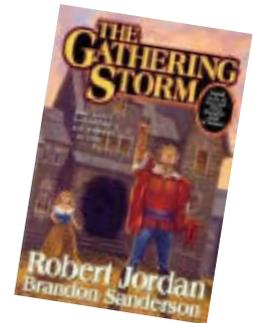
### Atheism/secularism/religion

- *Letter to a Christian nation* Sam Harris
- *God is not great* Christopher Hitchens
- *The Jesus delusion* G M Jackson
- *Biblical nonsense* Jason Long
- *The new atheism* Victor J Stenger
- *Godless and free* Pat Condell
- *In defence of atheism* Michael Onfray
- *Straw dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals* John Grey – a book of philosophy that criticises humanism – humans are not better than animals, he says. Nature is making use of us. One reviewer called John Grey an 'apocalyptic nihilist'!
- *Misquoting Jesus: the story behind who changed the Bible and why* Bart Ehrman – Ehrman, a New Testament scholar who has now renounced his previous evangelical Christian beliefs, explains how the early texts that eventually became the New Testament evolved. He contends that many widely-held Christian beliefs are associated not with the original words of scripture, but with later alterations.

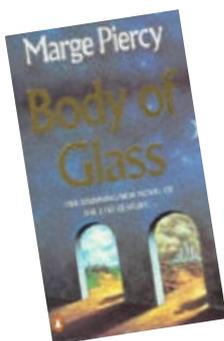
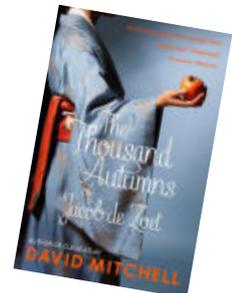


### Fiction

- *The gathering storm* Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson – this is Book 12 of *The wheel of time* series of epic fantasy novels, which draw on European and Asian mythology
- *The clan of the cave bear* Jean M Auel (Book 1 of the *Earth's children* series) – a plausible fictional account of how our Stone Age ancestors might have lived. This volume concentrates on the possible interaction between Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens.

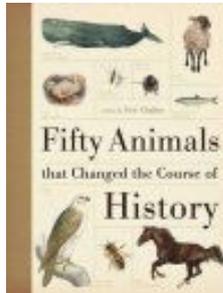
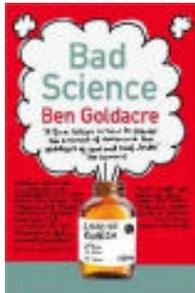
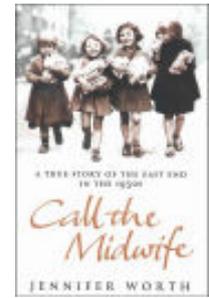
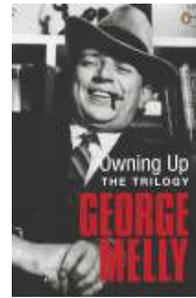


- *The thousand autumns of Jacob de Zoet* David Mitchell – a historical novel set in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this is the story of a Dutch clerk at the East India Company's trading post with Japan. It looks at the clash of cultures, and an open versus a closed society, and at religion versus science.
- *Body of glass* Marge Piercy – a science fiction/dystopian story, in which the world is ruled by ruthless multinational corporations. Some people who are fighting against the corporations make a human-like robot to protect their town. The novel asks what it means to be human.
- *Remarkable creatures* Tracy Chevalier – this historical novel, set in 1818, tells the story of Mary Anning, who has a talent for finding fossils, and whose discovery of ancient marine reptiles, such as the ichthyosaurus, shakes the scientific community and leads to new ways of thinking about the creation of the world.



