



NEWS & VIEWS



www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New Series

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

Past events

Without women, no development

On 25 May we were pleased to welcome Professor Lalage Bown who spoke about the work of Womankind Worldwide, the international human rights charity that aims to help women transform their lives in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Professor Bown began her talk with a statement by Sue Turrell, the outgoing Director of Womankind Worldwide, demanding a much greater commitment from international governments, the Afghan Government and mainstream civil society to promoting and protecting the rights of women in Afghanistan. She also quoted from Adam Smith: 'No society can be flourishing and happy of which by far the greater number of members are poor and miserable' and from Wilkinson and Pickett's book *The spirit level*: 'More equal societies almost always do better.'

Professor Bown went on to consider the position of women in the world today, looking particularly at the differences between women's lives in developed and undeveloped countries – for example:

- The average life expectancy of someone born in a rich country is 80 years, whereas it is 56 in a poor country.
- In some countries of African south of the Sahara, over 1,000 mothers out of every 100,000 die in childbirth; in the UK only 12 will die.
- Almost everywhere in the world, the poorest people are women, and women have less earning power than men. In Britain, women's average annual income is about two thirds that of men, while in some countries it is only half.
- The proportion of women to men in political decision-making positions is lower almost everywhere. Globally, the average proportion of women to men in national parliaments is just under 18%.
- In many countries there are still no laws against violence against women, and widows are left unsupported.
- At present throughout the world there are 60 million girls under 15 who are not at school, and half a billion girls/women over the age of 15 who have never had the chance to learn to read or write.

While literacy is not the only factor in social change, she said, it is a basic building block, giving women confidence and a greater share in decision making in the home and the community, as well as the capacity to take part in the wider economy.



Professor Lalage Bown

This is the background to the work of Womankind Worldwide, the only British-based charity which focuses solely on women's rights and the challenges facing women. Its vision is of 'a society where women can take their place as equals with men in determining the values, direction and governance of their communities and countries for the benefit of all'. Its present focus is to:

- end violence against women
- increase women's voice and participation in society and politics
- secure women's human rights.



At present Womankind supports and works with 42 organisations in 42 countries. Professor Bown stressed that it always works in collaboration with women leaders and/or women's groups in the countries concerned, to fulfil its mission of 'achieving lasting improvement in the economic, social and political position of women around the world'.

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

Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on 15 June 2012, with sixteen 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:

- We have still had no success in our attempts to get Humanist representation on the Birmingham SACRE, though the new Chair has begun to make conciliatory noises. A local councillor recently nominated by Labour is seen by SACRE as representing non-religious points of view. We shall continue to make representations and to take advice from the BHA on the best way of proceeding.
- We launched our new website in the summer of 2011. Peter Manchester has taken over the role of web master since Malik stepped down earlier this year. On the social network site Facebook, we have 660 followers.
- Attendances at meetings with speakers have been very good, numbering between 20 and 30, with up to 40 for some.
- The number of Humanist ceremonies taking place in Birmingham is increasing – there are seventeen BHA accredited celebrants in the area, along with independent and civil celebrants.
- We currently have 71 paid-up members (3 fewer than at this time last year). Our overall income has dropped from last year. There has been a steady decline in donations over the last three years. It was felt that we should make a concerted effort to increase membership, and we should encourage members to make donations when they renew their membership. (NB There is no opportunity to add to the basic membership fee when renewing online.)

It was reported that Victoria Denning and Percy Lea were leaving the committee. Victoria was stepping down as Secretary, as she was moving house to Shropshire. She stressed that she would remain a member of the group, and would continue to perform ceremonies in Birmingham. Although Percy would no longer be a member of the committee, he said that he would continue to act as Librarian. Votes of thanks were given to Victoria and Percy for all their hard work on the committee.

The only other changes to the committee were that Carolyn Sugden became Secretary, and Anne Dawes joined the committee.

Following a process of consultation with the British Humanist Association, a resolution was put to the meeting that Birmingham Humanists should become a partner organisation of the BHA. The Chair outlined the benefits of partnership, including:

- the BHA providing services, training for officers and publicity for the group
- having an input into BHA policy
- access to free space on the BHA website
- discount on BHA publications and publicity leaflets.

After some discussion, a motion for the Birmingham Humanists group to become a partner of the BHA, and to effect this by changing its constitution accordingly, was put to the group. The motion was passed by 14 votes to 2. The wording of section 12.1 of the BH constitution will therefore be changed from 'The group shall maintain its affiliation to the British Humanist Association' to 'The group shall be a partner organisation of the British Humanist Association (BHA), but, if for any reason this relationship ceases, it will maintain its affiliation to the BHA.'