## Autobiography

- *Owning up* George Melly – entertaining and often scabrous first-hand account of the professional jazz world in the 1950s. One commentator on the internet calls it ‘the most hilarious book ever written about jazz’.
- *Call the midwife* Jennifer Worth – a personal account of working as a midwife in the East End in the 1950s, now made into a BBC series



## Science

- *Bad science* Ben Goldacre – this contains extended versions of many of Ben Goldacre’s excellent columns in The Guardian, criticising media reporting on health and science issues.
- *Fifty animals that changed the course of history* Eric Chaline – a beautifully presented guide to the animals that have had the greatest impact on human civilisation.

You can see from this list that there was lots of food for thought. There are certainly several of the recommended books that I’m now determined to read.

## Skeptics in the Pub

**John Edwards reports on some recent Skeptics in the Pub events, which are held at The Victoria in John Bright Street, near the Alex Theatre in Birmingham city centre.**

### Would you like to become a ‘Zooite’?

On 8 February Alice Sheppard gave a talk about the Galaxy Zoo Forum, entitled ‘When the universe came to the people’. After recounting some of the interesting historical figures and facts in astronomical research, she focused in on the Sloan Digital Sky Survey. This is based on a 2.5 metre telescope at Apache Point Observatory, in New Mexico which in the last eight years has mapped over 35% of the sky with images going as far back as 2 billion light years. It does this by robotically scanning the night sky over and over again. It has so far discovered around 930,000 galaxies and over 120,000 quasars. This is a massive amount of data to analyse. It appears a PhD student in the UK was given the task of looking at all these galaxy images and classifying them. By working really hard at the end of a week, he/she had got through 10,000 or so, but was getting stressed and ‘bug-eyed’. So they went to the pub where a thought struck – why not ask the public to help by offering them the chance to look at the beautiful images and trust them to classify correctly after passing a short check-test.



*Alice Sheppard with some parakeets – not sure why!*

This is how the Galaxy Zoo website started, on a budget of £43, in the hope that a little help would be forthcoming from the public. Within three weeks the website had received 10 million galaxy classifications! It didn’t matter too much if the odd individual misclassified a galaxy, as each image was being judged by five to ten people online at different times and in different parts of the world.

‘*Citizen astronomy proves very popular*’ said a headline on the BBC website. A survey on why so many people took part pleasingly found that the top reason given was that individuals wanted to contribute to scientific research. The original survey asked people to classify images as stars or as clockwise spiral, anticlockwise spiral, edge-on spiral, elliptical or colliding galaxies. Eventually the survey turned up a rare new class, called ‘pea galaxies’ because of their green colour, in which new stars appear to be forming 40 times more than normal and which the spectroscope shows have far more oxygen than ‘normal’ galaxies. Alice said that this

proved that 'citizen science' is not only useful but also empowering, encouraging people to take ownership and not just be fed information.

The Galaxy Zoo data is published in a journal viewable online at [www.arxiv.org](http://www.arxiv.org) and many new projects are available for people to get involved with – planet hunting, solar storm watch, MoonZoo, reconstructing old weather maps and ancient lives research. You can find them all and start helping to create original research datasets at [www.adler.zooniverse.org](http://www.adler.zooniverse.org).

Once hooked, you're a Zooite!

## Atheism, as seen by a creationist

The previous month's talk, entitled 'A skeptical look at atheism', was given by Professor Andy McIntosh, Emeritus Professor in Physics at Leeds, specialising in thermodynamics and combustion theory (his PhD was in aerodynamics), who is a Young Earth Creationist, believing that answers to our origins are to be found in Genesis. A packed room of 130 people listened politely to what he had to say (unfortunately he didn't say anything about how he came to believe the Earth is a few thousand years old!). I can't find a better way of describing the evening than to lift Mil Millington's summary from <http://www.brumskeptics.blogspot.com>, because he says exactly what I felt about it:



Andy McIntosh

*The thing about Professor McIntosh's talk – and I honestly don't say this to mock – is that it felt like watching someone go incrementally insane. Putting aside his opener about the feather (presumably included because he could not resist catching Richard Dawkins saying that he, Dawkins, had 'faith' in something), the first half of the lecture was informative and within striking distance of well-reasoned. Whether one finds McIntosh's conclusions sound and persuasive or not, it did address the matter of the creationist invocation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics as a bar to evolution. The typical response to a creationist saying entropy must increase is simply to reply by finishing the sentence – 'in a closed (or isolated) system'. And that's generally the end of it: the creationist goes off to find another half of a sentence to use, and you can sit back and have a biscuit while you wait. Professor McIntosh explained why such a brisk dismissal of his position mischaracterised it. He, of course, is aware of what the law states and that the Earth isn't an isolated system; his argument rests, rather, on energy that's 'useable' by what he refers to as 'machines'. This is all fair enough as a clarification of a subtler argument, drawing on established scientific principles and so on.*

*That was the starting point. The finish was that Jesus is our Lord and the eye-witness accounts in the Bible prove it!*

*It really was like watching someone descend into delusion before your eyes. My internal response to the things he was saying followed this sort of path: 'OK... Ahhh... Um... Eh...? What...? \*What\*...? WHAT...? ARGGGHHH!' At the beginning what he's saying at least appears plausibly worth addressing; in the middle he's, for example, telling us that atheists have no response to the arguments CS Lewis puts forward in 'Miracles' (so he's now reached what one might – generously – call 'shaky ground'); by the end it's the kind of stuff that wouldn't fly in a Year 10 classroom debate – I expected at any moment to hear the words 'Pascal's wager', 'There are more of us than you' and 'Hitler'.*

*Professor McIntosh seems like a decent chap, he has genuinely-held beliefs, he's laudably keen to engage with those of differing views, and he's no doubt orders of magnitude a better mathematician than I am. Yet, as the talk went on, his reasoning simply fell to bits in breath-taking fashion. The room listened, and everyone really, really wanted to be polite, but towards the end there was a distinct rippling noise from the crowd – no one was actually interrupting, it was rather the sound of two hundred people all furiously trying to bite their tongues.*

How McIntosh saw the evening is interesting and can be read at <http://blogs.answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2012/01/15/ministering-to-skeptics-in-the-uk/>.

DVDs of McIntosh's talk were available for £3, but the two committee members present didn't think it worth including in the Brum Hums library, even at that price! Incidentally, Skeptics provide a link to Brum Hums' and Lichfield's programme of events at <http://birmingham.skepticsinthepub.org>.

## W F Whitehouse 1917–2012

Frank Whitehouse, who died recently at the age of 94, was a lifelong Rationalist and Humanist. He was a regular attendee at Birmingham Humanists' meetings, and at national conferences, although few current members will remember his quiet presence. In recent years he had become increasingly frail and eventually lost his sight.



Frank Whitehouse

Frank did not come from a privileged background, but in old age wrote a dedication to his parents 'who set me examples of independence, integrity and loyalty'. He was to a large extent self-educated. When in his forties, he won a place at Ruskin College, Oxford, where he was able to pursue his philosophical interests and work out his passionately held theories. This research resulted in several pamphlets and, eventually (in 1994) culminated in the publication of his life work: *A philosophy for democratic convergence – Marxism transcended*.

Although he lived alone for many years in a high-rise block of flats in West Bromwich and worked tirelessly on his research and writing, he had time for other more sociable interests such as rambling, photography and classical music, and was an amateur painter and poet.

His niece, Sylvia, has kindly presented a copy of his magnum opus to the Birmingham Humanists' library.

Jane Wynne Willson

### Do you want to attend the BHA Conference?

Birmingham Humanists are keen to encourage members of the group to attend the BHA's annual conference. This year it is being held in Cardiff, from 8–10 June, with the title 'Beyond tomorrow: visions of the future'. With this in mind, the committee has agreed that we will pay half the conference fee for one person to attend. The fee for BHA members is £120 – this includes food on the full day (the Saturday), but not accommodation.

There is a quid pro quo, though – we'd like the person attending to give us some feedback, in the form of a short report for News and Views.