Birmingham Humanists at the Moseley Festival

Percy Lea reports on our participation in the Moseley Festival Street Fair on 7 July 2012.

We had a covered stall for the day but fortunately the rain didn't fall in Moseley. Perhaps the threat of inclement weather reduced the normally bustling throng of shoppers at the festival, which seemed less than in previous years. Nevertheless, our stall attracted many local people who enjoyed a couple of free spins on our updated Humanist Heroes Wheel, which is now adorned with new photographs of well-known humanist celebrities. All successful spinners were rewarded with a free book chosen from the stall, as well as a BHA pen and badge. The stall was well supported by our members, who kept the general public supplied with BHA literature and information about the activities of our Birmingham Humanists group. We also had the support of Peter Mansell, a Humanist celebrant from Wolverhampton, who gave three hours of his time to help us.



Olga Farooqui and Peter Mansell on the Birmingham Humanists' stall

Many thanks to all those who helped on the stall and enabled our participation in the Moseley Festival Street Fair to be a success.

Jazz in the Garden



Sheila, Terry and other members of Eureka Jazz keeping us all entertained

At the invitation of Terry McGrath and Sheila Fawkes, Birmingham Humanists joined with Moseley in Bloom to put on an evening of jazz, food, drink and good company on 21 July.

This was a new departure for BH, and a very successful one! Fortunately the weather was kind to us, so we were able to hold the event in the garden as planned, with no need to retreat indoors. Terry and Sheila's garden was an ideal and beautiful setting for the lively and enjoyable music. The food contributed by those attending on an 'American supper' basis, was plentiful and excellent (as were the drinks!).

Many thanks to Terry and Sheila for hosting this very convivial and enjoyable event.

Publicising our meetings

Please help us to promote our meetings! If there's somewhere near you that you could put up a poster, please print out the posters about forthcoming events that we send you by email and take them along. If you need a hard copy in order to do this, contact me (Carolyn Sugden – carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk or 0121 240 6537) and I will send you one.

From time to time we also produce leaflets with details of several future meetings. Again, if there's somewhere (eg a local library) where you can take some of these, please let me know.

Thank you.

Atheism UK's position statement on the monarchy

As we shall be having a speaker from the anti-monarchist organisation Republic in November, it seems timely to include this recent statement from Atheism UK in N&V. The separation of church and state is a paramount doctrine for Republic, it states.

Starting from the basic premise of atheism – it is not true that God exists – it does not follow that there should be no monarchy. It is not self-contradictory for an atheist to be a monarchist or for a theist to be a republican, as most theists in the world are. Indeed, it is not self-contradictory for a monarch to be an atheist.

However, it does follow, from the same premise, that a state's – and, therefore, its head's – authority should not be founded on the Theory of Divine Right, irrespective of whether that head of state is a monarch or a president. The Irish constitution provides an example of the latter: 'In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred,'

For that reason, Atheism UK pressed for and obtained the following in the 2011 *Dublin Declaration on Secularism and the Place of Religion in Public Life*:

'The sovereignty of the State is derived from the people and not from any god or gods.'

The British monarchy abandoned the Theory of Divine Right during the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and the Bill of Rights 1689 makes it clear that its authority is derived from the people and not from God. Therefore, Atheism UK holds no position, one way or the other, as to the existence of the British monarchy per se. This is a matter for individual members who can, if they choose, join organisations that campaign for its abolition.

It is not the British monarchy per se but the following, of its statutory conditions of tenure, that offend against the principles of atheism and must be abolished:

- **Anglican succession**

The Act of Settlement 1701, provides:

'That whosoever shall hereafter come to the Possession of this Crown shall joyne in Communion with the Church of England as by Law established.'

- **Coronation oath**

The same act provides:

'Every King and Queen of this Realm who shall come to and succeed in the Imperiall Crown of this Kingdom by vertue of this Act shall have the Coronation Oath administred to him her or them at their respective Coronations'.

The objectionable element of the oath is:

'Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel? Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?'

The oath must be administered by the Archbishop of Canterbury or York, or any other bishop of the realm appointed by the monarch for that purpose.

- **Accession declaration**

The Bill of Rights 1689, the Act of Settlement 1701 and the Accession Declaration Act 1910, in combination, require the monarch to make the following declaration on the first day of the meeting of the first Parliament after the accession:

'I do solemnly and sincerely in the presence of God profess, testify and declare that I am a faithful Protestant, and that I will, according to the true intent of the enactments which secure the Protestant succession to the Throne of my Realm, uphold and maintain the said enactments to the best of my powers according to law.'

All these objectionable conditions stem from the position of the British head of state as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, which is the established church in England. This, again, is irrespective of whether that head of state is a monarch or a president.

Atheism UK holds a robust position in favour of the disestablishment of the Church of England, which necessarily includes the British head of state ceasing to be its Supreme Governor. The abolition of the Anglican succession, the religious element of the Coronation Oath and the Accession Declaration are subsumed into that aim.

Gore Vidal on religion

In its substantial piece on Gore Vidal, following his recent death, the Guardian included the following quote about religion.

'The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric bronze age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity, Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal – God is the Omnipotent Father – hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not for just one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose.'



Ex Cathedra

Here are some topical comments from Adrian Bailey, Chair of Birmingham Humanists.

I hope you had a good summer. I've just been to our meeting with the Reverend Sue Shewring at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (there will be a full report of this in the next issue of News & Views). Some members don't like us getting involved in things that involve religiously-charged words like chaplaincy, spirituality or faith, but religious organisations will be very pleased if we leave the field open for them. One day, secular bodies like the NHS will stop using these words, but in the meantime we just have to put up with them while we go about our business of supporting the needs of non-religious people in our community.

In other news, following the government reshuffle, we now have (to quote Andrew Copson of the BHA) a Health Minister against abortion, a Justice Minister against equality and a Communities Minister against secularism. I'll be on the Humanist stall at this year's Conservative Party Conference, which is taking place in Birmingham from 7-10 October, and I'll be doing my best to persuade those people I meet that their party would do better to commit itself to living in the 21st century with the rest of us.

This autumn there are a few big events in London you may be interested in:

- Saturday, 15 September – Campaign for a Secular Europe march and rally
- Saturday, 22 September – National Secular Society conference
- Saturday, 20 October – Centre for Inquiry 'Healing Powers of the Mind?'
- Saturday/Sunday, 20/21 October – Institute of Ideas 'Battle of Ideas 2012'

If you need any help getting to any of these events, please let me know.

Carpe diem, Adrian

<http://www.facebook.com/birmingham.humanists>

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.

An atheist perspective on the BHA conference

Rupert Young reports on this year's conference from an atheist's point of view.

As a member of the British Humanist Association, I decided to attend their annual conference; though in a personal capacity and not as an official of Atheism UK, as I am interested in the issues relevant to the atheism and humanism movements, and was intrigued as to whether any differences between the two movements would be obviously apparent, as I had also recently attended the European Atheist Conference in Cologne. I soon discovered that the differences appeared to be far starker than I had anticipated; skip to the end of the article if you want to read about those rather than the summary of the event.

The BHA 2012 conference commenced on the Friday evening in the very impressive venue of the National Museum in Cardiff; a building of grand architecture, similar to the great museums in London. The first session was a useful get-together around a humanism-related pub quiz and comedians. Ivy Lawrence was very amusing but a bit difficult to hear in the dampening acoustics of the Grand Hall. Richard Herring was easier to hear and was deliciously irreverent and crude. The humour of both was aimed at times at the absurdities of religion.

The Saturday sessions began in the lovely Reardon Smith Lecture Theatre with a welcome talk by the BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson. The first speaker was Kevin Warwick with 'The Cyborg Experiments'. He gave a review of experiments carried out at Reading University with some simple human-machine interfaces, as well as some simple autonomous robots which can roam around a controlled environment and avoid walls. It was amusing and interesting, but it doesn't look as though artificial intelligence has improved much in the fifteen years since I was studying AI at university, as the level of intelligence of the artificial agents still appears to be equivalent only to that of a slug.

Polly Higgins spoke on 'Ecocide: Leadership and Law' concerning the endeavours to get ecocide (the destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystems) to be internationally recognised as a crime alongside genocide and other such crimes. 'Humanism and the Future' in conversation with Greg Claeys and Paul McAuley contained some random musings about the future, with some references to the reduction in religiosity being desirable. In his talk 'Technology and our Inner Life', Ben Hammersley talked about how technology changes fast and how political and social planning must take account of what the state of technology will be in the future. Roger Martin spoke on 'Population Growth: Multiplier of Impacts; Divider of Resources; Provoker of Conflict'. Population is growing and it's going to be an increasing problem. The main solution is the provision of family planning services. Currently the global budget is equal to 10% of the Goldman Sachs bonuses, apparently. Carole Jahme's presentation 'The Better Apes of our Future' was 'performance art' involving forced audience participation and humiliation, something to do with empathy that is felt by apes; I didn't really get it.