If you'd like to be considered for this, please apply to the committee by contacting the Secretary, Victoria Denning at [avictoriadenning@aol.com](mailto:avictoriadenning@aol.com), by 27 April at the latest.

## Assisted dying – please write to your MP

On 27 March, Parliament will debate the Director of Public Prosecution's Guidelines on Assisted Suicide. The guidelines provide much-needed clarity and reassurance to many terminally ill people and their loved ones. This is the first chance MPs have had to consider these guidelines in Parliament. It is vital that a majority of MPs attend the debate, and support the law taking a flexible approach to those who compassionately assist a loved one to die.

Dignity in Dying is asking people to help them to get as many MPs to attend the debate as possible. If you visit the website Dignity in Dying ([www.dignityindying.org.uk](http://www.dignityindying.org.uk)), you will find a link which will enable you to email your MP. They've made it as easy as possible for people to do this – there's even a model letter that you can use or adapt as you want.

If you support a compassionate approach to prosecution, urge your MP to go to this vital debate and to vote on the motion which welcomes the DPP's guidelines.

### Videos on the BHA website

Did you know that there are over thirty video clips on the BHA website? To give you a flavour of what you can find there, here's a link to one of them – one of Germany's most famous Humanists, speaking about how to cope with the moral arguments against evolution: Darwin, Humanism and Science: Michael Schmidt-Saloman – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI9AI0f8jk8>.

# Our sponsorship of a Ugandan student

**We have received the following news of Samuel Ssebulime, the student we sponsor in Uganda. We have agreed to continue paying his fees for a further year, from our Legacy Fund.**

Dear Birmingham Humanists,

I am pleased to be able to send you brief details on the progress of Samuel Ssebulime, the student you have been sponsoring at the Isaac Newton High School. The school director reports that:

'Samuel is a very bright student who was top of his class last year. He will progress to year 3 when the new term begins in February. His best subjects are Physics, Chemistry and Geography and he enjoys playing football. Samuel is an orphan with no parents; he could not continue his schooling without support.'



*Samuel Ssebulime*

For new information about the Isaac Newton High School and other schools supported by UHST, please visit <http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/>.

The school and your student are extremely grateful for your kindness. Please would you let me know whether your group or an individual member would be prepared to continue sponsoring him. Sponsorship remains at £120 a year.

With best regards

Hilary Hurd  
UHST Trustee; Sponsorship Manager



*Isaac Newton High School*

## Letter to the Editor

I thought I ought to write to put the record straight, in case Bill Green's article on the Uganda Schools Trust (in the December issue of N&V) has inadvertently given people the wrong idea about how the Birmingham Humanists' Legacy Fund, principally funded by Anne White's generous donation, is being used.

The fund has not, and, as far as I can anticipate, will not, be used for 'the general running costs of the group'. During the last five years or so, a total of £3,853 has been spent from the Legacy Fund. Only £421 of this was used for one-off items that would directly benefit Birmingham Humanists and its membership – namely, a digital projector and an amplifier/microphone system for use at our meetings. Most of the spending has been for books for local schools, such as *The god delusion* and the *Rosie* books on Humanist ceremonies. We have also given copies of *Humanist perspectives 2* to the Head of Religious Studies in every secondary school in the West Midlands. We offered several hundred pounds as an essay prize to try and encourage secondary school pupils, alas unsuccessfully, to write on a topic related to humanism.

Apart from helping to pay for the water butt project in Uganda, we are currently using the fund to pay the fees to get Samuel Ssebulime through his four years of secondary education at one of the schools in Uganda (see the letter above reporting on his progress).

We also gave a small donation to the Waris Dirie campaign against female genital mutilation, but all recent donations to other charities have come from collections at meetings, topped up by money from the group's own coffers. When the money in the group's 'general fund' starts to run low, I think that most members would expect us to increase our membership fees rather than 'raid' the Legacy Fund.

John Edwards (Hon Treasurer)

# Debates on end-of-life decisions

**Issues to do with assisted dying and living wills continue to be a focus of public concern, both in the UK (see the piece on page 5 re the forthcoming debate in Parliament) and in Europe – see the letter below from David Pollock on a recent resolution of the Council of Europe.**

Dear friends

Once more, reactionary forces have ambushed and amended a resolution at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe with a last-minute amendment that they are now crowing about. The Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee produced a careful and welcome report on living wills: 'protecting human rights and dignity by taking into account previously expressed wishes of patients' – see <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc11/EDOC12804.htm>.

When it was debated last Wednesday – see <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2012/E/1201251530E.htm> – small amendments irrelevant to the main issue were passed that are highly damaging and regrettable. The main one was to include a clarification that the report did not concern euthanasia. This was, however, worded so as to condemn euthanasia in all circumstances:

'This resolution is not intended to deal with the issues of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Euthanasia, in the sense of the intentional killing by act or omission of a dependent human being for his or her alleged benefit, must always be prohibited. This resolution thus limits itself to the question of advance directives, living wills and continuing powers of attorney.'

The resultant resolution can be seen here: <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta12/ERES1859.htm>.

This has led to such triumphant reports as this – <http://www.zenit.org/article-34195?l=english> – from the Vatican and this – <http://www.europeandignitywatch.org/day-to-day/detail/article/council-of-europe-bans-euthanasia.html> – from European Dignity Watch.

I am trying to find out more about how this happened. It is clear, however, that our opponents are far better organised and resourced than we are. We certainly need to build closer relationships with members of PACE and others in like positions.

David Pollock  
President, European Humanist Federation

## **Biblical contradictions No 3 by Clearasmud**

In the King James version of the Bible that Mr Pickles has put in the hands of every schoolchild, it says in Genesis 11: 7–9:

- 7 *Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.*
- 8 *So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.*
- 9 *Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.*

This clearly suggests that God sowed discord, yet Proverbs 6: 16–19 states that God hates anyone who sows discord!

- 16 *These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:*
- 17 *A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,*
- 18 *An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,*
- 19 *A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*

Perhaps they thought that 1 Corinthians 14: 33 might get God off the hook, as it portrays him in the usual munificent manner:

- 33 *For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.*

## Climbing for charity



Two of our members are currently attempting to scale mountain in Africa in order to raise money for charity.

**Sanjay Chouhan** is climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in aid of Birmingham Children's Hospital. He says: 'The trip is entirely self-funded so, unlike other organised hikes, all funds raised will go to our chosen charity. We have selected the Machame route which is deemed to be one of the more challenging routes up to the summit.'

*Sanjay Chouhan* You can support him by going to <http://www.justgiving.com/Mt-Kilimanjaro2012>.

**John Edwards** is attempting to scale the 4,167 metre (13,670 feet) peak Jebel Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, in order to raise funds for the charity the Ian Edwards Cancer Break Trust, which was set up in December 2010, following the death from lymphoma of John's son, Ian.

John says: 'What helped to keep us positive and cheerful as a family during Ian's nine months of treatment were the many trips the three of us were able to make into the UK countryside when Ian wasn't an inpatient at the QE.' Ian's parents and friends therefore decided to set up a charity in Ian's name that would support cancer inpatients at the Queen Elizabeth and Royal Orthopaedic hospitals by enabling them to have a short holiday with their family or friends if they were in financial need.

John says that he felt it was about time he did his bit to raise funds, especially as social workers at the hospitals have said that the Trust is making a real difference to families struggling with a member suffering from cancer, often with young or teenage children.

If you would like to help support the work of Ian's Trust or sponsor John on his challenge, you can do so through <http://www.justgiving.com/John-Edwards8> or via a donations link on the trust's website ([www.ianedwardscbtrust.org.uk](http://www.ianedwardscbtrust.org.uk)).