The Sunday morning sessions began with Sir David King, who, in his talk on 'Human Ingenuity and the New Demand for Collective Action', spoke about the need for collective action to tackle the world's problems such as climate change, energy security, population growth and the exponential rise in consumption of resources. Mark Stevenson gave an interesting and amusing talk, 'An Optimist's Tour of the Future', with a positive look at the future of humanity, with a perspective that it does require innovation and a reboot of the way we think about some of the global issues.

So, that's about it. The weekend was very interesting with some impressive speakers raising important topics for the future of humankind; and I met lots of extremely nice and intelligent people. Now, have I forgotten anything? Was something missing? Well, yes. Can you spot what it was?

The elephant in the room: religion! I found it distinctly odd, if not extraordinary, that, at a humanist conference, apart from a few minor references (and the comedians), religion wasn't mentioned; though those references (criticisms) did get a positive response from the crowd. The topics of presentations and discussions contained virtually no atheist (or even humanist) perspective. It was like being at a meeting of the civil rights movement where no-one mentioned racism.

The talks were in stark contrast to the European Atheist Conference, where the topics concerned the malignant consequences of religion, such as: Taslim Nasrin talking about her experiences of the human rights abuses, death threats, physical violence and persecution she has personally experienced; teachers from Germany and Switzerland being sacked for not being

believers; and the situation within German Catholic-run hospitals and schools, which try to control the private lives of employees, who can be sacked if they do something of which the church disapproves, such as getting divorced or not going to church.

I can understand that people find it desirable to maintain a positive attitude by exploring how the outlook for humanity can be improved, but, for me at least, one major imperative is to say, to paraphrase the civil rights movement, 'No to theism', and to explore how that can be achieved so that the undoubted potential of humankind is not stifled.

On the whole a very enjoyable weekend, but based upon the evidence of these few days, although its members might be atheists, Humanism does not *do* Atheism.

Dawkins supports Gove



This may sound a surprising headline, but here's what's behind it. In the Observer, Richard Dawkins explained why he supports Michael Gove's £370,000 plan to put a Bible in every English school.



The privately-funded distribution of King James Bibles began this May to mark the 400th anniversary of its publication, after 54 scholars, all members of the Church of England, completed the translation from original Hebrew and Greek in 1611 (12% having died during the task!).

The NSS and other secular groups have said that the money could have been better spent elsewhere, but Professor Dawkins said: 'It is not a moral book and young people need to learn that important fact because they are very frequently told the opposite.' He went on to say: 'A native speaker of English who has never read a word of the King James Bible is verging on the barbarian. People who do not know the Bible well have been gulled into thinking it is a good guide to morality. I have even heard the cynically misanthropic opinion that, without the Bible as a moral compass, people would have no restraint against murder, theft and mayhem. The surest way to disabuse yourself of this pernicious falsehood is to read the Bible itself.'

Although he questioned whether any child would actually read it, Dawkins said: 'Whatever else the Bible might be – and it really is a great work of literature – it is not a book on morals.' He added: 'Not a bad way to find out what's in a book is to read it, so I say "Go to it" – but does anybody, even Gove, seriously think they will?'

In the same way that Mr Gove wanted pupils to learn about its wide influence, Professor Dawkins emphasised the Bible's contribution to literature saying, 'The whole King James Bible is littered with literary allusions, almost as many as Shakespeare (to quote that distinguished authority Anon, the trouble with Hamlet is it's so full of clichés).' Among the examples he used to illustrate his point were: the salt of the earth; go the extra mile; I wash my hands of it; filthy lucre; through a glass darkly; wolf in sheep's clothing; hide your light under a bushel; and no peace for the wicked.

Education Secretary Michael Gove said pupils should learn about the book's role in the nation's history, language, literacy and culture; critics have said it is unlikely that schools do not already have a Bible.

Biblical contradictions No 4 by Clearasmud

What were really the last words that Jesus spoke before he died? This is what we are told in three of the gospels.

Matthew 27:46 and 50: 'And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?" that is to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" ... Jesus, when he cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.'

Luke 23:46: 'And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, unto thy hands I commend my spirit" and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.'

John 19:30: 'When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished" and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.'