*John Edwards, ready for the trip!*

### ***The Pink Humanist***

Readers of N&V will find lots of interesting articles in the online magazine *The Pink Humanist*, which describes itself as 'an LGBT magazine for atheists, humanists, sceptics and freethinkers'. The current issue includes articles on Peter Tatchell, Alan Turing, the situation of gay people on the Isle of Man, and the role of religion in promoting 'cures' for homosexuality. You can find the magazine at [www.thepinkhumanist.com](http://www.thepinkhumanist.com).



### **Meeting with BHA**

Members of the Brum Hums committee recently met with Pavan Dhaliwal and Richy Thompson from the BHA. Among other things, we discussed progress in West Midlands local authorities in persuading SACRES to offer seats to Humanists. It appears that Wolverhampton is the only place that has been receptive to the idea – Humanists in other areas have had as little luck as we have. We'll keep plugging on!



*Pictured left to right are: John Edwards, Jan Woods, Bill Green, Carolyn Sugden, Adrian Bailey, Richy Thompson (BHA), Pavan Dhailwal (BHA), Jane Wynne Willson and Harry Stopes Roe*

# Partnership with the BHA

**Adrian Bailey, the Chair of Birmingham Humanists, outlines forthcoming changes in our relationship with the BHA.**

Although, like other local Humanist groups, we are actually completely independent of the British Humanist Association (BHA), it has always been the body that we are closest to, and it is part of our constitution that we should be affiliated to the BHA.

The BHA is now introducing a new level of affiliation, called 'partnership'. Partners will remain independent of the BHA, but will be able to act as its local representatives. Thus, if we become partners, the BHA will be able to delegate some of its work to us, and our activities will receive national backing. This better link-up will also mean that new members of the BHA will be invited to join us, and vice versa, and we will receive various forms of support from the BHA to help us develop as a group.

We will remain independent, so if there is any campaign or activity of the BHA that you personally take issue with at any time, we can discuss whether or not we should be a part of that. We will also continue to affiliate to other kindred organisations.

Your committee will present a motion at this year's AGM that we amend our constitution to allow us to become partners with/of the BHA, and we hope you will support it. Whichever way you feel on this issue, or to find out more about it, do come along to the AGM on 15 June.

## Militant secularism?

**There's been much commentary in the press following Baroness Warsi's pronouncements. Here's part of Polly Toynbee's article from The Guardian.**

The prefix 'aggressive' or 'militant' is now super-glued to the word 'secularist', but as president of the British Humanist Association and honorary associate of the National Secular Society, I find nothing extreme about trying to keep religion separate from the state. Aggressive? You should see this week's 'burn in hell' messages to the BHA attacking 'that spastic Hawking who denies God', and many more obscene unprintables.

I will defend to the death anyone's right to practice any faith, if it breaks no law, interferes with nobody's rights nor claims undue public policy influence. Church bells, calls to prayer, displays of crucifixes, beards or side-locks are freedoms, alongside bare midriffs and knicker-short miniskirts. Personally, I am affronted by women in face veils, but that's my problem. I will argue against them but freedom of speech, thought and dress are non-negotiable. But so is the right to robust argument that may offend religious sensibilities, including the right to challenge the improbability of the faith itself – and the right to make jokes.

Julian Baggini, writing in the Guardian yesterday took a swipe at secularism, wondering why bother with trivia like prayers at council meetings. He omits the heart of the matter, such as the right to die. Or the third of state schools run by religions, mainly CofE, oversubscribed as their results are burnished by admissions policies that consign an unfair share of poor or chaotic families to neighbouring schools. Meanwhile, faith organisations are given more contracts for social services: once outsourced, clients lose Human Rights Act protection against religious coercion, harassment or discrimination. None of this is trivial.

'Faith and reason go hand in hand,' said Lady Warsi. She's entitled to her view. I admire Dawkins' and Hawking's passionate devotion to the beauty of scientific proof, but it would be absurd to claim humanists are any more rational than others. Nor will we accept the jibe that unbelievers lack spirituality. Humans are only intermittently rational, living mostly in realms of hope, fear, memory or fantasy, lost in the power of the imagination.

Odder still is the religious claim to a monopoly on moral authority, as Cameron did in his pre-Christmas 'We are a Christian country' speech. Religious and irreligious alike commit atrocities, but faith ferments crusade, jihad and martyrdom. Belief makes people neither better nor worse: the latest research by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations found the religious no more likely to volunteer than non-believers. Claiming no special superiority, the view that our fate is in our hands makes humanists naturally progressive, not fatalistic. There is nothing militant about demanding that civic life and law binds us together as equal citizens, regardless of whatever peculiar ideas everyone harbours in their imagination.

# Do you believe in Santa?

**I recently came across the website 'God is Imaginary', which contain 50 'proofs' that God doesn't exist. Here's an excerpt from proof number 7: Understand religious delusion.**

## Understanding religious delusion

Let's imagine that I tell you the following story:

There is a man who lives at the North Pole. He lives there with his wife and a bunch of elves. During the year, he and the elves build toys. Then, on Christmas Eve, he loads up a sack with all the toys. He puts the sack in his sleigh. He hitches up eight (or possibly nine) flying reindeer. He then flies from house to house, landing on the rooftops of each one. He gets out with his sack and climbs down the chimney. He leaves toys for the children of the household. He climbs back up the chimney, gets back in his sleigh, and flies to the next house. He does this all around the world in one night. Then he flies back to the North Pole to repeat the cycle next year.

This, of course, is the story of Santa Claus.

But let's say that I am an adult, and I am your friend, and I reveal to you that I believe that this story is true. I believe it with all my heart. And I try to talk about it with you and convert you to believe it as I do. What would you think of me? You would think that I am delusional, and rightly so.

Why do you think that I am delusional? It is because you know that Santa is imaginary. The story is a total fairy tale. No matter how much I talk to you about Santa, you are not going to believe that Santa is real. Flying reindeer, for example, are make-believe. The dictionary defines delusion as: 'a false belief, strongly held, in spite of invalidating evidence'. That definition fits perfectly.

Since you are my friend, you might try to help me realise that my belief in Santa is a delusion. The way that you would try to do that is by asking me some questions. For example, you might say to me:

- 'But how can the sleigh carry enough toys for everyone in the world?' I say to you that the sleigh is magical. It has the ability to do this intrinsically.
- 'How does Santa get into houses and apartments that don't have chimneys?' I say that Santa can make chimneys appear, as shown to all of us in the movie *The Santa Clause*.
- 'How does Santa get down the chimney if there's a fire in the fireplace?' I say that Santa has a special flame-resistant suit, and it cleans itself too.
- 'Why doesn't the security system detect Santa?' Santa is invisible to security systems.
- 'How can Santa travel fast enough to visit every child in one night?' Santa is timeless.
- 'How can Santa know whether every child has been bad or good?' Santa is omniscient.
- 'Why are the toys distributed so unevenly? Why does Santa deliver more toys to rich kids, even if they are bad, than he ever gives to poor kids?' There is no way for us to understand the mysteries of Santa, because we are mere mortals, but Santa has his reasons. For example, perhaps poor children would be unable to handle a flood of expensive electronic toys. How would they afford the batteries? So Santa spares them this burden.

These are all quite logical questions that you have asked. I have answered all of them for you. I am wondering why you can't see what I see, and you are wondering how I can be so insane.

Why didn't my answers satisfy you? Why do you still know that I am delusional? It is because my answers have done nothing but confirm your assessment. My answers are ridiculous. In order to answer your questions, I invented, completely out of thin air, a magical sleigh, a magical self-cleaning suit, magical chimneys, 'timelessness' and magical invisibility. You don't believe my answers because you know that I am making this stuff up. The invalidating evidence is voluminous.

**The writer then goes on to look at various aspects of the Islamic and Christian religions in a similar way. You can read other entertaining proofs on the God is imaginary website at <http://godisimaginary.com/i7.htm>.**